



RUSH SHOW THEIR HAND

Drummer/lyricist NEAL PEART talks about Rush's *Mighty Quest*

Rush are the Great Communicators of rock. Their music and their message is simple. Clarity of thought and purpose. It's what makes their sound as a powerhouse rock trio so appealing, and makes them as people so impressive.

The music is clearly defined on their new double live album *'A Show Of Hands'* (Vertigo) which brilliantly captures the essence of Rush, as purveyors of shining guitars, blended with vocal intensity and percussive fury. Featuring great songs like 'Time Stand Still' and 'Force Ten' the bulk of the material was recorded on last year's tour and at Birmingham, England in particular. One of the highlights of the LP is Neal Peart's remarkable drum solo 'Rhythm Method' which sounds in part like an entire orchestra at work. So it was a pleasure to be able to talk to Neal about the album, the development of Rush, their studio recording plans - and his drumming skills.

Neal came on the line to our German office from Canada, sounding loud and clear, compared to a muffled conversation I'd had just a couple of days ago with Joe Elliott - and he was only in Dublin!

The live album has all the quality of any Rush studio album, so I wondered if the band played especially well when they knew the show was being recorded.

"Well as soon as we know we're being recorded we start playing differently. We are much more conscious of playing for the microphone than for yourself. The nice thing was because we were also filming, there was so much else going on with 12 cameras swinging around, that we kind of overlooked the recording part and just played naturally. We didn't care about the camera so much because they are not nearly so critical of your playing as the microphone. We usually record shows for ourselves on

cassette, especially near the beginning of a tour where we want to analyse our playing and to see how the different instruments are sounding and what the engineers are doing on the mix."

Did Neal feel the band had reached a peak or a turning point that led them to make *'A Show Of Hands'* now?

"I hope so. We were very pleased and surprised by the consistency of performance that we heard on the tapes from about 12 different shows that we did in America as well as England. So it was a kind of affirmation that we had been working hard on all these little details of technique all these years and they are actually paying off."

Had Rush been on a long search for perfection?

"In different areas, yes. We have gone on from quest to quest I guess. In the early days it was a quest for technique and knowledge and learning how to play. We never used to think about songwriting as seriously and definitely not arranging. But eventually, when we became more confident in our abilities as musicians we started to worry more about the songs. Lately arranging has really become a progressive area for us. We can pour ideas into that. We used to stick our songs together with Sellotape! Now we are into the art of sticking things together effectively. We used to take a piece of reggae or electronic music and butt them altogether into one song..

Rush tend not to write their creations down on sheet music. They memorise huge chunks but also use computers, as Neal explained.

"We play a song for a bit, listen to what feels good, and cement that onto a computerised version of it. So we can play it and hear it at the same time."

Watching a live Rush show is to be impressed by the slickness of it all and the apparent telepathy between Neal, singer Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson. But Neal reveals there is a hidden world behind the facade!

WHIRLWIND

"We want to create an overall impression of being in control even if there is absolute madness in your mind and there often is on stage with us controlling so much technology, triggering this and setting that off at exactly the right moment. Our heads might be in an absolute whirlwind but it has to appear as a placidly delivered performance!"

Neal was surprised when he saw a video of himself (that accompanies the album) taken at Birmingham. "It was like seeing it for the first time from an outsiders point of view, and not being involved in that mental welter of things going through my mind during the course of a performance."

How far ahead was he thinking while playing?

"Ah, good question! I think it goes in kind of layers. Mostly well ahead of where I am, and mostly up to the next difficult passage or if there is a transition coming that I know is awkward, I'll be setting myself up for that, while I'm playing the previous part. I'm one section ahead all the time."

How did Neal prepare himself for one of Rush's energy con-

suming concerts. Was it a big mental or physical strain?

"It's like an automatic focus from the moment you wake up on that day. It grows over the years to become an automatic response. Today I work! It was brought home to me really clearly on this tour when Geddy was suddenly stricken with laryngitis before one of the American shows. We very rarely cancel a show. Maybe one out of a whole tour. Well we cancelled and suddenly I found myself totally at sea. I just didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't spend it like a day off because my mind was focused on performance and I was lost in a limbo all day long."

Does the video have the same tracks as the album?

"No, we took a different philosophy in assembling it. The live album represents a retrospective and to me a more viable alternative to the greatest hits kind of package. So we used it to symbolise an era, and tried not to repeat songs that were recorded live before. For the most part we chose from the most recent selection of studio albums to encompass a milestone statement from us. Whereas the live video we wanted to represent the show and it's evolution as an entity - quite a different thing from an album. It's part of a whole series of evolutions that we've gone

since, for example 'Exit Stage Left'?

"Oh there has been such a revolution on the whole technological level since then. In the time since that album was made we didn't have the advantage of Midi, we didn't have digital synthesisers on the scale we have now. The whole world of sampling has had an enormous effect on me specifically and on us as a band on what it has allowed us as a three piece to have access to on stage. That has made a tremendous difference and advantage over the past four albums we've made. There has been a growing commitment to the cutting edge of technology and our sonic horizons."

Many say there is hardly any difference in quality between a studio and live album by Rush, except the latter has applause and is a bit louder!

"That's a wonderful thing and again that's technology, sequencing and sampling which enable us to play the sounds, just as the are on the record, in a concert. But we are always careful to draw the line that nothing is on tape or triggered by somebody else. We can bring studio fidelity to the stage though and I found that by using drum samples, whenever I've used ethnic percussion on the record, I can sample that now. I have a Midi Marimba so I can do

answering phrases to his drum breaks. All this can be heard on 'A Show Of Hands.' But how was it done?

"Yeah, well that again is sampling. In it's initial incarnation - this is an interesting story - I used samples from Count Basie's orchestra. I took a CD and used actual horn shots from Basie because I had grown up on that kind of music and it really meant something to me. I've always really loved big band music where the drummer is the trigger and the whole band shoots off! I've always loved that. So I took some samples from Basie but I felt awkward about that morally, so I went into the studio with a Synclavier and painstakingly recreated the Basie effect with synthetic horns. There is nothing like a full horn section unleashed with a bass drum y'know? Bang! So tight, and so powerful. The accents and punctuation are physically so powerful it's just like a punch."

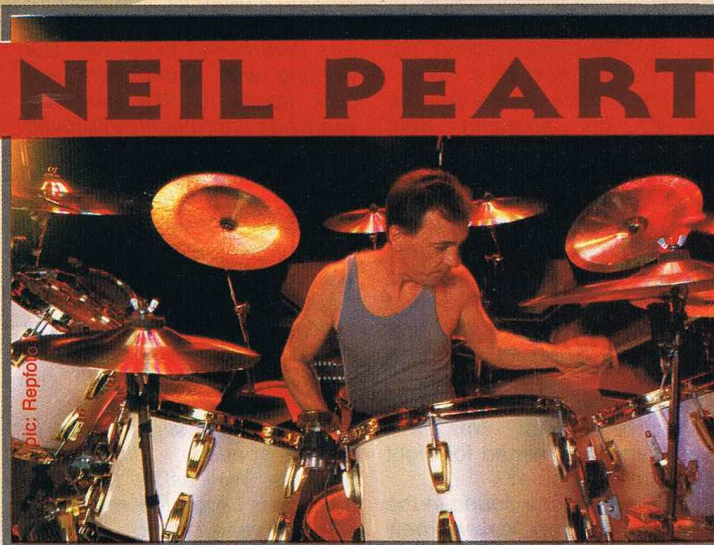
Neal uses Simmonds drum pads to trigger his own 'brass section' and also has an electronic Midi marimba, which he can also use throughout the show for glockenspiel, tubular bells, and sometimes just to trigger an effect.

"It's something I only started using on the last album and I hope to use a lot more. To be able to do a marimba solo and reproduce it live and still play drums at the same time is a fantastic thing. I'm not a great keyboard percussion player by any means but I've always loved the sound of it. Here we are a rock trio, who can dabble in syncopated marimba solos! Geddy plays bass with me, while my feet are keeping the drum part going. All of that going on in 5/4 time makes it a mental exercise! It is so satisfying to do, especially live. It's so delicate to pull off and when we do, we both look at each other with a big smile."

Months of planning and rehearsal go into each Rush tour, with Neal having his own special rehearsals to get all the tempos right, the transitions between numbers and use of samples. His drum solo alone took several days work to devise.

"I wanted to make it an encyclopaedia of percussion to tell the rise of the drum set from big band to rock, and then use sampling to suggest different eras, like tribal drumming. I had to do a lot of arranging to get it worked out. One part is focused completely on snare drum technique with paradiddles and flamacaues."

Surprisingly the Three



through. The video is an hour and a half long which is close enough to the length of our show to represent the dynamics it goes through"

So each Rush 'live' album represents the end of an era?

"Yes it really does, like a milepost planted, to mark the end of something but also the beginning of something. By accident or design a live album sends us off to explore new directions."

What had happened to Rush

keyboard percussion live and have the same effect they have on the record."

RHYTHM

One of the most exciting moments in a Rush concert is when Neal plays his highly intelligent, brilliantly executed drum solo, 'Rhythm Method'. I was amazed to hear at the last Rush concert, at Wembley in London, Neal playing along with what sounded like his own jazz big band, trumpets stabbing out



Stooges, ancient US comedians, make an appearance on the album, their theme tune at least. Neal laughed. "We wanted them on our last live album but we ran into all kinds of copyright stuff. So what we did was make our own version of their theme. We used our own voices instead of The Stooges, and a friend sampled all the instruments and orchestrated it on synthesiser, just as I did with the big band brass. It's 'Three Blind Mice' so there's no copyright problem there. It gives the effect of the original sound-track which is what we wanted of course, and it certainly sends us on stage in the right frame of mind!"

So Rush felt they were three stooges huh?

"Sometimes. No question."

ITCHY

Rush fans will want to know when we can expect the next studio album?

"We are literally on the brink of starting again. The three of us will be going away to the country and start working on new material to start recording probably starting in April. We don't have songs ready. We don't start writing until we are actually there. But we are all itchy and stored up with lots of ideas. Already we are sending things back and forth to each other. Ideas, lyrics, tapes are being sent to each other's houses, which is really exciting because we are not officially at work yet. We are so eager..."

So Rush was still a satisfying concept for the restless Peart mind?

"Yeah, definitely so. It's something you never take for granted and it's been remarkable to see the enthusiasm in action. We have been having informal meetings to plan things out and now we are talking to each other nearly every day about what we are going to be doing next month. It's nice. We all live in Toronto, so if we have an idea cooking we can just courier it across town."

Neal explained how Rush combined the lyrics and tunes. "There have been circumstances where they have given me a piece of music and

I've tailored lyrics to fit it. It's just a matter of facility. It's easier to conceptualise when you have blocks of words to look at. You can have a picture of the whole song."

Neal says his writing could well be influenced by the hectic year he has undergone, travelling to "exotic and remote places" but he doesn't want to write travelogue songs.

As band lyricist, did he feel Geddy Lee always interpreted the songs the way he wanted to hear them?

"Oh yeah...it's such a good partnership in that way. One of the most rewarding parts of my lyricist hat is when I hear them sung for the first time. But there is a lot of discussion goes on. I've learned a lot from Geddy about what's comfortable to sing in terms of syllables and consonants and what comes easily. I've learned a lot more about being responsive to a vocalist, writing words that are not only attractive to look at, or follow some abstract poetic scheme that I have in mind, but also to make them for a voice."

Frank Sinatra always said he learned his phrasing from Tommy Dorsey (the trombone player) and I really hear that in a good singer. The words have to have a good tonality, like the note of an instrument. A thin syllable doesn't permit that, and you can convey the wrong mood. It's important that the word be a sound as well as a symbol."

Rush now have a highly distinctive sound. Was this something they aimed for, right from the beginning?

"We aimed for a sound in the abstract, but we never knew what it would be. It's been the result of a cumulative effect of the music we've learnt in the last ten years. Our tastes have changed, the equipment we play has changed. Our sound is the result of a lot of smaller factors coming together."

They hadn't been influenced by the changes in pop music though. Rush always seem to carve their own path.

"It's because we really like rock. No other reason. We dabbled in fusion music and

learned a lot from those kinds of musicians. As a fan and music listener, there are lots of different styles I like from reggae to ethnic music to Italian opera. Anything basically, if it's well done. But when it comes to playing I really like rock drumming. I like the energy of it, I like the freedom. I can do anything stylistically that I want, and it's still called rock! I enjoy playing and listening to jazz, but it's not as completely fulfilling as rock. Funnily enough when I am at home, all of my playing tends to be with brushes or marimba. Because I play rock all the time, when I do play for myself I don't want to trash away at full speed because I do that for a living! I get the brushes out and settle myself into the slowest tempo I can possibly play."

Did Neal teach much? (I was hoping for a course of free lessons).

"No, not at all. I teach by example. I'm not patient enough with myself and I know I'd not be patient enough with anybody else."

Neal once said he felt anguished at every mistake he made on stage. Did that still apply?

PEAK

"Yes, I'm still very critical of tiny inaccuracies, but they become tinier. It used to bother me about keeping good tempos through a song or getting through a drum fill. I felt very insecure about those things and was determined to fix 'em. But working with sequencers and click tracks for the past few years has enormously improved my sense of time. When I listen to myself play live, I don't wince quite so much. The tempo play pretty steady. The faults become truly microscopic and you can live with them. I used to feel if I'd made a mistake everyone in the building knew it. Now I know they don't. It makes life easier."

Was Neal happy with his career and the business?

There was a slight pause in the speedy flow of answers. "Well as far as drumming goes I know I've reached a twenty year peak. I have plateaued out with a lot of things that were important to me. As for the music business - I don't mess with it too much. I really believe in drawing a line between those two words music and business. I definitely prefer the first part of it. I delegate the business to our office and the record company. People from the record company are NOT invited to our recording sessions, and we do not submit demos of our songs for their approval before we record them. Neither

do we go marching into their office and tell them how to sell records, or what the single should be or how to advertise. We stay out of their hair and we expect the same in return."

What did he think of the rock business though?

"I'm not a business man. Business is no dirtier or cleaner than anything else. Music has no purity in a lot of cases either where it is a bought and sold commodity. If business is done with the same standards as music then it can be a good and fulfilling thing. But it's just not for me."

Rush don't seem to join in the great rock'n'roll circus?

"No, we have been entirely fortunate in that. We have also been pretty stubborn about keeping ourselves as ourselves."

Were Rush planning to tour in '89?

DELAY

"If we are really fast we hope to have the studio album released before the end of '89, so touring would probably be a 1990 projection. We try to stay a year ahead of ourselves but we haven't discussed 1990 yet. The part we are starting now, is my favourite, which is the writing and arranging, when we go away in a creative atmosphere devoted to nothing else but making new things and the three of us working so closely together. There is great satisfaction in that interchange of ideas."

"We can write a song one day, record it and listen to it the same night at least as a demo and that's instant gratification which I love. I write songs on a computer and tried it for the first time on the 'Hold Your Fire' studio album. I was worried about, so I went back and re-copied the lyrics by hand because I have always written on little pads with a black marker pen. I was used to it looking that way. So the first two or three songs I wrote on the computer I copied onto pads to make sure they looked right. But I love the facility to edit and move things around"

Reverting briefly back to 'A Show Of Hands' wasn't the album delayed a while?

"Yes it was but this was again the realm of business into which I do not delve. It was just to make sure it got proper attention."

It was time for fast talking Neal to dash off and start work on the album. Meanwhile Rush fans will be delighted to know we will soon be running a special Rush Fan Mag, currently being prepared by Götz Kühnemund. More details later!