

SPIRIT OF PEART

By Dave Dickson.

**Part One of a
major interview
with Neil Peart
of Rush.**

WHEN the great juggernaut that today is Rush comes rolling into town everyone sits up and takes notice. Not least we at *Kerrang!*

Rush are reputedly notoriously awkward people to interview, the pitfalls are numerous and potentially disastrous; apparently they think nothing of simply getting up and quitting an interview if they should happen to take offence. The watchword here was 'caution'.

It was drummer Neil Peart who'd drawn the short straw and thereby became my target for the post-Birmingham NEC gig confrontation. My head was feeling numb from the long drive down... I couldn't have felt less like doing an interview. As it turned out I had very little to do in the course of our one-and-a-half hour discussion except nod and throw in the occasional question.

Peart, you see, is a man with an awful lot to say. He has a sharp mind, even if at times he fails to notice that his perception may no longer be based at quite the same grass-roots level he would prefer.

No matter how much he shies away from the term he has become a 'star' and that necessarily alters your ability to view the world from the same perspective as perhaps you could before. Whatever, whether you agree with him or not, whether you even happen to like Rush or not, his opinions are, for the most part, valid, intriguing and certainly nothing less than entertaining.

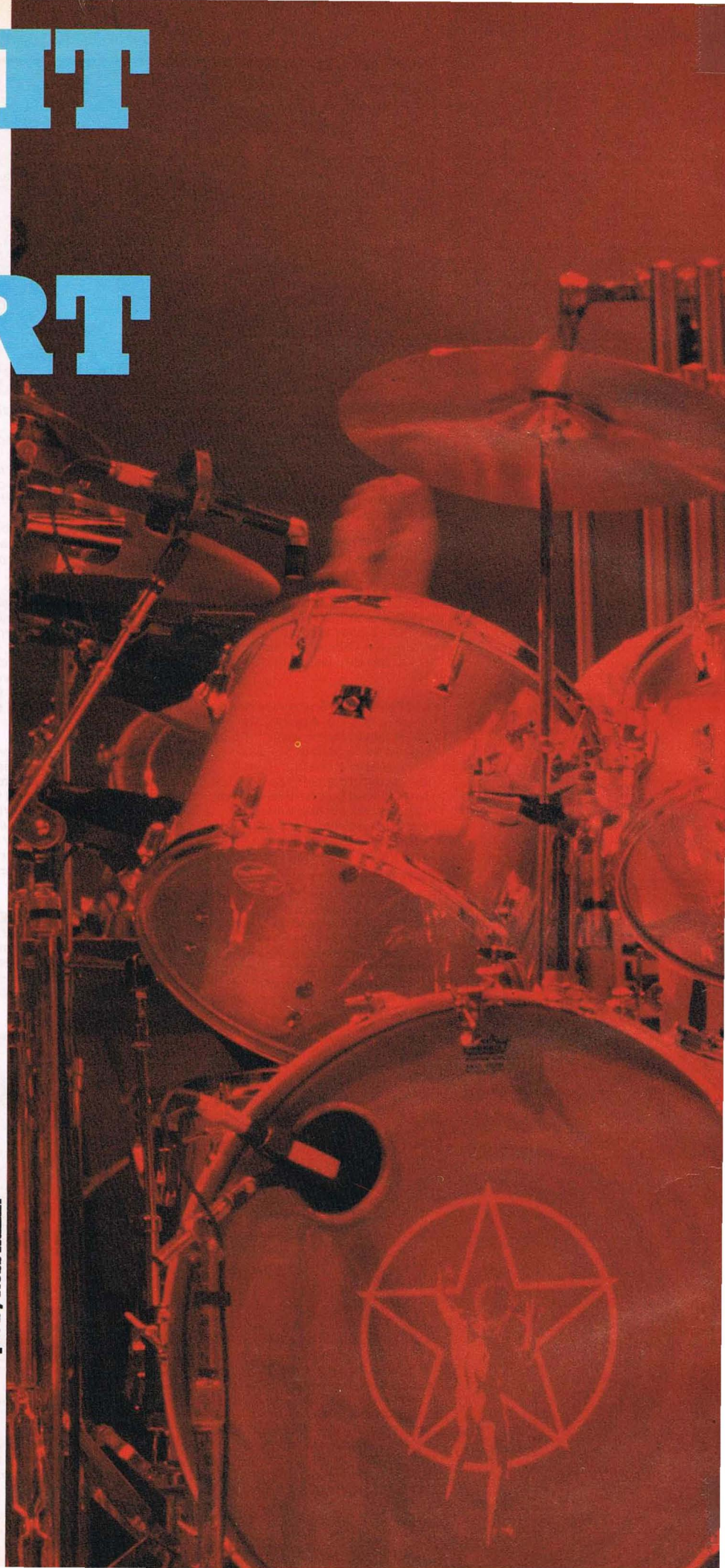
What follows, both in this issue and the next, is a largely unedited transcript of the interview which took place in a small room backstage, furnished only by two chairs, a table and an ashtray. Outside a queue was forming of eager young autograph hunters.

It was an impressive gig but I thought the drum sound was a bit flat.

"It's the building, yeah, it's very dead and it's very frustrating for me because I'm used to certain amount of liveliness coming back off them which feeds me, especially in the top-hat. There's something about this building that soaks up the high-end. It's probably better in the overall sound sense for everyone else for

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pic by Ross Halfin



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greater fidelity, but for a drummer . . . Tonight was probably really nice for the overall sound but for drums it was a little bit stilted."

How did it sound to you onstage?

"It's hard to describe, it's such a subjective thing . . . just that what I was putting into them wasn't coming back."

I imagine you were hitting them fairly hard.

"Oh, I do that anyway and usually I expect a return on that investment, ha!"

How do you react to this sort of interview situation? Does it become like a production line?

"Ah, no because we do them out of choice, or at least I do. Interviews, for me, I enjoy doing them so I choose when to do them – I like doing them after the show because I'm relaxed and the work of the day is done – and often I find it's a really good way to air your ideas. You get to talk about things you wouldn't ordinarily verbalise, about the band, about your playing or about yourself, and it's very helpful a lot of times. I'll think back on things that I've discussed during an interview and go: 'Oh yeah, that's right!' or 'Oh no, that's wrong!' and it's things under normal circumstances that you wouldn't talk about with your friends, you wouldn't cover those things in normal conversation. So being put on the spot and being forced to articulate things that are sometimes intangible, sometimes difficult to put into words, is a good challenge . . . and I like the sound of my own voice! Ha! It's kind of nice because in normal conversation, as in everything else, I tend to be a bit reserved and I'd rather listen than talk. In an interview it becomes incumbent on me to be the talker."

"I wouldn't do more than one a day and I'll never answer the same question the same way twice; and if I get asked the same question too many times I just have to refuse to answer it, and if it seems rude or arrogant I'm sorry. It's the same thing with us with the old songs. If they get tired to the point where we can't play them with any sincerity anymore then I think the only moral thing to do is stop playing them."

"And it's the same when I get a question like: How did you get together? or: How did you start playing drums? I just say I'm sorry, I do not wish to answer that question anymore because I'd have to give an answer that I've given a hundred times before, and it would be insincere."

So do you think Rush have now reached a stage where they no longer need the press?

"The press! Who needs the press? Again it's a thing you don't want to be arrogant about but the press in Britain has the same attitude that radio has in America where they think they rule the world, and personally I don't think that's so."

"Over here it's so incestuous because that's all there is. In America in some ways, in spite of the corruption that exists in radio and the fact that it's so formulated and so almost computerised now to find the lowest common denominator, here the press is slightly the opposite where they don't aim for the average but at the same time it becomes so incestuous where they have to build up 'the next big thing' this week and slag it off the next week because anything that anybody else knows about isn't 'hip' anymore; something that writers only know about, oh, that's really hip, and they can tout it all they want, but as soon as the public becomes aware of it then a certain segment of critics feel obliged to slag it off."

"I was thinking today that a lot of writers know far more about writing than they do about music. We've had so many multi-syllable words applied to us in the past, both in a negative and a positive sense, which appeals to me from my appreciation of words, but I realise it really



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has nothing to do with appreciation of music. "I don't really understand what makes a person want to be critic, except in the obvious ways where people are bitter if they're a frustrated musician, for instance. That's a bit of a cliché but on the other hand there are a great deal of music writers around the world who are frustrated musicians and in that case they just have to get the chance to get their bitterness off their chests and feel superior because they can say in print that somebody else isn't as good as they should be."

"I don't know, it's something I have mixed feelings about. When I lived in England I used to read all the music papers every week and devour it all wanting to know things as a musician and as a music fan. But when you get on the other end of the stick it doesn't seem so interesting."

Do you still regard yourself as a fan?

"Absolutely."

How do you see your rôle in this situation as a spokesman for Rush? What do you feel you have to communicate?

"What I think. That seems maybe a bit facile but it's communication I guess. But I can do that in other ways; I try hard to communicate with our fans directly through the programmes, and I write all our press releases and so on. To me, apart from our music which is so obviously the most direct communication possible to the people that receive it, I like people to know the truth, consequently I do it myself because then I know it's going to be right. To me that's more important than anything. I don't think I'm performing a service for anyone except to tell the truth, especially over here where the press is over-active, really, for the amount . . . there isn't something interesting happening in the music world every week, let's face it, things don't happen that fast. So I can't give it too much credit, I just enjoy doing it."

"There's times when I've talked with other people and had very successful interviews and, for the sake of sensationalism, they'll twist around everything that I've said and try to make it more 'newsworthy' than it was meant to be, so . . ."

Are you thinking of the NME's 'Threat to our Nation's youth – Rush are fascists!' thing?

"Ah, it's happened a lot of other times. Again, that's a very insular way of looking at it because you're thinking only of Britain. The world is much bigger than England is, much as the English people don't appreciate that. But it happens enough times that it makes you a little bit hesitant. But at the same time, like I said before, I like to shoot my mouth off! It's my own fault, I don't blame anyone else for it, you just say what you think and hope that you're dealing with someone who's objective and honest enough to present it that way."

Do you think you can still say that, as big as Rush are now, you still have that communication with the fans?

"As much as you ever do with a stranger. As much as our fans think they know all about us, know who we are and everything, they don't and never have."

Well, do you know who your fans are?

"No, of course not! How can you know two million people?! We have two million fans, two million individual people with individual lives who have grown up in different places in the world in different ways . . . No, I certainly don't. I have a sense of our ideal fan, the person that I think we have in mind when we do things, and certainly we have a conscientious attitude towards that, but I don't think the majority of our fans, or if in fact any human being, could fit into our concept of the ideal person who understands everything that we do and why."

"That's who we work for but it's an idealisation that just gives us a point of objectivity where we can stand back and say: 'OK, if we were a fan of this band what would we like them to do?' But if we tried to rule ourselves by what the fans want that would be just as absurd as trying to rule ourselves by what the record company wants or what the radio stations want."

"It's all an artificial lowest common denominator. If you think that we have to please the fans that like Iron Maiden and Saxon and AC/DC – I know I have nothing in common with those people, so I can't possibly hope to be able to relate to them on their level unless I play down or unless I talk down or think down, basically. So you just have to do what you feel is right and hope people respond to it, which has been the guiding philosophy for us all along."

In rock 'n' roll circles would you consider yourself an intellectual?

"Ha! No, in any circle I wouldn't consider myself so. No, not at all, I'm just curious. For me, it's all curiosity and it's pride. I'm curious about things and I feel ignorant if I don't know things, so I force myself to learn. I'm curious enough to want to think about things, so it pushes me."

"Being an intellectual certainly doesn't allow you to lead a better life, so I don't see that as necessarily an ideal. I think that being rational is very good, but being passionate's very good too and I don't feel the need to choose between the two. If I have to choose I'll take both because I think both are good."

"Intellectual' is an ugly word, let's face it, unless you're a particularly dried-up stick of a person you wouldn't like being called an intellectual, and it's not an epitaph I would choose for myself."

It seems to me that back in, say, '77 or '78 you could have been labelled the archetypal Science Fiction/Fantasy rock group. And then along came 'Hemispheres' in which, to me anyway, it looked like you'd over-reached yourselves and were treading water, then came 'Permanent Waves' and you'd changed direction completely to the extent that there was almost no connection between the two. Did

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you find that once you'd finished 'Hemispheres' that perhaps you were no longer communicating the way you wanted to?

"No, actually I don't share the general opinion of that album. Well, it isn't general, actually; again, I was saying about the division of our fans. There's people that only like the first couple of albums and hate everything we've done since; there's people that only like the middle period that hate where we started from and hate where we are now; and there are an awful lot of people, more than people realise, who only like the last two albums and hate everything we've done before. So all these stages are necessary.

"Personally 'Hemispheres' was a very difficult album for us to make, but in spite of that I still really like it a lot and respect it a lot. It took a lot out of us to make that album and I can understand why some people wouldn't like it, but for me, from an outside point of view, if I were a fan, I think I would really like that album."

Well, as a fan, I found the sequel to 'Cygnus X-1' a great anti-climax.

"Fine, that's OK, I don't care. Ha! You have to take chances, you never know how it's going to turn out. 'Signals' was the same way, it was a transitional album, we established certain directions that we wanted to explore, some of them were successful and some of them were not. But if we hadn't taken those chances we would be just like any other formula band, which your magazine and others are full of - people who have decided what will sell and they do it. Personally, I'd rather be wrong than be average or be calculated.

"To me, I hate 'Cygnus X-1', I like 'Hemispheres' but I think 'Cygnus X-1' is ... terrible! Ha! So it's very much a matter of taste. Sometimes, at a distance, when things are old enough that we've done, I can see them clearly and I know how successful they were or what we wanted to do and how much I would enjoy them if I wasn't in the band, if I were a fan of Rush. I know what we've done that I would like and what I wouldn't."

What you appeared to be striving for after 'Hemispheres', at least from a lyrical point of view, was something more direct and economical.

"I wasn't consciously at the time, actually. I only became aware of that with 'Permanent Waves', that I was changing. A lot of times you don't realise it as it's happening and there was a change definitely, you're right, in the sense that through 'Farewell to Kings' and into 'Hemispheres' there was a change going on, lyrically, but I wasn't yet aware of it. It was when 'Permanent Waves' came along that I started to understand what I was doing and why."

Certainly I don't listen to the early stuff so much these days. It was 'Signals', really, that brought me back into the fold since I'd drifted out of the habit of listening to Rush.

"Yeah, well that's good. And then there's people who've been there all along but hate 'Signals', what can you say? I think it's an album that has its flaws, certainly, as everyone that we've made does, but I certainly like the fact that we took the chances and I think the next album will benefit from that in the same way that 'Moving Pictures' benefitted from the schizophrenia of 'Permanent Waves' and 'Hemispheres'. I don't think we could have made 'Moving Pictures', which to me is one of the most musically successful and coherent, cohesive albums that we've ever made, and I know that, that album could not exist without the weirdness of 'Permanent Waves' and the darkness that 'Hemispheres' has, and that is a very dark album.



"I love cross-country

skiing, I love sailing, I

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grass"

"And there's a lot of our fans who don't have a taste for the frivolity we got into with 'Signals' so they don't like that. How can you possibly cater to that or how can you possibly analyse that? You can't, you just have to say that's too bad. Those people feel cheated, they feel ... I don't know, it doesn't make any sense but they feel we're selling out because we're doing something different, when in fact, if they look at who sells out, it's because they do the same thing for five albums in a row, that's what selling out is. But when you're young you don't have the perception or the understanding or the values to be able to draw upon to make a rational decision."

There's probably a lot of kids out there who look on you as some sort of guru, does that worry you?

"It's not my fault, ha! Again, I'm in no control of a thing like that so it makes me very embarrassed. I can't say that I like it, I don't but it's not something I can do anything about."

There's a certain prevailing attitude that rock music is trivial and meaningless but I came up with a phase the other day to counter that argument and give some weight and justification to my profession, and that was that I am creating the mythology of my age - in the sense that the gods and heroes of today are all pop-stars.

"Well, for the people that need it, I guess. I think it's pathetic, it's something that's indigenous to England, too. It doesn't exist in America, and I'm very glad that it doesn't, because life is bigger there. From an objective point of view, again I'm not American, I spend a lot of time defending America because people don't understand it, they've never been there, they don't know anything about it but they feel compelled to condemn it, that is something that is indigenous to England because life is such a narrow thing here that people attach too much importance to trivial things.

"The condemnation of music as being trivial, well, it's not trivial to me, it's been my whole life and I've given it everything I've ever had and sacrificed a lot to be a musician and get as good as I could be. But at the same time it makes me uncomfortable to see the way that it's looked at over here by kids; the fact that the biggest thing in their lives is when their favourite band doesn't come to town, and their whole lives revolve around such small things. It's pathetic really because life is so much

bigger than that. Music is wonderful and it has been the focus of my life but I like a lot of other stuff too."

But doesn't that put a daunting responsibility on your shoulders?

"No! Because I don't accept it. I didn't ask for it, I don't work for it, it happens to be a sociological condition that exists in this country right now and it makes me very uncomfortable. I don't like it!"

So what is it that American kids have that British kids don't?

"A much broader perspective on life really; life is bigger there! They have more things to do, more things to think about. Like I said, music has been the focus of my life but it isn't my whole life, there are other things in my life that I like a lot. I spend a lot of time reading, I love cross-country skiing, I love sailing, I love looking at the sky, I like lying on the grass, I like going for a drive, I like talking to people - there's so much to life that doesn't really exist here.

"It's hard to put it into a perspective that British people can understand; what they see is life as it is here and there couldn't possibly be anything better. Ha! Which is fine, that's the same kind of chauvinism that you meet everywhere in the world.

"I get so tired of hearing people run down America because they don't know anything about it. They have no clue what a person in Phoenix, Arizona, or Michigan, or New York, or Lakeland, Florida, they have no clue how these people live or how they've grown up or what they do, how they think, nothing! But they feel that they have the arrogance to be able to condemn two hundred million individual people and their lives and the country that they live in out of hand, and say: 'All Americans - tuh!' It's so simple but it's so wrong and so foolish."

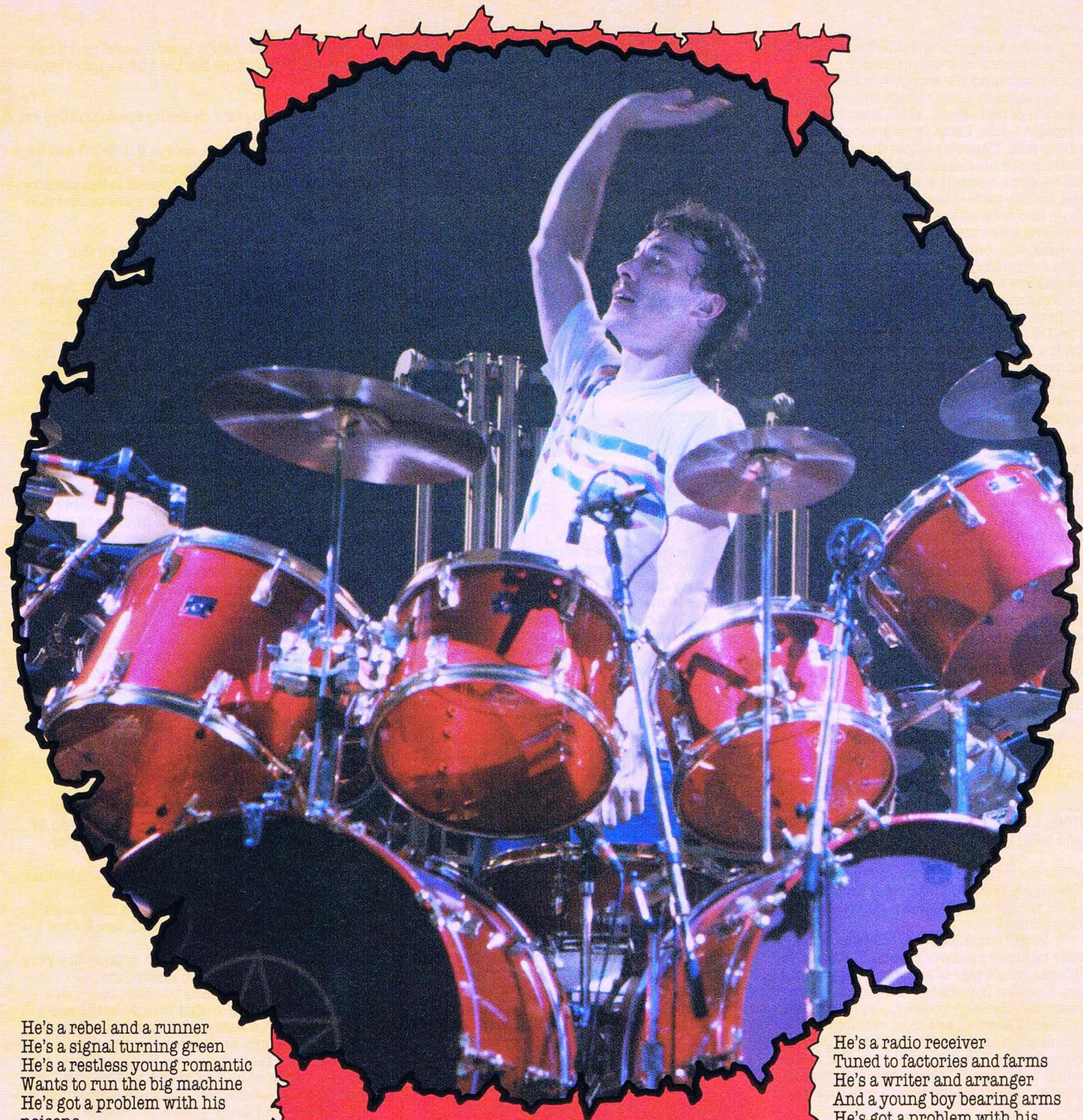
Perhaps most of the Americans we come in contact with are liable to be tourists who do fit that stereotypical mould we have of the rich, fat, cigar-chomping Texan.

"Well, that's fine, but you've got to remember you're talking about two hundred million people and you better think about the image that English people have abroad, too; it's not a pleasant one!

"People outside of their own country are very insecure and that leads to arrogance, especially for Americans because they have the inbuilt impression that people hate them because they're successful. And that's true of us as a band, too. Because we're successful a lot of people feel compelled to hate us, and it's the same part of human nature that makes people hate Americans. They did something very brave and dangerous and the way it worked out they became the most powerful country in the world with the best standard of living in the world ... and people hate them for it. So what can you do?

"English people are just as boorish and just as arrogant and just as ignorant abroad as Americans. I've seen them and it's true. English people at home are lovely but the finest people in the world are the Americans at home. If I ever have to be in trouble anywhere I hope it's in Ohio or Iowa or a place like that because those kind of people, as vulgar as they might seem to the refined Europeans, they will open their hearts and their homes to you in a way that no self-conscious European person ever could."

**To be continued
next issue ...**

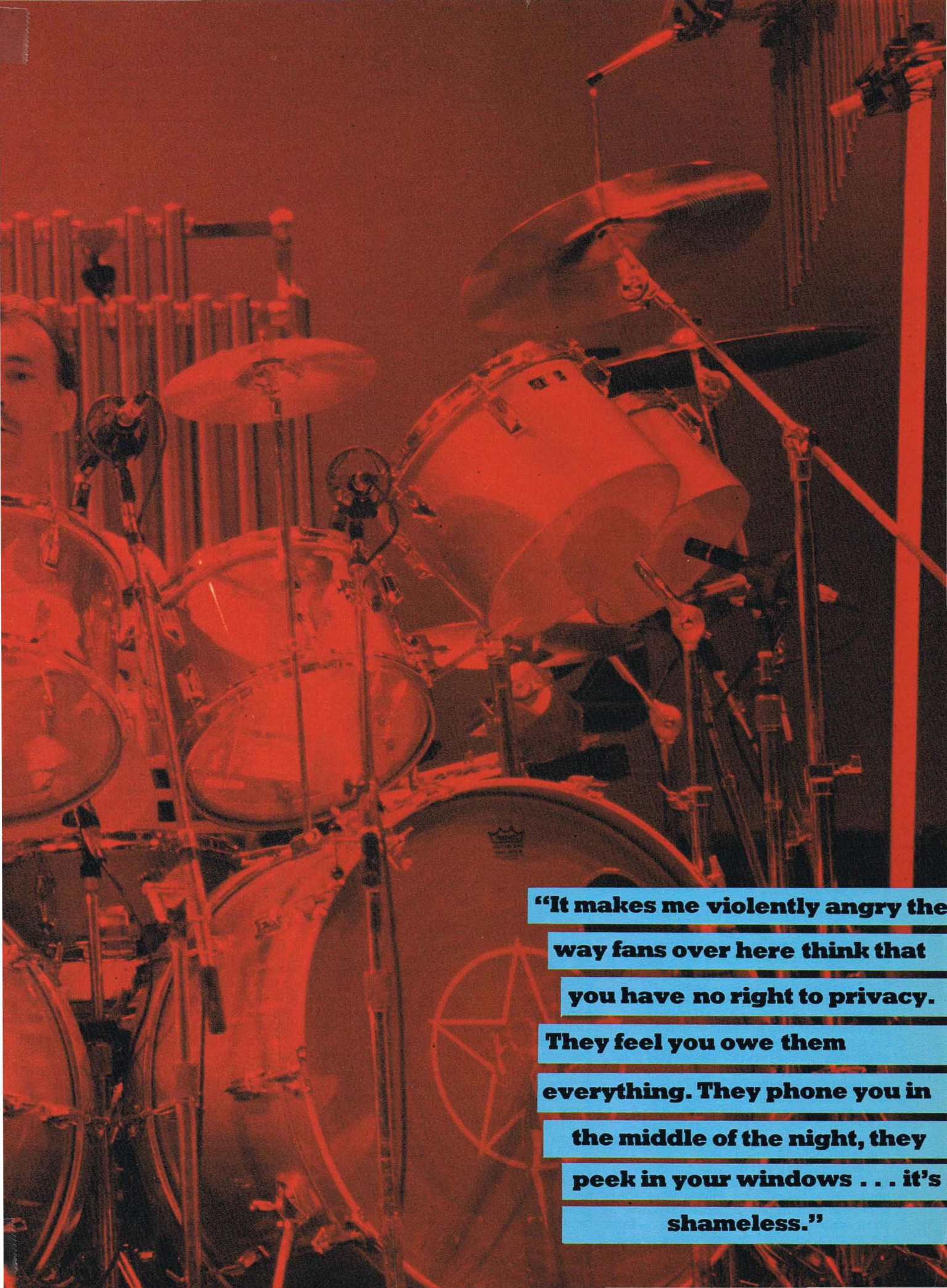


NEW WORLD MAN

He's a rebel and a runner
 He's a signal turning green
 He's a restless young romantic
 Wants to run the big machine
 He's got a problem with his
 poisons
 But you know he'll find a cure
 He's cleaning up his systems
 To keep his nature pure
 Learning to match the beat of
 the Old World man
 Learning to catch the heat of
 the Third World man
 He's got to make his own
 mistakes
 And learn to mend the mess he
 makes
 He's old enough to know what's
 right
 But young enough not to choose
 it
 He's noble enough to win the
 world
 But weak enough to lose it –
 He's a New World man...

He's a radio receiver
 Tuned to factories and farms
 He's a writer and arranger
 And a young boy bearing arms
 He's got a problem with his
 power
 With weapons on patrol
 He's got to walk a fine line
 And keep his self-control
 Trying to save the day for
 the Old World man
 Trying to pave the way for
 the Third World man
 He's not concerned with
 yesterday
 He knows constant change is
 here today
 He's noble enough to know
 what's right
 But weak enough not choose it
 He's wise enough to win the
 world
 But fool enough to lose it –
 He's a New World man...

Lyrics by Peart
 Music by Lee and Lifeson
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"It makes me violently angry the way fans over here think that you have no right to privacy. They feel you owe them everything. They phone you in the middle of the night, they peek in your windows . . . it's shameless."