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THE SONGWRITING INTERVIEW

# NEIL PEART

by Bruce Pollock



Rick Gould

**D**ownstairs, in the labyrinthian chambers of the Meadowlands, at two minutes to midnight, is neither the place nor the time one would be expecting to discuss the course of American Literature. "When you look at Herman Melville and Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne—the turn of the century American school of writers—and how writing developed through Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser and then up to Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, there was a tremendous progression, but at the same time an elimination. That progression of writing was a process of stripping things away and eliminating the inessential, making, in effect, the right word do the job of five approximations."

And neither would you expect the drummer of a world-renowned arena-resounding rock band to be conversant with the subtleties of Black Humor. "I love writers like Thomas Pynchon and John Barth and Tom Robbins. To me Robbins is the quintessential modern writer because he's funny, he's profound, he's sexy, he's irreverent, he's dirty, he's hip. He's everything I would like modern writing to be."

If you're talking rock lyrics, you'd have to consider Neil Peart, Rush's resident drummer/lyricist, as today's quintessential songwriter. Unashamedly intellectual in a world of lip-readers, Peart is the thinking man's wordslinger equivalent of Yngwie Malmsteen. What the flashy Swede does with notes, sheer manual dexterity, the loping Canadian accomplishes with words, a verbal drumbeat that is as much a part of Rush's sound as Alex Lifeson's guitar or Geddy Lee's bass. Speaking, in fact, in the same shifting time-signatures that characterize Rush's music, Peart is in total command of his mental resources, analyzing, conceptualizing, pontificating about the lyrics that are near and dear to his heart, an near and dear to the hearts of Rush fans the world over.

"I can take someone like T. S. Eliot, who has influenced me greatly over the last few years, and realize that what he was doing was just throwing so many images at you all the time that you were left dizzy. But at the same time you were left with something. You were left with a sense of unease, a sense of stepping into something mysterious, of almost stepping into another dimension. So I use that idea. On a song like *Red Lenses* from the *Grace Under Pressure* album, I tried to construct a series of ongoing images that just came at you. The color red was the theme of it, but I twisted it in so many ways. It was the hardest song I ever wrote, because I was trying not to say anything, and each line was saying something but at the same time it was trying to be so obscure and so oblique about the way that I went around saying it—on purpose. It seems confounding, but in the end you're left with something. T. S. Eliot's poetry is the same way to me. At the end of it I don't really know what I've read, but it comes back to me. When I think of *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock* or *The Wasteland* I can't quote lines from them, and I can't say I understand everything that was said, but they move me."

With a catalogue of standards that includes *Big Money*, *Tom Sawyer*, *The Spirit of Radio*, *Closer to the Heart*, *New World Man*, *Vital Signs*, *Distant Early Warning* and *Limelight*, you'd think Neil Peart would be content to relax atop the shelf of lyrics he's given his many fans to ponder. But, like the relentless perfectionist he is, Peart is driven to grander vistas of achievement. "For me, prose is where it's at," he says, a rare lapse into the vernacular. "I'd love to throw away the limitations of verse and be able to express myself in a much broader medium. To be able to write in sentences and paragraphs and whole chapters and sub-chapters appeals to me greatly. Someday I would love to turn out just one good short story."

So, while we've got him on our turf, working in the medium of the song lyric, we sat Neil down and grilled him extensively about his approach to his craft.

## Were you a student of songs before you started writing them?

No, but I was a student of words and a student of rhythm. I think as a listener to music, lyrics were strictly tertiary to me. First there was the song and then there was the musicianship, and then, after I already liked the song, there were the lyrics. There's no way I'll ever like the lyrics to a song that I don't like. It's an essential relationship. So I never really paid a lot of attention to lyrics until after I started writing them, and then it became a craft, like drumming. If I weren't a drummer I don't think I'd spend a lot of time thinking about drumming or drummers. It's something I became aware of as my involvement with words became more and more active and intense. At that point I started to become more aware of the techniques. I learned about rhymes and learned what's a real good rhyme and what's a false rhyme, what's a rhyme for the sake of convenience and what's a carefully constructed one. I have a very rigid set of values in those terms. I'll never rhyme just for the sake of it. I hate semi-rhymes.

## With some of the words you use in your songs, it seems the lyrics must have been written before the music.

It essentially goes both ways, but I think being a drummer has been very helpful to me. I have a good sense of the music of words and the poetry of words and what makes a nice-sounding and even a nice-looking word. For instance, *Territories* as a title appeals to me as much to look at as it does to listen to. I find that the more layers a word or a series of words offers to me, the more satisfied I am. So if I can get a series of words that are rhythmically interesting and maybe have some kind of internal rhyming and rhythmic relationship, plus at least two layers of interpretive ideas in there too, the more pleased I am. I love to sneak little bits of alliteration in—even if it would never be recognized. It is recognized. It's like, the more you put in it's always there and even sometimes the more you take out, it's still in. I do like to get away with

unusual words, but there are limits. There are some words that are not good to sing. They can sound good and look good and feel right in the context of a piece of verse, but when I go over them with Geddy, he'll complain to me that either I've gone overboard with the alliteration or there are certain vowel-consonant combinations that, from a singer's point of view, are very difficult to deliver because you have to think so much about the elocution of those syllables that you can't possibly deliver them with the necessary emotions. There are things that Geddy suggests to me from a singer's point of view that help me a lot.

### **Are you thinking with the drum track in mind when you write lyrics?**

Oh definitely. Being a drummer helps me a lot, because words are a subdivision of time. Sometimes I give my verse to Geddy and he's perplexed by how he's supposed to deliver it and I have to try to express it with my toneless delivery. Things have to be phrased in less obvious ways sometimes, across a bar line, with one syllable stretched and another compacted. In a song like *The Manhattan Project*, where it was essentially a documentary, I wanted the delivery to be like punctuation, and the chorus had to be more passionate and more rhythmically active. It was hard to express exactly how I wanted it. The first time we worked on the music, they had phrased the lyrics in a very slow manner and I had to protest. The phrasing of the line was two short lines and then a long line and two short lines and a long line. There were internal rhymes and internal relationships among the words and within the delivery that had to remain intact for it to make sense at all. It was so carefully crafted that it couldn't be delivered any old way.

### **When you come up with lyrics do you have your own melody?**

Yes, but it's purely arbitrary. Sometimes it can be the most childish melody or the most unrealistic one, or sometimes the melody to another song entirely. But it's just a framework; it's a written structure in my mind that allows me to go forward and to have something on which to hang all the rhythms, and it allows me to be adventurous and not be satisfied with the rhythmic basics. Being fairly adventurous rhythmically as a drummer, I'm driven that way lyrically. I like to stretch lines and play with phrasing. The more I became appreciative of singers I understood what phrasing could do for lyrics, how it can make them come alive. The first time I hear words sung is really when they come alive for me. When they're written on a piece of paper, it can be satisfying technically, but whether they work or not really happens when I hear Geddy sing them for the first time.

### **You obviously don't turn these songs out in one sitting.**

Definitely not. Sometimes the gist will come at one sitting, but the process of refinement will be very laborious. A lot of times I'll have a basic idea and a layout; usually I like to have a verse/chorus organization before I go to the other guys with it. Geddy, being the singer, has the greatest amount of input lyrically and he might suggest some little key twists that will help.

### **Do you have certain parts of the year when**

### **you do your writing?**

Yes, but the important thing is to keep those divisions external. They're limitations as opposed to compromises. What I find important are two other things—inspiration and craftsmanship. Those are things you cannot compromise. When an inspiration comes to you, it doesn't matter how inconvenient it is, you must take advantage of it at the time. So I keep a notebook all the time and always force myself to write down any cogent thought, however sketchy it might seem, whether it's a title I like or a phrase I like or even just an image that I would like to develop or a theme I would someday like to address. So by the time we reach the writing period, I'm prepared. That's the ironic part of it—you set aside a month or two months and say, ok we're going to write songs now. Obviously, anything creative doesn't work that way. But if you already have that part done, if you've already yielded to the spontaneity and the inspiration at the proper time, and had the discipline to take note of it, then you can literally sit down at a desk on the first Monday morning of the writing period and start sifting through pages and pages.

I keep things forever, and then, as I use them, I cross them out. As a page gets too full of things crossed out, I re-copy the things that haven't been used yet. Some things sit in my notebook for ages and ages, and then sometimes a catalytic idea comes, because it's never just one idea. For me no song is ever written on one idea. It takes probably four or five things and then I have to find the common parallel that will either unite all of those things, or at least give them some kind of linear flow. I think in anyone's experience, your thoughts will tend to follow a pattern and evolve around a nucleus of things that you're sensitive to at a particular time. All those things will collect together automatically. If you write a short story you have the luxury of developing all those things in a very relaxed form. Lyrics are a tremendously demanding form of discipline; it requires precision.

### **Do you have a special room where you work?**

Yes, but it's been a different one with every album. Basically I just need a table and a chair and my rhyming dictionary. On the last four or five albums we've worked each time in a different place, but in each there's been a room where I can go to have quiet and to be able to think. You need solitude for the amount of concentration that it takes. I try to get to writing as early as possible, before anything else becomes distracting. So I'll generally spend the whole day writing. Geddy and Alex work on the music during the daytime while I work on the lyrics, and we all get together after dinner to work on arranging and rehearsing the songs. So, in essence, days are devoted to individual work and the evenings are devoted to collective work.

### **Did you all ever work together in a kind of spontaneous atmosphere?**

Not very comfortably, because for me the craftsmanship is important. I'm not happy with spontaneity musically either. I think you take such a chance. It's the same with those ideas you wake up with in the middle of the night. Sometimes you write them down and you wake up in the morning and go, 'What?' And you rip it up and throw it away. Other times

you save it. We do, musically speaking, have improvisational periods during our sound-check or just when we're playing together, and we record them and at the end of the tour we sift through them and look for anything that happened that was magic. And there are ideas that we can mine out of there, taking advantage of the spontaneity of one day's mood. But to go on stage and expect people to indulge you; that doesn't work. I prefer organization. I don't like lyrics that are just thrown together, that were obviously written as you went along, or the song was already written and the guy made up the lyrics in five minutes. I can tell—craftsmanship speaks. It's the same with reading books. I admire writers who have obviously worked and worked over what they've done, to make sure it's clearly presented and as beautifully presented as it can be. And there's nothing like time and careful work to make that happen.

### **Have you adjusted to your own rhythms of writing?**

For me, the important thing is to do the inspirational part of it when it happens, so I never have to go there with an empty book. At worst, if I'm stumped I can just put the work in progress aside and I have pages and pages of other things to look at. I'll just sit there and leaf through those and hope something will connect, and generally it will. But the important thing is to be enough ahead that it's not scary, because if you get frightened, that's when writer's block will occur. I never want to be in that position. There have been things that I've tried to write that haven't worked out, but I've been able to find out early. You don't have to write 200 pages and then discover you're working at nothing. By the time you've gone through a verse and a chorus and you've shown it to the other guys, you can see if it's not working. It might be a satisfying technical exercise. I can be satisfied that I achieved what I set out to achieve even if the song wasn't used.

### **So you basically do a verse and a chorus and show it to the others?**

More often than not it's complete. I'll have a series of themes or a series of verses. Sometimes they become reversed. I'm very much in love with middle eights. It's something I really love as a musical and lyrical departure. So a lot of times I'll have a song that'll have a verse, chorus, verse, middle eight—the classic thing. But then when the other guys get hold of it, it'll be turned around and the middle eight will become the chorus or the verse will become the chorus.

### **Someone will come back and say, we need four more lines?**

Or the opposite, where there'll be two lines too many. Or a song just wants to be structured a different way musically. Those things are never negative. They're always a challenge. Sometimes it can't be done, and if you have truly done a good job and distilled the lyrics down to their most essential form, there's not much you can do with it. But if the music's demands are stronger, and if the lyrics can be messed around with, that's very exciting to do.

### **Do you ever work to a finished melody?**

Very often the guys will have worked on something musically and made a tape of it for

which they have nothing particular in mind. *Grand Designs*, on the last album, was done that way. They had the musical ideas laid out and just made a little tape for me with guitar, keyboards and drum machine, and I had that. So, again, if I'm stumped on something that I've been working on, I pull out that tape and try to close my mind off for a minute and listen to the tape. *Chemistry* was a true collaboration between the three of us. The other guys had a couple of key phrases they wanted to express, so they gave me the music. That was easy because all the groundwork was done. Playing with words comes so much easier than having to dream up the whole thing.

**Does the concept of each album start with you?**

Usually there isn't a concept. This album was the very first time that I decided from the beginning that I wanted my main theme to be power and I was going to address as many different vignettes of power as I could. In the past there have been themes in each of the albums, but they have been more after the fact. For instance, on *Grace Under Pressure*, the theme of that title seems very obvious in each of the songs, but in fact it came after, and the songs were each being written about different reactions. The theme of that album, to me, is pathos, and it came about through sometimes third-hand experiences, but most often second hand, observing my friends. That was a period of time when a lot of people were out of work and having difficulties in terms of self-esteem. They had reached a point in their lives where they felt they should

be established and they weren't. People were having life crises not only in employment, but also in terms of their romances. All of those things came to a head in my perception and I was writing with a great deal of empathy. It wasn't always understood by either listeners or critics, but that was the stem of it all. So, after the fact I realized that the theme of the album illustrated the 'Grace under pressure' concept. That album was made under a great deal of difficult circumstances for us personally, too.

**Doesn't it seem to you that sometimes a group is categorized for its music, but its message isn't considered as important as that of an individual singer/songwriter?**

That's ok; as a member of the audience it was that way to me, too. If people don't want to take all the trouble interpreting lyrics that I took in creating them, that doesn't bother me, because I'm a musician first and not just a lyricist. I only spend two months out of every two years doing that and the rest of the time I'm a drummer.

**Do you feel that Rush is the best vehicle for your self-expression—or do you have a goal to express yourself elsewhere too?**

That's complicated, because being a drummer first, the kind of liberality I have in Rush is important to me. Stylistically I never feel limited as a drummer and that will carry over lyrically, too. There's no way I'll ever write anything good that won't be suitable for Rush. On the other hand, I have written things with which I was happy but which didn't fit into the scheme of things at a given time. But I have

no trouble putting those away. Those things always lead me on to something else. We have musical ideas all the time that never get fully developed, but at the same time they lead us on to another area. Or even things that do get developed and recorded, from an artistic point of view a lot of times we're not satisfied. At this point we've gone through several periods of different stylistic approaches, different areas of influence and at this moment they might seem indulgent to us or naive, but without that experimentation we couldn't have arrived now at the ability to write a five or six minute song and put everything into it that we do. We can write a song that will have complicated time signatures but it won't be five minutes of that. It'll be two minutes of that. But the point is that now we have such comfort with that type of thing that we can change types of signatures three or four times in a song very comfortably.

I went through periods the same way lyrically of being over-ornamental and spending a lot of time developing an atmosphere lyrically. I don't do that anymore. I want five words to do what I used to use five lines to do. I'm fairly satisfied with my body of lyric writing over the last four or five years, but prior to that it was strictly kindergarten, strictly groundwork and experimentation. Musically, too, I don't have much use for our stuff prior to 1980. That's not negative. That's the way it should be, because we were honestly experimental. We pushed ourselves over our heads a lot of times and we were grappling for some kind of grip on the technique that we were aiming for.

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**Do you feel you have to distill your material to get it played on commercial radio?**

No, I don't. The hardest thing is to have something that's both personal and universal. To me, that's the aim. I try to find something that moves me—a lot of times it's anger, but sometimes it can be pathos or it can be joy. I can be thrilled by the world at large or by nature or by some small experience. Adolescence is a common theme for me. The cross-over between innocence and disillusionment is something I have addressed a lot, because I know it's something I can personally relate to and illustrate but at the same time it's universal. I don't want to just be confessional, like a Joni Mitchell. That's an area I've tried to avoid; at the same time, that's what gives you personal involvement, and without that impetus sometimes it's hard to get going.

Fortunately, I'm very prone to anger, very prone to outrage in the way people act and the way they treat each other and the world we live in. So all of these things act as an impetus to me, but I couldn't write only about my own areas of outrage. I like to find those and translate them into something that is universal.

**Do you feel that your best lyrics have become your best songs?**

No, not always. It's weird how it goes. There's so much chemistry involved and there's so many intangible things that happen. There are ones where the music has been better than the lyrics or the lyrics better than the music. I think *Middletown Dreams* is a good marriage of lyrics and music. *Mystic Rhythms* is another one.

**You said there's a magic moment when you hear a song for the first time. Is there another magic moment when you conceive of a song for the first time—or finish it for the first time?**

That's a good point. I think the joy of creation is very overrated. The irony of it is that the moment goes by so fast. When I'm working on a piece of lyrics and I have the theme of it going and I'm working away, there is that moment when I realize, yes, this is going to work. But then I'm gone. I'm gone into making it work. And then the knots in the brain start to become untied. I'm figuring out, ok, this line goes to that line, this verse to that verse. You can't just sit back and go, oh, I'm great. The moment is great, but you can't just sit back and feel fulfilled by it. To me the most satisfying time of making an album is the writing period. We listen to a demo, and yes, this is exciting, and it's what we wanted it to be and it gets you off. That is the ultimate return that you will get from the song. And then you'll spend another six months recording the basic tracks, doing the overdubs, doing the vocals, doing the mixing. At the end of it all there's no joy of creation; there's no sitting back and going, 'This is finished and wow, I'm so happy,' because you're so tired and drained from all of the mental demands. You don't have anything left to throw a party. In the demo period the rewards are instantaneous.

**Is there another level where you see a song you've worked on and believed in going over with the audience?**

You picked out a very important thing, be-

cause at the end of an album it's impossible for us to judge which songs will truly be popular and which won't. We're inevitably surprised. And then there are songs like *Vital Signs*, from our *Moving Pictures* album. At the time it was a very transitional song. Everybody had mixed feelings about it, but at the same time it expressed something essential that I wanted to say. That's a song that has a marriage of vocals and lyrics I'm very happy with. But it took our audience a long time to get it, because it was rhythmically very different for us and it demanded the audience to respond in a different rhythmic way. There was no heavy downbeat; it was all counterpoint between upbeat and downbeat, and there was some reflection of reggae influence and a reflection of the more refined areas of new wave music that we had sort of taken under our umbrella and made happen. That song took about three tours to catch on. It was kind of a baby for us. We kept playing it and wouldn't give up. We put it in our encore last tour—putting it in the most exciting part of the set possible—and just demanded that people accept it because we believed in it. I still think that song represents a culmination—the best combination of music, lyrics, rhythm. It opens up so many musical approaches, from being very simplistic and minimal to becoming very overplayed. Everything we wanted in the song is there. So that song was very special to us. But we had to wait. We had to be patient and wait for the audience to understand us. ■



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