

Notes On The Making Of MOVING PICTURES Part 1

by Neil Peart

Having been a regular reader of MD for the last couple of years, I've noticed most of the studio information has been for the "session" drummer. This is very good and valuable, but there are many drummers who will be (or hope to be) making records as part of a more-or-less permanent group, who will want to know how to make the studio work for *them*, rather than learn how *they* can work for the studio. I hope I can offer a few useful observations.

As difficult as it is to please someone else *on demand*, it may be even more difficult to make the decisions and learn the technique to please yourself. The modern studio environment, personnel and language can be overwhelming to the uninitiated. It can be frustrating trying to translate what you hear in your head and onstage to what you hear on tape.

Learning to "see" the shape of a sound is one very important step in the understanding and communication of recording. Sounds are often described as "round," "pointed," "flat," "tubular," "boxy," "bright," et cetera. This can give you a common language to describe what you like or dislike about a particular sound.

Over the course of seven studio albums with Rush, I've been fortunate enough to be limited only by my ability and imagination in exploring and developing my drumming. This is a very large and rare advantage. One of the nicest things about being a part of Rush is that freedom to work "over my head," and to be able to learn by experiment and analysis. Every album is a kind of "final exam" for me. I expect to hear new ideas and significant improvement in my playing after the yearly term of touring, writing, and rehearsing.

In general, we all wanted to try some different rhythmic devices for *Moving Pictures*. In the past we've often used many

time and tempo changes around a chord sequence we liked. This time we wanted to revolve the note structure around a good, strong pulse. This made for some interesting developments in the style and substance of our writing, and it seemed generally to give a more unified thrust to our music.

There have been no real revolutions in my own approach—just a little growth along a fairly linear path. I find myself playing harder all the time. As my tuning gets better and I don't have to worry about the sound "choking," I just want to squeeze out, thrash, hammer, or wallop that extra bit of sound. My smaller 12" and 13" closed toms are tuned quite a bit higher than before, and I find that if I lay the stick almost flat across the head and hit it *very hard*—the head will stretch to the point of de-tuning, similar to a guitar player bending a string. This athletic and unsubtle approach produces a nice throaty tone and a good strong attack, which allows greater definition and a more percussive effect from a closed tom-tom.

Another device I've been working on is the "left hand emphasis" approach to rolls. This involves beginning a single-stroke roll with a triplet, which shifts the downbeat to the opposite hand. This allows for a nice eighth note "push" in the right hand or, the completion of the roll with the left hand, *or* you can shift the emphasis *back* to the right hand with another triplet. For the non-ambidextrous drummer, this type of "opposite-hand" thinking and playing can be very difficult to master, but it does open up infinite areas of rhythmic variations that were formerly awkward or impossible.

Another sensitive area of recording is *editing*. For those who haven't experienced the studio first-hand, editing involves the cutting and splicing together of the best parts of two or more separate performances to form one perfect perform-

ance.

Editing is an art form for the engineer, but for the drummer it can be demoralizing and of questionable ethics. Why not just keep trying until you get it the way you want it? There are a few valid reasons that I would like to try to clarify.

One reason is *spontaneity*. Sometimes your part will not be firmly arranged. Everytime you play the song it will be slightly different. Sometimes it's nice to leave a section wide open, close your eyes, and go for it! Great things *do* happen by accident. Editing is the only way to capture these "accidents."

A good example of the principle of editing is the pair of long fills that introduce each vocal section in the second half of "The Camera Eye." I wanted something really special and exciting there, but I didn't want it to be organized and pre-arranged. The only way to capture that spirit of wild abandon is to *be* that way. Every time we did a take of the song, I would close my eyes to those sections, let go, and flail away. This ranged from the ridiculous to the sublime, but I was able to choose the most successful, exciting fills for the finished track. What it really boils down to is that it's always *you* playing. Editing just gives you the opportunity to choose the very best you can do.

A good analogy between playing live and recording in the studio is the difference between *talking* and *writing*. When you're writing, you can cross out unnecessary or inaccurate words, and replace them or shift them around until you arrive at the *essence* of what you wanted to say. They are still *your* words. They're just refined and distilled into their ideal form. In the case of "The Camera Eye," I had to go home and learn how to play the "accident" so I could play it that way live!

Another good reason for editing is *time*. Studio time is precious and costly, and the pressure during basic tracks will bear down

Photo by Karen Larcombe



on *the drummer!* Everybody else can repair a note here or there, but the drummer's part has to be perfect. The number of microphones involved in creating a drum sound precludes the possibility of "dropping in" to fix one bad snare beat or a click of the sticks. If a difficult track takes a long time, it's *you* they're waiting for! This can be really frustrating and lead you to over-concentration, and reproachful looks from the other musicians as you try it "one more time" because of some silly mistake you'd never make before or again in your life. AARRRGGH!

This was brought home to me sharply during the recording of "La Villa Strangiato" for our album *Hemispheres*. For four endless days and nights we played that very long and difficult instrumental again and again! We wouldn't give up. Over and over we played it until our fingers were raw and swollen and our minds were drained and dark. We were determined to get the whole thing perfect, but in the end I just couldn't do it, and we ended up putting it together from a few different takes.

Three years and hundreds of performances later, it continues to change and improve tour after tour, and remains very enjoyable, challenging and satisfying to play. Sometimes it's a case of ambition over-reaching ability.

Magic is still another reason for editing. This is always the subject of heated debate. Even if you define magic as "perfect synchronicity of rational factors," the fact remains that *sometimes* the combination of sounds, feel, and execution is so good that it must be kept; even if it's only half a song. Painters, writers, composers, and filmmakers must all know that you take advantage of a good thing when you've got it. You don't hope that it will return later! Somerset Maugham said "Only a mediocre man is always at his best." Amen.

We took a slightly different course in constructing "Witch Hunt." Usually our songs are put together as a three piece, but we sometimes set aside one project to be a studio production number. Being a cinematic type piece, "Witch Hunt" also allowed a lot of atmosphere for unusual percussion effects which I took full advantage of! I emptied my armory using the gong bass drums, wind chimes, glockenspiel, tubular bells, conga, cowbell, vibraslap, various electronic effects, and in one section I double-tracked the whole drum kit. It was fun.

The "percussion ensemble" in the second verse was very interesting to do. When we recorded the basic track, I left that section largely blank, and went back and overdubbed each drum separately. I used different sounds and perspectives on each drum to create the dramatic effect of things alternately being very distant and very near. I also removed the bottom heads of my toms on this track to get a darker, more primal sound.



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by Neil Peart

Notes On The Making Of Moving Pictures Part II

I'd like to say a few words about the dreaded click track. With a purist's pride, I resisted using this electronic metronome for many years, although the pursuit of really good time has been a constant trial for me. It wasn't until the sessions for *Permanent Waves* that I finally relented and agreed to give it a reluctant try.

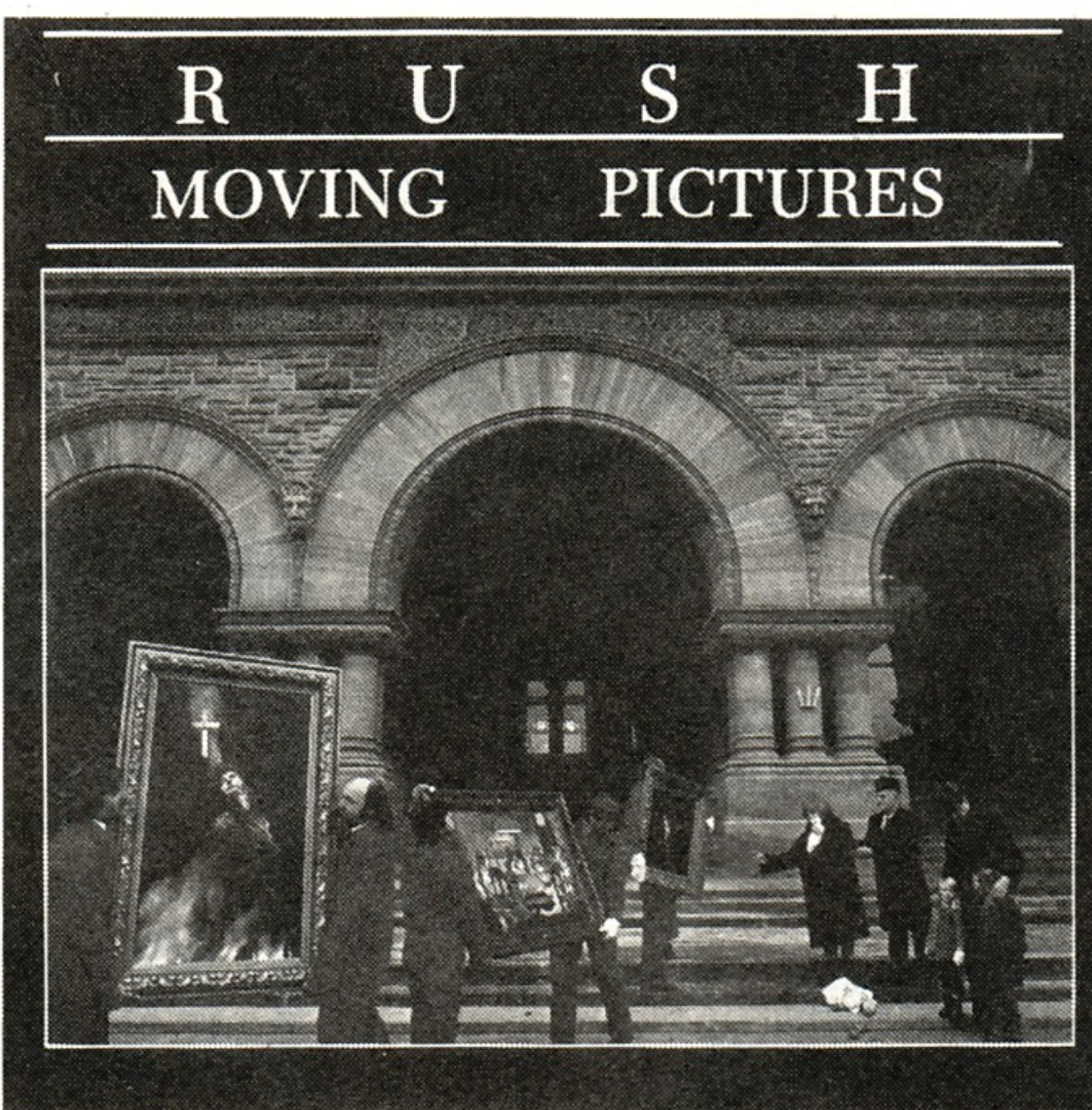
Imagine my surprise—I like it! It was much less difficult to work with than I had anticipated, because I could ignore it, except at crucial “pivot points” when one “click” would insure accuracy. As another musician pointed out to me, “If you can't hear the click track, you know your timing is right.” If you're locked into the tempo, your good timekeeping covers up the sound of the click.

The results are very satisfying. With all there is to keep in mind while recording a basic track, doubts about meter can be set aside in favor of concentrating on execution, dynamics, and *feel*. I am certain that my confidence and smooth rhythmic flow are only enhanced by it, and recording with the click has definitely improved my overall sense of time, which pays off in live performance as well.

Anyone who has ever tried to accompany a digital sequencer will know that it's just like the electronic metronome: It won't follow *you*; you've got to follow *it*. In “Vital Signs,” the sequencer is playing a sixteenth-note pattern for most of the song, while the bass plays eighth notes along with it, and the guitar and drums play alternate staccato rhythms.

There have been many interesting things

done with drum machines lately. As a thing apart, the artificial drum sounds are very good. Not better. Not worse. But, a completely different thing. I have a technical aversion to dealing with wires and electronics (my technical relationship to drums is hitting them with a stick!), but I wanted to use that sound. So, we set about making real drums sound like artificial ones. I suppose that's akin to making wood look like plastic, but it seemed like the right thing to



do! We used it for the short bridge which introduces the first chorus of “Vital Signs,” and in contrast to all the other stylistic influences used in this song, I think it worked quite well.

Conceptually, this song was an attempt to bridge the gap between the primal appeal of the rhythmic reggae “bounce” and

the electronic energy of high-technology music. As a drummer, this gave me the opportunity to begin as a simple “groove” player, and then grow through various developments into the “overplaying show-off type” toward the end! I drew on many influences throughout this progression: notably the works of Creme and Godley, Ultravox, The Police, the great things that Michael Giles did with early King Crimson, a healthy dose of good old hard rock, and a little Caribbean influence.

One thing I have come to learn about influences is that although copying one style can never be original, copying many styles often *is* original. Over the years I have learned from big band drummers, progressive jazz drummers, r&b drummers, jazz/rock drummers, pop drummers, reggae drummers, session drummers, rock drummers, and even some pretty lousy drummers. I know that when I add them all together I am none of them, but I am all of them. Some drummers provide instruction, some influence, and the rare great ones provide inspiration. The important thing is that if you listen to good, honest music, you are attending the greatest school of music there is. I'm certainly not going to knock the systematic pursuit of academic knowledge, but it's often the emotional response of *wanting* to learn how to play something you enjoy *listening* to that will teach you the most.

The best advice for someone who wants to develop an original style is: Don't copy one drummer, copy *twenty!*

I copied a hundred.





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Q: In the early years, when Rush played back-up to headliners, how were you able to play your best when the warm-up act is usually expected to go on "cold"? How did you warm-up with no time or room to do it onstage?

A: *This is an excellent question, and a problem which was difficult for me and many other drummers that I know. Another problem for the drummer in being in the "opening" situation is that you usually only get to play for a half-hour or forty-five minutes a night, which is not enough to keep you in good shape. I used to be plagued with cramps and stamina problems much worse than I experience now playing for two hours straight.*

I used to have my kit set up off-stage, and do a bit of practicing and warming-up while the headlining band was doing their soundcheck. It would have to be fairly quiet so as not to disturb them, but it was better than nothing, and actually was ideal for working on my long-neglected rudiments. It's also nice to work with a band who tries to let you have a sound-check when possible. On a three-act show this can be difficult. Perhaps a practice kit in the dressing room, or a regimen of exercise would be helpful to you.

Q: The parts you play in all of Rush's material are incredibly precise and tastefully played. Do you write out the parts in chart form? How do you remember the intricate rhythms, fills, etc.? Also, on "YYZ" you use a very strange cymbal with a thin, trashy sound and quick decay. What is it?

Lee Rothstein
Easton MA.

A: *Thanks for the always-appreciated kind words. No, I don't use charts to remember my parts; I put together a sequence of patterns that's comfortable and interesting, and I memorize it. There is some kind of wordless language that drummers have to trigger and retain patterns like this, that makes it possible to set off a sequence of rhythmic progressions without really thinking about it. I'm sure it's similar to the routine of a gymnast, a dancer, or an actor. The cymbal that you describe is a Chinese cymbal I originally acquired from Frank's Drum Shop in Chicago. I've since had a great deal of difficulty replacing it (it's cracked!). Being made by hand in China, these cymbals are subject to much variation in quality and sound and consequently can be very hard to duplicate exactly.*

