







# The Rhythm Method

Thinker, theorist, introvert, well-travelled, well-read, "bleeding-heart libertarian"... there's more to Rush drummer **Neil Peart** than just paradiddles, polyrhythms and labyrinthine lyrics.

Words: **Paul Elliott**

**N**eil Peart rarely gives interviews. Rush's drummer has spent 39 of his 60 years in one of the world's biggest rock bands, and as the group's lyricist, he is as much the voice of the band as the man who sings his words, Geddy Lee.

But Peart, nicknamed The Professor, has never been comfortable as a public figure. Outside Rush he has remained a very private man. And in the late 90s he retreated still further, following the death of his daughter Selena in a car crash and the loss of his wife Jacqueline to cancer. At that time, he informed Lee and Rush guitarist Alex Lifeson that he had retired.

Since then Peart has rebuilt his life and career. In 2000 he married photographer Carrie Nuttall, and the couple have a daughter, Olivia. And after Peart returned to Rush in 2001, the band have once again become a major force.

When Peart talks to *Classic Rock*, it's on the understanding that he will not be questioned about his private life. But he talks openly and expansively about his work, his beliefs and his code for living. He is quietly intense, but with a wry, self-aware humour. Highly intelligent and honest to a fault, Neil Peart is a most unusual

rock musician. "It's been a very interesting journey for me," he says.

**Growing up in rural Canada, you began playing drums as a teenager. How did music change you as a person?**

I was very academic until I discovered drums. Then I was a monomaniac about drumming. I was physically awkward. My ankles were weak, so I couldn't play any sports. I couldn't skate and I couldn't play hockey, which in Canada is like football is in the UK. And that makes you a pariah as a boy.

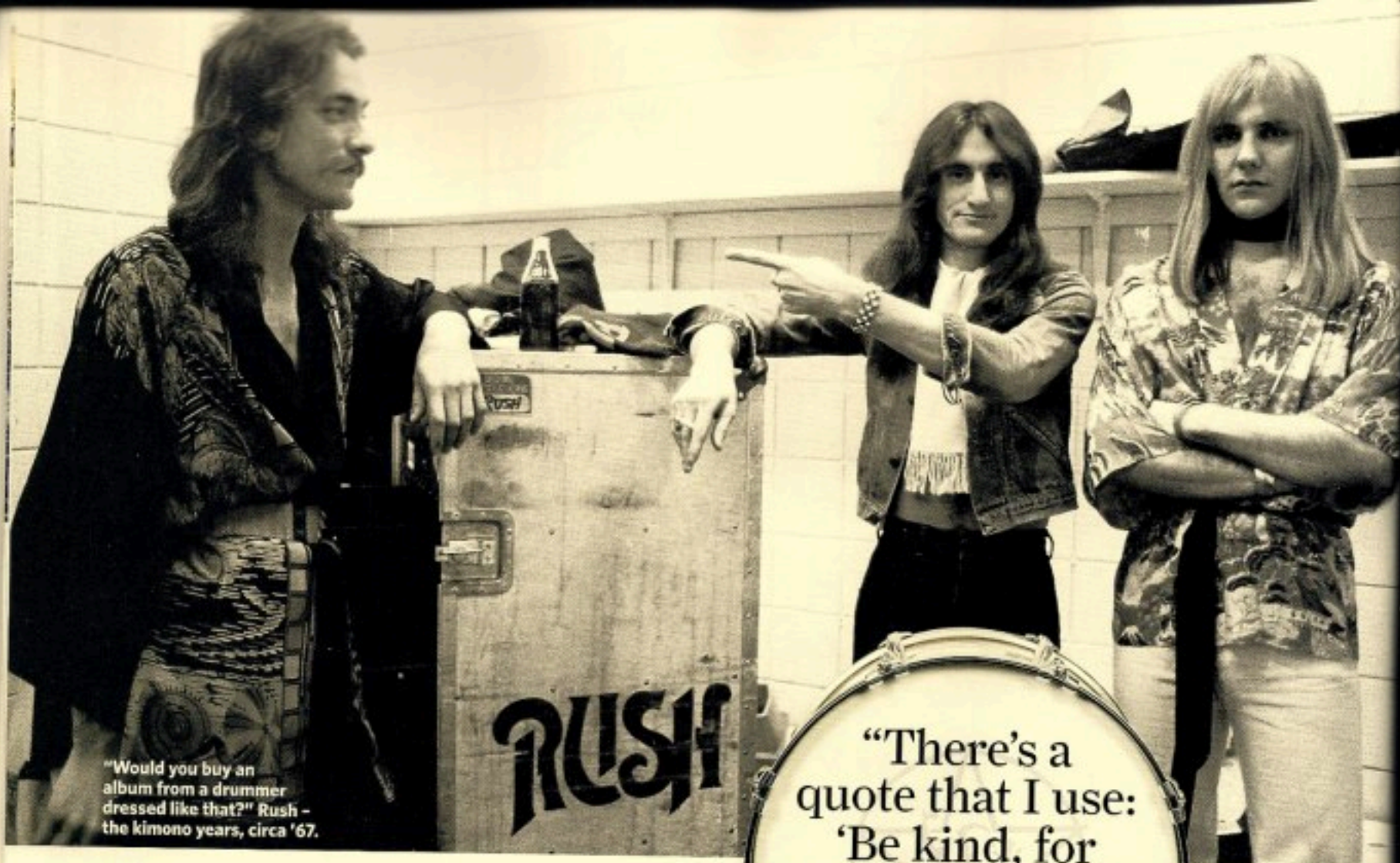
**You wrote about that aspect of teenage life in the Rush song *Subdivisions* – the pressure to 'be cool or be cast out'. Was that song autobiographical?**

Extremely! How we turn out as adults has a lot to do with the way others saw us in high school. Consider yourself as a teenager – whether you were treated as a geek, or as a scholar, or a jock, or a good-looking lothario or whatever. However you were treated by others has a lot to do with how you turn out.

**Would you describe yourself as an introvert?**

Yes. And extroverts don't ever understand introverts. You know that from your school days. Shy people were seen as stuck up. They were seen as conceited because they kept to themselves. ➤





"Would you buy an album from a drummer dressed like that?" Rush - the kimono years, circa '67.

That was a subject you addressed in the 1981 song *Limelight*: 'I can't pretend a stranger is a long-awaited friend.' Are you still the same person who wrote that lyric?

Entirely so. And, honesty, I've never had to retract it. My ability to express myself has grown and evolved over the years. And when I listen to early songs, I might cringe technically, but never psychologically or emotionally. I still mean every word of *Limelight*, however crudely it might have been expressed.

**What kind of encounter makes you feel uncomfortable?**

If you meet someone at the launderette and they go: "Oh, this is the greatest moment of my life!" I like the motto: 'never complain, never explain'. But I can never resist trying to explain.

**There are echoes of Pink Floyd's *The Wall* in *Limelight*. Did that album resonate with you?**  
Enormously. I totally understood it. Many years ago a DJ played a track from [Floyd's] *Wish You Were Here*, one of the alienation songs that preceded *The Wall*. And he said: "If you're a songwriter and you write about what's near to you, if you become alienated you're going to write about being alienated."

**Is that what fame means to you - alienation?**  
Another line from *Limelight* that grew in resonance over the years is: 'One must put up barriers to keep oneself intact.' But there is a corollary that I try to explain. Every day when I'm on tour and travelling between cities on my motorcycle, I have half-a-dozen pleasant encounters with people. I've spent a lot of time in truck stops and diners and cafes, very casual, low-grade places, and those are the encounters I have: stranger to stranger, I guess you could say. I love the anonymity of my travels.

**And when you're touring on a motorcycle, you must see a lot more of the world.**

I avoid motorways whenever possible. The roads I want are the ones that people don't travel unless they live on them.

**Do you ride alone?**

In America I usually go by myself, but in Europe I have a riding partner who spends months on the road with me. And it's a hugely planned effort to see everything we can.

**Is there an affinity between travellers?**

People are smiling and friendly because you're kin: hikers, cross-country skiers, bicyclists, motorcyclists. And when you're somewhere remote, other travellers immediately know that you're one of them - that you're cool, because you're there! I've experienced this in the Arctic, in Africa...

**And Britain?**

I've really noticed how outdoorsy British people are. I lived in Britain as a teenager for a couple of years, and what I learned was: nothing is contingent on the weather. And I've carried that with me all my life. I've ridden across the Yorkshire moors when it was cold and raining; I was suffering. But people were out there because they'd decided to do it.

**Touring also keeps you from your family.**

Honestly, people don't realise the sacrifice you make as a touring musician. Being away when children are growing up and when your partner needs you around, it's wrenching. Your family and friends, their lives continue and you're not part of them. People don't place enough value on family life. It's too easy to get caught up in the tedious day-to-day stuff and miss the miracle that's unfolding before you.

**Do you consider touring a necessary evil?**

"There's a quote that I use: 'Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.'"

NEIL PEART

Some years ago I met a wise man, Elliot Mintz, who was the PR guy for Bob Dylan and John Lennon. I told him I didn't really like touring but felt that I had to. And he said: "You have to do it because you can." I thought about that phrase

for the longest time. I mentioned it to Geddy one night when he was with a friend, and his friend said: "Well, it seems you have a pretty good life." I said: "It is a good life, but it has a price." That's the reality. I love my job and I love the people that I work with. I am very grateful for that. But I also love my home and family.

**Do you feel misunderstood?**

I don't like to puncture illusions. I know I represent some kind of fantasy to a lot of people. But there is no fantasy. There's a quote that I use: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." Most human life is made up of some mixture of happiness and misery.

**You were never more misunderstood than in 1977, when the NME portrayed you as a borderline fascist for basing the Rush song 2112 on the work of right-wing philosopher Ayn Rand. How did that affect you?**

I recall that NME interview very well because the conversation was great. And we all felt totally betrayed after, because we had a lovely time with the guy. I remember him being so courteous. It was so amicable. As far as I was concerned, we were just having an intellectual conversation. But these things are wide open to misinterpretation, and that was a classic case.

**Where do you stand politically - left or right?**  
I know where I fall politically. And I define it



On stage with Rush and a rather large kit. (Kitchen sink just out of shot.)



"The highest possible compliment is if someone that you admire respects your work."

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better now: I'm a libertarian, but a bleeding-heart libertarian.

#### Meaning what, exactly?

I believe in taxation and health care that is outside the usual libertarian mandate, because I don't want people to have to suffer. It's as simple as that. If people are suffering and I can help, I want to. But here's the difference between being an idealist and a realist. Idealistically, I believe that we should help people. But realistically, do I think that government will do that? No.

#### How do you define 'libertarianism'?

It's enlightened self-interest. Free will. I've lived in the US for the last 10 years, and I wanted there to be a health care system. The little bit that there is, it's a wonderful thing. So that's an example of what I consider enlightened self-interest. That's why I'm a bleeding-heart libertarian. Paul Theroux said: "A cynic is a disappointed idealist." But I'm not a cynic. I'm not disappointed. I've just broadened my idealism.

#### Most people become more cynical with age.

I must say I've come to grips with that. There are enough good people in the world, enough good books, enough good music. And again, it's about learning from people. In my book *Traveling Music*, I wrote about all the music that had meant so much to me. In Bob Dylan's term: "What music should do is inspire you." But, of course, I had to have some bile in there—for all the stuff that I hated. And my editor said: "Don't bother. Concentrate on the excellence."

So I cut it. And he was right. I needed to write it, to vent my spleen, but I didn't need to share that.

On the song *Afterimage*, from 1984's *Grace Under Pressure*, you wrote movingly about the death of a friend.

*Afterimage* is based on the idea that when someone goes, there are a number of lives they left their mark upon. The death of Frank Zappa was sad to me because the world needed people like Frank Zappa. And the same is true of a guy named Bernie, who I met when he was leading bird-watching tours in a national park. He had so much knowledge, but he's not long for this world, and all that knowledge is going to be lost. That's the tragedy. When some people go, I feel that kind of wrench. That's why I wrote in that song: "I try to believe..." But you can't believe in that kind of stuff.

#### You can't believe in what—God?

No. And I'm well-documented on that subject. In all my songs and in my prose. I was called a faith-basher recently and it went to my heart. I don't want to be an anything-basher. I don't like to make enemies.

#### What gives you the most satisfaction as an artist?

When I found out that Jeff Buckley was aware of our work... to have been a part of the inspiration for a talent like that! I refer back to that Bob Dylan quote. As an artist, what else can you do for people but inspire them? That is the absolute highest goal.

You've inspired a whole generation of rock drummers, of course, not least Dave Grohl and Taylor Hawkins of the Foo Fighters, who recently inducted Rush into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame.

The highest possible compliment is if someone that you admire respects your work. To those that have said I inspired them to start drumming, the first thing I say is: "I apologise to your parents." But it's wonderful just to be a little part of someone's life like that.

Dave Grohl says you are rock's greatest living drummer. But in the mid-90s you took instruction from jazz drummer Freddie Gruber. Why?

After 40, 45 years of playing, I wanted to push myself and open up this whole new frontier. I've been able to do that as a lyricist and as a prose writer, and now as a drummer. You have to challenge your own limitations and your own expectations of yourself.

#### Is that the secret to the longevity of Rush—the desire to keep pushing forward?

That's the way we've always operated as a band. Always doing what we believe in and believing in what we do, writing songs that we still like 30 years on and can still play with conviction.

Perhaps most important of all, you, Geddy and Alex have remained friends. This much is clearly evident in the documentary *Rush: Beyond The Lighted Stage*, in the scene when you're having dinner in a restaurant and you're all giggling drunk.

I haven't watched the documentary, but I know that in the dinner scene I was choking and crying all the way through it, because of the things Alex was saying. A guy I know told me: "You are Alex's best audience." And I said: "Yeah, I'm helpless around him. He's the funniest man in the world."

And after all these years, is it the ability to laugh at each other, and at yourselves, that has kept you sane?

Yes. The three of us really balance each other out. We're still the same suburban goofballs that we always were. And we're so fortunate to have a relationship like that. ●

Rush's UK tour begins on May 22.