

Abracadabra

•Larry Dobrow•

Presto — certainly an appropriate title for any album by Canadian techno-wizards Rush. After all, the musical prowess of the three bandmembers is, well, magical.

PRESTO

Rush

(Atlantic)

Geddy Lee's nimble-fingered bass guitar and Neil Peart's propulsive drumming create an

unmatchable rhythm section, while Alex Lifeson manages to hold his own on guitar.

But despite such musical proficiency, the band fell into a synthesizer-laden rut with their last studio opus, 1987's *Hold Your Fire*. This in turn was followed by last year's somewhat placid live release, *A Show of Hands*.

Fortunately, Rush returns to peak form on *Presto*, their first album for Atlantic. Gone is producer Peter Collins, who at times allowed the band's hard-edged ditties to float into empty technical exercises. Surprisingly, the band has chosen to replace him with Rupert Hine, who is best known for his plodding work with radio-aimed acts like Howard Jones and Stevie Nicks. The move pays off, as the atmospheric gloss of Collins' production is stripped away, leaving the band sounding more energetic and raw than it has in several albums.

And by no means is this one of Hine's trademark commercial concessions. A full digital recording, *Presto* is a sonic Christmas gift for Rush fans everywhere. Lifeson's guitar does not so much play as scream, while Peart's drumming explodes from the speakers. Lee is in fine voice and, as usual, his bass lines will leave fledgling bass guitarists with calloused fingers. Hine somehow manages to inject spice and vitality into the patented Rush formula.

It doesn't hurt that he gets to twist the knobs for one of the band's most coherent collections of songs ever. Peart's disillusioned, highly literate lyrics mesh easily with the angular rhythms and slashing guitars. "Show Don't Tell," the explosive first single, finds Lee wailing over Peart's furious percussive attack. Another winner is the

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unusually restrained title track, which features fine acoustic guitar work by Lifeson.

But the album's two best songs are "Chain Lightning" and "The Pass." The former fascinates lyrically and especially vocally, as Lee's impassioned pleas echo the song's intense lyrical content. The latter boasts sinuous bass guitar and — gasp! — the golden pop hook that had been absent from Rush songs since "Distant Early Warning." If any of the album's songs is to replace "New World Man" as Rush's highest charting single, this will be the one.

Only a couple of *Presto's* 11 songs fail to get off the ground, evoking memories of the weaker parts of *Hold Your Fire*. Despite a perversely poetic lyric, "Scars" wanders into an atmospheric haze, leaving the band directionless. "Available Light" and "Superconductor" find the band ignoring the songs and concentrating on super-neat-o technical stuff.

But for the most part, *Presto* is simply brimming with fascinating musical tricks. A new producer and a new record label have re-energized one of the decade's most consistent rock acts. Once again, Rush performs with grace under pressure.

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