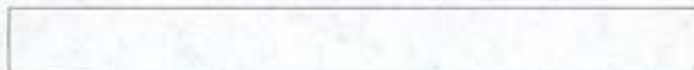


## Still a Rush

New CD 'Vapor Trails' shows Canadian trio is going strong again after personal tragedies

By Steve Morse, Globe Staff, 5/10/2002

Rush singer Geddy Lee pauses for a moment. "The band is on quite a high at the moment," he says. "But life has told us that it can be unpredictable."



That's an understatement.

Few other bands have ever had to face what Rush has dealt with in recent years. The Canadian power trio nearly called it quits after double tragedies befell drummer/lyricist Neal Peart. His daughter was killed in a car accident, and he lost his wife to cancer soon afterward in 1998.

"We never were sure that Neal would regain his spirit and come back to work, but he eventually turned a corner in his life," says Lee. "Everything has been an adjustment for him, but he got remarried in the past year. And every day he's stronger and more positive."

Rush's new CD, "Vapor Trails," is out Tuesday, followed by a tour coming July 12 to the Tweeter Center. The CD - the band's first studio effort in six years - is a hard-rocking disc in a career that has seen Rush sell 35 million albums.

"There's a passion and intensity on this record that reminds me of our earlier record '2112.' There was something about the spirit of that record that I find on this one, too," says Lee. "And we were desperate to prove to each other that we could still rock."

Not that it was easy. Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson made solo albums during Peart's hiatus, but Peart didn't touch his drums for years after the family tragedies. Instead, he jumped on his motorcycle and did some extensive touring of North America, going as far north as Alaska and as far south as Mexico.

From those travels came the new song "Ghost Rider," a blistering number with Peart's lines "Keep on riding north and west, then circle south and east/ Show me beauty, but there is no peace for the ghost rider/Shadows on the road ahead, shadows on the road behind/ Nothing can stop you now."

Nor was it easy when Peart and his mates entered a studio in Toronto. "Neal's emotions were quite close to the surface, so it seemed prudent to move slowly," says Lee, adding that Peart has declined interviews because he doesn't want to have to keep revisiting the story.

"For the first three or four weeks back together, we did much more talking than playing."

to be handled delicately, Lifeson says. The guys spent the first two weeks in the studio just talking. The first jam sessions yielded little.

"There were a few nuggets, but a lot of that stuff in the first couple of months was not really impressing us. It all sounded a little tentative and a little old hat," Lifeson explains. "There was some nervousness on my part. It was hard with such an open-ended schedule. Both Neil and I are Virgos, so we're very structured. It was tough to make decisions."

After a break and lots more jamming, Rush rediscovered its groove. The project progressed at a snail's pace. Fourteen months later - which is longer than even Metallica takes - and the record still wasn't done. The band members went their separate ways, leaving Lee to wrangle the mastering process. Glitches were found, much hair-pulling and long-distance phone calls ensued and the singer discovered to his horror that after all that gruelling effort, he didn't even like the album. Lee succumbed to a classic case of "tunnel vision," Lifeson says.

"I got away from it. I had to. When I came back and listened to it again, it was the first time I actually heard the songs. I called Geddy and he was very despondent. He didn't think the record was sounding the way we wanted it to. I said, 'Don't worry about it. Stop listening to it. Don't think about it. Then come back and listen to it objectively.' He did and now he's feeling very much better about it."

Vapor Trails isn't any departure from Rush's usual art rockin' sound. The difference this time - aside from the lack of keyboards - is the lyrics, much more personal than Peart's usual spacey ramblings. For every reference to "stratospheric traces of transitory flight" there's a more down-to-earth lyric like, "There is never love without pain." It might be the most direct line he's ever written.

"This record to me is a very positive record," says Lifeson. "It's about optimism and hope and recovery and moving forward."

That says it all for the current state of Rush