

Rush

Earlier this year singer-bassist Geddy Lee, drummer Neil Peart and guitarist Alex Lifeson released *Vapor Trails*, the first studio album from Rush since 1996, accompanied by their first tour in five years. So a look back is in order for the most unusually successful band in rock history - all 20 of its previous original studio and live albums is either gold or platinum despite having only one U.S. pop Top 40 single.

The Spirit Of Radio: Greatest Hits (1974-1987), (Mercury/UME), brings together 16 unedited Rush classics spanning the band's career on Mercury; tracks from 11 of its 12 studio albums on the label, each digitally remastered. The package also includes a 16-page booklet.

Formed in 1968 in Toronto, Canada, the power trio (with then-drummer John Rutsey) self-released a self-titled debut in 1974. Imports to the U.S. prompted Mercury to sign the band and re-release the album later that year. Peart then replaced Rutsey, and the triumvirate has been together ever since. Peart also took over the lyricist duties and his fascination with fantasy and grand themes became a trademark for Rush, as did Lee's high-pitched voice and Lifeson's guitar histrionics.

Be sure to check out the best of Rush on their new compilation, which will be released on February 11, 2003.

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What was the motivation for the latest album? What are the details on its release?

It's called the "Spirit of Radio." Well the motivation is (Laugh), ah, part of a contractual thing with Paul Egram with Mercury Records from our previous deal with them, which expired in 1990. So they have the rights to do a number of greatest hits or packaged records. So I think they wanted to put together something that represented some of our stronger radio songs over the course of the catalog. "Spirit of Radio" will be released February 11, 2003!

What is your set list like these days? How much do you blend the old stuff in with the new?

Um, actually ah, a fair bit of it. I would say probably 60%. Ah, 60% of the songs that are in the set when we tour are on this compilation.

What's the best thing about being rock stars? Money? Women? Money? Women?

Ah, rock star? (Laugh) I'm just a musician man, I just play guitar. Um, well there are certainly some wonderful things about being in rock music. For as long as we've been in it, that's for sure. I mean we started in 1968, that's when we were 15 years old. We'd get our first gig in September of that year. When we knew, I think 5 songs that we've played over and over and over again. We made \$10 bucks, the money got better. Um, I'm still with the same girl that I was with back then. That's a good thing too. Yeah, and it's been just wonderful to be able to continue writing music, making records, touring, never having to grow up. It's a wonderful advantage.

Do you get tired of playing certain songs?

To be honest with you, not really. We were on tour from mid-June until to the end of November of last year. And we put a set together; it's a 3-hour set, a lot of older material that we never played before. You know, I never got sick of it one night. It was such a joy to play every night. You get tired of some of the stuff, but I don't know, you kind of rise above it. The audience is getting into it so you feed off of that.

Alex, how did you get the nickname "Musical Scientist"?

I don't know, maybe it's our approach to the way we worked in the past. We were quite anal about recording. You know, we would do a take about a million times, work on a section of the song that was 10 seconds long until we got it absolutely perfect. And I think over the last couple of records we've gotten away from that and it's more about the feel now. If there's some looseness in playing, it doesn't really matter; it's all about how it feels. That's what's really important. So, hopefully we're sort of getting over that kind of reputation.

How do you know when you're there?

You just know it. It just feels right. It sits right. It's an intuitive thing. A lot of our last record was recorded that way. We jammed. Geddy and I would jam and we used a lot of those jams as the basis for those songs. So, Neil would record his drums and we'd keep the bass and the guitar from those jams and build on top of it. It was really great to be able to approach it in that way. It was a lot more organic.

Do you prefer playing small clubs or large arenas?

I'm much more comfortable in large arenas. I think we've been doing it for so long now that that is a comfortable format for us. We've played some small clubs on a European tour that we did 10 years ago. We

played some smaller venues in Germany, about 1,200 or 1,500 seats. It was okay, but I certainly don't have this great - or any of us really - desire to go back playing clubs.

Isn't that what you're trying to get away from (small clubs) when you're getting started?

Well, I'm a co-owner of a club in Toronto called the "Orbit Room." If we really jam them in, we get 100 people. So, I get my fix there if I want to get that kind of thing. There are a couple of great bands that play there through the week. I'll go in there and jam or sit-in with them.

With us, a lot of it's visual, so you need the space to be able to project all the rear screen stuff and all the other visuals.

What's it like to look out and see thousands and thousands of people?

It's amazing! At the moment, you don't really think about it. You're focused on what you're doing. Within the monitors, it's eliminated a lot of the excitement of the audience. As great a benefit as they are in terms of how you play and how in-time you are and how in-tune you are, you give up on getting the energy of the audience. We did a show in November in South Palo. We had 60,000 people, it's the biggest gig we've ever done. And, we came on stage and I pull my plugs out. I just had to hear it, because I couldn't hear anything. I mean I heard like "wahwahwahwah", the rumbling, but I pulled them out and "AH" I mean the hair stood up on the back of my neck. It was just incredible. It's very, very exciting.

What achievement in the band's long career are you most proud of?

Well, I think there have been quite a few. We've made a lot of records. We never expected to make as many records as we have when we started out. Certainly, when we started touring America when we got our first record deal. Um, the fact that we went through a very difficult period, ah, Neil's tragedy in his family, and having come back from it and having done a successful tour and made a record that we're very proud of. I think that's a huge accomplishment for us.

You're on the "South Park" movie soundtrack with Engelbert Humperdink. We spoke with him not too long ago and he loved doing "Lesbian Seagull." How did your group like doing "Oh Canada" with the kids?

Oh, we loved it! The problem with it is we got in at the tail end. I know Matt wanted to work it into the movie itself. But, he didn't get in touch with us until the last couple of weeks of their production. So it was all kind of a "rush" job but, ah - God I can't believe I just said that (laugh). But, it was great and he's a wonderful guy, very, very funny, very smart and it was really great.

What bands inspired your work?

Oh certainly in the beginning, Cream. Led Zeppelin of course was a huge inspiration. Jimi Hendrix, The Who, really that ilk of that period.

The Rush sound has been defined as prototypical, "Progressive" Rock. Are you comfortable with that title?

Well, you know, we've always considered ourselves as a hard rock band. I don't think we're a progressive rock band like some of them are. I don't know, you know it's, what's in a name like that? You know, why try to progress in terms of where our music goes and how we challenge ourselves in our writing. But I don't think stylistically we are really like those other progressive bands, maybe in the earlier years of our recording history.

Which new artists or bands impress you most?

Um, I like Tool a lot. Um, more currently, I haven't been listening too much lately.

If you could change one thing about the Music Industry in its current state, what would that be?

Yeah, that's a tough question. The music industry is in such a state a transition right now and the industry itself I sense is in a state of panic. They don't know what to do about file sharing, they were slow to pick it up, they were taking advantage of the consumer for a long time and its come back on the industry. What to change? Boy, I guess that whole attitude of how the industry works really. You know, they sell a product that's cost them very little and they charge an awful lot for it. So, it's not surprising it's all gone this way.

Where do you stand in the whole Napster debate?

You know, I think its theft whatever way you look at it. I know what it costs to make a Rush record and it's not cheap. So music is not free. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of your heart that goes into it, a lot of your sweat. You care very much about the way it's presented, the packaging we get involved in it. You know, the way our deal works is that we put the whole thing together and deliver it to the record company. So we're involved in every aspect of it. So, it's stealing when it comes down to that.

On the other hand, I understand how certainly with the generation, this younger generation, they don't want to spend \$19 on a CD that they know costs maybe 50 cents or a few dollars to make in terms of production.

And what the record companies are spending, you know, it's a business; they got to make money to spend money. At some point, you know all the things are changing. The record companies are asking bands to give them a piece of their touring. That's very, very wrong. It's really in a very strange state of affairs right now.

What's in your CD player right now?

My son's CD. It's "Contact". My son is 25 years old. He writes electronic music, he's got a couple different things that he does, different people that he works with. So, stylistically they are different. One's trancier, one's a little more rhythmic, more dance oriented. I help him. I use that term very loosely because he knows what he's doing. I play guitar on some of his stuff and then he rips it apart and samples it and moves it around and re-organizes the whole thing and makes it sound amazing. So I stay out of his way.

I was like, it's incredible because I have a studio and I let him in there. I'll spend some time doing a bunch of takes and then I'll go in and I'll start editing and he'll sit there quietly and then he'll get up and take over. And he'll do in minutes what took me an hour to do in a much more interesting way (laugh). So I've come to realize that I'm just there as a hired hand. When I finish playing, I'm supposed to go back to the couch and play Playstation 2 and eat chips (laugh). But it's so great to be able to do that with your kids. It's really, really a wonderful feeling.

What's the best thing that's happened to the band in the last 30 days?

We had a wonderful Chinese New Year dinner last night. That was a very wonderful positive thing. It was a beautiful experience. I can't begin to tell you. It was a 9-course dinner, served in reverse. We started with the main course first, which was venison and one (pronounced "ooh-nee") in a really light sauce with mashed turnips and then we kinda worked back. We finished with desert but the penultimate course was kind of like an appetizer crap dish at "Suser's" in Toronto. Suser Lee is a renowned chef, brilliant, very good friends with Geddy and his wife. So he goes down, you know, fairly often, even just to stop in and have a glass of wine. But Suser is an artistic genius when it comes to food. It's Chinese fusion and it's very, very authentic and individual and really, really great.

If you could have a meal with anyone in history, who and why?

Yeah, that's a really good question. I think, you know, I think it would be hard to pick a person. Um, Winston Churchill would be a fascinating person to sit down and have a meal with. A great orator, incredible history, especially in these times it would be amazing to get his perspective on what's going on in the world. It would be very, very interesting to hear what he would have to say.

Um, a light lunch with Jesus Christ wouldn't be bad (laugh). To get a sense of what he meant and where his whole story went. You know, how it changed from what he was trying to say I think would be very, very interesting. Well, there are two anyways.