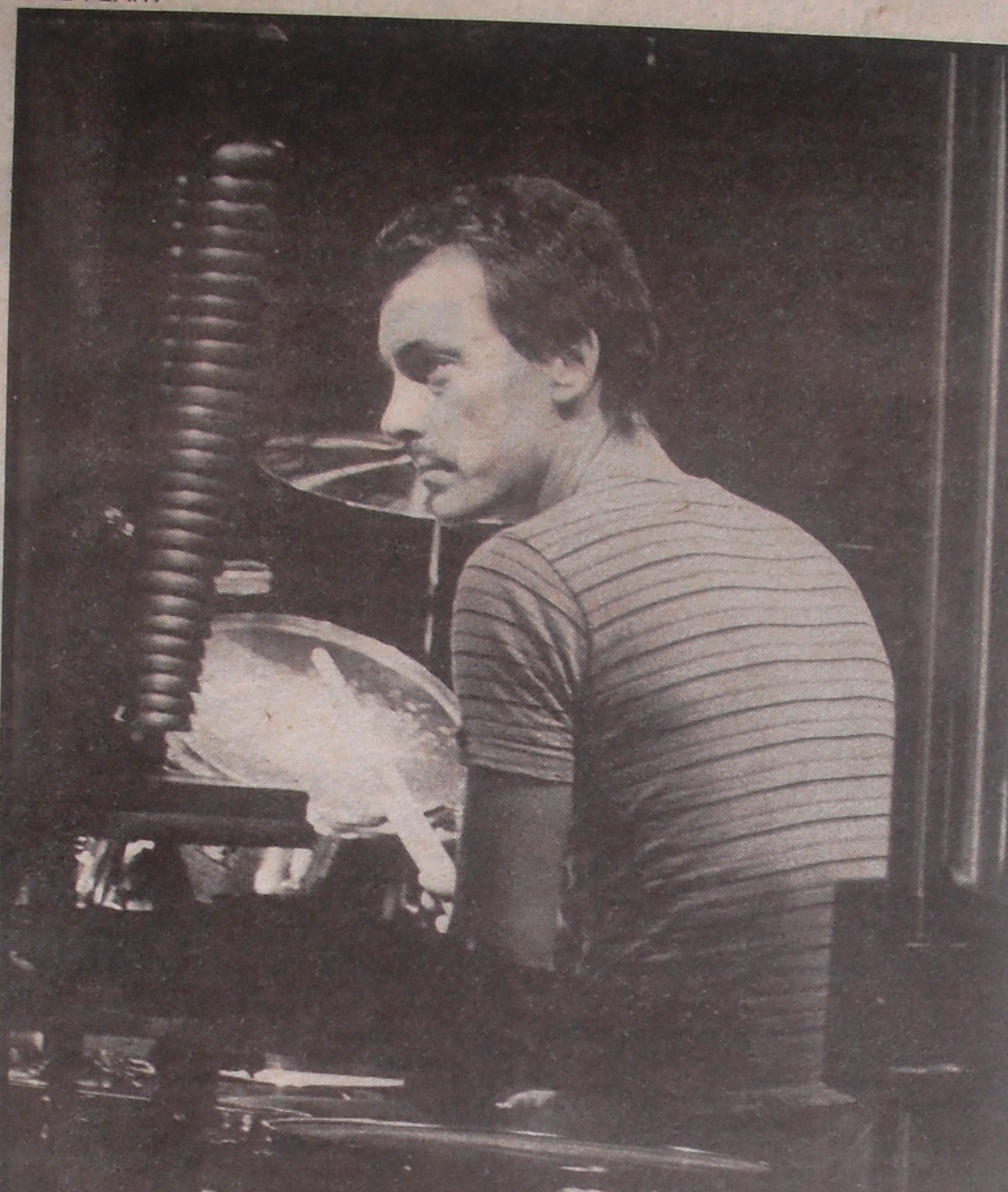


NEIL PEART

MAYOR DALEY may be dead and gone, and the mass clubbings/teargassings of '68 a mere hippy memory, but the spirit of state aggro is alive and well and living in the US Immigration Department at Chicago's O'Hare Airport. Although on the same visas, my 300 lb. Samoan photographer Slattery was welcomed with open arms while yours subversively was detained and all-but put on the next plane back to Heathrow.

America must be proud of its fat severe dykes who can reduce a teenage girl to tears and its piggy he-men threatening to throw niggers into the cells. And I can now reveal that being spreadeagled against a wall and groped from head to toe is the most unerotic experience in the world. "It'll make great local colour!" the Samoan said, unconvincingly.

We'd just blown into the Windy City to catch one of the first dates of yet another Rush marathon tour. They were staying at a snob hotel uptown (snob? Even the maids look down their noses at you) and playing four nights at the Amphitheatre, a Wembley-sized structure in a part of Chicago you don't walk into on your own. During the half-hour drive to the Amphitheatre, the cloud-piercing skyscrapers slip into gap-toothed development, plush apartment blocks punctuated by derelict sites and finally sprawl into the sort



beefy security men formed a corridor from the dressing rooms to the stage. Fans and liggers peered over their shoulders, hoping to catch a glimpse of the band. The only person to take advantage of this star treatment was the Samoan, who kept glancing nervously over his shoulder as he toddled towards the stage, thinking that some VIP's were behind him.

And, of course, Chicago went primal. The stadium was jammed to the rafters with bellowing teenagers, lighting matches and Zippos, waving dozens of banners and jumping up and down on their seats. I tried backstage, the light desk, the balcony and the fortified photographer's pit (guarded by what were described as 'heavy bikers'; these guys make the Oakland Chapter look like interior decorators) but could only catch the band while on the move, fleeing the security.

'2112' still opens, but has been cut in half and sandwiches the bulk of the set, a thinned-out selection of the normal set dominated by everything off 'Moving Pictures' except 'Witch Hunt'. It was only a few days into the tour, so the show wasn't Rush at their peak. But, given that Rush usually start at a technical/emotional level most bands end with, you can understand why Chicago went primal.

BACK AT the hotel the Samoan was whisked off to a room party and my tape machine was called to a room on the eighth

Gertrude Stein) but, considering his lyric-writing style and that of his journal, it's unlikely that Neil will follow them into the avant-garde. He's still very involved in straightforward narrative, as the continuing stream of songs sung from the 'I' point of view suggest.

On the I versus narrator question he says, "In songwriting I sometimes find that the first person is the only way to express something if it's particularly passionate, a particularly powerful experience. But sometimes if you want to be descriptive you become a narrative bystander. You choose what point of view that happens to suit."

A lot of people say that the 'I' lessens the impact of the message, but he disagrees.

"The word I is an overused word. It can sometimes make it difficult to be convincing. But in the case of '2112', for instance, it's a very fantastic background, at a very far remove from reality. The passion of response felt by the character in there couldn't have been done in the third person."

In terms of lyrics and prose, the I is a literary device he brings out for special/sensitive occasions.

"Sometimes I have a change of heart about being in the first person, and change to the third person. For instance, in 'Limelight', which was a delicate subject to handle, especially for Alex and Geddy for them to be able to sympathise and empathise with the song, there were

PERMANENT

John Gill travels to see Rush in Chicago and finds his enthusiasm

of urban wasteland on which you could film a re-make of 'Assault On Precinct 13'.

Backstage, Neil Peart was in hiding (more of which later) while Alex and Geddy chatted with the Samoan in the band/crew communal dining room. A young kid who must either have been blind or nuts — he certainly wasn't a fan — got rather upset when the Samoan kept denying that he was Neil Peart. Eventually, with the help of Alex and Geddy, the autograph hunter was despatched on a fruitless search for the real stickman.

Old pals Max Webster warmed up the crowd with a riproaring set, eliciting a response as cacophonous as the one Rush would receive.

As the time for their appearance drew near, Neil disappeared into the tent covering his drum-kit and Alex and Geddy went to stand at the side of the stage. Yet, mysteriously, two lines or



GEDDY LEE

floor, where Neil Peart was writing up his tour journal. This 'project' was suggested to him by someone in the Canadian record company, and he hopes to write a series of on-the-road articles for a Canadian daily paper. Not only that but — and you better be sitting down for this one — he wants to become a novelist, and foresees a point in the (distant) future where writing will become his profession and playing a hobby.

And no, he isn't going to re-write Ayn Rand. Over the last year or two he has worked his voracious way through the Wonderful World Of Literature, ancient mythology upwards. His heroes are (to snatch a few out of the air), Hemmingway, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos (seeworrimeant?), Barth and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It may start off reading like a seminar in literary criticism, but bear with us.

The last three authors in the journalist's shopping-list above have done some strange things to the narrative of the novel (albeit not as radical as Joyce and, er,

times when I had to change it from the first person, to say 'One must put up barriers to keep oneself intact'. Whereas my original intention had been 'I must put up...' And when Geddy suggested that change of focus, I realised it was right. Because it's not just me who has to do this.

"It's very important, actually. It's something that always comes into my thoughts; whether or not I want to be in the first person. Some songs I write for Geddy, for him to be able to adopt the character and evoke the character, it has to be in the first person for him."

For the 'I' songs Geddy has to assume the character like an actor, and Neil cites 'Red Barchetta' off 'Pictures' as "A perfect example."

"When he was doing the vocals for that in the studio, he closed his eyes and he was there. And that's a good example of a song that could only be sung in the first person. The power and sensuality I wanted to create in that song can't be described, it can only be felt."

"That's my fantasy, that song. So me in that song, I can only describe what's happening to me. I couldn't



RAVES

for the band's music undiminished



(Pix by Paul Slattery)

say 'The guy was driving along in a car', it just wouldn't work. And I know it wouldn't work for Geddy. For that song to work cinematically, in the sense that we wanted it to, he had to be able to be that character. Like '2112'. He had to be that character, he has to be an actor."

INSPIRED BY the story 'A Nice Morning Drive', written by one Rolan Foster in 1973, 'Barchetta' tells the tale of a young man who flouts a future society's rules by driving a racing car around the countryside, in an era when safety restrictions have pulled all private transport off the roads. Is he a deviant or a hero?

"Oh, he's good," Neil grins. "Like I say, it's my fantasy." Later, he adds, "There was just a strong point of relation that I felt with the rebel. I mean, rebellion to me is a good thing. Any kind of authoritarian line or order is, to me, poison. So the fact that this guy is rebelling — the same as the guy in '2112', there's a big parallel between these two heroes, because they're both rebelling against overwhelming odds, in a very singular way. Also in a very archaic way."

Was this man Henri Thoreau in a past life?

Never mind. Can Peart accept responsibility for his characters' rebellion against what the rest of society considers acceptable? He drily responds, "Social responsibility is a thing that probably neither of us is equipped to define."

You have just witnessed a know-all being put firmly in

his place. And as for 'Tom Sawyer'...

"Well, he's the same guy, I figured. There's a lot of boyhood in there. I grew up in a semi-rural atmosphere of being able to go out and float around on rafts, go skinnydipping in ponds and stuff. The image of the modern-day Tom Sawyer really appealed to me, too. They're someone else's lyrics (one Pye Dubois) to start with, so I can't speak authoritatively on them, and there are parts of the song that I don't necessarily understand. But I like the sound of it... the arrogance implied and the — unconcern of the character, I guess."

There's something about this 'modern day warrior' that makes your typist think he wouldn't particularly like to meet Sawyer. Maybe the 'arrogance' Neil speaks of.

"But it's mistaken arrogance. As the line says, 'Don't put him down as arrogant'. It's not arrogance. In some ways that's a very personal statement, because I have often been looked at as, or accused openly of being arrogant, when in fact it's probably a shyness or introversion that comes at the spur of the moment. A lot of shy people of my acquaintance are accused or thought to be arrogant, just because they're not happy-go-lucky, slap-on-the-back, let's-go-for-a-beer kind of guys."

"It's just a need for isolation, the sort of situation where I don't feel comfortable in so I'll just withdraw."

So you don't feel very comfortable in The Real World?

"Au contraire!" he retorts.

"I feel very comfortable in the real world. In the streets of Chicago, New York, London, I feel like a consummate human being. That's what 'The Camera Eye' wanted to create. It's the unreal world, the limelight that surrounds this particular business. There are always dishonest things you're expected to go along with, little games you're expected to play that Tom Sawyer and myself don't have time for, or the inclination, nor do we get any satisfaction out of doing them."

DISCUSSING THE band's need to keep themselves 'intact', he says, "It has much more to do with our lives than just image. I think it was Todd Rundgren who said that the more popular he became, the less accessible he would become. It's very much a truism, especially if you have a writer's inclination. You want to go to cities, you want to blend in, walk around, probe the areas of the city you may want to use — it's all part of your writing — and you have to do that anonymously. You can't walk in there as some fact that's been sold for years. That's another important part of my future, that I've got to work on eliminating. I don't want to sell my face any more, I don't want my face to be a household image."

When I suggest that drummers are usually the least noticeable, by the nature of their position on stage, he cites their various British tours and says, "You're virtually a prisoner there. You

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dare not stick your head out of the window or door. Sitting around in your hotel room not being able to open the curtains and not being able to leave the room is a prisoner's existence!"

So that's why he 'erects barriers'.

"I don't get angry about it or patronising or condescending about it. I get embarrassed. I feel I want to be back in my room as a regular person again. Basically that's what it comes down to."

To indulge a metaphor or twenty, The Novelist is already on tour with Rush. How will he live with the drummer on the road and at home?

"Basically it'll just change the focus of what is now. I'm a drummer by profession and a writer for a hobby. Lyrics included because that's a very small part of my time, a few weeks a year are actually spent being a lyricist. At some point in the unforeseeable future I'd like to become a writer by profession and a drummer by hobby. But I know I'll never give up drumming."

No, no 'Rush Split!' headlines this time kiddiwinks. At the very worst Neil would only want to get away from drumming as an 'obligation'. There would still be occasional tours and the yearly albums.

"It's really difficult to say, we don't know what our

relationship might be in ten years time. All of us have other things that we'd like to do and ways we'd like to progress along the lines of our craft. I can see Geddy as a record producer in that time, and Alex is very very passionate about flying. So it may be that he'll be a professional pilot by that time. I'm sure we'll always remain friends but there'll also come a point where each of us will feel a need to shift the focus, because we so live and breathe Rush at this time."

The fact that these external aspirations follow a chronological parallel to the last two albums (themselves marking out a new stylistic era for Rush) is, it seems, coincidental. From his vantage point, Neil sees a chain of cause-and-effect trailing back to the earliest albums. It becomes clear when he responds to the main criticism now levelled at the band; that they've become too 'complex'.

"Well, that did happen to an extent. To me it was a necessary change. Like, for me without 'Caress of Steel' '2112' couldn't exist. And to me '2112' is the stronger, more important work. We may lose touch at times or fall into erring ways but to me this is the price we pay for retaining our integrity and always following a natural path. So if the natural path does lead us through improper areas that's fine, because it always leads us to the right way. So, without going through 'A Farewell To Kings' and 'Hemispheres' there'd be no 'Permanent Waves', and without those three there could be no 'Moving Pictures'. Everything we've been through in the past, 'Moving Pictures' takes a less busy, less nervous crack at. But without that experimentation we wouldn't have the ability, the understanding or the compositional talents to create this album."

THE 'COMPLEX' school of thought holds that this natural path is slowly but surely leading Rush away from the



THE ENIGMATIC Mr Peart and (inset) the author being given the comfy chair treatment by Geddy Lee

right' path and away from their audience. He denies this, saying that that is 'Disregarding what constitutes the right path for us. We couldn't become an effete, aesthetic or whimsical band, because we're fans first. We responded to the essence of rock music and that made us become musicians. When we come to write a song we write the kind of songs that would excite us, and make us feel the same sensation that other people's music could make us feel. So to me an alienation from our audience is not possible on those terms, because our criteria for judging a new song or idea is visceral excitement. The prime mover for us has always been, Do you get off on this part? You have to get a buzz from it."

Does he believe that the headbangers can also skank along with Rush? "You just have to hope so. There has to be an element of

your audience that likes your music for reasons that you don't agree with. But you're not at liberty to choose that, and it's a thing you have to be particularly tolerant about."

Tolerance is something he cares about dearly. (How's that for a brazen switch of emphasis?!) It seems that no matter how Rush try they can't fully escape their past; that old fascist skeleton won't stop kicking the closet door open. This time, they've become victims of the scummy Nazi propaganda perpetrated by those wonderful young people who produce the Young National Front's magazine, Bulldog. A recent Bulldog article about Nazi rock dubbed Rush as Aryans and racists who aren't afraid to admit it. (Stand up and take a bow, Miles of the NME.) All three were struck dumb when they heard of, Neil just looking dazed, shaking his head and murmuring "That's sad,

that's very, very sad."

He deals with the subject in 'Witch Hunt', which apparently is part three of the longer work, 'Fear'.

"Parts one and two do exist, in my notebook. Part one was called 'The Enemy Within'; how fear affects your life and restricts what you do. And part two was called 'The Weapon'; how fear is used against you. How other people keep you in your place, or keep you out of their place."

THERE ARE, of course, very sound financial and political reasons for the likes of Oswald, Webster, Tyndall and kindred spirits like Powell and Paisley to nurture hatred and violence, but Neil is bemused at what he calls the 'seed', or basic ability to hate the different, of intolerance. This is because, as he admits, he

grew up in a sheltered environment.

"A boring WASP suburb where I was never exposed to racial hatred. I grew up with Ukrainians, Polish people and Italians, but no obvious kinds of variances. No one was ever persecuted for any reason other than for who they were, because of their nature. Never because of their colour."

Of all the rock musicians I've met Peart is the only one whose actual presence commands respect. He's quiet and shy, but also frank and most definitely not a man to be messed about. Philosopher, muscleman, poet, moralist, joker, shaman; if it didn't sound so bloody spineless and gushing I'd say he was a ideal prototype for the Total Man. A rock 'n' roll Bodhisattva.

And if the 300 lb Samoan is reading, this might explain why you couldn't get decent picture of this individualistic bugger.