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## Happy Trails

By MIKE ROSS -- Edmonton Sun

You know you've made it when your band becomes a punchline on a popular sitcom.

The characters on That '70s Show were detained at the Canadian border on the way back from a beer run, so they sweet-talked the Mounties (Dave Thomas and Joe Flaherty) by declaring, "We love Rush!"

There are Rush conventions where fans who also love Rush dress as their favourite band member. Geddy glasses are especially popular. I'm just guessing here. Rush itself has never turned up at Rush-o-Rama. "Feeling guilty" that they didn't attend the one in Toronto last year is as close as they've come. News that Rush has a new album, Vapor Trails, is greeted by some folks as the Second Coming, and by others - those who do not love Rush, mainly - as if Jerry Lewis was hitting the road again. Rush has a new album? You're kidding. Rush?!

Yes, Rush. There's a world tour, too. An Edmonton date "looks good" for mid-September. No promises.

This band has become such an icon that its members - regular Canadian guys Geddy Lee, Neil Peart and Alex Lifeson - have taken supporting roles in their own historical epic. They're rather like Pink Floyd, another popular cult band more famous as a unit than for its component parts. Lifeson is not likely to get mobbed while walking down the street - and he's fine with that.

"For us, the music is always the important thing," the guitarist says. "It's not the guys in the band - and we're pretty boring guys. We're just middle-class Canadians. We all have families. We all grew up with those middle-class kind of virtues. I don't feel like a rock star."

He doesn't look or talk or act like a rock star, either. In fact, Lifeson probably would've been content even if Rush ceased to exist. He could work on solo records (his 1995 Victor project is actually an improvement on Rush), putter in his studio with his son, produce other bands and indulge his favourite hobby - golf. It was left to drummer and lyricist Neil Peart, who lost his daughter to a car accident in 1997 and his wife to cancer the following year, to decide when or if Rush would get back together.

Says Lifeson, "Whether that day would come or not we didn't really know, but I suppose that Geddy and I felt that perhaps it wasn't going to come because Neil's recovery was, as you can imagine, difficult and long."

The call came, however: Start a new album in January 2001. No expectations. No deadlines. Take your time - and boy, did they ever. The first meeting after the hiatus had

to be handled delicately, Lifeson says. The guys spent the first two weeks in the studio just talking. The first jam sessions yielded little.

"There were a few nuggets, but a lot of that stuff in the first couple of months was not really impressing us. It all sounded a little tentative and a little old hat," Lifeson explains. "There was some nervousness on my part. It was hard with such an open-ended schedule. Both Neil and I are Virgos, so we're very structured. It was tough to make decisions."

After a break and lots more jamming, Rush rediscovered its groove. The project progressed at a snail's pace. Fourteen months later - which is longer than even Metallica takes - and the record still wasn't done. The band members went their separate ways, leaving Lee to wrangle the mastering process. Glitches were found, much hair-pulling and long-distance phone calls ensued and the singer discovered to his horror that after all that gruelling effort, he didn't even like the album. Lee succumbed to a classic case of "tunnel vision," Lifeson says.

"I got away from it. I had to. When I came back and listened to it again, it was the first time I actually heard the songs. I called Geddy and he was very despondent. He didn't think the record was sounding the way we wanted it to. I said, 'Don't worry about it. Stop listening to it. Don't think about it. Then come back and listen to it objectively.' He did and now he's feeling very much better about it."

Vapor Trails isn't any departure from Rush's usual art rockin' sound. The difference this time - aside from the lack of keyboards - is the lyrics, much more personal than Peart's usual spacey ramblings. For every reference to "stratospheric traces of transitory flight" there's a more down-to-earth lyric like, "There is never love without pain." It might be the most direct line he's ever written.

"This record to me is a very positive record," says Lifeson. "It's about optimism and hope and recovery and moving forward."

That says it all for the current state of Rush