

Rush on the road again

By [KIERAN GRANT <mailto:kgrant@sunpub.com>](mailto:kgrant@sunpub.com) -- Toronto Sun

If there's one word that's never applied to the music of Rush, it's "rushed."

The elaborate scope. The mathematical precision. The intricate melodies and hairpin time changes.

Rush at their best used accuracy the way other bands used abandon. And, in their own painstakingly thought-out way, they rocked.

It's a bit of a shocker, then, when singer-guitarist Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson point out that new disc Vapor Trails -- their 17th -- was the first time the band spent more than a couple of months preparing an album.

"We used to laugh at people who took a long time to make a record," a characteristically collected Lee, flanked by Lifeson in the downtown Toronto offices of Rush's management company, says recently.

"We'd wonder, 'How can they stay interested?'"

Much has changed for Rush since those days.

In fact, it's a wonder the band, specifically drummer and principal lyricist Neil Peart, are still standing at all.

The May release of Vapor Trails marked the trio's return from a half-decade absence -- a fissure in their 30-plus-year career that followed the death of Peart's daughter in a 1997 car accident, and the loss of his wife to cancer a year later.

Lee completed his debut solo effort, My Favourite Headache, in 2000.

Still, when Peart returned that year ready to play, it took time for Lee and Lifeson to re-evaluate their approach.

With the band's internal rhythm forever changed and their bond with each other tested and tightened, they found the old methods just didn't apply anymore.

"It was such an aberration, this pause," Lee says. "We were rusty, for lack of a better word. Neil didn't play his drums for five years, with the exception of one time where he went in to see if he had any heart to play and realized he didn't, so he put the sticks down and left it.

"I went immediately from my solo record into the long session for this record. I felt very confident but I was a bit fried. Alex was in good musical shape. So it was clear to me that we were not in sync. We were not playing particularly well and the material sounded run-

of-the-mill. Outwardly we were pretty up, but inwardly I was feeling quite disappointed. Neil kept wondering, 'Why haven't those guys brought me any music? I've written them lots of lyrics. What's going on in there?'

"But we kept bolstering each other," Lee says. "We laboriously started to wind ourselves into shape. It took a few months before we got past that stage of forcing it and trying to make it sound great. We said, 'Look, this is a long-term project and we have a lot of recovery to do.'

"Coming off a solo record that took a year-and-a-half, I'd already seen the benefits of not being in such a hurry."

Rush's tight deadline soon dissolved as they stretched their legs in the studio. Songs were worked out casually and intuitively as the band filtered through jams and passages.

"I was judging everything by the way we worked in the past," Lifeson says with a chuckle. "We'd give ourselves six or seven weeks to write a whole record and go into the studio. (This time) Geddy all along said, 'It's hard, but let's not worry about that. If it takes us five years to make this record, so what?'

"We ended up working as intensely as we ever have for three times as long. A lot of the music was spontaneous. In some cases there are songs that are made almost entirely of those first moments of a piece. I love that idea. It's pure instinct, and truly from the heart. We made it our criteria that if we can't better the performance and maintain the energy, we'd leave it. We wouldn't belabour it and spend three days on one 30-second passage. That's crazy."

Says Lee, "It was, 'F--- the sound. Keep the spirit.' "

It's that sense of spirit that runs through Vapor Trails.

Arguably Rush's best album since 1982's *Signals* -- and certainly their heaviest since then -- it reclaims much of the musical territory the band gave up during their prog-lite phase in the late '80s and early '90s. At the same time, it sets out on a relatively raw and edgy new course.

Lee likens the disc to their 1976 breakthrough *2112*, the most widely revered Rush album alongside 1980's *Permanent Waves* and 1981's *Moving Pictures*, which spawned respective classics *The Spirit Of Radio* and *Tom Sawyer*.

"There's something about the intensity of *2112* that I can feel on this one," Lee says.

Vapor Trails is also Peart's most personal and important statement as a songwriter. After having a lifetime's worth of dread packed into a couple of years, he surfaces sounding both haunted and perseverant. Accounts of escape, self-examination, and existence are all over the record, all carefully veiled as if to avoid anything too harrowing.

Peart, who chose to sit out promotional interviews until his personal tragedies are less central to the story, writes in the first-person more than usual.

"There was a tremendous degree of intimacy involved in the lyrics originally," Lee says. "It was a difficult task as a singer and co-writer to find a way to interpret that correctly in a way that allowed me to feel or learn what he had learned. That took a bit of shaping -- adding some light and universality to it so that anyone could listen to it and apply their own experience. I thought it was important that that happen without belittling or reducing the autobiographical nature of the songs. Some of it was absolutely appropriate and moving in the first person."

Was this album an exorcism for Peart and Rush?

"Exorcism is too weak a word," he says. "It's not appropriate because an exorcism gets rid of something, and what he went through cannot be gotten rid of. He's gone through the worst thing imaginable that a human can go through and still be standing up. He has come through it, and this is another step in his learning how to re-enter life -- to regain his spirit is the best phrase I could use. Music is spirit. And when your spirit is taken from you, there's no music. This album is evidence that his spirit has returned."

Lee and Lifeson have discovered things about themselves, both professionally and personally, through the revamped Rush.

"With every project now I try to bring a lot of life into it," Lee says. "I try to work sort of normal hours and make sure I'm home for dinner so there's more connection with life. There was a time with Rush where as soon as work started, all other forms of life ended. I don't want to give those things up anymore. I can't function well when I miss my kids, my friends ... my Wednesday night doubles game."

Could Rush have made Vapor Trails 20 years ago?

"I don't think we'd have finished it," Lee says. "I don't think I could survive any longer the way Rush used to make records. At the moment there's an incredible amount of respect and feeling for each other, and a lot of consideration ... there's now a great bond between us."

He adds, "We make music that we get off on -- and we assume, right or wrong, that if we love it then at least a portion of our fans will, too. We've been wrong many times!"

"We've always said, 'If we love it and it's successful, fantastic. If we love it and it fails, we always have that.' If you go down the road making records for someone else and it fails, you have nothing. You failed completely."