

Rush's long road to triumph in Rio

The Canadian rockers tell James McNair about dark times

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The Canadian rock trio Rush have rarely been courted by the mainstream music press. Yet scores of gold, silver and platinum discs festoon the reception area of the of the band's management company in Toronto. These gongs vouch for a buoyant, 30-year career that has seen Rush shift 35 million albums and, along the way, fend off young pretenders representing every rock sub-genre from punk to nu-metal.

Vocalist Geddy Lee, guitarist Alex Lifeson and I are chatting. But Rush's lyricist and drummer - and, consequently, antidote to all drummer jokes - Neil Peart, is not with us. From 1980's *Permanent Waves*, Peart has honed an aphoristic, highly literate approach to lyric writing which has offered some brilliant meditations on the human condition.

"Losing It", from 1982's *Signals*, is a typically deft look at the failing powers of ageing creatives, while any couple that has argued late into the night will wince at the scenario Peart unpacks on "Cold Fire", one of the stand-out tracks from the 1993 release, *Counterparts*.

But on 10 August 1997, Peart lost his teenage daughter and only child, Selena, in a car crash. Ten months later, his wife, Jackie, died of cancer. This led to a long hiatus for Rush. "Neil was completely lost", says Lifeson. "We all were. It's amazing how much dies in you at such a time, and how vulnerable you can feel."

"The only good thing that came out of it was the deepening of our friendships," adds Lee. "It also made us realise what was important."

For months, the grief-stricken drummer did nothing. But then Peart motorcycled across North America and Mexico alone, later documenting his experiences in his book, *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road*. "While he was out there, we were concerned about him daily", says Lifeson, "but we also knew that Neil wasn't a reckless person."

In 2002, when Rush finally returned with the *Vapor Trails* album, it bore testimony to Peart's courage and determination. A fixture on "greatest drummer in rock" lists throughout his career, Peart had barely shaken a maraca in five years. Before recording again, he had the daunting task of re-learning his instrument.

"The first day we started work on the album", recalls Lifeson, "Neil was driving into Toronto from Quebec. He said that the closer he got to Toronto the more grey and foreboding the skies got, and the more he felt like turning back. But, as the album was nearing completion, I remember him getting the artwork together. He'd come so far in the space of a year, you know?"

Given what Peart had been through, Lee and Lifeson were curious to read the lyrics that their drummer had penned for Vapor Trails. "As ever, they turned out to be fantastic", says Lee, "but it was a tough call. I wanted to be a sounding-board for Neil while offering a more universal context for the listener. We had to make the story not just Neil's, but one which said: 'These kinds of tragedies happen to people, and this is how we might try to recover from them.'"

If Lee seems particularly attuned to the notion of recovering from family tragedy, it's hardly surprising. His parents and most of his aunts and uncles spent time in Auschwitz and Belsen. He explains that his mother's account of her time in the concentration camps - and in particular her fear that she and her fellow prisoners might be the last ones left alive - was what inspired Peart's lyric for "Red Sector A", a highly emotive track from 1984's *Grace Under Pressure*. "I love singing that song, because I feel that I'm expressing something genetic," says Lee.

Rush went on to tour Vapor Trails, filming a truly spectacular end-of-tour gig at the Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro for their new DVD, *Rush In Rio*. It's a joyous and heartfelt performance, and the bit where 60,000 Brazilians try to sing along with the more ungainly parts of the instrumental "YYZ" is almost worth the price of the recording alone.

In the essay which accompanies the DVD release, it's heart-warming to read Peart's recollections of the night in Hartford, Connecticut when Rush took the stage for the first time in five years: "A few times during the show we looked at each other and shared a quick smile, an eloquent expression that stopped time for an instant and conveyed so much understanding, so much relief, and even a little joy."

Shortly before the publication of *Ghost Rider*, Peart remarried. But Lee and Lifeson still protect him, which is why they don't expect him to face interviews in which upsetting questions might arise.

Earlier this year, both Lee and Lifeson turned 50. Lifeson says that "physically, he has begun to notice a difference", while Lee admits to being bothered by the notion that he's now as close to 70 as he is to 30. For all that, both seem content. Lifeson enthuses about wine-tasting and Lee is excited about a cycling holiday in Vietnam.

"As you get older", says Lee, "the great fortune of a little bit of success is that it allows you to accept yourself. You learn to utilise your time to explore other facets of your personality, as opposed to obsessing about what you didn't become."

The two-disc DVD 'Rush in Rio' is out now on Sanctuary Visual Entertainment