

It's Rush hour again

On tour after a five-year absence, the members of Rush weren't sure they still had it. They do.

JORDAN ZIVITZ
The Gazette

Thursday, October 17, 2002

LORRAINE HJALTE, CALGARY HERALD

Singer-bassist Geddy Lee displays the old Rush fire in Calgary last month. The band's current tour boasts the most comprehensive song selection of its near-30-year career.

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In the last few years, there have been no guarantees for Rush. No guarantees that the Toronto-bred trio would record another album, and once Vapor Trails materialized last May after the longest layoff of the band's career, no guarantees the onstage chemistry would still be there.

"We hadn't played together on a stage since 1997," vocalist-bassist Geddy Lee said Tuesday from Washington, D.C. "I know that's not a long time for some bands, but for us it was an eternity."

Every Rush fan knows the story by now: after the tour in support of 1996's Test for Echo, drummer-lyricist Neil Peart lost his daughter in a car accident and then his wife to cancer (or to a broken heart, as he put forth in his recent memoir Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road). Rush went on an indefinite hiatus, and while Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson were hopeful the group would reconvene, their primary concern was naturally for their friend's recovery.

After Lee and Lifeson received a call from Peart regarding, as Lifeson said in an interview earlier this year, "the possibility of maybe thinking about possibly talking about maybe working again," the arduous birth of the group's 17th studio album began. Once the 14-month labour drew to a close, Lifeson embraced the finished work - a remarkably rugged collection, considering the group's legendary regard for mathematical precision. Lee wasn't so sure. In conversation two days ago, he still reserved judgment.

"I haven't listened to it since we finished it," he said. "You spend 14 months making a record, and the last three weeks are so intense, and you're dealing with such minutiae, that it obscures the over-all picture. ... After some time, I think I'll be a better judge of it."

Enough time has passed - almost 30 years in some cases - for Lee to judge Rush's previous albums with an impartial ear. In preparing a set list for the Vapor Trails tour, Lee and Lifeson listened back through the band's catalogue - through the sci-fi parables of the 1970s, the synthesizer sheen of the 1980s and the return to power-trio grit in the 1990s - to glean overlooked numbers and evaluate fan favourites for possible dusting-off.

"Some of (the albums), like Hemispheres (1978), for example, I was amazed at how good it still sounded and how interesting it was musically - if a bit pretentious, perhaps. Nonetheless, I thought it had some vitality. And I thought Power Windows (1985) was very impressive in its sonic scope. And then other records, like Presto (1989), disappointed me from a sonic point of view and from an energy point of view."

If a Toronto concert in July was any indication (and it surely was, considering the band's rep for tightly formulated set lists), the Vapor Trails tour boasts the most comprehensive and imaginative song selection of Rush's stage career, with barely any albums left unrepresented.

There are some stand-bys familiar from almost every tour, but there are also songs that have been out of commission for years (or decades) - including an encore medley that, if held over from the tour's first leg, will have longtime fans picking their jaws off the Bell Centre floor when the lights come up.

"It's funny - you would think we would have had more difficulty bringing them back, but ... some of those older songs that are all full of rock and sci-fi silliness seem to be the most fun to play," Lee said with a laugh. "It was like on the tour for Test for Echo when we decided to play all of (the 20-minute title track from 1976's) 2112. When we first started rehearsing it, we were chuckling: 'Oh, we can't really play this.' Then after about three shows, we just loved it. It just felt so right to do it."

While some chestnuts have been jettisoned to make room for bolder selections, at least one signature song - Tom Sawyer - is untouchable.

"I think (taking it out of the set) would be blasphemy. Some songs you've got to play - Tom Sawyer you've got to play. And Tom Sawyer we want to play, in all fairness. It's probably our single greatest pop song." Laughter ensues on both ends of the phone line. "If you can call it a pop song - it's about as close as we ever got."

After the tragedies suffered by Peart, there's something victorious about Vapor Trails and the current tour. While the group is obviously less fragile than it was a few years ago, Lee remains cautious when discussing Rush's future.

"We're optimistic about making more music together, but we're realistic in the fact that we have been together for almost 30 years and the clock is ticking. ... Certainly there may be a couple more records in us, but we just take it one step at a time. If I've learned anything from my life in the last six or seven years, it's that life is completely unpredictable."

In the meantime, there's a tour to finish, one that Lee says has been rewarding for everyone involved - yes, including Peart. ("I've never seen him smile so much on tour in my life, so contrary to popular belief I think he is enjoying himself.")

"We were all pretty optimistic, but we didn't know what would happen when we stepped out on stage again, didn't know if we can still do this. And now we know we can - and that we can do it and love it."

Rush performs tomorrow at 7:30 p.m. at the Bell Centre. Tickets cost \$39.50 to \$79.50. Call (514) 790-1245.

jzivitz@thegazette.southam.ca