Rush refines its hard rock sophistication

This review ran only in yesterday's late edition because the performance ended late. It is reprinted today for readers who missed it.

By Anatasia Protée

Canadian rock trio Rush in a two-for-the-night stand at the Coliseum continued to refine the sophisticated hard rock sound of its music. Opening night, Thursday, its live show also showed signs of change, almost all for the good.

In contrast to the bland and spiritless show that the group performed last year at the Civic, all was its dynamic here.

Banister, keyboard, piano, and guitarist Alex Lifeson was positively bobby-Drummer Neil Peart, however, was in his element behind a massive barrier of percussion.

The group is augmenting its performances with an elaborate visual presentation. It is not only more extravagant than the usual hard rock shows. Bands toss in a backdrop slide or film or a lighting effect every second song.

Rush's show features a continuous display of film, lights, lasers, and special effects, and that's really the way to do it up in style or forget it.

The audience, however, had no need to be diverted with flashy effects. Though Rush has sometimes been erroneously tagged a heavy metal, its kind of band, the antagonists graduate to the literature at the same time they discover groups like Genesis, Pink Floyd, and Yes. All these groups play music but with a bit more substance than straight hard rock.

So it was a relatively quiet crew that took in Rush opening night. Pearl told me recently in an interview that about the only thing he actually wants to tell an audience is to do is to stand on stage and make sure that it can't happen. That it's not expected to be more than a second, to change the music for comfort. If my image for the spacecraft was the subterfuge in "Out Bistro."

The crowd mostly sat in rap attention as Rush wound its way through an impressive program of material largely drawn from its recent "Grace Under Pressure" album, with older favorites like "Tom Sawyer" thrown in. An instrumental work of the band, as it's always, intricate and well-flavored, with a dramatic increase in the amount of keyboards Lee is now playing. Lee's vocals have deepened and gained expression, too. He probably won't be anyone's favorite rock singer, but his vocals no longer come from the music. In fact, they work with it effectively, something that would have been hard to do five years ago.

The best part of the show, apart from the visual display and the musicianship, was the grace that obvious enthusiasm for performing, and the little bits of humor that peeked out. If Rush had a weak spot, it was a lack of that sense of humor. Yet in this show, they introduced "The Weapon" with a film featuring the infamous Count Floyd - Joe Flaherty of "SCTV" - doing his "Monster Chiller Horror Theater" routine.

It was a clever and cheeky bit, yet even better was Lifeson, in the darkness below the screen, doing a couple of reggae-style dance steps, just feeling good.

Opening for Rush was guitarist Gary Moore, formerly of Thin Lizzy, and his new three-piece band, called Les. Moore is a fantastic guitarist with a blues sound reminiscent of the early 1970s and other guitarists, like Rory Gallagher and Robin Trower, whose work is rooted in that era. He states his affinity for that period with his version of Free's "Wishing Well" and the Yardbirds' "Shapes of Things" as well as his crying guitar leads.

Moore's strong suit is a good band with a good sound and performing ability. He's weak in material and a tendency to be a little tight, as when he urged the audience into a ring-a-ling on the lines "Keep on rocking, keep on rocking, goodness!"

Rush's opening night is a good show, and it may well be the best band in the business. A lot of people come in expecting a little more than what they get. But it's worth it. You get what you pay for.