Canadian trio RUSH have just completed a UK tour that was totally devoid of Metal Mayhem. What's more, drummer Neil Peart thinks rock 'n' roll should be treated just like any other job of work. CHRIS WATTS sat down to roll the dice and ask questions about the cerebral lyricist's trivial pursuit.

There are no naked girls in Neil Peart's hotel room. There are no mysterious cameras, broken television sets or recently abused serving maids. The room is spotless and Peart is dressed like any other casual Canadian in London town. Frankly, I'm a little disappointed.

I'm probably not the greatest Rush fan in this world. Sure, I've heard the albums and the raving adoration of friends who know better. Oh God, they all mean Rush are just so... so intense. Yesterday somebody even told me that in 1978 'Hemispheres' was a pretty radical album to own. I found his opinion oddly distressing.

Concerts to being warned by a tour manager that Neil Peart is wonderful, honest, down-to-earth and brain. Blah, blah, but can be prone to walk out of interviews if pushed, and my day is just about complete. Who is this guy? Is he the drummer with a rock 'n' roll band or is he merely God?

As it happens he's a little of both.

At best Neil Peart feels uncomfortable with the European media. I was about to dismiss him as a spook rock brain waving his broken rattle, but found the truth is far more painful.

In the late '70s a British music tabloid condemned Rush and Neil Peart in particular for disseminating Nazi atrocities. When you learn that Geddy Lee's parents were both survivors of a concentration camp and that his father later died of his lasting effects, you begin to understand the resentment.

Rush are back in town with their fourteenth album, 'Hold Your Fire'. In 1968 they were paid 25 dollars for playing bad Cream covers in a northern Toronto coffee bar. In 1988 people will tell you that Rush own the world. For 20 years their name has been synonymous with thoughtful, lavish and progressive techno rock. The individual musical proficiency has become a yardstick for imitators and until 'Grace Under Pressure' Jeff Lee died.

In 1984 Rush grew up.

'Suddenly I wanted the real world to be as exciting and bright as fantasy,' Peart explains in his role as lyricist. 'The early '80s was a difficult time. A lot of my friends weren't working or were having health problems, marriage problems, and I was very moved. I wrote that album out of empathy because my life was doing pretty well.

'A lot of our early work was pure escapism and at the time it was right. We were teenagers growing up in the suburbs and we needed to escape. I really dwelt on Science Fiction and fantasy which I've now outgrown. I can smile at my naivety but I can't aimer.'

A leaner, less pompous Rush emerged with 'Grace Under Pressure'. For the first time in ages a photograph of Alex, Geddy and Neil appeared on the cover. They'd had their hair cut to celebrate the passing decade. I wouldn't say I became a fan but I still play 'Distant Early Warning' and 'Afterimage' when the mood strikes.

It's an album that thanks to Peter Henderson's stark production belongs in the 1980s. The original choice had been Steve Lillywhite (noted for his work with Big Country and
(3) and Neil Peart agree that the rumoured partnerships might well have been seminal. “Grace Under Pressure” was followed in 1985 by “Power Windows” and now “Hollywood Fire.” Both the latter were recorded with Peter Collins at the helm (currently working with Latte Angels). Can’t say as ever the sound is encouraged. As ever the music is immense and faultless. As ever it goes somehow yet goes everywhere. I guess Neil Peart would take it as a compliment.

S H O W D O E S a n established rock act approach their fourteenth album?

“I’m always nervous.” Peart says, “about approaching a new album with a blank slate. I’ll have a few phrases, ideas, just bits that I take in with me. We’ve never made too many plans though about what the album should accomplish. For the most part it’s pretty much intuition. We generally use the last album as a launching pad. Listening to ‘Power Windows’ just before we started to record, my fresh reaction was that it was so dense. We wanted to strip the sound away a little bit.

“Lyrical I always go into the studio prepared for rejection. Sometimes I know in my own mind that the lyrics are weak, and that’s where Geddy is so helpful. It’s a very fragile situation having to let people know that their work is perhaps not up to scratch. There’s a quote from Sting who said, describing the friction in the Police, that telling someone their song was bad was like telling them that their girlfriend is ugly.

“But none of us is so egotistical to imagine that something is great just because we’ve written it. All of us know when a song isn’t going to work.”

He sits hunched over as I ask my questions and frowns with thought. His eyes are piercing and restful, his brain rapid and concentrated. There is the temptation to emerge from a conversation thinking the man is some deep genius. At the end of the day he’s an immensely likeable and informed talker who shuns publicity and takes his hobby of endurance cycling very seriously. He would like to be seen as nothing special. “Yes, it does annoy me when people glamourise the band,” he says earnestly, “but also when they over-invalidate it as well. I tend to see it in a prosaic terms of getting up in the morning and going to work. I put in an eight-hour day like anyone else. I’m at the venue in the afternoon. I soundcheck, and from that moment I do nothing but think of my work. Those two hours on stage are a part of a whole day spent concentrating on that time. It really can be condensed into that elemental reality. I would like to see it refined into much more of a work ethic than it is.”

He slumps and lights a cigarette. “Unfortunately you’re battling against decades of people glamorising and trivialising it. That has been allowed to happen.”

Alex Lifeson introduces a photograph of Alex Lifeson. “Looking at the casualties is pretty sobering. People find it easy to dismiss all the people that have been killed by the passions, the temptations and the...”
unreality of their lives"
But people perpetuate the myth?
"Oh, sure," he says and searches for words. "People want their myths, the glamour. They want people to be larger than life as if it was almost a transplanted religious impulse. It goes back to people wanting something to dignify their existence, something that transcends stomach-aches and tooth-aches!
People will not have the fact that triviality and glamour can kill people. Whoever you are, whatever you are, you're still got to get up in the morning and do your job.
In a bizarre twist then, people had expected you to play the part? In a bizarre twist, people would like Rush to die in a plane crash.
He injected back and laughs nervously. "Well, I thought about this quite a bit. How much respect did drummers like Keith Moon and John Bonham have before they died? Not much. They were drummers I admired very much but they were frowned upon by musicians of their time.
"Now everyone feels safe in knowing them. They're not going to come back and embarrass people by doing something artistically horrible. They're not a threat any more."
"And things you get from having a great magazine, as separate from the people's magazine, is true. When a band is alive and doing well they're a threat. You're also a threat to your admirers because you might sell out and do something that would embarrass them for liking you. That's happened to us with people we've admired.
"It's like the Evangelists in America. People are giving them their money, their love, their tears, only to be betrayed when they find in bed with a prostitute! But people want to place that trust. I'm astounded, totally amazed, that people can be so gullible. To be a twice gullible in forgiving him is beyond comprehension.

SOMETIMES I fear that Neil Peart doesn't belong in rock 'n' roll. Yet Rush have proved time and again with heavy and extravagant tours that they have a punch.
"The Hold Your Fire" shows that have just swept the country have been no exception. Music controlled by computers. Videotape, keyboard players and a crystal wash of sound are my lasting impressions. Somewhere beneath the giant slide-show, the red balloons and sound effects, I was just a little person. I wondered what, for Rush's purpose, was the point of a live show?
"My fundamental responsibility," Peart says, "is to express our music. In North America we don't have Top 40 radio to let people hear it. Our music is only going to interest a small percentage of people who love to listen to music anyway. So touring is a way of giving new people a chance to hear us. In the broadest sense that's the purpose, but walking up the stairs to the stage is a different mentality.
"It's never so rational or reflective. At that time it's the challenge of knowing you have a blank slate on which to make an impression. It never gets any easy and I've never had it.
"Once I get complacent-I'll make a really stupid mistake. But if we do play a really good show there is a certain glow, a certain space between you and the earth that lasts for about a day.
"Our first tour, rather my first tour with Rush, was in front of 10,000 people (as the support for Uriah Heep and Meat Loaf in Pittsburgh). We'd only had a matter of days to rehearse but I remember, it wasn't a feeling of fear walking out to my kit. It was just an apprehension, anticipation, also exciting.
"Glitches aside, it was truly awesome. That feeling is still with me. There's an incredible electricity about a half full of people that starts to crackle around. The anticipation and excitement are built in with the crowd when the gates open.
"Does a stadium full of adoring people frighten you? It doesn't frighten me because I can't accept my superiority. Adulation presupposes that superiority and I won't accept that. I don't feel comfortable with the mantle. Obviously it's nice to be informed for the work I do and that's the truth in those simple words. It doesn't allow for me to be larger than life."
He sits at the ceiling for a brief moment. "If it's a double-edged sword I find intriguing. A lot of artists play down to their audience. They don't write what they want but instead write what they think their audience will accept. That again presupposes a superiority and eventually that turns to cynicism."
"Rush have never seen the point in that. We've been criticised for writing our audiences' leads but that's perverse logic. If we're capable of understanding it then our audience is as well. If we don't write what our audience wants we're fault for not being clear. It's not because our audience is stupid.
"If they don't want to care about the lyrics then that's fine. It's like expecting them to be a slave player or put a three-part harmony together before they can enjoy music. Why should they have care?"
"Why pay so much attention to lyrics?"
"I guess if I had to justify my existence and say that what we do is important is nothing more than its entertainment. It has to be entertainment. If I'm forced to dignify it then I'd say that I have the leisure to sit back and assimilate my experience, my responsibilities, my principles professionally allowed to sit and think! People who get up and go to work may not have the leisure but they have the same thoughts and worries as me.
More and more I want to grab experiences, I want to see more of the world and how people behave. I really feel that they share the same thoughts which bother me.
"If the band were less successful, then I think Rush would die. The competition as a drummer is still in me and my obsession with lyrics is still active, so ask Rush when they cease to exist is a question that will never be asked by the band.
"Fortunately we reach a wide enough audience to ensure that our creativity can be self-perpetuating. We always take it that unless someone says otherwise we'll still be working for the next album and the next tour. That's all the future and security we've ever needed.
"As I mentioned, I'm not the greatest Rush fan in this world. Even I, however, can see the point.