

NEIL'S AGONY OVER

By WILL ROMANO

"I really don't know how he survived," says Rush bassist Geddy Lee of heartbroken drum legend Neil Peart. "He proved to himself and us that he hasn't lost anything."

May 12, 2002 -- Five years ago, Neil Peart was living a rock 'n' roll fantasy. A member of the mega-selling Canadian band Rush, Peart was considered one of rock's greatest living drummers. Then it all came crashing down. Within 11 months, Peart lost everything that was dear to him. His only daughter, Selena Taylor, 19, died in a car accident in 1997, then his wife Jacqueline Taylor - his high school sweetheart - succumbed to cancer the following year. A modern heir to drumming legends Gene Krupa, Max Roach and Keith Moon, Peart lost the will to play, and Rush, which had sold 35 million albums, went on indefinite hiatus. "It was one horrible tragedy after another," noted Ray Danniels, Rush's long-time manager. "[The cancer] came on suddenly, and his wife was gone in five months. It's amazing that the man got out of bed every day." But Peart has overcome the twin tragedies and is now set to return to the music scene. Behind his percussive force, Rush will release a new album this Tuesday, "Vapor Trails" (Anthem/Atlantic). With 13 tracks and more than an hour's worth of music, the new disc marks a resounding return for one of rock's great bands. "It's quite a meal," enthused Geddy Lee, the band's bassist and vocalist. "There's a certain level of intensity that exists from song to song." Peart's fiery drumming complement the grittiness of the CD. It's as if he hadn't missed a beat. "I really don't know how he survived," said Lee. "He proved to himself and us that he hasn't lost anything." Peart won't comment publicly on what he's been through, but perhaps his feelings can be divined from some of the lyrics he penned for "Vapor Trails." From the track "How It Is": *"It's such a cloudy day/Seems we will never see the sun/Still, the day has possibilities/See how it is and how it ought to be."* During his four-year absence, his bandmates immersed themselves in solo projects, while Peart - a world traveler who'd spent months in China and Africa - ventured out alone, pedaling his way through the U.S. on a cross-country bicycle tour. "Neil had to face his demons and spend some time alone," said Rush's guitarist, Alex Lifeson. "We kept the lines of communication open, to check in with him and see how he was doing." "Geddy and Alex have tremendous loyalty to Neil and they knew that when he was emotionally ready, their careers would again be on track," said Danniels, who also managed Van Halen for six topsy-turvy years. By 2000, the healing had begun. In September, Peart married Carrie Nuttall, an American photographer. The two settled in Los Angeles. Sensing the time was right, Lee and Lifeson began writing and jamming in early 2001, trying out new material that would later become "Vapor Trails." But the band, long known as perfectionists, had a long way to go before they were satisfied. "Being able to play together was one thing," said Lifeson. "Playing good stuff is another altogether." The added delicacy of Peart's losses created an uneasiness in the studio initially. "I think Neil was tentative and not very confident of his

abilities," said Lee. "It was important to create an atmosphere in the studio that was private and gentle and allowed him to be nurtured." Added Lifeson: "I think each of us have learned to grasp life and live it to the fullest."