MAJOR DALLEY may be dead and gone, and the mass clubbings/tearassings of '68 a mere hippy memory, but the spirit of state Big Brother 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 secure dykes who can reduce a teenage girl to tears and its piggly 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, push apartment blocks punctuated by derelict sites and finally sprawl into the sort 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 of 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 VIPs were behind him.

And, of course, Chicago went primal. The stadium was jammed to the rafters with bedazzling teenagers, lighting matches and Zipsos, 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 was out 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 its 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 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 rewrite Ayn Rand. Over the 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 hat), Hemingway, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos (see previous column?), 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 radically Joyce and er...

GERTRUDIE 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 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 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 able to adopt the character and evoke the character, it has to be 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..."
say: 'The guy was driving along in a car. It just wouldn't work. And I knew it wouldn't work for Geddy. For that thing to work chromatically, you have to know the sense that we wanted it to. He had to be able to be the character. Like '2112'. He had to be that character. He has to be an actor.' 

say: 'I'm just a strong point of view. 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 what they feel are wrongs, in a very singular way. Also it's in a very archaic way.' 

Never mind. Can Peart accept responsibility for his characters 'rebelling against what we think of as the upper crust' as the band's current style? He trulyrotsp. "Social responsibility is a thing that probably neither of us is equipped to define." You have just witnessed a know-all braggart firing 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. You're able to get out and float around on rafts, go skinny dipping in ponds and stuff. The image of the modern-day Tom Sawyer really appealed to me, too. They're someone else's 'lyrics (line Pye Dubois) to start with, so I can speak authoritatively on them, and there are parts of the song that I don't necessarily understand. But like the sound of it... the arrangement intrigued and the -- unconcern of the character, I guess."  

There's something about this 'modern day warrior' that makes your imagination think he wouldn't particularly like to meet Sawyer. Maybe the 'arrangement' Neal speaks of: "But it's mistaken arangement. 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 socially of being arrogant, when in fact it's probably a shyness orintroversion 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 liveliness, the sort of situation where I don't feel comfortable in so I just withdraw. So you don't feel very comfortable in The Real World?" "Au contraire!" he reverts.

"I feel very comfortable in the real world. In the streets of Chicago, New York, London, I feel very comfortable around human being. That's what 'The Clapton Effect' was wanted to create. It's not the unreal world, the loneliness 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 their yourselves '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 motivation. 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 apart of your writing -- and if you have to do that anonymously. You can't walk there in as much . That's another important part of the future, that I'm going to work on eliminating. I didn't want to say 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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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 see Geddy as a record producer in that time, and Alex is 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 still 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 that targeted 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 strongest, 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 that way 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 ENIGMATIC Mr Pearson and (inset) the author being given the comfy chair treatment by Geddy Lee.