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Rush has no need for spotlight

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Knight-Ridder

If rock 'n' roll success is measured by media hype, flashy imagery and Grammy night gossip, chalk Rush up as a big loser. But if 19 gold and platinum albums, a worldwide legion of passionate fans and, most importantly, an unwavering commitment to integrity and musicianship count for anything, this Canadian trio should own the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame.

With two decades of rigorous, incessant touring and recording under their belts, the members of Rush — drummer-lyricist Neil Peart, bassist-vocalist Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson — have paid their dues,



RUSH consists of, from left, Geddy Lee, Neil Peart and Alex Lifeson.

earning the respect and devotion of millions of hard-rock disciples while overlooking the neglect or scorn of many critics.

Unlike longtime peers Aerosmith and the Rolling Stones, Rush, which plays the Knickerbocker Arena on Tuesday night, managed to thrive without the benefit of a constant media spotlight. In other words, despite the No. 2 debut of the band's 19th album, "Counterparts," on *Billboard's* top 200 in October, don't look for it on the cover of *Rolling Stone* anytime soon. It's a paradox that may bewilder fans, but brings little distress to the band itself.

"There's some kind of leap that the trendy side of the media has trouble making with us, and I don't know what it is," Peart said during a recent phone interview. "It makes me kind of snicker, because it's silly."

"I don't understand why we don't fit in that category. Here we are, serious musicians with high musical values, working for 20 years, and we are certainly at the peak of our form right now. . . . They need to have the next big thing, and they need Nirvana on the cover three times a year,

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RUSH: Fame without the critical acclaim

and that's fine."

David Fricke, *Rolling Stone's* music editor and a Rush fan, was asked to explain this situation. He shared his view that most media coverage is based not on what an artist deserves, but on what plays on the page.

"The thing is, Rush has never really gone out of their way (for coverage), and they're not flashy guys. They're not from the Axl Rose school of getting attention. And to be quite honest, that's what newspaper editors and writers are attracted to.

"I think that it's very difficult for editors and other writers to be excited about it when Eddie Vedder's out there. That's about journalism and readers, and frankly, selling magazines. I don't mean to sound cold about it, but that's just a fact of life."

Peart, considered rock's finest drummer by many (including the voters in *Rolling Stone's* annual readers' poll), takes it all in stride. "I'd much rather be on the cover of *Modern Drummer* magazine than on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, if you know what I mean," he said, laughing.

Peart also would much rather discuss Rush's artistic work, and his enthusiasm becomes evident when the conversation shifts to "Counterparts." With its raw-rock emphasis, marked by Lifeson's straight-ahead guitar sound and an in-your-face

vocal mix, the album hints at the band's early days, when the neo-Zepelin rock of "Rush" and the power-art metal of "Fly by Night" defined the band.

"We've made certain conscious stylistic choices. With keyboards, for instance ... we changed the focus so that all the keyboards on the record are pretty well piano and organ," he said. "The keyboards take on a rawer and more earthy nature, just because a Hammond organ and a piano are that way — they're natural, organic, noisy instruments. They just changed the texture of things in a pretty profound way."

Peart said today's hot grunge bands also deserve credit, in part for demonstrating that the "disgusting, artificial" music of the late '80s did not indeed spell the death of rock. The emergence of the Seattle sound reassured Rush that "yes, the torch is still alive, and these values are still important and valid."

"It's been an important time for us, the early '90s and right up to now, that suddenly we are part of a rock scene, and not some kind of lonely outpost," he said.

Thematically, the album explores the most recent of Peart's intellectual excursions, reflecting several years' interest in the finer points of duality and relationships — hence the title.

"The idea of 'Counterparts' is a

metaphor for the three of us, and it's a metaphor for any kind of relationship. The beautiful thing about the word is that it means things that are the same, but different," he said. "That's so often true between genders, or among races and cultures, in that they are the same in so many ways, but there are little, special differences that ought to be explored and celebrated. We are not all the same!"

Peart's lyrical work consistently has touched on the sometimes delicate, often stormy, nature of relationships, from the emotion-vs.-reason battle of 1979's "Hemispheres" to the subtle symbiosis of watcher and watched in 1981's "Moving Pictures." On "Counterparts," however, he goes full throttle, taking a no-holds-barred look at the conditions under which love can survive.

"All of us (Rush members) not only have been together for 20 years; we've been together with the same (wives) for 20 years," he said. "(But) it's destructive to go around feeding this fantasy of 'eternal love will just happen to you, someday you'll meet the right person,' and all that. None of that's true!"

"I don't think it's a question of being optimistic or pessimistic, it's just being idealistic, because I do believe long-term love is possible."