



pic by Fin Costello

NEIL PEART proving that it's lonely at the top

# THE MOUSTACHE THAT CONQUERED THE WORLD

**Rush with a hit single?  
On Top of The Pops??!!  
Guiding genius Neil Peart grapples  
with the paradox.  
SYLVIE SIMMONS takes notes**



pic by Ross Hallin

Forum and have added another arena date. Lee, Lifeson and Peart have done as much head-scratching over the non-denimed half of the audience — who head for popcom stand during all but the single while headbanging-as-usual goes on elsewhere — as their record company has over the high entry in the charts. Said someone up at Mercury Records: "We haven't got time to wonder why. We're too busy shipping the albums."

Or, to quote "The Spirit Of Radio" (with a nod and a wink to Simon & Garfunkel): "For the words of the profits are written on the studio wall... Echo with the sounds of salesmen."

**I**N AN interview around the time of "Hemispheres", Peart had hinted at slightly more conventional, if not commercial, albums to come, suggesting less concepts and shorter songs. There are six tracks on "Permanent Waves", which doesn't exactly make them The

Dickies, and the human integrity/technology theme pretty much runs throughout. So what have they done this time to give them a hit?

Says Peart: "I guess our time has come. It happened with FM radio where it was pretty much a forced thing. It became that we were so popular in so many cities with touring all the time and people calling them up and saying, hey, play Rush, that radio stations couldn't avoid playing us! They certainly didn't do it voluntarily. For a lot of people airplay brings popularity, but for us it was the other way round."

Being quoted as turning away from concept albums and long involved opuses was a misunderstanding, he claims. "It was our intention at the time, because of 'Hemispheres' taking so much out of us, to give ourselves a creative rest. We decided that we owed it to ourselves."

"At the time we'd been out on the road non-stop all year, and then we went

straight into the studio and only had a couple of weeks to get the material together and ourselves as prepared as we could be. But we weren't that well prepared, and we had to squeeze ourselves. I don't think that the result suffered — working under pressure can be really productive — but we did. You pay a high toll for it in how badly you feel afterwards. It was so draining and difficult.

"When you're working with a 20-minute piece of music, I guess it must be what making a film or writing a novel is like. With something of that span you have so many threads that you have to keep together in your mind all the way through, and as you're recording one part you're trying to relate it to the other parts and make sure the continuity is going to be there as well as the integrity of the original parts. It takes a lot of concentration to pull something like that off. It was something we wanted to give a rest to for a short while, though there are two pretty long tracks on this album, and the short ones are no shorter than five minutes."

**A**ND SO Rush decided to put their feet up, relatively speaking, with this album, which often means (as with Aerosmith's "Draw The Line", one of their rare albums made without the fast-paced tour-studio-tour routine, and probably their worst) more time to get flaccidly self-indulgent. In Rush's case, though, instead of coming out with a longer, more involved set of songs than before, it just meant time to work on several ideas without pressure to finish them off.

Peart, for example, spent a lot of time working on putting the old medieval opus "Sir Gawain And The Green Knight" to music. It didn't make it onto "Permanent Waves" and many resurface in the future, "but whether it gets used or not isn't too important to me anymore, really, having done it. It was really a challenge to me as a lyricist to take something like an eighty-page medieval poem and try to encapsulate it in a reasonably (even for Rush) lengthed song.

"All it meant was going in with clear heads and coming up with a lot of new ideas on a fresh basis. If you're going to look for something to base a whole side-long piece on, it's got to be a pretty big

**S**OMEWHERE in America in that black hole known as the Midwest, little bands are slogging their balls off to become big bands, and big bands are often cutting theirs off in order to become even bigger bands.

There may be a recession and Peter Frampton may have had problems selling out a toilet on his last tour, but megastardom is here to stay in the States, and quadruple-platinum albums are considered as much the ultimate goal of any self-respecting rock and roll band as the bag of coke and thirteen groupies.

Rush have always claimed they don't want to be that successful — easy to say when you're as sure as hell not likely to get out of the middle range. To step across from big to BIG in the States, you've got to have a hit single for the widespread coverage for one thing, which means getting your record on the radio in the first place.

Which also means making a single short and catchy enough for AM radio (three minutes maximum, Donna Summer excepted) and sweet and syrupy enough for AOR (adult-oriented) FM radio which favours Fleetwood Mac and Linda Ronstadt and other music downright dangerous to diabetics.

Rush's audience are not generally the type to run out and buy the latest 45, and what with Geddy Lee's voice (awarded free shares in the Panadol company, it doesn't make for background music) and heavy lyrics (boy-meets-girl changed for science-meets-nature) and the usual length of the songs, Rush weren't that likely to make a hit with one, which would have meant many more years of poodling along on the smaller arena circuit with albums gradually building to gold and not stepping a unit further.

But, for some unknown reason, their latest single, "The Spirit Of Radio", a (for them) bare-bones arrangement round a moralistic tale of the freeing power of technology when used with integrity (like them) has shot into the American top ten, with the album towed no far behind. "Permanent Waves", more songs about human honesty versus science. They've just sold out the 18,000-seater

idea — a concept that demands a lot of exposition and a lot of lyrical and musical fleshing-out. Whereas most of the ideas we were dealing with this time were on the lesser side, and in some cases, like in 'Jacobs Ladder', looked at as a cinematic idea, where we created all the music first to summon up an image — the effect of Jacobs Ladder — and paint the picture, with the lyrics added, just as a sort of little detail, later, to make it more descriptive."

Majestic kerranngg with a large dab of finesse.

Preparation for the album took place at Lakewoods Farm set in a cosy little pastoral scene by a lake. A picture of HM domestic bliss. Alex Lifeson cooked lasagne while Geddy Lee played with his gizmos and Neal trudged down to the adjoining cottage to concentrate on the flow of lyrics. The first night together they created an instrumental goulash dubbed 'Uncle Tounouse', which may not have made it onto the album itself but provided bits and pieces for just about every other song.

'Spirit Of Radio', 'Free Will' and 'Jacobs Ladder' were the first to be ready, having already been incorporated into and worked to a fine art in their last shows on the tour. Next they moved to a studio near Montreal where there were more lakes and more hills and views but a different cook (Andre the French chef proved to be not so hot as Alex on guitar) and the big outdoors provided natural lake-echoes and row-boat noises and water-splashes for the record. The album was finished on a diet of Chinese food in a Soho studio. The record may not be bloated but the band most certainly were.

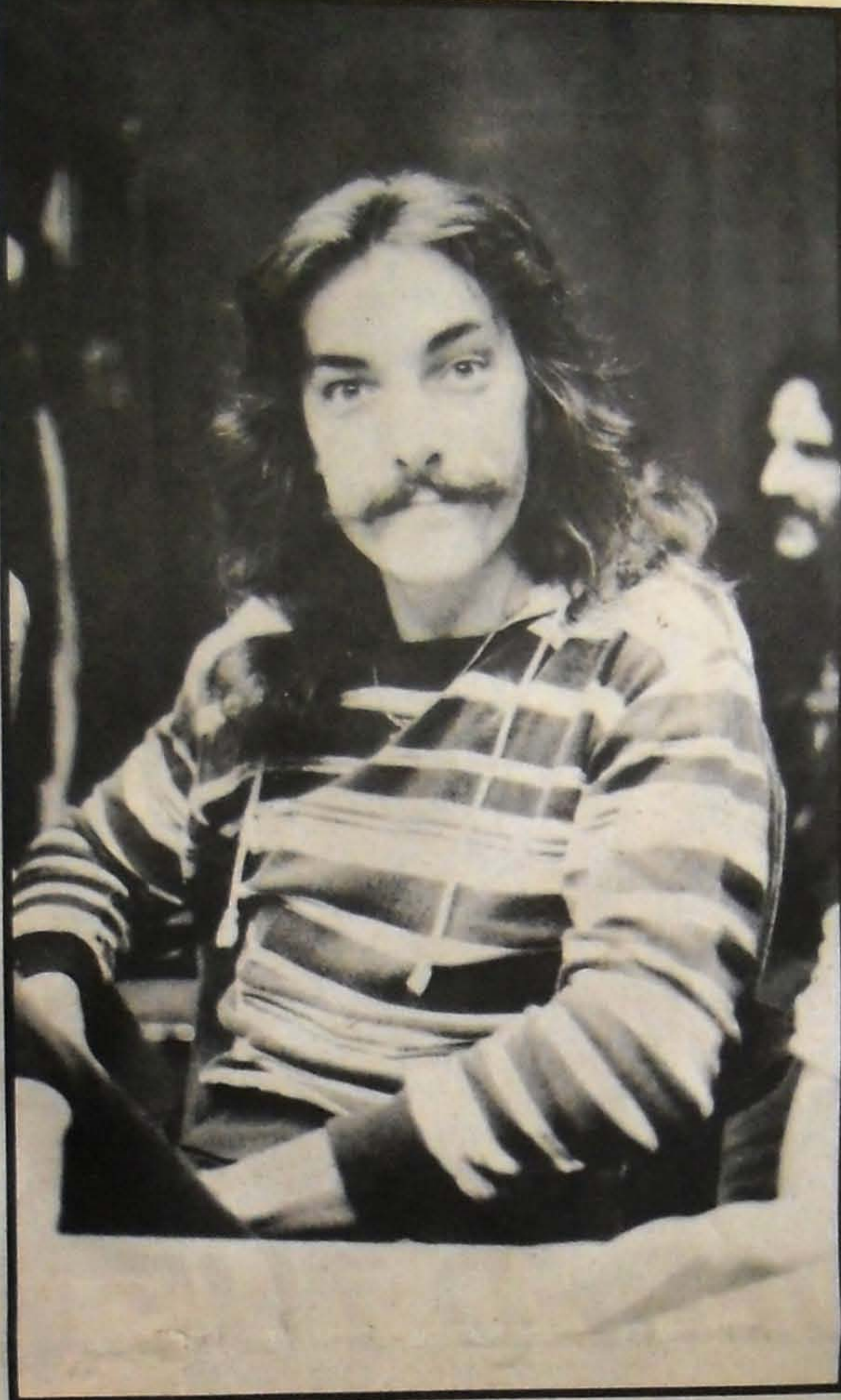
The title — he reckons it was an original idea when they came up with it, and it was too late to change the artwork when they found out how many other people had the same original idea — is not intended as an up-yours to the new wave which Peart follows out of interest, signing to the group's own record label in Canada if they feel like it. He reckons if anything "it's a tribute to those new bands who stand for the same things that we and the people we respect do, and who have kept their integrity all along."

But it is intended as a slap in the face — "a tongue-in-cheek one" at the English press, "which is so absurd because they're either killing off somebody or bringing up some poor musician as the unheralded new god. I think it comes from having a press that come out every week and they get so desperate for things to write about. I can't understand writing anyone off at the expense of promoting your new favourite..." As far as Peart is concerned, his band's success — not exactly a 'rush' job — has proved their staying power.

**L**EE, Lifeson and drummer John Rutsey formed the first Rush in a North Toronto basement as their reaction to the Hendrix-Cream-Zepplin hard-rock tide of that time, taking it one step further than the teenage boys who stood in audiences and closely watched the fingers of their left hands go up and down imaginary guitar necks rather than observing Robert Plant and the like demonstrate onstage what tight pants are made for. (Having never been a 15-year-old boy I've been at some disadvantage in understanding why that should be.) And taking it yet another step, Rush released an album on their own label in Canada, Moon Records, in 1974. Neal Peart — who had always had "a natural proclivity" for rock and roll, notably drums, having banged his knife and fork on the tabletop since infancy "as my emotional, rhythmic response towards what little pop music I was exposed to" got his first drums from his parents at 13, and joined several unknown bands, including some during his 1 1/2 years in England — replaced Rutsey for their tour that year and stuck around.

"When we were starting," Peart reminisces, "no record company in Canada would touch us, and the only way we could get a record released was by putting it out ourselves on an independent label, which is pretty pathetic when you think about us being the biggest band Canada has produced. It makes you a little bit cynical about the whole thing."

Canada is pretty immature as a rock and roll country — it has been all along — but it's gradually waking up. Our independent label helps when you have a young industry, because we're in the position where we can and do take risks. We support things we believe in, whereas the Canadian companies, which in most cases are very much subsidiaries of



pic by Ian Dickson

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American companies, won't take any risks. They're just happy to sell the records that America and Britain sends them without taking the responsibility of signing new talent in Canada."

Rush's label has five acts at the moment on its roster, ranging from jazz to new wave and straight-down-the-line rock and roll. Rush's support act on this tour, Max Webster, is also on their Canadian label. All of the above and more are Peart's personal musical tastes, which he sums up as "wide". He listens to everything, not to keep up with the competition but "to follow the standards. When it comes to competitiveness we're only competing against ourselves as musicians. I like to listen to people to stay aware, but I don't feel any anguish."

Except about his own playing: "I set up my own standards too high, definitely. Where the best I could possibly ever play is my standard, and as that only happens once or twice on the whole tour, every other night is either a bit or a lot frustrating, depending on how close to that standard I manage to come. You have to seek perfection even if it's probably humanly impossible to find it. Without that goal in mind, you're cheating yourself and you're cheating the audience."

**T**SOUNDS like a prepared speech, a commercial on behalf of the good guys, when Peart goes into the respectable life on the road spiel, but he does take his playing seriously. Their main audience, he says, is not the "reserved and unaffected" segment of tonight's show who "showed up on the

strength of one hit single. You could tell which ones they were because they couldn't relate to the old stuff we were playing for our hard-core fans and for ourselves," fans who know every note of every song and share Peart's taste in Rush music — 'Hemispheres', '2112', 'Farewell to Kings', the concept albums."

They are not the trendy set out to see the latest change-reflecting band of the 80s, but budding musicians. So he feels it's his duty to do it right. Which means, "pacing it right, setting it up right — touring is so gruelling physically that you have to do it right. Which means there's not all that much left for the, uh, extras."

Playing more than two hours a night takes it out of a man, he says, "and all that travelling takes it out of you physically as well. You have to be in first class shape to be able to do it in the first place, so you can't afford to let your health run down. So you do start learning after a while to get a good meal and a good night's sleep, so there isn't plenty of partying."

But it's not all work and no play. Being on the road up to nine months a year and believing that "flying around and living in airports is unhealthy" and "you can't live among strangers and businessmen all of your life and expect to retain your sanity and objectivity and have any grasp on real life," they go pretty much everywhere by bus with a crew that's essentially 25 "good friends, so you can imagine what that's like," adding that the three of them get along perfectly, being different enough not to be boring but with the same ideals and outlooks, and

that there's "chemistry at work" (and he doesn't mean drugs) that makes for some magical bond between the power-trio.

"We like to get away from the panoply and glitter that surrounds this business. When you're driving down the highways of America every day you can't help but get the pulse of the streets and keep in touch with reality. We're a pretty low-key bunch."

**B**UT WILL that change with megastardom just around the corner? "Personally," says Neal, "not only don't I care about superstardom, I hope it never happens. You can get into a position where all of a sudden you have no private life. We travel a lot around the country every year and we've pretty much just been able to do our jobs without a hundred people hanging on our every movement. I think that kind of privacy and isolation would be hard to give up."

They are in a comfortable position, he says, where they're doing well enough not to have to take shit from businessmen who regularly put pressure of some sort on the band to be more commercial and hence bigger in America — "short-thinking people who think only of what can be earned today rather than the advantages of a long career, which is what we were after and stuck out for, but we're immune from the pressure now because we're doing okay which makes you a lot less vulnerable — money talks; nothing succeeds like success, as they say" — but not so well as to have to sign autographs in supermarkets.

"We're pretty private people," says Peart. Which means he doesn't like to discuss his thoughts and the other machinations that go into the lyric writing, except to say he spends a lot of time reading, though very little science-fiction which "has become pretty boring all of a sudden lately," and that he doesn't necessarily believe all he writes or borrows from (the more right-wing novels, for example).

But he can certainly understand the science-fiction subculture among H.M. fans who embroider "Wizards of Liverpool" on their denims "because it comes from the same thing with me. I grew up in the suburbs and it was all pretty prosaic and dull, so I started getting interested in all those kinds of things just in the belief that there must be a more interesting world out there."

"Consequently you just get tied up in all that and whether you believe it or not doesn't matter. It becomes an escape and as a writer fantasy is really an excellent vehicle if you want to express an idea in its purest sense. There's nothing better than creating a completely made-to-order extra-terrestrial world in order to express that idea so you're not caught up in any preconceptions."

He hopes to write some books of his own in the far future, but that's a long way down the road, like the film soundtrack the band have been hoping to work on (not just any old film — "The Citizen Kane of the 80s at least").

The more tangible future includes a British tour in May — five dates at Hammersmith — and a live album to be recorded on that tour.

**C**LOSING, I asked about the album cover. A Hollywood starlet emerging from what looks like a catastrophe with a starlet smile and starlet knickers showing, seemingly to the delight of the man at the bus stop. Sexist? No says Peart, who reckons they'll be getting more females in their audiences on this tour, not so much from the single success as from their policy of playing no more general admission free-for-all gigs ("I know, I've gone to shows and been crushed because I really want to see the band; but I think it takes some kind of strange individual to go to a show and actually want to be crushed") which will do away with that argument.

"The woman on the cover is really a symbol of us. If you think that's sexist in a negative way — well, it's really looking at ourselves so I don't think it can be. The idea is her perfect imperturbability in the face of all this chaos. In that she represents us."

"In the basic sense, all that cover picture means is forging on regardless, being completely uninvolved with all the chaos and ridiculous nonsense that's going on around us. Plus she represents the spirit of music and the spirit of radio, a symbol of perfect integrity and truth and beauty and..."

Okay, point taken. Integrity is what 'Permanent Waves' is about and you can't argue with Peart that his band got where it was — slowly, admittedly, but got there — because they have it. As he said, there isn't a lot of it about.