

SPIRIT OF PEART

By Dave Dickson.

Part Two of a
major interview
with Neil Peart
of Rush.

Do you think you, as a public figure known fairly well throughout the Western Hemisphere have a right to a private life?

"I have more than a right. I'm not a public figure, I never wanted to be, never asked to be, never tried to be, never worked to be. So I have more than a right to a private life.

"I'm a very reserved person by nature and I hate the importance that's attached to me as an individual over here; that doesn't exist in America. That's a thing I appreciate very much about over there; they have other things to think about. It's a very British thing and it's a very British problem that exists among the young people here that they think a public figure is somehow a special person set apart, they think that they're people who don't have normal functions, and consequently they treat us as such over here.

"It's one of the reasons why we feel uncomfortable and can't think about doing an extended tour here anymore. Those people have no conception of you as a human being and they feel they have the right - more than the right! It doesn't even come down to any morality at all - they just feel you owe them everything and consequently you have no life of your own. They'll 'phone you up in the middle of the night or at the crack of dawn, they'll knock on your door, they'll peek in your windows; it's shameless!

"They feel they can stand outside our hotel room and stare into a place where I'm sitting reading a book like a normal human being - and there's people staring at me! That makes me furious, that just makes me violently angry! Like I said, it's just one of the things that makes us very uncomfortable here."

But to be a 'star' there must be something intrinsic to your character to set you apart from 'normal' human beings.

"No, that's a very British attitude, it's absolutely untrue. Why do you think so many musicians have so many problems with alcohol, drugs, self-image and self-esteem? I've known

enough of these personally to see that I'm not the only one who has difficulty dealing with it. People are not different, the people that do perform onstage, granted, sure they have a talent but it's no different from having a talent for architecture or gardening . . ."

Except that there must be a quality in you that enables you to go out in front of 20,000 people and entertain them.

"I can only do it in my own way. I couldn't go out there and dance for them, I couldn't go out there and sing for them or recite Shakespeare, I'd be terrified. But the fact that I've played drums since I was too young to know any different means there's no nervousness about it because it's my job, it's my life.

"The mechanics of our lives are not so different really, it's just the way people look at them and how difficult people make our lives that makes it so rare. It's really not so weird. I've had a lot of other kinds of jobs too and they're really very much the same."

Can you explain why the majority of Mega-bands in the States, the likes of Styx, Journey and Toto, are so remarkably faceless?

"In Europe there's nothing to lose. In Europe if a band gets together and starts as a garage band, as all bands do, they really don't have any hope. Let's face it, European bands do get successful but if you're starting as a garage band and playing pubs and so on the chances of getting beyond that are so minimal that you have to think, well, you might as well do what you want. And that's why a band can come out of Europe and be successful because they feel they have nothing to lose. Whereas in America,

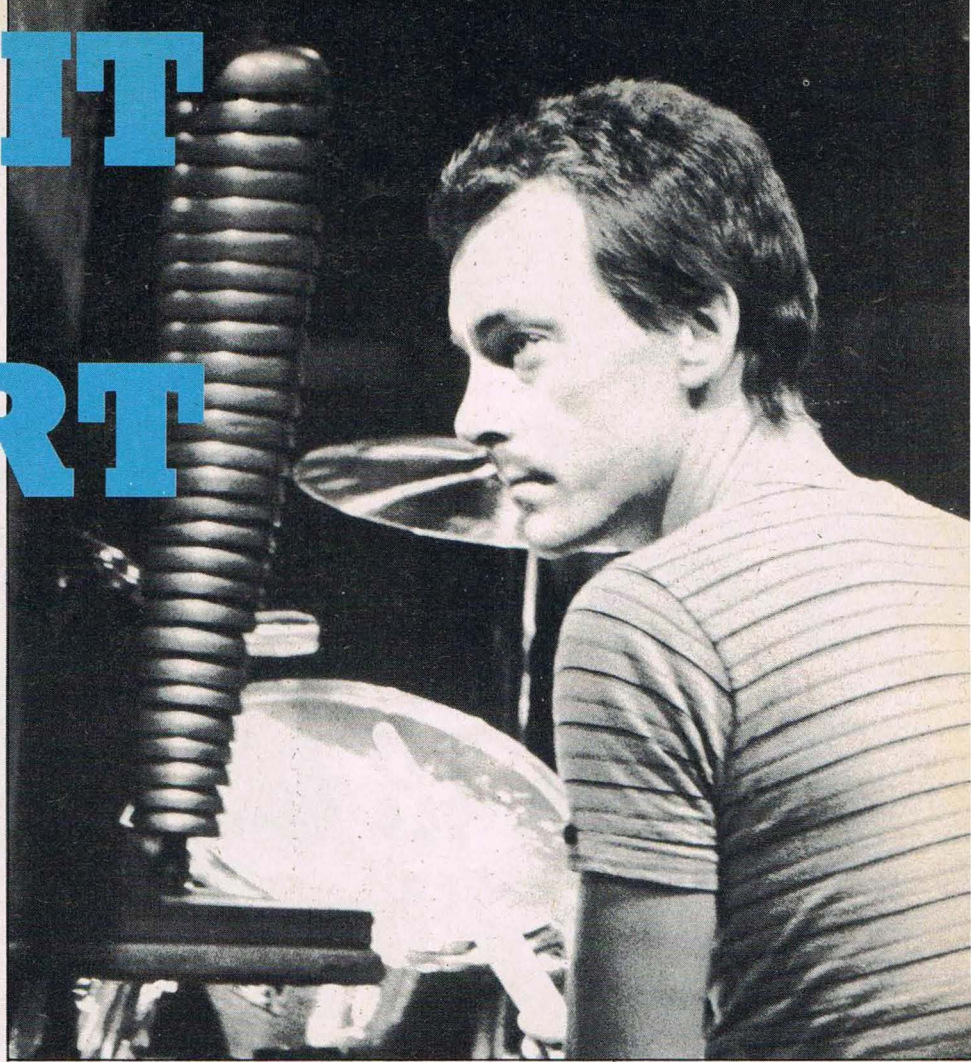
even if you get no farther than the bars you can still make a lot of money so there's always that carrot hanging in front of those bands. They cannot hang in front of those bands. They know if they homogenise their music enough and if they sell-out enough even playing in the bars they can make thousands of dollars a week. That's why when those bands become successful they've already sold-out so far they wouldn't know how to be adventurous or unusual if they tried."

So how much of what you do out there onstage is just another day's work, or does 'art' intrude as well?

"Aah, that's a hard thing to talk about, the 'artistic' aspect of it. I tend to separate them, for convenience sake, into 'inspiration' and 'craftsmanship'. Inspiration is not a thing you can predict or call to mind at will. So, in a lyrical sense, I keep a little notebook all the time of little ideas, and that's inspiration. We usually take a month at songwriting and that's the time of craftsmanship. Everybody brings their little ideas and their little bits of inspiration in there, and that's the artistic side of it. And when you actually get together and try to work on songs or I'm sitting down trying to work out lyrics it really becomes craftsmanship at that point. The artistic part has to be the spontaneity, the happy chance, the serendipity of it, really, is what it comes down to.

"So you try to balance those two things out. You know that people have gone to a lot of trouble and they've spent a lot of money and they attach a lot of importance to your concert so you try hard every time to make it as good as it possibly can be, and I can honestly say we have never done a show that was compromised in us giving as much as we can give.

"There's been times when we've certainly



given shows that weren't *great* but it hasn't been our fault for whatever reason – whether it's been something biological, something chemical or something technological. As much as we can do anything about it and as much as we can be in the right frame for it I know that we have that same drive every night to be as good as we possibly can regardless of whether it's in front of 10,000 people here or 2000 in Hamburg, or years ago when we'd be opening up a show and have a half-hour set.

"But at this point in our career the audience's expectations are so high and they have so many relations to the songs because they remember when they first heard it or a special time when they heard it, they remember the friends they were with when they heard that song and how much it has meant to them over the years. All of those subjective things I understand so well. It's not shallowness the fact that they appreciate your show regardless, it's just the fact that we've been doing it for so long that a bad show to us is just a matter of degree.

"If you look at 100% as the very best we could do, we never go lower than 90%; at this point we never give a really horrendous show, but there are nights that are better than others. Some nights you walk off stage just feeling like 99%, tonight was just fantastic! And there's other nights when 90% makes you feel like a fraud! You walk off stage and you know you haven't played like an idiot, you haven't played terribly but you just haven't played as well as you know you can, and you just feel like those people have been cheated!"

Do you think that post-'Farewell To Kings' Rush are now trying to disengage themselves from pre-'Farewell To Kings' Rush, after all you're now playing only about four numbers from before that album?

"Well, that's just a limitation. It's just the fact that we have so many albums of songs to choose from now and obviously we like what we've done more recently than what we did eight years or nine years ago. The old songs that we no longer have any association with at all, playing them would simply be 'going through the motions', it's dishonest! So in spite of the fact that people might feel cheated by the fact that we didn't play it we can't feel wrong about that. It would be wrong of us to go the other way and play all those songs totally dishonestly with no satisfaction for ourselves and no challenge, no fulfilment. To me that would be the cheapest thing we could possibly do.

"It's natural, I think, with any writer or artist, as you progress, the better you get the more you like what you're doing. I like the last three albums much more, so that to me is what I always wanted us to be so that's what I would rather represent. You have a stronger responsibility to your newer material because it represents you today; something that represented you six or eight years ago isn't necessarily true anymore."

Are you trying to get away from that 'Heavy Metal' tag?

"Well, I never accepted it so I don't care. Because someone calls you an asshole doesn't mean you're an asshole, so you can't accept someone else's opinion of you as being you. It's the same for an individual as it is for the band; if someone calls you a jerk, too bad, they think you're a jerk, you can't call yourself a jerk: 'He thinks I'm a jerk, I must be one!' It's the same as: 'They think we're Heavy Metal, we must be Heavy Metal!' I've never thought of us that way, ever, and still don't and never will."

Let's talk about manipulation. Are you in fact manipulating your audience?

"It's not manipulation, it's just communication. In a sense it's where you have done something



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so well that people respond to it. The perfect example of that is '2112', that's the first album of ours that really reached people and it was exactly the opposite of being calculating because we were being totally rebellious at the time. We were rebelling against the whole industry, the thing that was trying to manipulate us. There were a lot of people telling us what we should do and that what we were planning to do was all wrong and we should forget it all. So that album was a total rebellion against manipulation, but at the same time that cause led to the effect of that album being so passionate and so angry that it reached people. So how can you call that manipulation.

"Things like singing along with 'Closer To The Heart', we never knew that would happen. We didn't write that song thinking this is a song the audience can sing along with. And the first time it happened we were surprised, wonderfully surprised! It happened by accident and it's still a very lovely thing.

"I can never look on people as a *mass*. You can say it's manipulation when we shine the lights out on the audience but it's an important psychological thing to us because it's the only part of the show where we see each one, even if it's only little circles, we see each individual in the audience as a person."

But they are all reacting as one in the same way that if they went to a football match they'd act as one.

"Well, yeah, that's frightening, yeah, that has its bad side, no question about it. Mob rule, there's nothing more frightening than that. And from our fans that's one of the things that makes me very uncomfortable because you know a mob has no brain, but again, it's not something I can do anything about. Granted there is a mass mentality that exists everywhere and that's what happened in Germany in WW1! And that's what happens at a football match too where people get killed and stomped on and get broken bottles smashed in their faces and darts thrown at their heads and stuff.

"That kind of mindless violence happens all over the world. It's very fashionable in Europe to say: 'Oh, that only happens in America!', but it's worse here! In America it's gangsters killing other gangsters and pimps killing other pimps. Granted, there's all the guns and all kinds more murder but over here it's people thinking that, oh, this is more important than life so we'll blow up a church full of children. These things that go on over here are far, far more sickening than two criminals killing each other. A human life is a human life but you've got to recognise the fact that this is a pimp killing a drug-pusher on the streets of New York whereas over here it's an innocent mother or an innocent young

boy getting killed.

"Those kind of things, to me, are just so appalling that I can hardly believe that it's possible for them to feel superior and say: 'Well, it doesn't matter, it's for the Irish cause. It doesn't matter if we kill a hundred innocent people, it's for something more important than their lives!' And let's face it, that's what happens in Russia, that's what happened in Nazi Germany; it's the same mentality, that something is more important than a life. To my mind nothing is more important than a life so that kind of mindless violence I find more appalling than anything."

Isn't that exactly what's going on in El Salvador though, where the great cause of the 'American Way' is being threatened by the onrush of Communism?

"Ah, you don't know that, I don't know that. I wouldn't presume to judge. I think the El Salvadorians are killing each other. I don't think America cares one way or the other what happens in Central America. It's all a matter of what's being done by force; America wouldn't have to care what Russia was doing if Russia wasn't so determined to do everything by force."

Can you see Rush ever playing a Soviet bloc country?

"Yeah, we have no prejudices, we are free people. As far as I'm concerned it's unfortunate that people are forced to think or do anything. I don't care, I'm not that passionate about politics. Politics is much more important in Europe than it is anywhere else. And I don't care; if these people choose to live that way that's wonderful but the fact that they don't get to choose is horrible and I will never, ever accept the fact that it's OK for them to be forced to be anything".

Somewhere along the line Rush picked up this image of being the ultimate Capitalist band.

"Aah, no-one knows what Capitalism is anymore than they know what Socialism is. It's the same as calling us a Heavy Metal band, no-one knows what it means so what difference does it make? I don't call myself a Capitalist because I know that that has unfortunate connotations. I call myself an individualist because no-one knows what that means either – except me. So if anyone asks me to put an 'ism' after my name I'll say I'm an individualist because to me an individual life is the ultimate, supreme value in the world."

How much are you prepared to sacrifice to retain that?

"Sacrifice' – those things don't go together, you don't sacrifice. Any compromise, any sacrifice, necessitates giving up a good thing and I don't choose to choose there. I want everything. What can you sacrifice anyway?"

Your life, ultimately.

"Well then, that's not individualism because what's worth more than your life? A person that I love, yes. I would die for a person that I love, if I were forced into that but I hope I never would be."

But in the event of an all-out war would you fight for your country?

"Not just for the country, no. But people that I care about I would do anything for, sure. I would gladly barricade my house and get machine-guns and canons and hand-grenades and everything, certainly I would. I would never let that be walked over."

On an individual level but not on a national level?

"I'm not nationalistic, that kind of chauvinism is pathetic."