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liveDaily Interview: Neil Peart of Rush

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July 30, 2004 03:49 PM - Rush is currently headlining its 30th anniversary tour, the band's first outing since the trek supporting 2002's "Vapor Trails."

Although the group--bassist-keyboardist-vocalist Geddy Lee, guitarist Alex Lifeson and drummer-percussionist Neil Peart--doesn't have an album of new material out, it recently released "Feedback," an EP of covers that includes The Who's "The Seeker," Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" and The Yardbirds' "Heart Full of Soul."

Over their three-decade career, the Canadian rockers sponged musical influences from progressive rock and fusion to funk and reggae, and persevered through a cloudy period after the well-documented tragedies of the late '90s, when Peart lost his daughter in an automobile accident and his wife to cancer less than a year later. The band hung tough and released "Vapor Trails," and the subsequent tour was documented on the Juno-winning CD/DVD "Rush in Rio."

St. Catharines, Ontario native Peart actually played piano before he took up drums at the age of 13. Besides being something of a drumming icon today, he also is Rush's lyricist.

liveDaily: So did you get your first drums when you were 13?

Neil Peart: No, no drums. For my 13th birthday, I got a pair of sticks and a practice pad. My parents said, "Once you show that you're going to stick with it for a year, then we'll get you some drums." That's the way that went down. Fair enough. I'd do the same thing.

Once you got that first pad, was it a galvanizing thing right away?

Oh yeah, it was before that, really.

When did you say to yourself, "This is what I'm going to do"?

Well, I was never that sweepingly unrealistic, but it certainly was what I wanted to do. And even without drums, I would take magazines and lay them out on my bed, and pretend they were drums and cymbals, and beat the covers off them. It became total obsession.

What was the idea behind "Feedback?"

Our vision was 1966, when we were teenagers. We just decided to pick songs from our youth that we liked and make a tribute album to the people we grew up on. For instance, we did "Summertime Blues" and kind of combined the arrangements of Blue Cheer and The Who, and did Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth," and this other

obscure '60s band called Love, a song called "Seven and Seven Is." All of us loved being freed from the material--in other words, not being responsible to think it up. And we did it our own way, of course, but we paid a little due respect to the times. We called the project "Feedback" because when Geddy and Alex were working on demos, they decided to have feedback and backwards guitar on every song.

After seeing the "Rush in Rio" DVD, it seems amazing those shows happened at all. Explain how they came together, the weather, and everything else.

We went there with the wide-open expectation that it would be out of our control, basically, and that we wouldn't have our usual tight reign on everything, technologically and personally, as we can in the United States or Canada. So we went there very much open-minded, with an attitude of: whatever happens, we'll deal with it along the way. There were three shows, all outdoors in big soccer stadiums, and it *constantly* rained.

The first day they couldn't get the monitor board working at all, and they were figuring out how to move the house mixing board down beside the stage so our front-of-house mixer could mix live sound and the monitors from the side of the stage. It was about problem solving. The electronics went out on the second night in Sao Paolo, where we were in front of 60,000 people and it had been raining off and on, and blowing rain right in our faces--it was surreal. It was something you might see in a video, but not in real life.

How did you deal with that?

That night in Sao Paolo--when all of the electronic drums and MIDI marimba and everything were gone--immediately my mind was thinking ahead, not only getting around the parts that night, because it was like, "Okay, what am I going to do *tomorrow* night? How am I going to play my solo without those things?" I'd be thinking ahead to the next song, "What do I do? Okay, I won't have that sound. Here's how I can imitate it or get around it or whatever." I was already starting to orchestrate a new solo that wouldn't have those things, because that's what you have to do.

And the next day in Rio, the trucks were late and didn't arrive until late afternoon, and we're filming and recording the last night of the tour, our one and only chance that we really wanted to capture on that tour. So this was the last and final chance under the most ... impossible is not too strong a word. No sound check. Minutes before we went on, [drum tech] Lorne [Wheaton] came up to tell me the electronics were actually working. They had no sound check for the recording truck, no test for the cameras, everybody had to adopt that attitude of, "Okay, here's what we do." And did.

One telling anecdote that I love, the carpet that we used on stage got so soaking wet during those days that we had to leave it behind. It was too heavy to ship home. It was so waterlogged that it would have cost way more than it was worth to ship it home, so we just left it there. It's in some Brazilian guy's living room. [laughs]

Without naming names, there are a lot of veteran bands putting out product that don't look like they're having near the amount of fun you were having on the DVD.

It was one of those magical nights, despite all. I not only remember that show now, I knew at the time it was going really well. And, yeah, in retrospect I really like the way the video came out. Alex spent a lot of work on the audio trying to rescue all that went wrong in that truck during the course of the show. There was a lot of technical fixing up to do that took him a lot of work. But in the final analysis it was a piece of work I'm proud of.