RUSH'S NEIL PEART
TOP OF THE PROFS

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In the wake of recent 'Rush to split!' rumours, drummer and lyricist NEIL PEART reflects on the band's art and plots their journey into the future...

WHAT IS there to say about Rush which hasn't already been said? Most rock bands are fairly unsophisticated entities, and the interview procedure a pretty mundane affair designed to fill in the blanks at album release time before the hacks move on to next week's would-be big boys. Rush is something different, though; one of the few rock bands around to exhibit signs of blatant intelligence, the trio of guitarist Alex Lifeson, bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee and drummer Neil Peart seem to challenge writers to don their thinking caps and embroider the basic role-playing of rock 'n' roll with whims and wherefores which set the band permanently apart from the masses.

With most groups what you see/hear is what you get, but with Rush there's a whole heck of knowledge both around and about the trio, elicited over the years by journalists and fans alike in an effort to try that little bit harder...

Thus, when yours truly got the news that Neil Peart was leaving ahead, the quivering started. Rush in general — and Neil in particular — have been probed every which way, so the hell is there left to ask that won't reduce the guy to sleep? It's not very often that you develop much of an interview strategy, you just tend to ask a few questions about the news album and then see where they lead, but this called for something special. Start with the standard stuff, but try and get into something worthwhile before the man begins to nod off and answer on automatic.

So did I manage it? Does the following story cast any light on Neil Peart and Rush? Well, I tried guys, I tried to add a few new brushstrokes to the picture, and in the process, enjoyed this interview much more than most. Peart may be highly erudite and sharp as a tack, but he's also an amiable and open character, with the feared aloofness nowhere in evidence. The truth would appear to be that Rush may be a very special musical entity, but don't make the mistake of taking them for gods.

There was a nice piece of stupidity to break the ice with, anyway; in December last year a radio station in San Francisco — which ought to have known better — broadcast the news that Rush had split up and that Peart had joined The Who!

"Not! I've not heard that one before," admitted Neil with a laugh. "All I've been hearing is that this (A Show Of Hands) is our last album, but then again I've heard that about the last four albums!"

Okay, time to get down. Certain questions are inevitable under given circumstances, and their inevitability can only become tedious for the person being asked. But you, dear readers, would hardly let me off the hook without asking, so... why, yet another double album? (And I'm sorry I had to ask such a boring, non-innovative, predictable question.)

"No, it's a valid question — it's the reason why I like doing interviews, it keeps you on your toes finding new ways to answer... and of course valid ways too.

"Basically, it's a case of third time lucky. We weren't happy with our last two efforts to create a live atmosphere on record ('All The World's A Stage' and 'Exit... Stage Left'). It's extremely difficult to get the first was too raw and lacked the fidelity we wanted, and the second was too far towards the other extreme. That one we polished too much, practically eliminating the ambience of playing in a hall to an audience. So this time we had both of those efforts in mind, and went into it with the idea of making it, hopefully, the definitive Rush live record.

"The three have certainly become one of the most sophisticated performing outfits around, using a vast array of expensive toys to strive towards consistency of reproduction. Live albums tend to be a 'warts 'n' all' concept unless you're blantly cheating (q.v. W.A.S.P.), so how did Rush go about trying to make a truly live LP which met both standards and the definition of a live recording?

"Technology certainly has an amount to do with it, at the recording level and definitely for mixing. Ever since our last live album there have been advances in technology which actually make it possible to create a very natural sound — it's going full circle towards capturing what you used to get with one microphone and a tour-track studio. So that's how we avoided the pitfalls of the second album, where we did too much cleaning up and repair work, and lost sight of trying to make a live album. We were trying to make a perfect live album, and in some ways that's a contradiction in terms.

"This time we were able to fix up the most jarring things — a broken string, a shriek of feedback, and so on. Let us replace a single guitar chord or a single note of a vocal from another night, whereas previously you had to live with this horrible thing or else re-do the whole guitar or vocal track in the studio. This time we were able to preserve live performances as they went on to tape on the night — there was no sense of working on a tryst: we joked at the time about calling 'Exit... Stage Left' Live-ish, so determined were we not to have it as raw as the first one!"

ONE THING which has always characterised Rush has been the way the band's material develops and evolves in live performance, is this the result of varying degrees of crowd feedback, or the erratic spark of collective inspiration?

"I think as a band we tend to go through peaks and valleys, and occasionally the tapes happen to capture an out of those rare and magic nights with everything flowing effortlessly. It's important though that we're not aware and self-conscious about the tape rolling because then we start to look inward more, and concentrate on technique, and that defeats the purpose of trying to get us to express ourselves.

"You'll notice a lot of the tracks on the new album come from the Birmingham NEC show. We were filming it, and... wait! that whole level of chaos was distracting enough for us to forget that the tapes were rolling, which really made a difference in the way we performed that night..."

But given the evolutionary process of Rush development, and the spark of inspiration which fires the evolutionary changes — what is the definitive version of any Rush composition, and does A Show Of Hands' contain any? Is the special quality contained in the original creation as originally envisaged and recorded, or is it in the tune which becomes as its basic format and attitude inspires the band to take it further on stage, their ever-widening horizons drawing new aspects out of something which most bands would simply leave alone? If Rush were to chart their development on vinyl, would the path be marked by the original studio recordings, or the different creations they frequently turned into on stage?

"Most often I think the studio recording is the definitive version of the tune. Onstage it's what we're trying to live up to. When I'm rehearsing on my own I'll play along with the studio track and try to make sure that I've still got the spirit of the song in my mind, and through the course of a tour the songs can change, so I try to listen to live tapes and make sure that they're still true to the spirit of the song as we recorded it.

"Some songs don't change that much, though. If something is really difficult to play, like 'Tom Sawyer' for example, then it only changes in small, subtle ways because we were satisfied with the way it stood, and because it's so difficult to get right it never becomes easy and lends itself to changing around. Some numbers we wanted to keep playing but they'd become stale for us, so we had to find some way to revitalise them.

In the studio you can always work a little over your head; some tracks have been really hard to try and learn! Sometimes things happen spontaneously whilst you're recording, and for a while my mind will refuse to think about things the right way, and it becomes impossible to reproduce what I did. But it's like a
And a new producer. 

"With the live album just out the excitement level’s up again, so it’s a good time for us. All of a sudden we’re focused on Rush after having a few months with the luxury of it not being the centre of our lives. It’s good for us now to be talking about the past and gearing ourselves up to move into the future. Since we’ve only talked in general terms so far I have to be a little vague, but I think the era we’ve just closed with the live album was one of massive keyboard technology - synthesizers, sequencing and sampling, all digital - which was enormously valuable to us, but took up a lot of our creative time. So now we’re ready to back off and maybe go back to the foundations - write with just guitar, bass and drums. It’s not a reaction away from keyboards, I’m sure we’ll still use lots of them, but I think that to work out an arrangement now we’ll gather around the guitar rather than a keyboard. It’s a fundamental thing which might not be audible to the listener, but it’s certainly going to change our approach. When you write with keyboards there’s a greater sense of relaxation, whereas guitar is more immediate and more rhythmic."

"And then there’s the other change too, the split with producer Peter Collins (he worked on Rush’s last studio LP, Hold Your Fire), which will put a new face into the control room. The long-standing Rush/Terry Brown partnership founded when it was too comfortable - what happened this time?"

"We only just found out ourselves! Apparently Peter went through a crisis of conscience, because he’d enjoyed working with us, but it’s a career move for him. He prefers to work in London with a lot of new bands rather than spending six months making a Rush record. We’re regretful of course, but we remain friends; it’s a good spark for us to have to go out and find someone new."

"I see guys, surely you could do it yourselves by now??"

"Technically yes, but it’s an irreplaceable asset having someone you respect whom you can set to the material after you’ve written it and be objective. Peter was great, he never got involved in the technical side of the recording - he sat away from the console and gave comments in the context of the whole song, which is exactly what we need. We can capture our sounds well enough, but when it comes to the song or the arrangement, all the little tools of building a tune, that’s where we love having someone to bounce off. Writing alone I miss Alex and Geddy, and recording collectively we miss that other person too."

RUSH STAND alone in so many respects when you pause to consider the entire arena of rock. Most bands remain fairly true to themselves in a very obvious way, but they don’t change. Rush, however, as they now stand are poles apart from the power-trio which came together 21 years ago (although their self-titled debut album dates back mere 15 years), but nevertheless they continue to actually consolidate their position with each new twist, rather than subverting what they have achieved to that point, and one is forced to wonder whether the band has become blasé about the continuing solidity of their fan base.

"I’m genuinely surprised - and obviously grateful too," responds Neil,
we've gotten away with a lot! We've always done what we wanted, made some radical shifts in direction — and as we've challenged and changed our audiences too, but we've always subverted the last ones with other areas of taste. It's a constantly overlapping process of evolution, and we've been very fortunate with a fairly large, dedicated, already numerous people who've liked at least one of our incarnations.

... which only serves to reaffirm that Rush are not a 'lowest denominator' kind of band, but are as sophisticated as they want to be and create. The generous way of looking at such a typical stance is to credit the band in question in unerringly giving their fans what they want, and the cynical way of looking at Rush is to imply that they're creating solely for their own pleasure and ignoring the fans who reward them for making music which has given them, the audience, pleasure. But on one condition: if a band have the right to make the music which pleases them most and then project it towards whichever like-minded record buyers there are out there? Does the process of acceptance and rejection on a band's part to give up personal satisfaction in favour of stagnation.

I'd say we're fringe-dwellers. We're certainly not in the mainstream madding crowd; instead, we're the result of design we certainly set out to make music which interests us — but we like to feel that by definition that will interest a certain number of other people as well. So it's not just a number game; we're serving; we're hoping and ready willing to communicate something. We're not playing in a basement just for ourselves; we want to communicate with people, but we're not very interested in the minority, the majority. It's a great situation that we've always had a big enough minority to keep us going, but if it's something, I wish more would aspire to; rather than giving up their originality so readily. These audiences might be a little smaller, but their lives would be proportionately longer and far more interesting.

So the bottom line is that Rush write and record music for the sake of it. Has there been anything you've ultimately vetoed as being too far left-field?""""Perhaps to our detriment — NO! If we've ever believed in it long enough to record it, we've followed through on it. And it's true that our body of work is uneven, with things that have been more or less successful than others. But we look at that as the justifiable price we pay.

RUSH HAVE certainly come a long way since capturing their first stone into the rock 'n' roll pond, initially with drummer John Rutsey before his deteriorating health and diverging interests thrust Peart into the limelight. He had two weeks to learn the contents of the first album before the band launched into their debut US tour, which didn't give him a great deal of time to reflect on what he was getting himself into. One wonders if he had any concept of where things might lead.

"Good grief, NO! I've always been one to look too far ahead. I've got my goals in reachable stages so at that time I was just thinking, Here's a band with a record deal and they're paying a salary. That was novelty and ambition enough for me at the time. Mumble a day and could I need to? To go from playing bars and High Schools to an American tour? I didn't have to dream beyond that.

And it's always been at the same level for me. I've got my goals on one step away so that they're reachable, an attainable dream, not a fantasy."

Talking of early Rush still, there was more than a tad of blues-based Zeppelin than to have heard in those days. A music goes full circle, except for Rush, of course — and the likes of Condom King play their very Zeppelin-ian wares, how does one who's already been there and moved on look at this repitition in Betty?"

Paul Suter