

Back In The Limelight Alex Lifeson and Rush reignite after a five-year hiatus

By Shawn Hammond

When Rush emerged from the Great White North in 1974, the band was two thirds of the way to becoming one of hard rock's most groundbreaking and successful acts. Just prior to their first full U.S tour that year, guitarist Alex Lifeson and bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee recruited drummer/lyricist Neil Peart to cement what would also become one of the longest-lived and most-virtuosic trios of all time.

The band's unique style spawned a string of radio classics (including "Fly by Night," "Closer to the Heart," "The Spirit of Radio," and "Tom Sawyer"), and allowed them to weather every fad from '70s riff rock to '80s synth mania to '90s grunge. But shortly after the last date of their 1997 Test For Echo tour, the band's career was put on indefinite hiatus after the tragic deaths of Peart's daughter and wife. As befitting longtime friends, Lifeson and Lee made Peart's emotional well-being priority one, and left him to decide when - and if - Rush would resume work.

Early in 2001, the band members settled into a small Toronto studio and proceeded to work on their 17th studio album, *Vapor Trails* (Anthem/Atlantic). Much to the delight of Lifeson - and fans of his guitar work - the record is completely devoid of keyboards, which freed him to strap on approximately 50 guitars and lay down track upon track of what might be his most rabid and experimental playing ever.

When was the last time you guys played together before Vapor Trails?

July 4, 1997. After that, I saw Ged a fair bit, but he was busy working on his solo record. With Neil, it was a little more difficult. He was searching for answers and embarking on a new life. We kept in touch, but it was from a distance. Finally, Neil felt he was ready to refocus, so we went back into the studio. It has been a long recovery for everybody, but getting into the studio was terrific therapy for all of us.

Did you play guitar much during the band's time off?

I didn't pick up a guitar for about a year after (Peart's daughter) Selena's death. I couldn't find any joy in playing. But I slowly came around to finding solace in it as I spent more time in my home studio, writing and jamming with friends just for the fun of it. I also did a lot of recording with my son, who plays techno stuff on keyboard. Doing that helped me stay in shape - musically and mentally. It also gave me a chance to experiment. I got involved with some other projects, too. I produced some songs for 3 Doors Down, and I did some soundtrack work for a TV show called *Andromeda*. After Geddy finished his record, I took a gig producing a band called Lifer (covered in the Oct. '01 GP). A couple of months after that, we started on *Vapor Trails*.

What were your first few sessions like?

We didn't play anything for two or three weeks. We just sat and talked, and got a feel for

each other's frame of mind. We needed to see if everybody was really up for it. Eventually, we started jamming but we didn't have anything we were crazy about. The material seemed a little forced - nothing grabbed us. So we took a couple of weeks off, and when we came back, we felt fresh and more focused, and we were able to hear *songs*, not just parts.

Had your tastes drifted apart during the interim?

Not really. In the beginning, it was difficult to find common ground in terms of direction. I had just come off projects that were aggressive and youthful, and Geddy's record was quite melodic. So we had to figure out what kind of record we wanted to make. But, after spending those weeks talking about what we wanted out of it, we were in agreement on every aspect of recording. And when we finally started jamming, we were really feeding off each other. A lot of stuff on the album is from those jams - the original, played-once versions.

What is an example of a song that came from those first jams?

The heart of the album - including "Peaceable Kingdom," "Ceiling Unlimited," and "Nocturne" - came from early jams. For "Peaceable Kingdom," we just assembled the pieces and enhanced a couple of things. We added another clean guitar in the chorus, beefed up the middle section, and that was it. There are moments on all the songs that are from the original jams. I don't think there was one song that was completely re-recorded.

How did your writing and recording approach change during this project?

We used to take five or six weeks to write and do preproduction demos, and then we'd go into the studio and record everything all over again. In addition, each of us would bring in song ideas as starting points. But we found over the last couple of records that it's a lot more fun to come in the first day and start fresh. We wanted this album to be completely disconnected from anything we've done before, so there was no preconceived ideas. We wanted to capture the spontaneous, instinctive, emotional stuff that often gets lost when you do it the other way.

We spent a little time making sure we had good sounds, and we hit record. If we thought we could beat any of those first performances, we'd do the song again. If not, we knew we had something special. There's a magic created in those types of moments - a real spark - that's difficult to recapture.

Another difference is we used to be obsessive about deadlines. We'd allot a certain amount of time to record each instrument, and we wouldn't budge from those schedules. For *Vapor Trails*, we left things open-ended - which took off a lot of the pressure and allowed us not to be precious about anything. That might not sound like a big deal, but, for us, breaking out of the deadline mold was a big move - and we ended up constantly tweaking all the songs.

The lack of keyboards on this album certainly allowed you to stretch out on guitar.

Leaving the keyboards off this record was very important to me, and Geddy was open to that because he knew that I'd often worried about their presence in the band. So I spent a lot of time working on guitar parts that were richer in tonality and harmonic quality, and that satisfied our needs for the background stuff that synths would normally provide.

There is a new intensity in your playing.

My playing *has* taken on a different character, but I don't know how I would explain it. These days, I think of myself more as a song writer than a guitar player. I've always been very proud of the fact that this is my main instrument - and I *love* playing it. But when I pick up the guitar now, I don't play scales or little riffs. I look for parts that give some immediate emotional payback. I seem to have reached a point where I really crave writing song parts.

Does that mean you're more tuned into chords and rhythm work?

Yeah. On *Vapor Trails*, I played chords and let all kinds of open strings ring out, whether they were in key or not. I didn't care - it was more about the effect of the sound than the neatness of the notes. Having said that, Ged played a lot of chords on bass, and that opened up a *different* area for me, because it let me play more single-note lines.

How did you get that uncharacteristically dry and dark overdrive at the beginning of "Ghost Rider"?

I used my '69 Gibson ES-335 through a Hughes & Kettner TriAmp. The next time I played that part, I used my '76 ES-355. We were looking for this bluesy, melancholy nightclub feel. Something like that never would have appeared on a Rush record in the past - it's bare and raw, and there's nothing sophisticated about it. For the opening clean part, I played my 1981 Gibson Howard Roberts Fusion, and in the bridges I used a '59 Tele reissue from 1978 - which has been my main writing and recording guitar ever since I brought it. In the choruses I played a '95 Gibson Les Paul Custom and the 335.

What other guitars did you use on the album?

I used the Tele for about 70 percent of it, but I also had every one of my guitars in the studio - about 50 - and it was my dream to use them all, even if it was just for one little line. I came really, really close. The guitars I relied on most were the ones I already mentioned, as well as a '78 Strat, a '75 Les Paul Standard, a 2001 Les Paul Deluxe, a '76 Gibson EDS-1275 doubleneck, and a 1991 PRS CE 24. Paul Northfield, the producer also brought in some Danelectros that were possibly the worst guitars I've played in my life. They would not stay in tune, and they were very clumsy to play, but they had this loose, ratty sound that suited what we were going for in a few places.

Did you use a ton of amps too?

No, that was much simpler. When I produced the Lifer project, (guitarist) Aaron Fink had a Hughes & Kettner TriAmp, and I was really impressed with how it sounded. So I had the company send me a TriAmp, a zenTera, and a Duotone. I used the TriAmp for just about everything, and I used the zenTera a fair bit. I also used a Matchless Clubman and I pulled out my Marshall for a couple of things. I ran the Duotone, TriAmp, Clubman, and Marshall heads through a Marshall 4x12 with Greenback speakers.

What did you use the zenTera on?

I'm a real stickler for details, so I could tell you which guitars, amps, and strings gauges I used on everything - if I could just remember where I put my notes (laughs). The zenTera

has a warmth that's just awesome, and I used it in the second and third choruses of "Earthshine" for the soaring background parts that sound like strings. I also used it for the soloing and gurgling parts in the verses of "Ghost Rider".

When I used it for clean parts, I usually chose one of the Tweed settings, and for the mid-heavy, dirge-like stuff, I picked the Brit Hi Gain model. For the really over-a,ped stuff, it was the Ultra Gain model. I miked the amps with Shure SM57 positioned directly in front of the speaker's dust cap.

Did you do any direct recording?

In the second verse of "How It Is," there's a quick guitar line that we thought we'd run through Amp Farm, but we ended up running the guitar through a Neve 1073 preamp and a bunch of compressors.

We recorded everything to Emagic's Logic Audio - we've used it for a long time because we're comfortable with how it works - but we used three different digital conversion sources. For vocals and some drum parts it was an Apogee, for guitars and drums it was the converters in the Mackie D8B console, and for bass it was a Digidesign 888 interface. During the mixdown, we dumped a lot of the guitars to analogue tape to add some warmth.

This album has a ton of intertwining guitar parts - what are some of the tricks to doing that effectively?

I was just having fun. On any given song, I did five or six different parts for each section. Sometimes it was too much, but it was still fun to lay the parts down and be able to make the decision later as to what worked best. Knowing when you've got too much is the real trick.

On "Vapor Trail," for example, I started with a descending line on the 12-string side of my Gibson EDS-1275 doubleneck, and then I tried to find counterpoints with other guitars. prior to mixing, the 12-string was the primary guitar, and the tinkling guitars played a background role. But Dave Leonard, who mixed the album, decided to push the other guitars up and bring the 12-string down, which gave the song a stripped-down, naked feel That's not something I would have thought of, but I think it was the best mix of all because it gave the vulnerable nature of the lyrics more impact.

You used very few effects on the album.

Definitely - I didn't use any chorus for the first time since it was invented (laughs). For the swirling effect in the middle of "Out of the Cradle," I used a Hughes & Kettner Rotosphere. I also used a Boss digital delay a little bit, and some of the zenTera's effects, but most of the guitars are dry.

The main riff in "How It Is" has an Irish jig feel.

Yeah. When we wrote that song, it was very simple and plain, and I spent weeks trying to wreck it. I was doing all kinds of electric-guitar things, and nothing was working. I finally realized that it needed to stay simple.

But it's not completely simple.

For the middle part, I recored 21 tracks of mandola, with groups of four or five tracks playing similar parts. In one group, I was just rubbing my fingers across the strings. In

another, I was playing arpeggios. One group had a low line, and one had a fast, cross-picking thing. So there is an orchestra of mandola tracks that gave this beautiful, shimmering effect. We really liked it, so we said "Let's throw some of this on the front." The we thought, "Hey, you know what? 'Earthshine could use some of that too!" The mandola became the great utility instrument on the record. It crept into a lot of songs.

What gear are you bringing on the road?

For this tour, I've revamped my backline. I'm using two TriAmp half-stacks running in stereo for the main sound, and one or two zenTeras for super-clean or super-dirty tones with effects. I'll probably take my old T.C. Electronic 1210 Spatial Expander Stereo Chorus/Flanger, and replace my 2290 digital delays with multiple units such as the T.C. Electronic G-Force or G-Major. That'll pretty much be my whole rig - nice and simple.

Early on, your most obvious influence was Jimmy Page - who else touched you?

I was also influenced by Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, and Jimi Hendrix, but Page was definitely the biggest. He taught me about hard rock and metal. He showed me how free soloing should be, and how you can walk the line - and even trip over it a couple of times - but you don't have to let anything restrict you. If your solo's a little loose or out of tune, that's not a mistake - it's a good thing.

Pete Townshend was an enormous influence, too - I learned rhythm guitar from him. Even though The Who was essentially a three-piece band, they never sounded thin or empty. They always sounded heavy and powerful, even when Pete was playing an acoustic guitar.

I also love Dave Gilmour, Steve Hackett, Steve Howe, and Eric Johnson. As far as more recent players, I love Adam Jones of Tool - he's a great riff writer. A lot of his parts sound more difficult than they are - and that's a real art. Tool is probably my favorite band right now.

As Rush fans can be pretty nostalgic, do you ever feel pigeonholed by your past?

We've always been very aware of how intense our fans are - a lot of them know more about the band than I do - but I've never been driven by their likes or dislikes. It can be frightening how passionate and loyal they are, but it's also amazing to talk to a fan and realize you've been a positive influence in their life. That goes straight to your heart, and it leaves a lump in your throat. We take that into consideration by doing a three-hour show with material we haven't played in a long time. That makes the fans happy, and it keeps the material fresh for us. I think the real Rush fans realize we need to move forward - or at least side to side - and experiment with new things.

But do you still get psyched about playing "Closer to the Heart" and other Rush classics for the 100,000th time?

Well, some of those old classics are finally going to be retired. For this tour, we're also going to make the set really unusual by playing stuff we've never played before. Obviously, there are standards like "Tom Sawyer" and "The Spirit of Radio" that we need to play, but audiences react so powerfully to those that it's always a treat to play them.

Are there any downsides to working with the same people for 30 years?

No. I might have thought that if I didn't have the benefit of doing other projects. It's great to work with other people, but Rush works in a certain way, and we each realize that we shouldn't expect more than that. If I want to get darker and heavier, I feel perfectly at ease doing that outside the band. It's the same with Geddy. he likes a melodic approach to songwriting that sometimes doesn't fit with how I hear things, so he exercises that stuff outside the band.

How has your outlook on guitar changed over the years?

I don't play as much as I used to. I still absolutely love it, but it's not important for me to play everyday anymore. I don't think I *could*. I mean, I have so many other interests, and my head is in so many other places - even musically - that don't require me to play guitar. But, invariably, when I go into my studio to work on *anything*, I always start by playing guitar. If that leads to something work-wise, that's great. If not, at least it reconnects me to my studio and my instrument.

I've also noticed now that, even if I go a month or two without playing, it doesn't affect me like it used to. My fingers used to get really stiff, and there would be a lot of spooling-up time to get back into shape. But now, my fingers might get a little soft, but it doesn't take long to get up to speed. The other advantage of not playing for a while is that when I come back, I'll play stuff that I never played before. I find that really fascinating