

## Neil Peart, Drumming Legend

Despite England's claim to the vast majority of important progressive rock bands, the most notorious prog drummer came from Canada. The power-prog trio Rush, featuring Neil Peart, based its sound on the blueprints laid out by Genesis and Yes but added a blues-influenced metallic edge, showed a penchant for sci-fi lyrical concepts, and freely indulged in odd-time mania. Peart, a formidable soloist encircled by drums, quickly became the most obsessed-over drummer of his generation, eliciting more fan mail and critical discussion than any other drummer of the day.

"When I was teaching in a store a while back, there was a guy who came in with his eight-year-old son," recalls L.A.-based drummer/educator Michelle Mangione. "He said, 'I want you to make my son sound like Neil Peart.'" Mangione laughs at the memory. "I thought, Okay...he's eight years old."

Though certain aspects of Peart's nightly solo remain consistent from tour to tour, each time the band goes out Neil deconstructs and reconstructs his style to bring something fresh to his performances. Such amendments and alterations include his incorporating Count Basie-style synth horn hits triggered by electronic pads via MIDI in the late '80s and, years later, his own interpretation of Max Roach's famed independence-building showpiece in 3/4, "The Drum Also Waltzes."

In fact, Peart's work ethic is as famous as his chops. Though he has loosened up a bit in recent years, he'll forever be perceived, for better or worse, as the drummer who, as Rush bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee once joked, rehearses to rehearse. "In a way, he was slightly intimidating to record," says engineer/producer Stephen Tayler, who worked with Rush for 1989's *Presto* and 1991's *Roll The Bones*, "because you know he's going to get it right. So it's quite a lot of pressure on you, the recording engineer, to get it right as well."

Despite Peart's preparedness, some aspects of the drummer's playing remain a mystery. For instance, why does he choose to make slight variations on the syncopated 6/4 rhythm of "Turn The Page," from 1987's *Hold Your Fire*? How does he, in the much mimicked drum break of "Tom Sawyer," from 1981's *Moving Pictures*, fuse caveman aggression with African-style call-and-response patterns while engaging the toms, double kicks, and crash cymbals in conversation? How does he

smoothly tap into his mates' hair-raising guitar and bass performances, maintain the integrity of his own creative rhythmic ideas while playing fills throughout the verses, decorate the track with orchestral embellishments, and do it all in 5/4 for "The Trees," from 1978 *Hemispheres*? What inhuman spirit inhabited his playing when he laid down the 7/8 ostinato patterns and roundhouse over-the-edge fills, reminiscent of Michael Giles' swingin' performance on King Crimson's "21st Century Schizoid Man," on "La Villa Strangiato"?

Whether or not we ever learn the answers to these puzzles, it doesn't detract from the fact that Peart has become such an endearing progressive drumming figure, not only due to his execution of tricky rhythmic ideas but, perhaps more important, because he had the mind and musical freedom to think them up in the first place. "For me, playing drums is the ultimate involvement," Peart said in 1994. "It's as involving to an athletic degree as a marathon run is, but at the same time your mind is as busy as an engineer is, with all the calculations a drummer has to make."

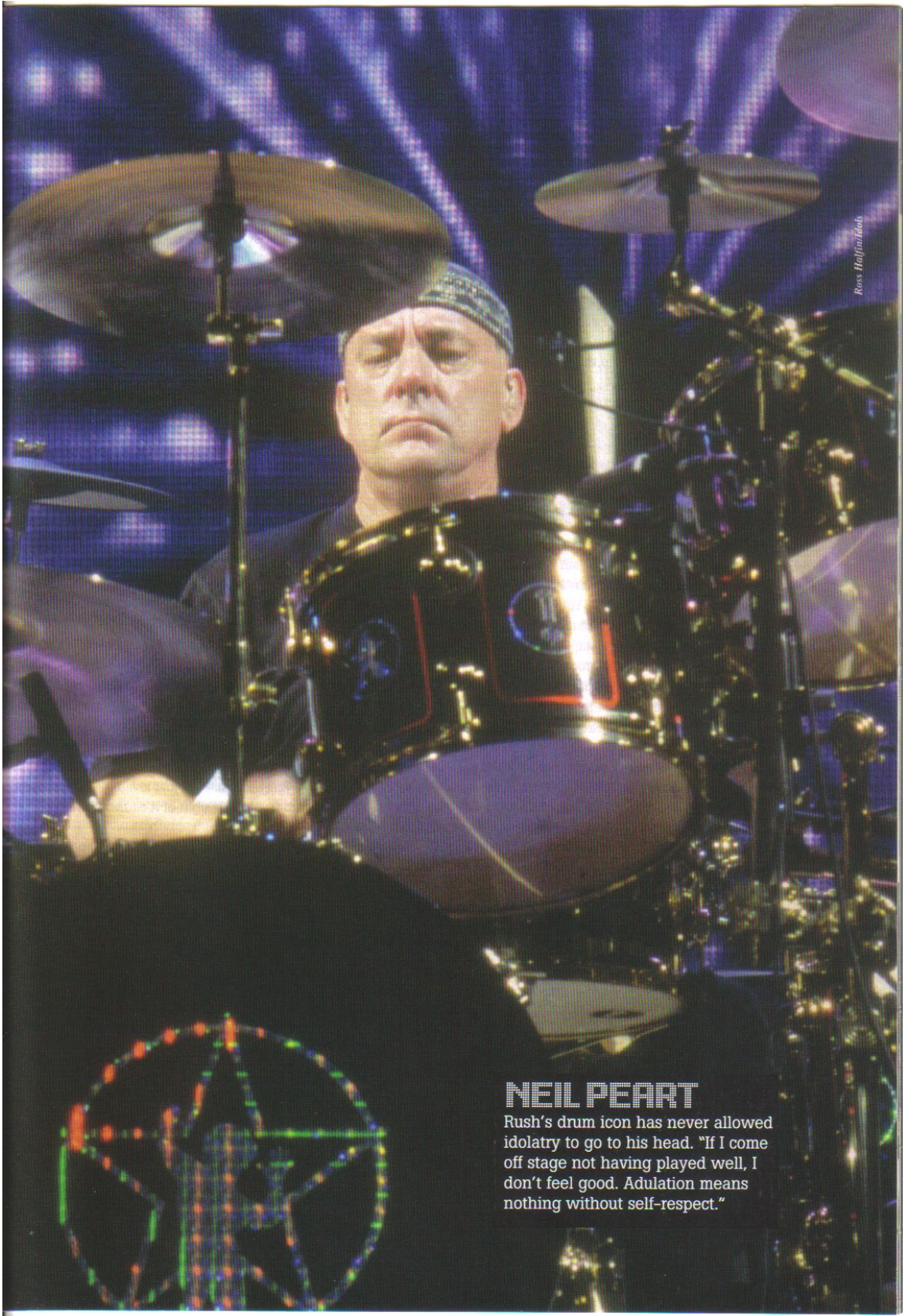
"You don't have to see Keith Moon to think the guy must be a maniac," Jane's Addiction drummer Stephen Perkins said in a 2006 interview. "When you hear Neil Peart, you think this must be a mathematical, book-smart type of guy. You can hear [great musicians'] personalities come out of their instruments."

As Peart observed in 1989, the end of each tour and each recording project marks a "significant broadening of my abilities and my choices of techniques." Neil has been open to a wide range of musical and nonmusical influences, from traditional African drumming and MIDI sampling to the literary work of T.S. Eliot and Ayn Rand. In the '90s he showed that he was even open to explicitly retooling his own playing methods, tapping the wisdom of legendary drum teacher Freddie Gruber's "non-note," circular-motion sticking technique—one of the many byproducts of Peart's experience producing the Buddy Rich tribute *Burning For Buddy*.

As popular today as they have ever been, Neil Peart and Rush tour regularly and record albums that move hundreds of thousands of units (on their summer 2010 tour they played the beloved *Moving Pictures* in its entirety), a feat that continually confounds the naysayers who thought prog died three decades ago.







Ross Halfon/Reds

## NEIL PEART

Rush's drum icon has never allowed idolatry to go to his head. "If I come off stage not having played well, I don't feel good. Adulation means nothing without self-respect."