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Canadian trio Rush refuses to give up

Friday, July 9, 2004

San Francisco Chronicle

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It is not by any means clear how Rush has lasted this long. The Canadian prog-rock trio, which celebrates the 30th anniversary of its first release with a pair of Bay Area shows this week, has done just about everything wrong.

Its early album covers were impaired with paintings of mutant owls and Salvador Dali knockoffs. Bassist and vocalist Geddy Lee sang in a high register that suggested that he had a badger attached to his testicles.

And then there were the songs -- horrendous little things like "By-Tor and the Snow Dog" and the six-part, 20-minute "The Fountain of Lamneth" -- sci-fi epics so far out even Pink Floyd would have found them too posterous.

If nothing else, wasn't the mere fact that they were a Canadian prog-rock trio enough? That should have put the brakes on their career within the first three minutes.

Even Lee -- whose speaking voice, incidentally, is pleasantly smooth --

is a little amazed the band made it this far. "When I listen to those records now, there are moments I love and moments where I go, 'What the hell were we thinking?' " he says. "You can almost smell the hash oil coming off them."

Yet while old peers like Styx and Asia have resigned themselves to playing between pig races and hot-dog-eating contests at county fairs, Rush is still able to pack major sheds.

It's all the more baffling because Lee, drummer Neil Peart and guitarist Alex Lifeson, who later came up with respectable FM rock staples like "Tom Sawyer" and "New World Man," never actually delivered a huge crossover hit like "Come Sail Away." They didn't even have a "Mr. Roboto."

"Maybe that's part of the key to our success," Lee reasons. "We never ran the risk of overexposure."

That's an understatement. Most of the critics

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hated Rush. And the ones that didn't simply ignored the band. Rolling Stone didn't review any of their albums until 1982, when it finally offered a measly two out of five stars for "Signals," calling it a "wasted effort."

Lee says he and the other members just took the punches and kept moving. "When you're young, you feed off of that stuff and it kind of stokes your fire," he says. "And if you stick around long enough, you get enough positive criticism that offsets whatever negative criticism."

The band's last studio effort, 2002's "Vapor Trails," earned a whole three stars from the rock bible.

But it's this stubborn determination -- the band has released 17 studio albums, four live discs and a handful of compilations -- that has earned Rush the kind of class-A obsessive lunatic fans that other bands dream about. Although chances are that fantasy wouldn't include a following made up mostly of grown men who are in love with comic books and video games.

But Lee says even that is changing. "A couple nights ago, there were girls in the front playing air drums and singing all the words," he insists.

It seems unlikely that Aerosmith's Steven Tyler would have to stop the conversation to make the same claim.

This is the first time Rush has officially acknowledged an anniversary. Its 25th was undermined by tragedy.

In 1997, shortly after completing a tour supporting the disc "Test for Echo," Peart lost his 19-year-old daughter, Selena, in a car accident. Less than a year later, his wife, Jackie, died of cancer.

The band stayed off the road for six years.

"It was just awful," Lee says. "I don't know how you get through that, but you do get through it. You just put one foot in front of the other and try to carry on with your life."

The experience took so much out of the members of Rush that their latest project, "Feedback," sees them regressing to the very beginning -- even before the high-minded heavy metal tendencies sank in -- with stripped-down covers of eight classic rock tracks by the likes of the Yardbirds, Buffalo Springfield and Love.

"It feels like we're wiping the slate clean," Lee says. "It was a good reminder to not overthink things. Sometimes our worst enemy is not just our intellect but our neurosis."

They were bound to get it eventually.

Rush plays at 7:30 p.m. Friday at Shoreline

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