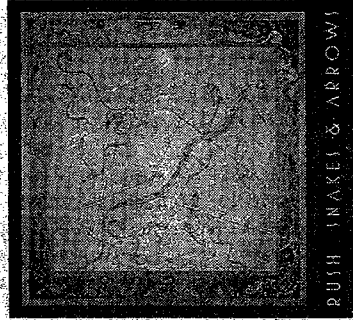


**Rush — “Snakes & Arrows”**  
(Atlantic): For a time in the late '90s, it seemed that legendary progressive trio Rush might finally call it a day, after almost 30 years of activity. Drummer Neil Peart had suffered the loss of his wife and daughter, and even the rest of the band — bassist/singer Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson — had let



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on that they questioned Rush's future. But then 2002 brought "Vapor Trails," a back-to-basics rock record that showed a band back in the groove.

"Snakes & Arrows," Rush's 18th studio disc, is an even more definitive statement; it's the trio's best effort since 1989's "Presto." Some moments hark back to the band's prog days, some are straight-ahead rock, some even recall a robust jam band. Peart's lyrics are in fine shape, with the drumming legend tackling hope and faith while referencing Buddhism (the album's title comes from an old Buddhist game), T.S. Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Robert Frost and more.

And while the lyrics on "Snakes & Arrows," with their metaphorical and literal spiritual bent, are classic Peart, it's the music that shines brightest. Lifeson's guitar work is more exciting and varied than anything he's done from the last three decades. On the instrumental "Hope," his 12-string-guitar work marvels, and on "Armor and Sword," Lifeson exhibits a freedom and looseness on the King Crimson-like track. Lee's acerbic bass playing manages to be kinetic without disrupting the flow. With age, the bass player's voice has become less shrill, but no less powerful.

The progressive folk of "Way the Wind Blows" is the majestic centerpiece of "Snakes & Arrows," a more than 6-minute track that's full of urgency and energy. It's the kind of tune Rush used to throw out regularly in the '70s and '80s, but have moved away from recently, preferring instead to stick with more traditional rock. Why the band has gone back to its roots is unknown, but the surprisingly nimble and eclectic "Snakes & Arrows" is clearly, so far, one of the best records of the year.