

Teenaged Canadian school-mates and rock star wannabes Gary Lee Weinrib and Alex Zivojinovic made their first semi-professional forays into the Toronto club circuit in the late '60's. Within three years, the persistent (if cumbrously named) twosome had transmogrified themselves into Geddy Lee (bass/vocals) and Alex Lifeson (guitar), front-line of a power-trio called Rush and regulars on the North American arena warm-up circuit. Lee, Lifeson and drummer John Rutsey issued a self-titled 1974 debut album that was cut from a James Gang-y mold and loaded with stock rock n' rollin' '70s lyrical concerns. Rutsey, claiming musical differences and health considerations, left the band shortly thereafter.

His replacement, Neil Peart, had a radical and immediate impact on the band's sound. Where Rutsey had been something of a stodgy banger, Peart favored an aggressive, adventurous rhythmic style that blended the Keith Moon's frenzy with Bill Bruford's adventurous musicality. Peart also made significant changes in Rush's voice--not as a singer, but as a lyricist whose second-and third-person narratives touched more on man vs. man-nature-self themes than they did on I-me-my-boy-girl-guitar fare.

"I've always really disliked the kind of confessional approach to lyrics", Peart tells me when I reach him by phone to discuss Rush's upcoming show at the Knickerbocker Arena. "I think that's kind of egocentric. Why should anyone be interested in my subjective little whinings or whatever? Sometimes I'll *create* a personal side, so I can invent situations or conversations that people may think are confessional. I find that's a really friendly way to write: I don't have to be didactic or cold and the lyrics don't have to read like an essay, but at the same time I can get across those observations about human nature."

Peart's cohesive lyrical style and Rush's penchant for side-long songs give many of the band's records a concept album flavor, particularly the vintage late-70s trio of *2112*, *A Farewell to Kings* and *Hemispheres* and 1991's *Roll the Bones*. Peart good-naturedly disavows any intentional conceptualizing when I ask about uniting themes on the band's new album, *Test for Echo*. "I never approach an album with a grand theme," he said, "but since my lyrics reflect my thinking over a certain period of time, certain common themes do emerge. On *Test for Echo* the theme of affirmation--calling out and wanting to hear a response to know that someone else in the world felt the way you did--appears in quite a few different songs."

The three-year time span between *Test for Echo* and its predecessor, *Counterparts*, was the longest album gap in Rush's career (they've released 20 records in 22 years). I ask Peart what drove that break. "It was just a chain of circumstances", he replies. "We ended the *Counterparts* tour because Geddy was going off on paternity leave and then I went off and did a Buddy Rich tribute and Alex started working on his solo record. After that, I started working with a master drum teacher by the name of Fred Gruber; I got all fired up about that and wanted to let all that new information mature in my head."

Peart won *Modern Drummer* magazine's "Best Rock Drummer" award every year from 1980 to 1985 (at which point he was delegated to the Honor Roll list, so someone else could win something). I ask what drove such an accomplished performer to seek instruction from Gruber. "One of the reasons I was interested in getting outside help was because my pursuit of perfection was leading me toward rigidity," he answers. "I was getting perfect metronomic time and was

able to play along with click-tracks and sequencers and all that, but it had a by-product, it had a side-effect: I was getting more and more rigid. My work with Fred was mainly about movement and developing a new physical approach to the drum set more than nuts and bolts of beats and notes."

Peart elaborates. "If you think of the process of lifting your hand and bringing it down on the desk top in front of you, most of that motion has nothing to do with the hit. So that was the revelation: What happened between the beats and while the sticks were in the air and while my feet were off the pedals was way more important than how I hit the drum or cymbal. So now I still have the accuracy and precision but I come about it through a whole smoother way, so that the sticks just flow around from place to place. If I hit the wrong thing it doesn't matter because it still happens in terms of the time flow. It makes the physical act of drumming less stressful and angst-ridden."

Peart recently returned to the studio to record his first instructional video, focussing on his new-found technique and how he used it in creating *Test for Echo*. He also recently consummated his long-time literary aspirations by publishing his first book. "*The Masked Rider*", he tells me, "is built around a cycling trip I took in Cameroon, with any number of tangents based on the experiences I had there. The nice thing about travel writing is that it encompasses anything you damn well want to throw in there. So I like that aspect of it: It's loose and I can go off into essays and little rants about any subject that appeals to me."

One of Peart's favorite current rants centers around what he sacrilegiously calls the Inert-net: "I've become the Salman Rushdie of the Internet lately" he laments (half-heartedly), "because I dare to make fun of it. I'm not a Luddite or anything, but I *do* see the limitations of the thing. I mean, the World Wide Web? Really now, that's a joke. More than half the countries in Africa have no Internet connections at all--not even the governments have them! So all the hype's just a joke to me . . . or I guess I can't call it a joke 'cause that's like making fun of religion, and I get excoriated for that."

Peart and his band-mates are also inviting excoriation from music industry and promotions types this year, as the long-time arena openers have finally decided to tour in an "Evening With" format, i.e. sans opening act. "We've resisted that approach for many years", Peart explains, "because our route to the big-time was as an opening act, and we know how important that can be for a band without radio and media exposure. But we decided it would be great for our audience to finally get more scope in our shows. For example, "2112" has never been played live in its entirety because we were still opening a lot of shows back then; we were playing 40 minutes a night and we couldn't really give 20 minutes of that to one piece. We have an abridged version, but we just finally decided that we wanted to do it all. Having more time gave us the scope to do things like that, plus give a really nice sampling of the new album."

When Peart looks out on the audiences this year, does he expect to see the same people who bought *2112* way back in 1976? "I don't know!" he laughs. "It's always interesting for me to do a little demographic survey at our concerts. We've got people who grew up with our music, and people who discovered it a various times, even in the 90s. I get letters from people sometimes that say 'Aren't you going to make more records like *Hold Your Fire* or *Power Windows*?'"

Well . . . that's only '88! When people are thinking that our glorious past was only that far back, that's pretty funny to me. So I would expect to see a spread of all ages--but I suppose time will tell."