

Row the Boats

By Neil Peart

We're only immortal for a limited time.

Musicians are sometimes said to be immature. Not us guys, you understand, but some of the other musicians we know. Like them, we spent our adolescent years welded to our instruments, obsessed by music to the exclusion of everything else in "normal life." And maybe that youthful seriousness, which in a way is growing up too fast, means that the adolescent sense of immortality and irresponsibility stays with us a little longer, into the time when we're supposed to be adults. This is called "artistic temperament." This is also called a good excuse.

The point is, each of us experiences a time when we feel immortal, when time is not passing and we're never going to die. But it's a limited-time offer – time does pass, and soon enough the realities of life come crowding in on us, whether we're ready for them or not, and we have to get serious. This is called "facing the real world."

We're only at home when we're on the run.

Being mature doesn't have to mean being dead. You just have to go out there and rock, keep your bones rolling, and stay out of the ruts. That has been true for Rush as well; we have continued to learn and grow and change, but behind all that the important thing was to just keep moving. Rolling bones gather no rust.

Through seventeen years and umpteen albums and tours together, we seldom stopped to look back, but neither did look ahead much beyond the next album or tour. We just kept doing what seemed right, without worrying about the future – it would take care of itself. That is called being philosophical. That is also called a good excuse.

But suddenly it's different – all at once it seems obvious that we have a long creative partnership ahead of us. Maybe we're growing up a tiny bit; I'm not sure; but I do know that we are excited about this band in a whole new way. Each of us feels it, and Roll the Bones was the catalyst – this record was so enjoyable to make, and the process was so satisfying through each of its stages that suddenly we feel a new conviction, a sense of rebirth. We cut our holidays short in order to start recording sooner, we finished it in "record" time, and now we're eager to get it out so people can hear it. We're even cutting our holidays short again in order to start a tour, then get on to the next record. We are psyched. And still immortal...

We will pay the price, but we will not count the cost.

A line from John Bath's *The Tidewater Tales* (he said I could use it) which echoed around inside me for a long time after I read the book. To me, it just means go for it.

"There are no failures of talent, only failures of character." I think that's often true too. Sure there are a lot of talented people who don't achieve artistic or worldly success, but I think there's usually a reason – a failure inside them. The important thing is: if you fail once, or if your luck is bad this time, the dream is still there. A dream is only over if you give it up – or if it comes true. That is called irony.

We have to remember the oracle's words, from Nike, the Greek goddess of victory and lumpy athletic shoes: Just do it. No excuses.

The night has a thousand saxophones.
And nary a clarinet between us.

Turn it up – or turn that wild card down.

The line that started it all...On a rainy day in late summer, cool enough to draw me close to the fire, I sat on the floor of my cottage with a pile of papers around me – notes from the previous two years, lines and phrases collected on the road, or in that dream-like moment before sleep. I began playing with the phrases "turn it up" and "turn it down," thought of turning a card down, as you do in some game I forget the name of, and then started to think more about the "wild card" idea. I guess that's called inspiration.

So many wildcards we are dealt in life – where we're born, the genes we wear, the people we meet along the way, and the circumstances of the world around us. Sometimes we even choose a wild card: Faith is like that, and so is Trust – one of the biggest chances you can take in life is trusting somebody, and yet most of us take that chance, at least once or twice. Some of us pursue ambitions where the odds against success are great (and where we might have to stay adolescents all our lives). That is called bravado.

There is truth in homilies like "the harder I work, the luckier I get" and "luck is when preparation meets opportunity," but they are only tendencies, not laws. The best-laid plans, et cetera. No matter how intelligent, talented, and beautiful we might be, we still don't know what the hell's going to happen next. But we can improve the odds by the choices we make.

I am not an existentialist; I am a free man!

Where's my thing?

Where indeed. No deep meaning here, I'm glad to report – just one of those things people say: "Where's that...um...oh, you know...where's my – thing?"

We had a lot of fun with this one, putting so much stuff into it there wasn't even room for a small kitchen sink. And for once, the lyrics are guaranteed politically correct. We've been meaning to do another instrumental (exercise in self-indulgence) for a few years, but something always seemed to derail our good intentions – as soon as Geddy and Alex would come up with a good musical part, it would fit with some lyrics I'd just written.

This time I outsmarted them; I wouldn't give them any more words until they'd finished an instrumental. It worked.

Playing the game, but not the way the big boys played.

Yo, DJ – spin that wheel!

Sorry. You lose. Life is so unfair. I mean, shuffling around this mortal coil, this vale of tears, playing the cosmic game show and waiting for the party-at-the-end-of-the-world, taking commercial breaks and flicking through the channels – then suddenly the show is over? If you played well and gave it all you had, you're certainly a true winner, but sometimes the winner takes nothing. That is called tragedy.

Do we have to be forgiving at last?

I suppose. The deconstruction of the Eastern Bloc made some people happy; it made me mad.

For generations those people had to line up for toilet paper, wear bad suits, drive nasty cars, and drink bug spray to get high – and it was all a mistake? A heavy price to pay for somebody else's

misguided ideology, it seems to me, and that waste of life must be the ultimate heresy. The drum part in this song was inspired by a different part of the world. One hot night I lay under the stars on a rooftop in Togo, and heard the sound of drums from across the valley. Even on the edge of sleep the drumming moved me, the rhythm stayed in my head, and while working on this song I used variations of it and other West African influences. Depending on your point-of-view, that is either called cultural cross-pollination, or plundering the Third World.

Somehow we find each other, through all that masquerade.

The timeless quest – find somebody to love, and make it last. We know the odds are not good, but most of us keep trying. Some of us get lucky. Some of us don't. C'est la vie.

Some greater guitar stuff in this song, I think, but don't tell him I said so.

This is the kind of song that we always think ought to be a massive hit single, but by this time we've learned that it won't be, because we're too weird.

Life is a diamond you turn into dust.

Some people can't deal with the world-as-it-is, or themselves-as-they-are, and feel powerless to change things – so they get all crazy. They waste away their lives in delusions, paranoia, aimless rage, and neuroses, and in the process they often make those around them miserable too. Strained friendships, broken couples, warped children. I think they should all just stop it. That is called wishful thinking.

Be-bop or a one-drop or a hip-hop lite-pop-metallist.

Yep – no matter what kind of song you choose to sing, you're betting your life on it, for good or ill, and what you believe is what you are. So there. However you slice it, you're taking a chance, and you might not be right. (Just this once.) No one can ever be sure, in this best of all possible random universes.

That's why the essence of these songs is: if there's a chance, you might as well take it. So what if some parts of life are a crap shoot? Get out there and shoot the crap. A random universe doesn't have to be futile; we can change the odds, load the dice, and roll again.

And there's no escaping the dice; even if you try to take the sting out of a random universe by embracing the prefab structure of Faith, you still have to gamble that it's the right one. Say the secret word and win a hundred dollars. For anyone who hasn't seen Groucho Marx's game show "You Bet Your Life," I mean that no one but Groucho knows the secret word, and one guess is as good as another. You might have lived a good long life as an exemplary Christian, only to be met at the gates of heaven by Mohammed...

Anything can happen. That is called fate.

Why are we here? Because we're here. Row the boats.