

RUSH

Album Title: Vapor Trails

Producer(s): Rush, Paul Northfield

Genre: ROCK

Label/Catalog Number: Atlantic 83531

Source: PRINT

Originally Reviewed: May 18, 2002

The blaze of metal-edged guitar licks Alex Lifeson unleashes during this disc's intro were surely fueled by pent-up anticipation for Rush to start jamming again. In fact, that same blast of energy welding this CD of new material together resonates long after the last crash of drummer Neil Peart's cymbals. After a six-year hiatus, Rush seems more concerned with preserving its musical empathy than exploring a vastly new direction: Vapor Trails echoes the passion of 1993's *Counterparts*, albeit with a more back-to-basics sensibility (there are no keyboards and overdubs are kept to a minimum). Peart's lyrics are both confessional and celebrational, and few can match his still-precise drumming technique. Lifeson's playing is freer and bolder; Geddy Lee handles his bass/vocal chores with equal aplomb. The more time one spends with Vapor Trails, the richer and more nuanced it becomes. Consider this an absolute triumph.—CLT

VAPOR TRAILS
Rush
(Anthem/Universal)

By [PAUL CANTIN <mailto:pcantin@canoe.ca>](mailto:pcantin@canoe.ca) -- JAM! Showbiz

DISC INFO

GENRE: Heavy rock **FORMAT:** CD **ENHANCED:** No **NO. OF DISCS:** 1

RELEASE DATE(S): May 14, 2002

PRODUCER(S): Rush with Paul Northfield

NOTES: 1. Six years and a whole lot of water under the bridge, Rush returns with their first album since "Test For Echo."

2. Written and recorded in a protracted 14 month process in Toronto, with producer Paul Northfield (Moist, Ozzy Osbourne, Hole, April Wine) drafted in to help with the home stretch.

3. Hugh Syme, the graphics wizard behind some of Rush's most indelible covers ("2112," "A Farewell To Kings," "Moving Pictures"), returns to the fold with a typically eye-catching design.

POINTED REMARKS

Vapor trails, those milky-white exhaust streams that streak and fade across our skies, can only show us where the pilot has been, not where he's going. Where Toronto heavy rock legends Rush have been in recent history is all over this new album, but its real value is how it suggests a band looking forward, while drawing lessons from a difficult past.

Ignoring drummer/lyricist Neil Peart's brushes with tragedy (he lost his wife to cancer and his daughter to an auto accident in the years since Rush's last album) makes no more sense than dwelling on it unduly. Suffice it to say that Peart's trials have informed his work and prodded him to produce just about the last thing you'd expect -- a searingly personal set of songs.

Gone, largely, are the intellectually challenging, conceptually dense works of past Rush albums, to be replaced with often intensely private insights.

"Pack up all those phantoms/Shoulder that invisible load/Keep on riding north and west/Haunting that wilderness road," Peart writes on "Ghost Rider," which could detail his own restless search for answers.

On "Ceiling Unlimited," bassist Geddy Lee voices Peart's ambivalence about responding to life's challenges: "The slack-jawed gaze of true profanity/Feels more like surrender than defeat ... The vacant smile of true insanity/Dressed up in the mask of tragedy."

"Stars Look Down" rails against fate ("Does it seem like a lifetime ago/That you looked with pride on your world of peace?"); "How It Is" wrestles with pessimism ("See the bright tomorrows/Give way to resignation ... I feel the day has possibilities"); and "Vapor Trail" stares unblinkingly into the great void ("Fading away like an hourglass/Grain by grain/Swept away like voices in a hurricane").

Tilting at the Temples of Syinx, this ain't. But Peart has accomplished the neat trick of purging his personal demons by framing his observations as universal truths without ever slipping into solipsistic obscurity.

Musically, too, "Vapor Trails" sees Rush breaking new ground and escaping from the baroque, rhythmically complex arrangements of past efforts. The relatively streamlined sound contemporizes Rush's style without pandering to fashion. Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson have learned to write and play with greater economy than their critics would ever give them credit for.

"Earthshine" opens with arena-rock riffing, but introduces what sounds like a chorus of balalaikas furiously strumming behind the chorus. Lee's bass intro to "Ghost Rider" will raise a knowing smile from fans of The Tragically Hip's "Blow At High Dough", and Lifeson's staccato chording on "Freeze" powers the song to greater heights.

Lee's melodic gifts, which bloomed on his solo album "My Favorite Headache," are given a fine showing within the context of Rush's new music (and if you haven't warmed up to his distinctive voice by now, there's nothing on "Vapor Trails" that's likely to change your mind).

Peart -- whose furious runs through his jungle of percussion instruments had become a signature -- gets in on the less-is-more action, paring back his contributions with winning results. (Check out the herd-of-elephants intro he provides for "One Little Victory").

"Sometimes we freeze until the light comes/Sometimes we roll/And sometimes we rise/Sometimes we fight against the darkness," Peart writes on "Freeze."

"Vapor Trails" sees Rush rolling with the punches, rising above the tumult, and fighting valiantly against darkness. To paraphrase the title of the album's first single, in the end, they score something greater than one little victory.

RATING: 4 (out of 5)

SIMILARITIES: Well, nobody sounds like Rush.

BEST TRACK: "Peaceable Kingdom," which was originally intended to be an instrumental, was reworked after Sept. 11 into an uncompromising condemnation of both the perpetrators of terror and our own complacency. ("All this time we're hoping and praying we all might learn/While a billion other teachers are teaching them how to burn"). And, at over six minutes, "Freeze" is the kind of dense, expansive work that long-time Rush fans have been pining for.

WORST TRACK: The worst bit, for fans of the band, will have been the waiting, which is mercifully at an end.

THE BOTTOM LINE: To quote the leather-lunged intro from their early live album "All The World's A Stage": "I WANT YOU TO PLEASE WELCOME HOME ... RUSH!"

Track Listing

1. One Little Victory 2. Peaceable Kingdom 3. Ghost Rider 4. Ceiling Unlimited 5. The Stars Look Down 6. How It Is 7. Vapor Trail 8. Out Of The Cradle 9. Earthshine 10. Sweet Miracle 11. Nocturne 12. Freeze (Part IV of "Fear") 13. Secret Touch

TOTAL TIME: 67:15