

Rush Return From Tragic Hiatus Sounding More Like Tool

Vapor Trails at least partially influenced by today's heavy rock bands.

By Jon Wiederhorn

Rush
Photo: Atlantic

The song "One Little Victory" starts with flailing militaristic drums, followed by a churning down-tuned guitar riff that drips with angst. It sounds like Tool covering P.O.D.

Strangely, it's Rush, a band that was around when Judas Priest and Iron Maiden were considered "new metal" and Rush members Geddy Lee (vocals/bass), Alex Lifeson (guitar) and Neil Peart (drums) were articulate mavericks carving out their own iconoclastic space. Some things never change.

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The track is from *Vapor Trails*, due May 14, and it's a major triumph for Rush. Not only does it represent a commitment to remain sonically relevant, it marks the confident return of a band that's been off the radar for more than five years.

"That song, like most of our songs, is a fortunate accident," Lee said. "Musically, it was born out of Alex spending a few hours in the evening throwing a whole bunch of wild ideas down on tape and me being able to take them and play with them and try to create a structure out of them that I got off on.

"And then when the right lyric came by I realized there was a real simpatico between the concept of victory and that song. So for me, it's just about success being measured by inches as opposed to miles. And I thought in some way it very succinctly wrapped up how we feel about just being able to be back on track and functioning again."

Many bands take off four or five years between albums to rediscover their families, indulge in side projects or just decompress. Rush's half-decade hiatus was completely unplanned, though. In 1997 Peart's 19-year-old daughter died in a car accident; the next year his wife Jackie died from cancer.

"When his daughter was killed, it was a very horrible time and their grief was unbearable," Lee said. "Neil and his wife left the country to grieve," and just when the drummer had started to come to terms with the loss, Jackie died "and it began another kind of devastating period that was very hard for him to get a grip on."

Again Peart reacted by fleeing, only this time there was no clear destination. As he details in the song "Ghost Rider," he hopped on his motorcycle and hit the highway. Since Peart is no longer granting interviews, his bandmates have had the task of explaining his acts and motivations.

"He's always been kind of a solitary figure, and he functions very well on his own, so in a way it was natural for him to do that," Lee said. "He was trying to be inspired by what he saw and breathe the world in a little bit and hope that would be some sort of medication for him."

For more than two years Peart rode. Then in 2000 the drummer fell in love again and got remarried. "That was really

good for him and started turning his life around," Lee said. "Had that not happened, I'm not sure we'd be sitting here talking."

Since Peart had retreated from the music scene for years, he was sorely out of practice and had to work hard to regain his groove.

"He was a little guarded because he wasn't sure if he was going to be able to handle it," Lifeson said. "He came back at a very gray, cold time of the year to a city that had a lot of dark, painful memories for him. So to be there for a long time caused some apprehension in his heart.

"But I don't think it took him long to get caught up in the familiarity of doing this again, and he loves working in the studio. It's always been his favorite part of the Rush experience. ... Once he started really playing his drums, it made him feel good."

Vapor Trails is autobiographical, but instead of writing about the trauma in his life, Peart was inspired by the elusive powers of recovery and redemption he discovered during his ordeals, which prevents the disc from being a downer. And Lee's and Lifeson's immediate songwriting give the material the kind of urgency Rush haven't had since 1981's *Moving Pictures*. To a certain extent, the band's decision to eschew sprawling prog-rock for more direct musical paths is the result of the simple, heavy music that's been flooding airwaves.

"I don't think you can help but be influenced by the music around you," Lifeson said. "I think it seeps into our music in the way we apply it to the stuff we write and how we want it to sound and the impression of it. But when Ged and I sat down and started playing, we didn't think of anything. We needed to rock and we needed to play hard, I think."

"We wanted to find some passion in ourselves and make the music express how much we appreciate still being here," Lee concluded. "There's probably no record where we took less for granted than this one."

This report is from MTV News