

CHAPTER 1

A Man of His Words 1974–1979

Born into a middle class family in Ontario, Canada, Neil Peart found his love of the drums at age thirteen. At that point, “Everything disappeared,” he remembers. “I’d done well in school up until that time. I was fairly adjusted socially up until that time.” Once he started drum lessons, however, “I became completely monomania-obsessed all through my teens. Nothing else existed anymore.”¹³

When Neil Peart joined Rush in 1974, the band had already released one album, the successful self-titled album with its best and most recognizable debut single, “Working Man.” Not wanting to imitate Led Zeppelin too much, Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson had already begun moving toward a much more progressive position musically while touring to support the first album. They still loved Zeppelin, The Who, Cream, Buffalo Springfield, and the Yardbirds, but they were also quite taken with what Yes, Genesis, and King Crimson were accomplishing, especially in the United Kingdom.

It’s worth remembering that though the first two Rush albums appeared only eleven months apart, the first album had been in the works for almost five years by the time it came on the market. In those five years, Lee and Lifeson reached the age of 21—no longer teenagers, but men. It stands to reason that those five years not only shaped them, on a day-to-day level as they matured, but also exposed them to a radically different sound in rock as the music scene rapidly changed during that time.

The band’s second album, *Fly by Night*—the first written with Peart—reveals a serious maturation of sound and confidence over the first album. While the debut album, *Rush*, had decent production and good hard, acid-rock-like riffs, it was, lyrically speaking, rather pedestrian. That is, it provided a great sound to accompany drinking beer with friends, driving around the countryside without too many worries, and pumping fists in the air.

The words, though, were far from heady and certainly less than extraordinary. *Rush* was little more than blues-acid-party-rock music

for Midwestern teenagers to enjoy while drinking, smoking, and making out. This represents, as I have decided to label the pre-Peart Rush era, Rush 1.0. The contrast between this album and what Peart would contribute over the next forty years is startling.

*Hey, baby, it's a quarter to eight
I feel I'm in the mood
Hey baby, the hour is late
I feel I've got to move*

—“In the Mood” 1974

The lyrics of the first album prove as ephemeral as almost anything Foghat or Headeast wrote in that decade. They mean next to nothing, but they can call up wells of nostalgia for those who might have danced, drunk, smoked, or made out to such music as it first appeared on the pop scene. When Rush finished their R40 concert in Lincoln on May 10, 2015, with “Working Man,” the crowd—a mostly middle-aged white male audience—went absolutely wild. While it’s a great song, it simply cannot compare to the complexity of a “Tom Sawyer” or a “Headlong Flight.” Still, “Working Man” captures the imaginations of its listeners, even after forty-one years.

When Peart joined the band in the summer of 1974, Rush 2.0 began and would last until 1997. When Rush re-emerged after the horrific tragedies in Peart’s life with Vapor Trails in 2002, they became the ultimate Rush, Rush 3.0.

While many would agree that Peart is one of the greatest drummers of all time, he might also justly be considered one of the best living essayists in the English language. Peart cherishes the word, in whatever form. This proves equally true in his book and essay writing, his lyrics, and even in his interviews. A writer for the *Toronto Star* enthused: “Peart’s verbal skills would be the envy of any politician. Grammatically structured sentences tumble from his mouth at a breathless rate without pauses, ums, or hesitations, as if his mouth is in perfect synch with a brain firing on all cylinders.”¹⁴ It’s not, however, only his skills at communication. He cherishes the opportunity to make those words incarnate, to give them tangible and physical form.

It occurred to me that there are few activities more enjoyable than making things. When I was young, it was car models, go-karts, then later pop-art mobiles and

laughably inept carpentry. A couple of years ago, I ran across a wall-mount “drumstick holder” I had dreamed up in my teens. It had been inspired by my dad’s cue rack by his pool table, but it was a crudely shaped assemblage of gray-painted plywood, with holes drilled by an old brace-and-bit—it looked like it had been crafted by a troglodyte. But still—I had made something. It is stimulating and satisfying to write stories, or play the drums, but most gratifying of all to me is creating a physical object: a book, a CD, a DVD. Of course it remains the content that gives the mere object its value, but many would agree, I hope, that owning such a carefully crafted object is more pleasing than just acquiring the content by whatever means. That urge may sustain the existence of things apart from their content, and that would be good, methinks.¹⁵

Peart, however, also longs to communicate with his audience, even if he usually prefers to maintain some distance from its individual members.

Communication is what music is, certainly. And the lyrics, and writing the bio, and basically every aspect of what we do, is essential communication. That it can’t really be two-way, in the sense of communication, but it can be a successful. It takes certainly two people to make it successful. If you’re transmitting an idea, you need a receiver, and for that receiver, you need good media in between. So that’s where the craft comes into it too, of carefully refining that idea, or that thought, or that feeling, so that it communicates to a listener.¹⁶

Certainly, Peart and his two bandmates hope to connect with the best and the most intelligent of their audience.

Words can carry different freight for different people, of course, but for those who do have the sensitivity to pay the kind of attention to lyrics I put into them, it’s wonderful to connect that way. To feel that you’re not playing down to anyone. We’ve always had the impression that people are just as smart as we are. If we can figure this stuff out, they can too. ... This is really what turned us on this year.

*Lyrically, it's always been a reflection of my times and the times I observe.*¹⁷

He also has no problem directly talking to those he considers equals or betters, whatever their own fields of expertise. That is, Peart maintains a number of sustained, deep friendships. He is not, as some have claimed, anti-social. He distrusts those who admire him because of their own illusions and delusions, those who would project their own hopes and desires upon him. For those who listen to his music, however, Peart presents his case(s) in Socratic fashion.

*But it's certainly true that we think about what we do. Our music is a reflection of our interest. It is made by thinking people for thinking people. We never talk down to our audiences. I presume they are as smart as we are. Anyone who knows us should have the perception that we work hard and enjoy it. We pay attention to the real details. We take care to imprint our set of values on it. The same values that apply to our music extend through our organization.*¹⁸

Peart adamantly denies the label of preacher, however. Rather, he claims that every thought he presents, he does so as a question, an invitation to enter a long-term conversation.¹⁹ It is, he continues, nothing but a love and honesty of spirit. His own music heroes—such as Roger Waters, Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, Ian Anderson, and Pete Townshend—always “cared about what they do.” At some level, Peart continues, “I sensed what was honest, and I sensed when care had been taken, when someone really meant what they sang.”²⁰

Peart's lyrics on *Fly by Night*, though, took Rush to a whole new level of exploration and intellectual respectability. The opening moments reveal a new Rush. In open defiance to the aquarian norms of '60s rock, Peart offers an “Anthem,” a statement of individualist pride in one's creation and integrity, accompanied by pounding acidic bass and drums, driving the rhythm to levels and depths well beyond the pop norm of 4/4 time signatures.

*Anthem of the heart and anthem of the mind
A funeral dirge for eyes gone blind
We marvel after those who sought
The wonders of the world, wonders of the world*

*Wonders of the world they wrought
 Live for yourself ... there's no one else
 More worth living for
 Begging hands and bleeding hearts will only cry out for more.*

While one might understandably define these lyrics as Social Darwinist, they are an attempt to define the individual—often lost as a part of a community in '60s lyrics—in a positive, proactive manner. And, while not at the level of a Henry David Thoreau, they show significant depth relative to other lyrics of the day and especially considering this was 22-year old Peart's first attempt at writing. He would continue the same theme of perseverance in "Something for Nothing" and "Marathon."

Most of the songs on *Fly by Night* follow the traditional rock format in terms of length, ranging from just under three minutes to just under seven minutes. One track, though, stands out in terms of structure, lyrics, and length, revealing the future direction of Rush, the bizarrely named "By-Tor and the Snow Dog." If the opening song revealed Peart's love of the individualism of nineteenth-century America, this song equally demonstrated his appreciation for the fantastical world of J.R.R. Tolkien. At 8½ minutes and broken into four parts, "By-Tor" tells the story of a demon from hell who attempts to open a portal to the Overworld. The champion of the latter, Snow Dog, defeats By-Tor in open combat, thus saving the world of the living from the twilight realm of the dead.

Fly by Night reveals Peart's uncanny ability to combine Enlightenment philosophy—admittedly, a century or two after its time and glory—with the fantastic and mythic as understood in the twentieth century. While the opening track expresses a rugged individualism, By-Tor demonstrates that individual bravery can save an entire world as well as bring glory and honor upon the rescuer. These seemingly incompatible themes predominate in many of Peart's early lyrics.

A mere six months later, Rush released their third LP—the second with Peart—*Caress of Steel*. In almost every way, *Caress* serves as a sequel to *Fly by Night*. But, if *Fly by Night* was the black sheep of the rock world, *Caress* was its estranged stoner cousin who only attended family events when someone had unexpectedly passed away. "I think we were pretty high when we made that record," Lee laments with a snicker, "and it sounds like it to me."²¹ Looking back on the time, Lee admits that they had smoked too much hash oil, something the band