

Rush: New World Men After five years and a series of tragedies, Rush didn't know if it would ever make another album. The band members talk about the journey back.

By Gary Graff

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In the wake of a double tragedy -- the 1997 deaths of Rush drummer/lyricist Neil Peart's wife and daughter -- the Canadian trio went into an indefinite hiatus, with no promise to ever return. Singer-bassist-keyboardist Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson engaged in solo recording and production projects, while Peart -- whose own solo forays had included a triumvirate of big band-styled albums -- slowly, and quietly, dealt with his circumstances, eventually remarrying and rejoining his bandmates.

Not surprisingly, Rush's new *Vapor Trails* is brimming with lyrics about loss, renewal, and hope, as well as the occasional foray into world affairs. It's also one of the group's most vigorous outings to date, filled with the palpable sound of three old friends and longtime compatriots absolutely thrilled to be playing music together again.

Recorded in Toronto with engineer Paul Northfield, *Vapor Trails* finds Rush in fine, revitalized form -- and, interestingly, using almost no keyboards, favoring instead a punchy and more direct guitar-bass-drums attack.

CDNOW: Were you ever concerned that Rush would never come back together?

Geddy Lee: I really wasn't sure, to be honest. I sort of thought in the back of my mind there'll come a time in [Peart's] life when he'll sort things out and feel a need to get back on the horse kind of thing. I wasn't positive that would occur, but I had a feeling it probably would, and that's what eventually came to pass.

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Alex Lifeson: I didn't know what to think. It was such a difficult period, and we were all in a state. All of us, I think, lost the love of what we were doing; I think a loss like that changes everything and the way you feel about everything. Nothing seems important anymore. I guess at some point I thought it was very unlikely we'd get back together; it seemed like Neil had been progressing very slowly, up and down, and reached a point where he crashed, and it seemed like it would be a long time before he would recover. I think meeting his wife when he did changed everything for him and gave him a new focus, and a new desire to carry on.

Was bringing Rush back together a delicate process?

Lifeson: It was a little bit of an adjustment. I had just finished producing a band called Lifer and had a lot of fun doing that. I came into the [Rush] project feeling really good about other things I could do outside of Rush. I think Geddy felt the same way. We talked a lot at the beginning about how the years had affected us and where we were going and what other interesting things we had done. Slowly we started playing and started having fun with it. It took a few months before we kind of got it back.

Lee: Alex and I had to get to know each other again as writing partners. Neil was getting used to being back in Toronto. The first few months were not so fruitful and a little frustrating; I think it was us sort of shaking the rust off and Neil kind of building his confidence back. Eventually we said, "Look, let's take a month off now. Let's go away and see what we've been doing here." By the time we got back together -- that was about July of 2001 -- we felt like we'd gotten all the crap out of our systems and felt really kind of focused, and excited to go on. From that point on, things started coming, and it was very fresh and even fun. We ended up with way more material than we had expected.

There's a real renewed energy on *Vapor Trails*. This is a very hard-rocking record with a kind of joyful feel to it.

Lee: Absolutely. This record is all about spirit. Once everybody stopped kind of being on tenterhooks and stopped worrying about "Can we produce?" and actually relaxed enough to enjoy the fact we were still here, and we did have a passion to continue ... I think it was really a lot of fun and quite electric when Alex and I jammed; we were looking at each other during some of these jams going, like, "Wow, keep going ..." A lot of those original jams we kept intact, and this album, more than any Rush album, has that sense of kind of live playing.

There's also much less synthesizer than there has been on Rush albums since the late '70s.

Lee: Alex wouldn't let me put any keyboards on it [laughs].

Lifeson: Yes, that was the law ... because they suck [laughs]. I just thought it would be great if we used more organic instruments to achieve the same sort of background sounds the keyboards were providing in the past. I wanted to create things with the guitar and with Geddy's voice. It was way more fun.

Lee: I think he was right in the end; I was becoming a little dependent on keyboards to provide melody, and his desire to stay away from them forced me to use our main instruments in a different way. This album is very three-piece and also very intricate even though there's only guitar, bass, and drums. Some songs have three layers of bass tracks, and some songs have five or six nuanced guitar

parts. And in some songs, the guitars act like violins.

Lifeson: This record was all about the three of us in a very pure kind of way. It was a rebirth in a lot of ways. It needed to be stripped-down.

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While most of the songs seem to reflect on personal issues, "Peaceable Kingdom" addresses current events.

Lee: That was one of the few post-9/11 songs we wrote. I think it's quite clearly influenced by that event and the aftermath, the thinking and worrying, and the pain of all the things that happened in the world after that point. There's something about the song that's very special for me in the fact that it recognizes the rage and the cause, and puzzling nature of trying to understand cultures that are so different and so angry, and at the same time, it's all about wishing. It's about praying, in a way, and wishing it all away, wishing for a better time.

It's been five years since the last record: Where does Rush fit into the rock-and-roll scheme of things?

Lee: Oh, I don't know ... I think we're like the last descendants of the Zeppelin era. In some ways, we're proponents of hard rock and still with a whiff of progressive rock in there. I don't know what to say beyond that.