

Exclusive Interview with Neil Peart

Neil, explain what led you to decide to do another instructional drum DVD at this point.

My first instructional video, *A Work in Progress* (1996), dealt with themes of drum part creation and recording. Early in 2005, my collaborators on that project, Paul Siegel and Rob Wallis from Hudson Music, suggested taking on another project together.

At that time Rush was launching our R30 tour, and it seemed to me that the next area of exploration for an instructional DVD ought to be live performance. As the tour went on, it occurred to me that my drum solo might make a story all by itself. That combination of composition and performance encapsulated so much of my thinking about drumming and performing live, and had so much subtext and back story that I thought it alone would offer enough material to talk about and demonstrate.

In early 2004, once the tour was over and I had time to really think about it, Paul and Rob and I began exchanging thoughts by e-mail. These exchanges grew into a veritable flood of conversation back and forth, about what might be presented in such a DVD, and how we might present it.

The process resembled the way I work with my bandmates. One of my favorite parts of working with Alex and Geddy is the exchange of ideas when we're writing songs together. After doing that for 30 years, the three of us form a synergistic combination that elevates each individual's contribution, step by step, into something greater than any of us could have imagined or accomplished on our own. That's exactly the way things work among Paul and Rob and I, and why I enjoy the process of collaborating with them so much. That same process and method applied when we were "on set," though with more pressure and urgency. Before each shot, while the lighting, camera, and audio team was setting up, the three of us would gather in the studio's kitchen and go over any notes I had made, adding thoughts and organizing them. Then I went out to face the camera and try to present all that material as well as I could.

The talking was actually harder than the drumming — putting myself in front of the camera and working from a point-form list, trying to cover and link together all the necessary descriptions, anecdotes, and background into a reasonably smooth flow. Just like playing drums in front of an audience, I had to will myself into a certain state of mind, an intense pitch of focus and concentration that pushes me into a "zone" that allows me to do the best job I possibly can at that moment.

It's not easy, but it's the only way. After the shoot, I described it as "the hardest three days of work I've ever done," and inevitably, I didn't think I had done as good a job as I might have. For that reason, it was nice to leave it all in the hands of master editor Phil Fallo, with Rob's and Paul's consultation, and be able to get away from it for awhile. A month or so later, when I did start to see rough edits of the material, I could be pleasantly surprised that it wasn't as bad as I had feared!

After watching the first rough edit, I grumbled to my wife, Carrie, "Well... I guess it might be okay."

That is as close as I ever get to appreciating my own work

How big an influence was your teacher, Don George?

In the essay that accompanies *Anatomy of a Drum Solo*, I describe my earliest inspiration to play the drums: "Gene Krupa was the first and only drummer to have a movie based on his life, and more than 40 years ago, before I ever touched a pair of drumsticks or knew what a snare drum was, I saw *The Gene Krupa Story* on late-night TV. To the boy I was then, the notion of being a drummer seemed exciting, glamorous, elegant, and dangerous, and my eyes must have been shining with inspiration and desire. I remember thinking, 'I wanna do that!'"

I started taking drum lessons at age 13, and my first teacher was Don George. In the small upstairs room at the Peninsula Conservatory of Music, with a set of drum pads and muffled cymbals, Don gave me a good grounding in basic technique, rudiments, and sight reading. However, Don's most important influence on me was his encouragement — just telling me that he thought I could be a drummer one day was one of the most important things anybody ever said to me.

After about 18 months of weekly lessons and daily practising at home after school, Don quit teaching at the Peninsula Conservatory of Music. I continued with his successors for a while, but none of them was as inspiring (though one guy showed me the first Jimi Hendrix album, and prophesized, "This changes everything"). Eventually I just continued on my own, learning from all the drummers I heard on the radio, or in local bands.

Playing along with Top 40 radio was a major learning experience for me, and in the mid '60s, if I was playing along with the hits of the day — Simon and Garfunkel, the Beach Boys, Johnny Rivers, the Byrds, Roy Orbison, the Association, Gary Lewis and the Playboys, the Mamas and the Papas, Frank Sinatra, Nancy Sinatra, even the Carpenters — I was playing along with Hal Blaine. I didn't realize it until years later, but in that way Hal Blaine would obviously become an important influence on my early development. (I sympathize with another drummer of my generation who once said that he was surprised to learn that his five favorite drummers were all Hal Blaine!)

Earning money by delivering newspapers, cutting lawns, and working at my dad's farm equipment dealership, I was able to keep myself in drumsticks (though it's true that when I broke the tips off of my Slingerland Gene Krupa sticks, and couldn't afford new ones, I turned them around and played them "butt end," and eventually ended up playing that way for many years), and I could also afford to buy a new LP every few weeks. I bought that first Jimi Hendrix album, along with early records by The Who, Cream, Blue Cheer, Moby Grape, Traffic, Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin, and so on (child of the '60s!). I don't know about me being a "great" inspiration, but when younger drummers tell me they were inspired to take up drumming because of me, I usually say something like, "I apologize to your parents."

How do you feel about the fact that you are now, in turn, a great inspiration to others?

I don't know about me being a "great" inspiration, but when younger drummers tell me they were inspired to take up drumming because of me, I usually say something like, "I apologize to your parents." But of course, it's nice to hear that. Personally, I don't think all that highly of my own abilities or accomplishments, but I know that I do try hard — perhaps that's a good enough example to set.

Are you conscious of hearing your influence in other drummers?

I really don't hear that myself, but sometimes other people say it is so. Some drummers surprise me when they tell me they were influenced by my playing, because it seems to me they play nothing like I do. But I understand about that, because of course any player with an original voice is filtering his or her influences and experiences through their own personality, their temperament. Thus the music becomes their own. Similarly, I was powerfully influenced by Keith Moon as a youngster, yet my own character dictated a much more deliberate and organized style for me.

Which drummers do you like to listen to nowadays?

Along with all the drummers I have always enjoyed, and still listen to and appreciate (many mentioned in the DVD and related material), I like what Gavin Harrison is doing with Porcupine Tree, and on his instructional DVDs. His playing and his thinking are interesting, musical, and inspiring.

Overall, I believe Steve Smith is the reigning master of drumming these days. With dedication and hard work, Steve has acquired such a wealth of skill and technique, and so much knowledge about the history and evolution of drumming. Because of that, it is particularly wonderful to watch Steve play, to see all of that grace and dexterity in action, but that mastery also contributes to his heightened understanding and creation of music.

How do you achieve such a great, and consistent, level of performance? Do you have specific warm-up routines that you do either on your own before a show or together with the band?

I do have a pretty strict series of preparations for a show. First, I like to arrive at the venue early. After whatever it has taken me to get to work — usually a long motorcycle ride through often nasty weather, and always murderous traffic — I want to avoid the stress of feeling “late,” and have an hour or so to clean up and relax. At 5:00 I make my way to the stage, exchanging greetings with crew members along the way, and check in with my drum tech, Lorne.

Lorne might tell me he’s found a cracked cymbal and had to replace it (he knows I don’t like new cymbals — they take a few shows to open up, both sonically and physically). Or he might point to the worn-away circle in the middle of the snare drum batter head, wordlessly telling me he thinks it ought to be changed. He knows I don’t like new heads either, and I’ll tell him, “let’s give it one more night.”

Lorne will shake his head, raise his hands and say, “Okay, it’s up to you — I just don’t want it breaking during the show.” We’ll both laugh at the familiar routine, but in fact that almost never happens. Either I heed Lorne’s advice and tell him to go ahead and change it (“if you must!”), or it does hold together that “one more night” before I let him change it. (I do often try to “break in” new cymbals or heads on my backstage warmup kit.)

At sound check I first have an easy warmup on the silent V-drum pads of the back kit, while Alex and Geddy make their way to the stage and go through the acoustic numbers. Then we’ll play three or four songs together, always ending with the opening song (last tour, the “R30 Overture”) so our front-of-house mixer, Brad, can have everything set for that.

Exactly 30 minutes before showtime, I put on my drumming shoes (soft-shoe dancing shoes) and sit down at my little practice kit in the “Bubba Gump Room” (my and Lorne’s nicknames combined). I set my watch on the floor beside me, where I can see it, and just play for 20 minutes.

I almost always begin with a little time-keeping exercise Freddie Gruber showed me — a relaxed pattern that gets all four limbs working together, gets me “rooted,” and allows me to gradually increase the complexity and intensity. Then I work through a random drum-ramble of whatever occurs to me (as described in *Anatomy of a Drum Solo* as “Explorations”) for those 20 minutes. Then I put on my stage clothes — black pants (shorts in hot weather) T-shirt and cotton-lined cap, to absorb the sweat and keep it out of my eyes — and join Alex and Geddy in the main dressing room.

Usually there will be a baseball game on the television for Geddy, or golf for Alex, crew members coming and going with last-minute messages and discussions about equipment issues, and the three of us exchanging dumb jokes and comments on the day. A few minutes later... off we go!

Are you planning on getting more into the electronic side of the drum kit or will it stay a balanced combination of acoustic and electric?

For your electronic sounds do you do your own programming and/or sampling or do you use mainly factory sounds or prefabricated samples from a library?

I like the combination of acoustic drums and electronic triggers I have now, and don’t plan any major changes. Since the mid ’80s I have built up a fairly extensive library of samples and sounds. Some of them are recorded samples of my own drums, some are created in the studio,

and others come from generic “sound libraries” from synthesizers and samplers. I also use some of the pre-programmed Roland V-drum sounds.

“Vapor Trails” is the heaviest-sounding record in years and marks a different direction with a sound that is both essential and aggressive. Is this a new direction for Rush and what plans are there for the future?

When Geddy and Alex and I get together to work on a new Rush project, we don't start with any preconceptions or plans. We just start exchanging ideas, the ones we like and dismiss the ones we don't, and see what happens. Right now (January 2006), the three of us have begun to discuss getting to work on some new songs, so we'll soon be getting more serious about that.

On earlier albums, you worked closely with Terry Brown. He appears to work in what we might term an ‘old fashioned’ way. How important was his input on the drum sound that we now know and love as ‘typically Neil Peart’?

Over the years, I have worked with many different recording engineers, and also many different drums, drum heads, pedals, and cymbals. I have also played rental drums, and borrowed drums, all different makes and conditions. I have found that no matter what I do, or how hard I try to sound different, I always sound like me! Back in 1996, after working for a couple of years with teacher Freddie Gruber, I had completely changed my physical approach to the drums, the way I held the sticks, and the way I hit the drums. Then, when I started working with the band again, I was explaining all that to producer Peter Collins, and he said, “Well, it still sounds like you.” no matter what I do, or how hard I try to sound different, I always sound like me!

At first I was a little disappointed, but then I realized the truth — no matter what I do, or how hard I try to sound different, I always sound like me! That being the case, the most an engineer can do is try to translate the way my drums sound, also guided by the way I describe how I want them to sound. I have found that every engineer I've worked with has been able to do that, while often contributing some elements of their own, or the “sonic fashions” of the times.

You do have to be stubborn sometimes, though — engineers often want to put damping on snare drums and toms, when a little resonance from a well-tuned drum is not necessarily a negative part of the sound, and most of the time I have to be insistent about keeping a solid front head on my bass drum. Typically, engineers prefer an open front and lots of damping against that batter head, but I prefer the playing feel and sound dynamics of a double-headed drum. By now I know that it's possible to get a good bass drum sound that way — it just might be a bit more trouble!

What are your next projects overall?

I am working on the final draft of my book about the “R30” tour, called Roadshow: Landscape With Drums, A Concert Tour By Motorcycle. I hope to have that published in 2006.

As mentioned, Alex and Geddy and I are already starting to exchange ideas and discuss plans for writing some songs, so it's likely there will be some new Rush music in the next year or so. No promises, of course, but the main thing is that right now we still feel inspired to move forward — together.

Not many bands can say that after more than 30 years, the same guys still looking forward to working together again. It's pretty amazing, really, and we don't take it for granted. For myself, I am very grateful to be able to work together with people I truly like, writing songs, making records, playing concerts, making instructional DVDs, and writing books. It keeps me busy, and it keeps me happy.