

What's the Rush? Trio united and ready to reclaim reputation as flawless live act

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It has been a long time since Canadian rock trio Rush toured in support of a new record, six years to be exact - since 1996's "Test for Echo."

After drummer and writer Neil Peart lost his only child in a 1997 car crash - then later that year lost his wife to cancer - it seemed as though the band would never unite again, guitarist Alex Lifeson said. But after Peart had healed enough, and Lifeson and bassist Geddy Lee had kept their musical passion by working on side projects, the band found its way back into the studio and recorded "Vapor Trails."

"We weren't sure how or even if Neil would recover from all that he went through. It was very difficult," Lifeson said from Glens Falls, New York, where the band has been doing private technical and production rehearsal for the tour that will stop at the Montage Mountain Amphitheater this Saturday.

"It took him a long time to regroup. At that time the band seemed insignificant. We agreed that when Neil was ready to come back, we'd come back."

In the meantime, Lee recorded a solo project, "My Favorite Headache," while Lifeson kept busy via an NEPA connection. He produced the Universal Records debut for Lifer.

"They were youthful and bright," Lifeson said of the Wilkes-Barre based modern rock band. "They really had their hearts inside the music. They turned me onto a lot of things and energized my passion with theirs."

He specifically complimented lead singer Nick Coyle and then guitarist Aaron Fink, who along with Mark Klepaski has since left Lifer to join Hollywood Records act breaking Benjamin.

"They recorded that whole album in three weeks and we mixed it in ten days," Lifeson said of the Lifer debut.

"I think it represented them very well."

When Peart felt ready, or as Lifeson insightfully stated - "He seemed to need to run to something as much as run away from it" - Rush stepped back into the studio as one with Lifeson and Lee both enriched from their side efforts.

"Once we got rolling, the project took on a life of its own," Lifeson said, "a 14-month life."

"That was a long process, usually we go through it in four to six months," Lifeson said, agreeing that the additional experience lengthened and fortified the effort.

"Geddy had stronger feelings about arrangements. It became instinctive-we jammed a lot, tried a number of different things. Then we started to put it together with Neil. We're happy with the way it turned out."

He spent some of his down time checking out bands, such as Radiohead, the Jesus Lizard, Queens of the Stone Age and one band that he found had similarity with his.

"I saw the Tool show in Toronto-great show. I had the chance to meet them after. You know those guys kind of remind me of us (Rush). It was nice to meet a band that has that sort of appreciation for the music like we do," Lifeson said.

One could forgive him if he were haggard. He and bandmates Peart and Lee have been making "12-hour-a-day" press junket tours of radio stations, talk shows, tele-conferences and dreaded phone interviews for months.

To his credit, Lifeson does not sound weary. Instead, he sounds revitalized by the new music that his band has produced and seems ready to accept the challenge of stepping on to the stage and reclaiming the group's reputation as a nearly flawless live rock act.

"We've been working quite hard at it," Lifeson said.

"We started putting the set together in Toronto. After we played the songs, we wanted (to be in the set), we realized that the running time was roughly four hours and fifteen minutes," Lifeson laughed, then added "it's supposed to be a three hour show."

He said that the band then went to whittling down the list until it reached the more workable format that they are now rehearsing in anticipation for Friday's tour opener in Hartford.

"It's a challenge to work the new material with the old and find a balance. It's really a bit of work, but I think we have put together a show that fans will like," Lifeson added.

He said the band takes suggestions seriously that fans submit through e-mail and that Rush has always made an effort to be attentive to their hard-core audience. He hinted that there will be some nuggets thrown into the set list.

"After 20 odd years there is a fair bit of material to cover. It's fun playing some of the older songs that we haven't played for awhile, " Lifeson said.

I just caught Geddy smiling while we were playing away at something we haven't played in years."

As usual for the band, the show will not only consist of expertly played music.

"We have a bunch of stuff planned for the visual aspect of the show. There will be a lot going on," Lifeson promised, "fans will not be bored."

When talking to Lifeson, one gets the feeling that he is doing what he truly loves, for his part he feels fortunate.

"Every day I wake up feeling incredibly lucky. Since I was 15, I've been in a band with the same bass player (Lee), who happens to be my very best friend in the world," Lifeson commented.

The three of us are connected like brothers. To stay around this long we have had to appreciate the depth of what our music means and what we mean to each other. It doesn't feel like work when we're together. It's amazing to me that after all this time I still get to do this. It's very special."