

A chilling story cowritten with *Rush* drummer and lyricist Neil Peart. A rock drummer bicycling through the African wilderness encounters a village that makes very special drums. This one will make your heart skip a beat. With an introduction by Kevin J. Anderson and afterword by Neil Peart.

Drumbeats

Kevin J. Anderson and Neil Peart

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INTRODUCTION

Kevin J. Anderson

For those of my fans who don't recognize the name of the coauthor on this story (and I doubt there are very many who don't), Neil Peart is the drummer and lyricist for the rock group Rush, writer of some of the most innovative and thought-provoking songs I have ever heard.

The music of Rush has inspired my writing since the late 1970s, when I picked copies of *2112* and *A Farewell to Kings* among my “Ten Albums for a Dollar” signup bonus for joining a record club. (At the time, I had never heard of Rush, never heard any of the

songs, but I thought the cover art looked cool on the tiny stickers.)

After hearing the epic science fiction music of “2112,” “Xanadu,” and “Cygnus X-1,” I was hooked. I haunted record stores, picking up any Rush album I could find. *A Farewell to Kings* was followed by *Hemispheres*, then *Permanent Waves*.

I went to my first Rush concert for the *Moving Pictures* tour in 1981, and I haven’t missed one since, in thirty years. The next album was *Signals*. And then *Grace Under Pressure*.

Grace Under Pressure hit me at exactly the right time as I was plotting my novel *Resurrection, Inc.* The music seemed to tie in exactly with the story taking shape in my mind. “We need someone to talk to, and someone to sweep the floors.” “Are we the last ones left alive?” “Suspicious-looking stranger flashes you a dangerous grin.” “Steely-eyed outside—to hide the enemy within.” “One humanoid escapee, one android on the run.” “Cruising in prime time, soaking up the cathode rays.”

As I wrote the novel, I had specific scenes in mind tied directly to the lyrics; Rush provided the soundtrack in my imagination. When Signet Books published the novel in 1988, I autographed copies to Neil and to his bandmates Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee, then mailed them off to the black hole (Cygnus X-1?) of Mercury Records.

A year later, Neil wrote back. We struck up a correspondence, and then during their *Presto* tour he bicycled down to my townhouse in the San Francisco area where we met for the first time. I’ve known Neil longer than I’ve known my wife Rebecca (and we’ve been married twenty years); in fact, *Roll the Bones* was the first rock concert Rebecca had ever attended (and not a bad way to start, with front-and-center seats and backstage passes).

When I was asked to contribute a story for the Pocket Books anthology *Shock Rock II*—rock-themed horror and dark-fantasy stories—working with Neil seemed a natural thing to do.

Neil himself has bicycled around Africa several times, and has written detailed and insightful travel journals. (You can check out his latest travelogues at neilpeart.net, and he also has a new

collection of his essays and photos, *Far and Away: A Prize Every Time*.) Shortly before I received the *Shock Rock* anthology invitation, Neil had sent me a copy of his self-published book, *The African Drum*, detailing his adventures in Africa, including vivid descriptions of the landscape and people. It all seemed perfect fodder for a short story. The character in “Drumbeats” is loosely based on him, of course, and large portions of the narrative are taken from these travelogues.

While writing intelligent and meaningful lyrics to his songs, Neil always had aspirations of being a writer (and he has published several excellent nonfiction books). However, after “Drumbeats” appeared in print and he received his portion of the meager payment, Neil decided that he wouldn’t quit his job as a platinum-selling rock drummer and lyricist any time soon.

While I’m very proud of the story we wrote together, as a Rush fan, I’m glad of his decision as well.

DRUMBEATS

Kevin J. Anderson & Neil Peart

After nine months of touring across North America—with hotel suites and elaborate dinners and clean sheets every day—it felt good to be hot and dirty, muscles straining not for the benefit of any screaming audience, but just to get to the next village up the dusty road, where none of the natives recognized Danny Imbro or knew his name. To them, he was just another White Man, an exotic object of awe for little children, a target of scorn for drunken soldiers at border checkpoints.

Bicycling through Africa was about the furthest thing from a rock concert tour that Danny could imagine—which was why he did it, after promoting the latest Blitzkrieg album and performing each song until the tracks were worn smooth in his head. This

cleared his mind, gave him a sense of balance, perspective.

The other members of Blitzkrieg did their own thing during the group's break months. Phil, whom they called the "music machine" because he couldn't stop writing music, spent his relaxation time cranking out film scores for Hollywood; Reggie caught up on his reading, soaking up grocery bags full of political thrillers and mysteries; Shane turned into a vegetable on Maui. But Danny Imbro took his expensive-but-battered bicycle and bummed around West Africa. The others thought it strangely appropriate that the band's drummer would go off hunting for tribal rhythms.

Late in the afternoon on the sixth day of his ride through Cameroon, Danny stopped in a large open market and bus depot in the town of Garoua. The marketplace was a line of mud-brick kiosks and chophouses, the air filled with the smell of baked dust and stones, hot oil and frying beignets. Abandoned cars squatted by the roadside, stripped clean but unblemished by corrosion in the dry air. Groups of men and children in long blouses like nightshirts idled their time away on the street corners.

Wives and daughters appeared on the road with their buckets, going to fetch water from the well on the other side of the marketplace. They wore bright-colored *pagnes* and kerchiefs, covering their traditionally naked breasts with T-shirts or castoff Western blouses, since the government in the capital city of Yaounde had forbidden women from going topless.

Behind one kiosk in the shade sat a pan holding several bottles of Coca-Cola, Fanta, and ginger ale, cooling in water. Some vendors sold a thin stew of bony fish chunks over gritty rice, others sold *fufu*, a dough-like paste of pounded yams to be dipped into a sauce of meat and okra. Bread merchants stacked their long *baguettes* like dry firewood.

Danny used the back of his hand to smear sweat-caked dust off his forehead, then removed the bandanna he wore under his helmet to keep the sweat out of his eyes. With streaks of white skin peeking through the layer of grit around his eyes, he probably looked like some strange lemur.

In halting French, he began haggling with a wiry boy to buy a bottle of water. Hiding behind his kiosk, the boy demanded 800 francs for the water, an outrageous price. While Danny attempted to bargain it down, he saw the gaunt, grayish-skinned man walking through the marketplace like a wind-up toy running down.

The man was playing a drum.

The boy cringed and looked away. Danny kept staring. The crowd seemed to shrink away from the strange man as he wandered among them, continuing his incessant beat. He wore his hair long and unruly, which in itself was unusual among the close-cropped Africans. In the equatorial heat, the long stained overcoat he wore must have heated his body like a furnace, but the man did not seem to notice. His eyes were focused on some invisible distance.

“*Huit-cent francs,*” the boy insisted on his price, holding the lukewarm bottle of water just out of Danny’s reach.

The staggering man walked closer, tapping a slow monotonous beat on the small cylindrical drum under his arm. He did not change his tempo, but continued to play as if his life depended on it. Danny saw that the man’s fingers and wrists were wrapped with scraps of hide; even so, he had beaten his fingertips bloody.

Danny stood transfixed. He had heard tribal musicians play all manner of percussion instruments, from hollowed tree trunks, to rusted metal cans, to beautifully carved *djembe* drums with goat-skin drumheads—but he had never heard a tone so rich and sweet, with such an odd echoey quality as this strange African drum.

In the studio, he had messed around with drum synthesizers and reverbs and the new technology designed to turn computer hackers into musicians. But this drum sounded different, solid and pure, and it hooked him through the heart, hypnotizing him. It distracted him entirely from the unpleasant appearance of its bearer.

“What is that?” he asked.

“*Sept-cent francs,*” the boy insisted in a nervous whisper, dropping his price to 700 and pushing the water closer.

Danny walked in front of the staggering man, smiling broadly