

THE GAME OF SNAKES AND ARROWS

PRIZE EVERY TIME

By Neil Peart

“PRIZE EVERY TIME!” I used to have to call that out, over and over, one long-ago summer on the midway at Lakeside Park in Port Dalhousie, Ontario. “Catch a bubble, prize every time!” The “bubbles” were ping-pong balls with painted numbers that floated on a jet of forced air, like popcorn. You had to catch one with a tiny net, and its number would match the array of shelves behind me, rewarding the bubble catcher with a stuffed animal, keychain, or “magic trick.” Prize every time.

Back then I was about twelve, and I’m older now, but speaking of prizes (and startling segues), I will never forget first hearing the initial few songs for this album. On a snowy day in March 2006, Alex and Geddy came to visit me at my house in Quebec, and brought a CD of a handful of songs they’d put together in Geddy’s home studio in Toronto, with some lyrics I’d sent up from California.

It is always a thrill to hear my words sung for the first time, when those dry, printed lines I’ve labored over finally become charged with *life*. “Prize every time.” Plus, there’s a sense of affirmation in knowing that Geddy found those words worth singing (many are sent; few are chosen).

When I first listen to a rough sketch of guitar, bass, vocal, and drum machine, I am hearing it as the lyricist, seeing how the words work, and I am also listening as the drummer, knowing I will have to learn that song and play it, maybe hundreds of times. In a larger sense, though, I’m really listening as a “fan”—someone who wants to *love* that song. Even on first listen, I felt that way about “Bravest Face” and “The Way the Wind Blows,” and I was especially excited by how different they were from anything we had done before—fresh and vital, yet rooted in some deeper musical streams.

Three decades of working together have given us wells of experience to draw upon, sure, but perhaps more important are the longer intervals between songwriting sessions, when we can let those aquifers fill. In the early years, it was an album every six months, then every year, then every two years, but in the past decade, for one reason and another, it’s been five years between projects. And it seems that with more time to learn and grow, we can still surprise ourselves.

At the time of hearing the first few songs, the only word I could think of for their essence was “spiritual.” Another quality might be the almost oxymoronic sense of “raw sophistication” (good name for an oyster bar). They demonstrated our band’s characteristic alloy of driving rhythms behind soaring melodies and harmonies, all set in a framework that was complex, and crafted with care. But this time, while the arrangements remained intricate and dynamic, the elements were often simple and direct—basic hard rock and blues forms. *The Raw and the Cooked*. (Still thinking up names for oyster bars.)

In May 2006, the three of us moved into a small studio in Toronto to work together for a month. In that northern season of riotous bloom, the city was bright with flowers and spreading leaves, washed in warm sun and sudden thunderstorms. Our work was blossoming, too, and by the beginning of June we had eight songs we all liked. We adjourned for the summer, planning to pick up again in September, and keep working until it was finished.

We had also made some production decisions that would be fruitful later. Engineer Rich Chycki had worked with Alex on the mixes for the *R30* DVD, and we felt he had done a perfect job of maximizing our live sound. We signed him up to be our recording and mixing engineer.

Earlier that year, a young American producer heard we were back working on new material, and asked his manager to send our office a CD of some of the music he had worked on. We always like to have a coproducer, and many times we’re looking for somebody we haven’t worked with before, for fresh input and new directions. We listened to that CD one afternoon while we sat around the control room of the Toronto studio, reviewing a selection of production work by several candidates. Right away we were drawn to the work of that young American, Nick Raskulinez, and when we met him soon after, we were drawn to him even more.

At thirty-six, Nick was a little younger than us (his *mother* was a little younger than us!), but he was also experienced enough, as both musician and producer, to have strong opinions and creative ideas. The three of us quickly agreed to hire him, and once we started work again in September, and had sketched out a few more songs, Nick joined us to review our work so far. He was a powerhouse of enthusiasm, and offered suggestions for the arrangements (one of his frequent lines, “I’d be curious to hear . . .”), helping us to shape the songs more effectively. He also encouraged and elevated our individual performances, challenging us to keep reaching higher (another typical line, “Hey, I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t know you could do it!”).

Nick is a master “air musician,” equally virtuosic on all instruments (some of them for *real*, too; he had started as a drummer, then played both guitar and bass in bands, until he gravitated to the production side). While suggesting an idea for a drum part to me, Nick would use a combination of physical and vocal emulation, arms flailing to something like, “Bloppida-bloppida-batu-batu-whirrrrr-blop-*booujze*.”

“Booujze” was Nick’s vocalization of a bass drum and cymbal crash at the end of that incredible air-drumming fill, and we heard it often. One day I walked into the control room to see Geddy behind the computer screen, moving the sections of a song around on the digital recording. He looked up at me, then nodded toward Nick, “*Booujze* here wants us to try changing the chorus in ‘Spindrifft.’”

Everybody laughed, and from then on, he was Booujze. (The proper spelling determined after considerable discussion.)

By October we had eleven songs completed in rough form, and some dominant lyrical themes were evident. Thoughts on spirituality and faith were woven into several songs: “Whirlwind life of faith and betrayal,” as hinted in “Far Cry,” and further expressed in “Armor and Sword,” “The Way the Wind Blows,” and “Faithless.”

Other lyrical themes include a twist on the time-honored “relationship songs,” framed along the lines of Robert Frost’s epitaph, “I Had a Lover’s Quarrel With the World.” In “Spindrifft” and “Good News First,” for example, the lyrics are deliberately presented in the context of a “lover’s quarrel.” The addressee, though, is not a “significant other,” but a significant proportion of the whole, wide world—as expressed in “The Way the Wind Blows,” all those people “Who don’t seem to see things the way you do.”

The same “lover’s quarrel” device colors the album’s final statement, “We Hold On.” (With a nod to T.S. Eliot for “measured out in coffee breaks.”) If many of the other lyrics illuminate the struggles we all have to face, in love and in life, this one shows how we deal with it: We hold on.

Geddy adapted “Workin’ Them Angels” from the verses that open my book *Traveling Music*, which closed that circle nicely. In a similar loop, the title for “The Larger Bowl” came from a bicycle trip in West Africa, as described in *The Masked Rider*, when a song with that title wafted through a feverish, hallucinatory “dysentery dream.” Waking in a sweaty tangle of twisted sheets, I only remembered the title, but I knew I had to write that song. Make a dream come true, as it were.

Back in the early '90s, I gave that title to some words partly inspired by the dream's location, Africa, about life's unequal "fortunes and fates." The front of my rhyming dictionary had an index of traditional verse patterns, and I tried writing in some of them—as an exercise, like solving a crossword puzzle. Among sonnets, villanelles, and sestinas, I particularly liked a Malay form called the pantoum, and wrote several lyrics using that scheme, including "The Larger Bowl." However, I never even submitted them to my bandmates until this album—fifteen years later.

It must have been the right time, because, to my delight, Alex and Geddy responded to the challenge of "The Larger Bowl," and its unusual construction. Musically, the song seemed to benefit from stylistic influences we discovered, or recovered, during our *Feedback* project, when we recorded a number of cover tunes from our earliest influences. That spirit of youthful enthusiasm, and the spirit of the '60s, is alive in several of these songs, from the blues sections in "The Way the Wind Blows" to the "feedback solo" in "Far Cry," and the simple rhythm section backing for the melodic guitar solo in "The Larger Bowl."

And speaking of the all-important rhythm section, I had been working hard on my drum parts, too. While Alex and Geddy wrote and arranged in the control room, I could play my drums in the recording room without disturbing them. Several times a day I took a break from lyric writing and went in to play along with CDs of their song sketches, and two nights a week Alex stayed late to be my "producer," so I could record my ideas and see how they worked.

As a drummer, it has become apparent to me that am I more of a "composer" than an "improviser," yet I still face every new song by imagining everything that might *possibly* fit. Determined not to repeat myself if I can avoid it, I search for new approaches to parts, and different kinds of fills. In that spirit, I played through all of the songs many times while I experimented, and that helped to "groom" my performances, make them smoother and more finely detailed.

In November we began the final recording at Allaire Studios, a rambling residential studio in the Catskill Mountains of New York. In the summer of 2005, I had filmed an instructional DVD, *Anatomy of a Drum Solo*, at Allaire, and had loved both the recording facilities (a large room of wood and stone, the estate's former Great Hall, sounded terrific for drums) and the friendly, comfortable atmosphere of the place. The view from the studio windows looked down over a forested valley and far across to receding round peaks—and the food was good!

After a little scientific mic-placing and knob-twiddling, and some impromptu jam sessions, we got down to work. After more than thirty years of recording together, the three of us felt we achieved our best results by concentrating on one performance at a time. Even if we were playing alone to a recorded guide track, it was still *us*, and we “meshed” automatically. Still, we remained open to other methods, and at Booujze’s direction, sometimes I recorded the drum track to the guide by myself; sometimes Geddy and I played together; and sometimes Booujze wanted all three of us out there. Once he was satisfied that we were getting the most from each part of every song, we concentrated on getting the best drum performances. Then Geddy could take a similarly focused approach to rerecording his bass parts to them.

We had only planned to stay at Allaire for two weeks to get those basic tracks done, then move back to Toronto to overdub final guitars and vocals. However, everybody found the atmosphere at Allaire so comfortable, and so conducive to getting good work done, that we ended up staying for *six* weeks, and recording everything there—often all at once. Allaire was equipped with two complete studios in different parts of the compound, and thus Rich and Alex were recording guitars in one room, while Booujze and Geddy worked on vocals in the other.

In a single, inspired performance, Alex recorded his eclectic and poignant solo guitar piece, “Hope,” which also has qualities of spirituality, and raw sophistication. He chose the title from the line in “Faithless,” “I still cling to hope,” and like that song, “Hope” is a kind of secular prayer.

Toward the end of the sessions, Geddy was playing with a fretless bass between vocal takes, just riffing aimlessly, and Booujze was getting excited. He started recording some of those figures over the vocal mic, and fired us up with the idea of putting them together to create a short, quirky instrumental. This inspired the thirteenth track, for luck, “Malignant Narcissism” (an apt title for an instrumental with bass and drum solos, it came from *Team America: World Police*). For everyday use, that mouthful was soon abbreviated to “MalNar” (cue robot voice, “We are from the planet Malnar”). I had left a little four-piece drumset in the studio for Booujze to play around on, and I ended up recording “Malignant Narcissism” on that. Just for fun.

Nearing the end of December, that spirit of fun, inspiration, perspiration, spontaneity, efficiency, and isolation (little to do *but* work) had sped the recording along, and we were done months ahead of our best-case scenario. More importantly, we enjoyed our time working together more than we have in years

(maybe ever), thanks to the great conditions at Allaire and our “dream team” of Rich and Booujze. As I said to them on the day the drum tracks were finished, “I have never enjoyed the recording process so much, nor felt so satisfied by the results.” That’s saying something, believe me, after nearly thirty-three years and I don’t know how many recordings.

In January 2007, we started the mixing at Ocean Way in Hollywood, California. That made quite a change from the rustic surroundings of Allaire, but it was pleasant for me. All through the six years I had been living in Los Angeles, I had commuted to Toronto for rehearsing, writing, and recording, so it was nice to have Alex and Geddy come to me for a change.

And they didn’t seem to mind escaping January in Toronto for Southern California. One day Geddy reported that Toronto was exactly a *hundred* degrees colder—a balmy 80 degrees in Los Angeles, and a 20-below wind chill in Toronto. While waiting for Rich (now “Arch,” for his spot-on imitations of Archie Bunker) and Booujze to put together a mix for our approval, there was plenty of time for, say, tennis and golf.

By then we had settled on the album title, *Snakes and Arrows*, which came about when I was working on the lyrics for “Armor and Sword.” In turn, that title metaphor had been developed for my book, *Roadshow*, to describe the “good” kind of faith as being armor, while the “bad” kind of faith is a sword.

While I was working on those lyrics for “Armor and Sword,” the battlefield imagery reminded me of a line, “Where ignorant armies clash by night,” from a poem I half-remembered. It turned out to be Matthew Arnold’s magnificent “Dover Beach,” and I was so excited by its synchronicity with my own preoccupations in many of these songs that I had to put in one line from the poem, as a tribute, “Confused alarms of struggle and flight.”

I was also thinking, like Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, about how children are usually *imprinted* with a particular faith, along with their other early blessings and scars. People who actively choose their faith are vanishingly few; most simply receive it, with their mother’s milk, language, and customs. Thinking also of people being shaped by early *abuse* of one kind or another, I felt a connection with friends who had adopted rescue dogs as puppies, and given them unlimited love, care, and security. If those puppies had been “damaged” by their earlier treatment—made nervous, timid, or worse—they would *always* remain that way, no matter how smooth the rest of their life might be. It seemed the same for children.

To express that notion, I came up with, “The snakes and arrows a child is heir to/ Are enough to leave a thousand cuts.” I thought I was only combining Hamlet’s “slings and arrows” with the childhood game “Snakes and Ladders,” to make something less clichéd. And indeed, when we were discussing *Snakes and Arrows* as a possible album title, Geddy remarked, “I like it because it *sounds* familiar, but isn’t.”

One thing I have always done when we decide on a title is check to see if it’s been used already. In the old millennium, that would involve a visit to the local record store and a flip through their master list, the Phonolog. These days, of course, it’s a perfect job for a search engine.

To my surprise, “snakes and arrows” called up several links to something called “Leela, The Game of Self Knowledge,” or, incredibly, “The Game of Snakes and Arrows.” Long story short, I followed that trail with growing enthusiasm, and learned that Leela (Hindi for “the game”) was at least 2,000 years old, and had been created by Buddhist saints and sages as a game of karma—like many games, a metaphor for life. (And an accidental but deep connection with the tarot cards we used on *Vapor Trails*, or the dice on *Roll the Bones*—both ancient games, and metaphors for life.)

The Leela player rolls a single die, said to be affected by his or her karma, and moves around the board. Each square on the grid represents a stage of consciousness or existence, and the player is raised to higher levels by arrows, and brought low by snakes. The children’s game “Snakes and Ladders” (sometimes “Chutes and Ladders”) was adapted from Leela by the British during the 19th century Colonial period. After that, the original game almost disappeared—apparently only two gameboards existed in India when scholar Harish Johari revived the game and brought it to America in the 1970s. The Sanskrit chants that once accompanied each of the squares were lost, but a cosmos of spirituality (there’s that word again) survived.

When I told Alex and Geddy about the Leela connection, and showed them the gameboard painted by Harish Johari, they were as excited by all that serendipity as I was, and we agreed to use his painting for the cover. Hugh Syme and I began our always enjoyable collaboration of creating the other elements for the packaging — the *presentation* — and images for each of the songs.

So, from the first demo to the final cover, that’s the story of *Snakes and Arrows*. Or a few of them, anyway. If every song is a story, every song *has* many stories, too. The elaborate instrumental, “The Main Monkey Business,” was certainly the most painstaking song of all to write, arrange, and record (it took me

three days just to *learn* it). Its title comes from a conversation Geddy had with his Polish mother. Talking about a cousin of theirs, she said, “I have a feeling he’s up to some monkey business.”

Geddy laughed, saying, “What kind of monkey business?”

“*You* know,” she said, with Old World wisdom, “The *main* monkey business.”
Everybody knows about that.

And so it can be said that *Snakes and Arrows* offers some monkey business, some spirituality, some lover’s quarrels with the world, some raw sophistication, some dysentery dreams, some malignant narcissism, the spirit of the ’60s, and the Tao of Booujze. It combines everything we know about making music with everything we *love* about making music.

Naturally, we hope listeners will feel that spirit—*all* those spirits—and have a rewarding musical experience, not just once, but again and again.

With a prize every time.

