

Rush Rolls Again

By Jon Wiederhorn

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In their heyday, the idea that Rush might go five years between tours would have been unthinkable. For more than two decades the Canadian progrockers held the reputation of being the ultimate untiring road act. Proof lies in the band's four multidisc concert albums, which showcase their virtuosity perhaps more accurately and articulately than their well-wrought studio discs.

In 1997, however, the Rush touring machine ground to a screeching halt when drummer Neil Peart's daughter Selena Taylor was killed in an automobile accident on a highway between Toronto and Montreal. As if that weren't horrible enough, Peart's wife Jackie Taylor died of cancer about a year later.

Peart was devastated and unable to even pick up his sticks. He left Toronto, his home for many years, and lived as a nomad, traveling by motorcycle from town to town in a desperate attempt to bring meaning back into his life. Eventually he settled in rural California, where a ring of close friends helped him cope with his terrible loss.

For the next four years, Rush was eerily inactive. Bassist Geddy Lee released a solo album and guitarist Alex Lifeson produced a disc by nu-metal group Lifer, but fans of Rush had to settle for memories and the 1998 live album *Different Stages*, which featured two discs from the group's 1997 tour and a third disc of a 1978 performance at London's Hammersmith Odeon.

For a while it appeared that Rush was through. But last year, after falling in love and getting remarried, Peart decided that he was ready to start playing music once again.

"I remember we had a meeting where Neil said he'd like to try to do another record," Lee says. "But he was still very tentative and not feeling very confident. So we said, 'Look, we'll create an atmosphere that's loose and as intimate as we can get it. And at some point, if you feel you can't handle this or it's freaking you out or it's not working, fine. That's cool. So let's throw the schedule and deadline out and see if we can get back to work.' And he was a real pro. Once he got in a position of working, he realized how much he enjoyed it."

After Peart brushed up his chops and wrote lyrics for the band's new disc, *Vapor Trails*, he decided that it was time to fully resume his life as a musician. That meant touring.

Rush's 2002 show promises to be one of their most inspiring and exciting ever. According to Lifeson, the band will play almost three hours of material, including much of *Vapor Trails* and a handful of songs they haven't performed in over a decade. The music will be accompanied by a new high-tech light and video show.

Lee and Lifeson talked to *Onstage* just prior to the group's tour about a boatload of issues facing a band on the road: tour preparation, road survival, technology, show pacing, improvisation, onstage snafus ... and snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

More than five years have passed since you last toured. Are you looking forward to getting back on the road?

Geddy Lee: Until we get out there and play the first show it'll all be [both] strangely familiar and strangely foreign. There was quite an unusual atmosphere through rehearsals. I'm looking forward to it feeling different and fresh, but until we play one flawless show it'll be a little nerve-wracking.

Alex Lifeson: We're doing a lot of planning and changing a lot of things for the tour, and that's making things pretty exciting. I changed all my equipment, so I have all new gear this year just because I want the challenge of something fresh and new.

Did you miss touring?

Lee: I didn't, to be frank. One of the benefits of the difficulties of the last couple of years is I've become a true member of my family and my community. For someone who's spent his life since he was 19 on the road, that's a great benefit. So it's a little bit difficult for me to unplug myself from that and get back into the headspace to go back on the road.

Is it something you have to prepare for, or is it like riding a bike?

Lifeson: Well, it's been five years and the longest we'd gone between tours before is a little over a year. The first week of rehearsal we sounded like a very bad Rush cover band, and then after that we slid into it and got our sea legs back. But there was definitely that period of having to get back on the horse.

Lee: Playing a Rush show is a big physical job. It's not just a question of going out and remembering your parts. It's physically exhausting and very draining, and you have to get into the right headspace and the right physical shape. I look at it like an athlete preparing for a season. Also, there's a lot of dieting that I have to do. Certain foods are not good for my voice, so I have to start eliminating them from my diet, and when I'm off the road I can let that slip a little bit.

What can't you eat?

Lee: No dairy products. No spicy foods. And anything that's highly mucolytic you have to get out of your diet because you're just asking for vocal problems.

Did you learn that the hard way?

Lee: Yeah, I learned that from struggling through cold after cold. But this is the first summer tour that we've done, so I'm hoping being outdoors in the warm weather will be a good thing. I'm looking forward to the humidity.

What about exercise?

Lifeson: We're both doing that. I started in November working out with a personal trainer twice a week. And I take yoga once a week. Also, I try to get out and play tennis at least once a week. Usually I hit with a pro, which gives me a really good workout. It's all about building up stamina again.

Does aging provide its share of concerns?

Lee: Absolutely. I'm 48 now, and your body just doesn't work as well as it did when you were 28. But you just have to be smart and prepare for it. I'm in pretty good shape, so I should be all right.

Lifeson: The older you get, the harder it gets. There seems to be this curve over 45 where you do need to work a lot harder physically to maintain any kind of conditioning. But in a lot of ways in my head I feel like the same guy I was in my 20s.

Is all that grueling preparation worth it?

Lee: Oh, yeah. When you are in the middle of a show that's going well, there's just a fantastic feeling. Everything's clicking and the crowd's enjoying it and you're feeding off of them. It's a marvelous experience and I have to remind myself of that when I've been away from it for a while.

Lifeson: For me, I don't think there was one night on the last tour when it felt like a job. As I get older, I can still find great enjoyment in what we do. You can't deny that it's exciting to get in front of 15,000 screaming people and not be caught up in the energy of that. I remember some sold-out shows we've done at Madison Square Garden, for example. The crowd was so loud, we couldn't hear anything onstage. And you're playing the first couple of songs and the cheering and screaming is relentless. For the first 10 minutes of the set, you can't hear what you're doing, but it's so exciting. I don't think you could ever lose the buzz of that.

Both of you obviously have some reservations about going back on the road, but for Neil, who's suffered heart-wrenching loss, it must be even more difficult.

Lee: At first, touring was a difficult concept for him to come to grips with. He was very nervous about it and didn't know how he would deal with it emotionally. He's got a lot of memories tied to family visits. And physically, he probably has the most demanding role onstage. But when we started talking about the setlist and writing back and forth to each other, I sensed an excitement and kind of a fun spirit that carried over from the making of the album. When all is said and done, through the difficulties of the last several years, we are better friends than we have ever been. We're more open and honest with each other and up-front about whatever we need to express to each other. I think that's very reassuring for him, and for me it made the planning of the tour very stress free. And hey, he's a musician. We're all hams in one way or another. We wouldn't have done it if we didn't like getting up onstage and have people nod approval after we've played something.

Lifeson: He's normally more apprehensive than either of us when it comes to touring, and this time is no exception. But I think he's really excited about playing a lot of old material that we haven't played for a long, long time.

Was there a time after he lost his wife and daughter that he thought he'd lost the will to play?

Lee: Absolutely, and I felt I had in a way, as well. Music is spirit and rock music is a celebration. Even when it's serious, it's still joyful and it's about spirit. And when something like that hits you, you have no spirit. I'm sure he wondered when the spirit would return — as I did myself. And since he felt the loss a million times more intensely than Alex or I did, he was devastated. I'm sure he wondered if it was ever possible for him to make music again. Turning his life around has been great for him, in part because he's realized that those things do return.

Do you expect any special challenges in communicating material from Vapor Trails to an audience?

Lifeson: Well, in the past we've written songs and then rehearsed them, then done pre-production, then gone into the studio and recorded them. So we had the benefit of playing songs 50 or 60 times, which made it easier to take them live. But this record was recorded from these jams that Geddy and I did, so a lot of it was played just that one time. And that's something we love about this record. It's so spontaneous and instinctive and it's captured a moment that just happened once. But it took us a little while to work all these parts up — to select the most important parts of a layered guitar passage, for example. But once we got into rehearsal, it all came fairly quickly.

Is it tough to translate the new studio material to the live environment with only three musicians?

Lee: You just strip it down a little bit, but keep all the fundamentals. And I think most of these songs should translate quite accurately. The only thing we won't be able to replicate is some of the vocal layers. Some of the songs have layers and layers of harmonies, which are mostly sung by me. But with Alex and the aid of some electronics making his voice sound groovy, we should be able to get away with some of that.

Your music is generally very complex and sometimes sprawling. Lots of bands that have long, involved tunes tend to jam a lot and improvise in concert. Why have you never really done that?

Lee: The first 15 years of touring we were very much victims of structure. We tried to reproduce our albums as accurately as we could. The last number of years we've been slipping away from that kind of, and leaving moments in songs like "Bravado," "Closer to the Heart," and "2112" that are a little more spontaneous for us to jam out a little bit. But what I find happens is that we fall into patterns in our jams and after a couple months they stop being spontaneous. We kind of accidentally develop a new structure. That's just the way we are. It's like we cannot exist in a spontaneous world when we're onstage. The same thing happens with Neil's drum solo. He starts it as a jam with himself and falls into a pattern.

What do you take into account when putting together a set?

Lee: Our set has certain dynamics. I'm doing an hour and a half straight through, so I need to pace it with certain instrumental pieces to give my voice a rest. We have to scatter in a certain number of songs that are more popular and are what people really want to hear. In between that, we try to ease in new material. Also, we have the drum solo part of the show, so we have to build our dynamics around that. And we need to follow that with something that allows Neil to catch his breath. I think every band has its own prerequisites, and every band looks to balance the dynamics the same way you would when creating a sequence on an album. It's kind of the same thing, but you also have all these physical demands.

Do you have any major gear changes for this tour?

Lee: Not really. I'm using the same basic concept as last time. My bass sound is basically a combination of three different small direct devices: an Avalon U5 tube DI box, a Palmer speaker simulator, and a SansAmp RBI bass distortion unit. So between those three things I get the control that I want.

Lifeson: I have a deal now with Hughes and Kettner. I used their amplifiers on this record. Eric Fink, the guitarist for Lifer — the band I produced before coming back into Rush — was using those amps at the time and I thought they sounded great. I also have a new pedalboard and new outboard equipment. And I'm bringing lots of guitars with me on this tour. I'm looking forward to playing. I guess I just want to keep it fresh.

Do you use in-ear monitors?

Lee: Yes, I do. They're amazing. The ability to sing in pitch and with expression has been improved 400 or 500 percent through the development of those things. They're just about the greatest thing that's ever invented for live performance.

Performing live can be a perilous proposition. What are some of the things that tend to go wrong onstage for you guys?

Lee: We usually have two or three train wrecks every tour, where for some reason — either you're not hearing correctly or your level of concentration goes askew — you're all playing a different part of the song at the same time. And you're looking at each other trying to figure out how you're going to get back on track. It's like the train has gone off the rails and you're not really sure how to communicate with each other to get back because of the variety of some of our

structures. It's not like it's the same part that repeats over and over again, so you can't just start the verse later. And sometimes it's just a disaster, and you're just crossing your fingers and hoping you're going to end up back at the same place, and it usually works itself out. What's really funny is when you look out in the audience and people are trying to figure out if you're jamming or what.

Do you remember your worst performance nightmare?

Lee: One time in Leeds, England, in the early '80s, I went onstage to sing "Closer to the Heart" and for the life of me the lyrics would not come into my mind. I just stood there silently waiting for them to come back. It was just like when sometimes you're having a conversation and you blank on what you were going to say. I just looked to the audience and the kids are singing it, and they're trying to prod me on. Eventually, it came back.

Can you offer some tips for surviving and thriving on the road?

Lifeson: Road maintenance is a tricky one. I think when you're young and more resilient you can get into certain habits that you can rebound from. But as you get older, you want to have a more balanced lifestyle, especially playing in a rock band. There's an excitement to the whole thing that's a little overwhelming at times. And also, you get very bored on the road. You're basically waiting around for those few hours that you work and the rest of the time is spend waiting. And through boredom, you get into bad habits if you let yourself. If you keep yourself busy you're better off. I play lots of golf on the road. And I try to get out and play tennis. I go to movies on my nights off. And Ged and I will go out to dinner quite often and taste some great wines. We're both collectors. So those little things keep us occupied.

Lee: Everybody's different. The best thing I could say to someone is take care of yourself, because touring is hard on you emotionally and physically. If you can be aware of that and have respect for your body, you stand a better chance of playing better and living longer.

Jon Wiederhorn is a New York-based music journalist. Thanks to Craig Blazier, Rick Britton, Brent Carpenter, Brad Madix, Eric Pavlyak, Russ Ryan, Jack Secret, and Lorne "Gump" Wheaton from Rush's crew. Gear coverage by Mike Levine.

In Their Ears

All three members of Rush are using in-ear monitors for this tour; Lee and Lifeson use Ultimate Ears UE-5 monitors through Sennheiser 3000-series wireless hardware, and Peart uses a wired setup featuring Ultimate Ears UE-5s and a Crown D-75 power amp.

To add additional bottom end to what the band hears onstage, monitor engineer Brent Carpenter uses a series of subwoofers. "I'm using double 15" Clair Brothers MB15s powered by Crown amps," says Carpenter. "I'm using two boxes on stage left, two boxes on stage right, and two boxes upstage center. They're crossed over really low so that I can rattle the stage a little bit."

Although the band is only three pieces, their complex stage setup requires a whopping 77 inputs on the monitor console. To help keep it all under control, Carpenter uses a sophisticated Harrison/Showco Showconsole — a fully automated analog mixer — and separate presets are recalled for each song.

"I've got to take my hat off to whoever did this gig before me," Carpenter says, "because I can't imagine doing this without automation."

Neil's Revolving Rig

The drum set that Neal Peart is taking on this summer's tour is actually like two kits in one (see **Fig A**). Situated on a rotating riser, the front part of the kit is a DW custom red-sparkle finish acoustic set featuring a kick, two snares, and eight toms, all outfitted with Remo white-coated Ambassador heads. The acoustic kit also features numerous Zildjian cymbals, including two sets of hi-hats, a ride, three splashes, four crashes, and two chinas.

Facing opposite from the acoustic drums is a customized set of Roland V-Drums that Peart plays during parts of his extended drum solo. He also has a MalletKAT Controller, two Shark trigger pedals, and a small black Daus trigger pad that looks like an oversize hockey puck.

The V-Drums and the pads and pedals trigger a variety of sound sources, including a Roland TD-10 drum brain and two E-mu samplers. The E-mu (an E5000 and a 4XT) are loaded mostly with percussion samples but, depending on the song, are used for sound effects, as well.

Alex's Amazing Arsenal

Many guitarists in high-level touring bands have complicated rigs, but it's unlikely that many are more involved than Alex Lifeson's (see list below). He's carrying 12 guitars, all of which use wireless setups (depending on the guitar, he uses either Shure or Samson hardware). From the wireless receivers, the guitar signal takes a complex path through his switchers, his amplification section (that includes four Hughes and Kettner heads: two digital modeling Zenteras and two tube-based Triamps) and his rack effects.

Guitar tech Rick Britton, who designed and wired Lifeson's rig, explains that the four Hughes and Kettner 4×12 cabs (and a fifth for backup) are not miked and are used only for stage sound. Lifeson's sound to the house is derived direct through four Palmer PDI-03 speaker simulators.

Lifeson's pedalboard has no actual audio going to it, but instead has control pedals of various types. From there he's able to shut amps on and off, switch patches, and control his rackmounted wah and his three TC Electronic G-Force processors. He also has an old Korg MPK-130 MIDI foot controller that allows him to trigger samples from the offstage keyboard rack (see "Geddy Is Ready" on p. 38). Here's Lifeson's key stage gear:

- PRS Singlecut CE22 and CE24 guitars (5 total, 2 with piezo pickups)
- Gibson SG doubleneck
- Gibson Les Paul Standards (2)
- Gibson Les Paul Custom
- Gibson ES-355
- Gibson J-150 acoustic with Fishman transducer
- Fender Telecaster (customized)
- Hughes and Kettner Zentera heads (2)
- Hughes and Kettner Triamp heads (2)
- 4×12 Hughes and Kettner cabinets (5)
- Digital Music Corp. GCX Guitar Audio Switchers (2)
- Digital Music Corp. Ground Control pedal
- Dunlop DCR-ISR Crybaby Rack wah
- TC Electronic TC 1210 Spatial Expander
- TC Electronic G-Force multi-effects processors (3)
- Hughes and Kettner Rotosphere
- Behringer Multigate Pro XR4400
- Behringer Virtualizer Pro DSP 2024P
- Behringer MX602 line mixers (2)
- Behringer 662 line splitter/mixer
- Custom Audio Japan GVCA-2 Rev 3 guitar volume controllers (2)
- Dunlop volume pedal
- Boss TU-12H tuner
- Korg MPK-130 MIDI Pedal Keyboard
- Shure U4D wireless receivers (2)
- Shure U-1 wireless belt-pack transmitters
- Shure Antenna Distribution System
- Samson UR-5D wireless receiver (for acoustic and piezo guitars)
- Samson UT-5 belt-pack transmitter
- Palmer PDI-03 speaker simulators (4)

Geddy Is Ready

Geddy Lee's main axe is a '77 Fender Jazz Bass that he uses for most of the show. On the song "Driven" he straps on a '97 Fender Custom Shop Jazz Bass that has the low E string dropped to D. When the band plays "2112," Lee uses another Fender Custom Shop Jazz that's tuned down a whole step. (Lee also has a Taylor 612-CE acoustic guitar that he plays on the song "Resist.")

Whichever bass he's using, his signal goes through a Samson wireless setup and then to the house through feeds from three sources: a Tech 21 SansAmp RBI for overdriven sound, an Avalon U5 DI for clean DI sound, and a Palmer PDI-05 speaker simulator. The Palmer is driven by a Trace Elliot Quatra Valve power amp for a tube-amp tone (see **Fig. B**).

Lee also handles a large portion of the band's synth parts and sample triggering. The guts of his keyboard rig sit in an offstage rack, where keyboard tech Jack Secret has designed a system that's based around four Roland XV-5080 synth modules (with sample playback capability) with external Glyph hard drives.

Lee triggers his parts from three older, tried-and-true MIDI controllers: a Yamaha DX-7 keyboard and two MIDI keyboard pedals, a Korg MPK-130 and a Roland PK-5. The MPK-130 sits under his keyboard stand, and the PK-5 is underneath his primary mic stand at center stage.

Miking Rush

When *Onstage* spoke to front-of-house engineer Brad Madix, the band was still in rehearsal and he hadn't completely finalized his mic input list for the tour. However, Madix, who will be mixing on a Yamaha PM1D console, had decided on most of his mic choices. Geddy Lee will be signing through Audio-Technica's new AE5400 condenser, and Alex Lifeson will use a Neumann KMS105 vocal mic.

The drum mics will include a Shure SM91 and an Audio-Technica AT4055 on the kick, an Audio-Technica ATM23HE and an Audio-Technica AT4051a on the snare (with a Shure SM98 used as a cross-stick mic), Audio Technica ATM35s on the rack toms, and Audio-Technica AT4050/CM5s on the floor toms. The overheads are a pair of Audio-Technica AT4060 tube mics, while the hi-hat and ride are miked with Neumann KM 184s. Shure SM98s are used on the splash cymbals.

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www.atlantic-records.com/rush

The band's official Atlantic Records site.

www.geocities.com/sunsetstrip/venue/9123

An up-to-date page devoted to Neil Peart.

www.myfavoriteheadache.com

Geddy Lee's official artist site. Slick and Flash-packed.

<http://launch.yahoo.com/artist/default.asp?artistID=1023239>

The Rush page on Launch includes videos and a detailed discography.

**For more Rush coverage, go to www.onstagemag.com and click on
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