

Tragedies alter outlook of progressive rock icons

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In the mid-'90s, if anyone had suggested that Rush would stop touring for five years during its heyday, no one would have believed it.

For more than 25 years, the Canadian prog-rock titans were tireless road warriors, often spending as many as 10 months out of 12 on the road, and releasing an album (sometime two) a year.

Rush survived the onslaught of disco, hair metal, new wave and grunge, racking up sales of more than 35 million records while continuing to fill large stadiums. The band even earned the respect of some critics -- once a band nemesis -- along the way.

Then in 1997 the unthinkable happened. Within the space of 11 months, drummer Neil Peart's 19-year-old daughter, Selena Taylor, was killed in a single-vehicle car accident on the way back to college, and her mother, Jacqueline Taylor, Peart's common-law wife of 22 years, died of cancer.

Not surprisingly, Peart went into emotional shock. Unable even to think about sitting behind his drum kit, he packed up and left Toronto, selling the house where he had lived for many years, to wander the open roads on his motorcycle in an effort to come to terms with what had happened.

Eventually, he relocated to the Central California coast near Santa Barbara, attempting to put his life back together. Last year, the musician remarried and began to think about making music once again, reaching out to his erstwhile band members Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson, who had all but given up hope of ever performing as Rush again.

``It was more important for us to be his friends at that point than his band mates, and that's what we did," says Lee.

In the interim, the two contributed to the soundtrack for ``South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut'' (1999), and Lee released an uncharacteristically melodic solo album, ``My Favorite Headache.'' Lifeson came back slowly, refusing to pick up a guitar for nearly a year after Selena's death. Eventually he got back to work and produced tracks for the Universal Music act Lifer and producing and playing guitar on the yet-to-be released album ``3 Doors Down.'' When Peart called, the two were skeptical about reconstituting the band.

``I wasn't really sure if we could ever put Rush back together again," says bassist Geddy Lee, calling from his Toronto home during a break in the band's North American tour, which brings it to Shoreline Amphitheatre tonight. ``In the back of my mind, I thought we would, but I really didn't have much to hang that off of. And the longer it went, the more I believed that we would not get back together. I just thought it was a place that he was not going to be able to go back to emotionally. Neil obviously was not quite the man he used to be."''

But Peart surprised everyone. By January 2001 the band was not only talking but also had booked time at Toronto's Reaction Studio to record its 17th studio album.

``We really didn't do anything for the first three or four weeks we were in the studio but talk," says Lee. ``The first week of rehearsal we sounded like a very bad Rush cover band, but after that things got better. At first I didn't have faith that anything would come of it. I just felt that too much had happened and there was too much to overcome. I sat down next to Neil and said we need a lot of time here. We need to throw schedules out and forget all the practicalities and just work and see what happens."

But that wasn't as easy as it sounds, especially since they didn't envision that the process would take 14 months.

``We're workaholics," says Lee. ``We never could figure out how other bands could survive making records that took a year or two years to record."

In the '70s, Rush held the land speed record for recording, finishing its first album (``Rush'') in only two days, spending five days to record the second, ``Fly By Night'' and luxuriating for a whole week on its third, ``2112."

But the recording of the new disc took so long that Peart wrote a book in the middle of it all. ``Ghost Rider," due out later this month, chronicles his 55,000-mile personal odyssey and the small painful moments of his tragedies as well as the steps that led to his healing process.

``This time, it required patience," says Lee. ``I felt that I didn't want to come back after all that and put out something that wasn't as strong as it could possibly be. I thought it was time for us to be as intimate as we could be with our music, just go with our guts."

Which they did. ``Vapor Trails'' displays all the raw energy and enthusiasm of the power trio's early days, coupled with a new urgency and ferocity that have been missing from the band's records for a decade.

In addition, Peart's brainy lyrics were much more personal than abstract this time, whether in his lamentation for the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on ``Peaceable Kingdom'' or giving the world a glimpse into the hell he's been going through for the past five years on the anxious ``Ghost Rider'' (``Pack up all those phantoms/ Shoulder that invisible load'') and the more somber and cathartic ``Stars Look Down."

The band also exchanged its trademark keyboards for a more layered guitar sound. But the most remarkable change is that Geddy Lee's infamous glass-shattering voice has been toned down, no longer issuing the piercing shriek that secured his place in the rock canon.

``You know, I can still sing that way when I want to," he says. ``I just take the high voice out of its little box where I keep and say, `OK, let's go,' when I sing the older songs."

``But as for this `new' voice, I really don't know where it came from. I recorded all the vocals by myself. Essentially for the first time ever, I was all alone in the studio. I didn't use an engineer or a producer. I just sat in a room with my headphones on and my computer and recorded all the vocals. I decided to let them go where they wanted, and this is what happened. I know if the guys thought something was wrong, they'd have told me. But they were really encouraging."

The three also emerged from the studio with their sense of humor intact. When planning their 50-city tour, the band decided to employ three industrial-size Maytag dryers that stand like noisy sentries behind them onstage, tumbling away during Rush's 3 1/2-hour set. Intermittently, a roadie dressed in coveralls deposits another quarter in each machine -- these particular appliances run only on Canadian coins, something the band anticipated, lugging a sackful of money with them from show to show.

``Everybody wants to know about the dryers," says Lee with a laugh. ``It's not a metaphor, really. It's just a special sound advancement that we've discovered that gives us a cleaner, warmer, drier sound. And that's all I'll say on the subject."