

**Rush, "Vapor Trails" [Atlantic]**

Rush has never been a critical darling, to say the least. Go ahead - ask the band's fans if they care. Rush has endeared itself to a worldwide audience numbering in the millions without the aid of MTV or commercial radio support.

"Vapor Trails" is the band's first effort in six years. It's a masterpiece, a forward-looking progressive heavy rock album that represents a new plateau in the virtuosic trio's canon.

When drummer and lyricist Neil Peart lost both his daughter and his wife in 1997, the band went on hiatus, giving Peart time to heal and concentrating on their friendship rather than their band duties. Peart's sadness is palpable in spots throughout "Vapor Trails," particularly in the tracks "Stars Look Down," "How It Is" and "Nocturne," but the album is notable for its life-affirming lyrics and its sense of striving for grace under pressure.

"Vapor Trails" is an instant classic. The band, always given to personal and musical exploration and never content to rest on its laurels, has made a bold musical statement here. Vocalist/bassist Geddy Lee has never sounded better; here, he blends vocal harmonies into rich aural tapestries. Lee's vocal melodies are complex but extremely hook-heavy, something that hasn't always been the case throughout the band's career.

Drummer Peart is all but peerless in the rock world. Throughout the record, he plays like a man possessed, blending fire, passion and technique like only he can. Guitarist Alex Lifeson - always underrated, it's fair to say - has virtually re-created his guitar style, opting to forgo traditional guitar solos for a wash of intricate rhythmic work and chordal soloing. The effect is unique.

"Vapor Trails" is a brilliant hard rock album, one of this band's finest. It arrives in stores May 14. The band hits the road June 28 and plays Darien Lake Performing Arts Center on July 7.