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Sunday, August 22, 2004

Rush shows no signs of fading

By JANE STEVENSON -- Toronto Sun

It's hard to believe it has been 30 years since Toronto prog-power trio Rush released their self-titled debut.

Sometimes it seems even longer for guitarist Alex Lifeson, who -- with singer-bassist Geddy Lee and drummer Neil Peart -- wrap up the North American leg of their current 30th-anniversary tour with a sold-out show tonight at the Molson Amphitheatre.

"It feels more like 50 actually," joked Lifeson, 50, in an exclusive Canadian newspaper interview with the Sun, while seated in his tuning room backstage just hours before a show last week in Darien Lake, N.Y.

"At some point in the set we kind of look at each other and sort of shake our heads and can't believe that we're still doing this. In (Geddy's case), he and I, since we were 15 years old -- playing those high schools and those millions of bars throughout southern Ontario."

Twenty-four albums and some 35 million in sales worldwide later, Rush seems to have arrived at a place where they see no end in sight for their collective music-making.

STRONGER THAN EVER

And a lot of that has to do with the fact that they came close to disbanding during a five-year hiatus that ended in 2002 as Peart grieved the loss of his daughter in a car accident and his wife to cancer.

But it seems the trio has emerged from those bleak times stronger than ever -- both as a band and as friends.

"I think after the whole dark period surrounding Neil's tragedies, obviously we felt ... there was a good chance we were through as a band," said Lee, 51, in a separate exclusive interview with the Sun.

"And when we were able to reform and move forward in such a positive way with (the critically acclaimed 2002 release) Vapor Trails and through the last tour, I think we felt completely rejuvenated ... (with) a wonderful sense of having been through such a terrible thing together and coming out the other side still okay and still friends, and probably better friends than anything."

When Rush has run its course musically, the trio will instinctively know it, Lee said.

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"If anything would stop our band now, it would be just us deciding that we don't have anything else to say together, which I find highly unlikely, for awhile, but you never know. I never assume. If I've learned anything from that terrible period, it's that you can't assume anything. You never know what life is going to throw at you."

For example, Lifeson has had his own drama to deal with the past year following his arrest last New Year's Eve at the Ritz-Carlton in Naples, Fla., after an altercation between members of his family and sheriff's deputies.

After spending two nights in jail with a broken nose, he currently stands accused of two felony counts of battery on a law enforcement officer with the potential of a 10-year prison term if convicted.

Understandably, with the next court date Sept. 13, Lifeson has been advised not to talk about the specifics of the incident, but he did tell the Sun, "We're so close to working it out. There's an ongoing investigation that's looking much more promising. And they've agreed to hear the trial in October. Hopefully, we'll get it all resolved before it even goes to trial."

Much better news in the Rush camp is that to celebrate 30 years together, the group chose to record an eight-song covers EP called Feedback -- made up of 1966-1967 material by The Yardbirds, The Who, Buffalo Springfield and others.

Lee said the group wanted to have a new release in the bank before hitting the road again and also wanted to pay tribute to those groups that had influenced them as 13- and 14-year-old fledgling musicians.

"When a band of our age category goes out on tour without something new, sometimes it's categorized as a nostalgia thing. And we've never considered ourselves having retired. So we don't want to be considered to be one of those bands that is trading on our past. The other consideration was that we wanted to do something fun, something different, to celebrate our 30 years. And a friend of mine suggested, 'well, why don't you look backward, instead of forward? Why don't you find some songs that you guys used to play when you were in baby bands? And see about recording a couple of them just as an EP?' "

Still, it was an idea that almost went away as Rush got bogged down in 30th-anniversary tour rehearsals.

"We didn't really have time to go into the studio and then Alex and I started fooling around with some of these songs at my home studio and before you knew it, we had about eight songs," Lee said. "We were communicating back and forth with Neil, and everybody kind of

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got fired up and we got David Leonard to come in and produce it and we did the whole thing in three weeks. So it turned out to be really a lot of fun. And it was so nice to do material that we hadn't written, 'cause you don't have to worry whether it's any good! Time has proven that the songs are good, so it's one less worry. We just had to worry about getting great performances."

Never usually a problem for the three virtuoso musicians of Rush, but Lee said it wasn't always so.

"Thirty years ago, we tried to play those songs, and they were a struggle. Now we've picked them up so quickly and we looked at each other, 'wow, I guess we've figured out how to do what we do.' And there was a real sense of time -- how much time had passed."

Lee said he hopes the "relaxed, performance-based atmosphere" of making Feedback is repeated on the next Rush studio album, which the band likely won't start working on until next spring or summer.

After wrapping up the North American leg in Toronto tonight, the group still have three weeks of touring in Europe, starting Sept. 8 with a two-night stand at Wembley Arena in London.

"I hope we can take that forward with us into the next writing project that we do," he said. "We're always relaxed with each other but the writing gets very intense. And the writing sessions are quite long. We've become very picky. We push each other really hard to write the best we can."