

## NEIL PEART INTERVIEW

Interview by **David Wanderman**, Contributing Editor



Neil Peart, one of the most proficient drummers and articulate lyricists in Rock history, generally prefers to let his bandmates - and more significantly, his music - do all the talking. For the release of the historic, double DVD/CD *Rush: R30*, however, Peart has taken some time to look back at what he, vocalist and bassist Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson, have accomplished over the past 30 years, as well as his ambitions as a player, his development as a lyricist and the chemistry that keeps Rush together.

**UGO:** When you started the band 30 plus years ago, did you have aspirations of grandeur? Did you ever imagine you'd reach the heights you have?

**NEIL PEART:** When I joined Rush, in August of 1974, we were already entering into "Fairy Tale Land." The band had just signed a U.S. record deal, and it included an advance to buy all new equipment. I'll never forget how exciting it was to walk into a music store in downtown Toronto and buy our "dream gear." While Alex and Geddy were looking at Gibson guitars, Rickenbacker basses, and Marshall amps, I was picking out a set of chrome Slingerland drums. Driving away from there with all those treasures in the back of our truck was already a dream come true.

**UGO:** Do you remember your first concert?

**NEIL:** Two weeks after I joined, we played our first show together in Pittsburgh, in front of about 11,000 people, then continued around the U.S., opening for bigger bands, playing club dates on our own, and even appearing on a few television shows. Eventually, that first tour took us all around the United States and Canada, and that was pretty exciting, too. Those were heady times, no question, and we were certainly fully engaged "in the moment." It's safe to say we weren't thinking too much about the future. A song we wrote around that time -- while riding in a rental car somewhere south of St. Louis -- was called "Making Memories," and sums up our state-of-mind pretty well:

You know we're having good days  
And we hope they're gonna last  
Our future still looks brighter than our past.

**UGO:** What were your goals in the beginning? How do they differ from your goals today?

**NEIL:** My earliest goals were really just about playing drums - getting better, joining a band, playing at the local roller rink or teen dance. My goals expanded as my life did, and eventually I wanted to learn more about what drummer Bill Bruford once called, "Life beyond the cymbals." I started reading a lot, fiction and non-fiction, catching



up on the education I had more-or-less "dodged" during my teenage obsession with drums and rock music. Later, I got interested in outdoor activities like cross-country skiing and cycling, and those activities incorporated goals of their own - traveling farther, building stamina and new experiences, and seeking out fresh adventures.

**UGO:** You've written books. What inspired you to become an author?

**NEIL:** That taste for adventure travel, and all that reading, led me into travel writing. Through the '80s and '90s, a series of "apprenticeship" books, privately printed for friends and fellow travelers, led to my first published book, *The Masked Rider: Cycling in West Africa*, in 1996. The writing ambition led to a few magazine stories for periodicals like *Macleans*, *Modern Drummer*, and *Cycle Canada*, and eventually publishing other books: *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road* in 2001, and *Traveling Music: The Soundtrack to My Life and Times* in 2004. Now, in October 2005, I am working on a book about our R30 Tour, called *Roadshow: Landscape With Drums, A Concert Tour by Motorcycle*. I hope to publish it early in 2006. I've also recently been working on an instructional DVD about drum soloing, called *Anatomy of a Drum Solo*. It is built around an explication of the solo from the R30 DVD, recorded and filmed in Frankfurt, Germany.

**UGO:** What was it like to view the footage for the second DVD of *R30*? Did it take you back to a bygone era?



**NEIL:** What that old footage does is make us laugh, really, at how we looked back then, and smile with a certain fond appreciation for our youthful earnestness and energy. We had a lot to learn - but we were learning it!

**UGO:** What do you think you have learned since the early days? How have you changed as a band?

**NEIL:** We have learned so much, it's hard to begin to quantify it. But if anyone hasn't learned a whole bunch in 30 years, they haven't been paying attention. From the band's point of view, we certainly worked on our musicianship first, then - armed with that increased facility and confidence in our individual instruments - expanded into paying more attention to songwriting, arranging, and production.

**UGO:** Rush has always been regarded as musicians' musicians. Is there a challenge in keeping the music technical, yet still making accessible rock songs?

**NEIL:** There is a parallel track there: Making the arrangements interesting and challenging stimulates and inspires us, not just while we're writing and recording, but for the hundreds or thousands of times we might play that song in concert. Along with that, there is our "natural" sense of what we find exciting in rock music, which we always trust that others might share too. That relation doesn't come from us as musicians, but from us as music fans. Two different things, but they don't need to lose track of each other.

**UGO:** You have been praised as one of the most proficient rock drummers. Can you describe your style -- what you're shooting for as a player?



**NEIL:** The way I play is an honest reflection of myself - I like to challenge myself creatively to come up with lots of different parts for the songs, and make them challenging to play. But at the same time, I am driven by a personal sense of what I find exciting in drumming, and in rock music. Some musicians try to second-guess that instinctive response, and "design" their music to appeal to as many people as possible, but I have to think that must get confusing. It's hard enough to decide what you like, and figure out how to do it, never mind trying to please everybody.

**UGO:** What inspired you to write mythic tales like *2112* and

*Hemispheres?*

**NEIL:** In simple terms, those early big pieces were driven by ambition. I was grappling with big, metaphorical themes and sweeping allegories, and it's another mirror of personal development too - start out with the grand principles and idealistic dreams, then gradually move on to more concrete, real-life applications of those principles and ideals.

**UGO:** Do you see the influence of your more ambitious music and lyrics in bands like Coheed and Cambria, Tool and Mudvayne?

**NEIL:** I wouldn't presume to try to identify our own influence in the work of others - but some of those people have said nice things about us, and that feels good.

**UGO:** After *Permanent Waves*, your lyrics became less rooted in science fiction. What triggered the shift?

**NEIL:** Our music has always been a mirror of ourselves, our lives, and our interests. Any "shift" in my lyrics was thus a gradual, natural one - my reading expanded, I matured, I didn't want to do what I had already done. Those were reasons enough to keep trying different things, some successful, some not - but all sincere.

**UGO:** How have you, Geddy and Alex managed to stay together as a band for 30 years?

**NEIL:** There's no easy answer for that, and yet it is basically a simple relation: We like each other, and we like working together. Still, nobody can choose to have an audience for 30 years - like dance partners, they have to choose you too. So we have always been delighted that as we pursued our goals in music, we managed to please enough other people to give us an audience. To say we'd be nothing without them is more than fatuous sentimentality - it's the plain truth.

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