

MOVING PICTURES: AN EXCURSION INTO THE WORLD OF THE ROCK GROUP



RUSH



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"I don't know how we got this [serious] image. Maybe we wore too many robes in the 70s ... We really don't take ourselves seriously as people. We take what we do seriously."

(Geddy Lee in conversation, 1991.)

Many years ago, in 1974, on an edition of the *Old Grey Whistle Test*, I heard a song called "Finding My Way" by an obscure group of Canadian musicians. I did not hear them again for another five years, until a West Indian reggae fan provided me with a more complete introduction via their fifth studio album, *A Farewell To Kings*. These Canadian musicians were not reggae artists, however, but a progressive heavy rock group, not afraid to experiment with any musical form nor to express their thoughts on a diverse range of intellectual topics. Collectively, they go by the name of "Rush". After hearing *A Farewell To Kings* in 1979 I truly had "found my way". Since then I have purchased every original album as soon as it's appeared.

TOLKIEN AND RAND

Rush started out as a conventional heavy rock band in the late Sixties, influenced by the likes of Cream, The Who, Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck and The Rolling Stones, all of whom they covered in their repertoire of songs. Also included was Elvis Presley. One of the songs they covered was "Jailhouse Rock" — in Yugoslavian! (The Rush lead guitarist, Alex Lifeson, is of Yugoslavian origin.) In the early Seventies Led Zeppelin joined their list of influences. After going through several rearrangements of personnel the lineup which eventually emerged was Alex Lifeson (the only current member of the band who was there from the beginning), Geddy Lee (bass guitar and lead vocals) and John Rutsey (drums). Their first album is the eponymously titled *Rush* (1974), which is clearly influenced by Led Zeppelin. Geddy Lee's vocals have frequently been compared with those of Robert Plant, the lead singer of Led Zeppelin, although, in fact, he sounds quite different to me.

In mid-1974, after the release of their first album, John Rutsey left the band due to musical differences and poor health, and was replaced by Neil Peart. It was with the release of *Fly By Night* in 1975 that the definitive Rush style started to emerge. Peart's major contribution was not only his highly accomplished and distinctive

percussion skills but his intelligent lyrics. Since 1975 Peart has remained the band's principal lyricist, with Lee and Lifeson making only occasional contributions. Peart's position was more-or-less established by default because Lee and Lifeson weren't much interested in writing lyrics, whereas Peart was an avid reader. Peart's lyrics on the early Rush albums display two major influences: J.R.R. Tolkien and individualism. In this, they followed Led Zeppelin, whose debt to Tolkien can be heard in such outstanding songs as "Ramble On" from *Led Zeppelin 2* and "Battle of Evermore" from *Led Zeppelin 4*.

In the case of Rush, Tolkien's influences can be heard on songs like "Rivendell" and "By-Tor and The Snow Dog" from *Fly By Night*; and "The Necromancer" and "The Fountain of Lamneth" from *Careless of Steel* (1975). Here are the lyrics for part three of "The Necromancer", entitled "Return of the Prince":

Enter the champion, Prince By-Tor appears
To battle for freedom, from chains of long years
The spell has been broken — the dark lands are bright
The Wraith of the Necromancer soars away in the night ...

Stealthily attacking
By-Tor slays his foe
The men are free to run now
From labyrinths below
The Wraith of the Necromancer
Shadows through the sky
Another land to darken
With evil prism eye

And the opening to the hauntingly beautiful ballad, "Rivendell", from *Fly By Night*:

Sunlight dances through the leaves
Soft winds stir the sighing trees
Lying in the warm grass
Feel the sun upon your face
Elven songs and endless nights
Sweet wine and soft relaxing lights
Time will never touch you
Here in this enchanted place

"Rivendell" is the name of the legendary retreat of the Elves in Tolkien's epic fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Rush's individualism manifested itself initially through the works of Ayn Rand, and the most explicit Rand-influenced songs are "Anthem" from *Fly By Night*, "2112", the title track, from *2112* and "Something For Nothing", also from *2112*.

Prior to joining Rush Peart spent some time in the UK doing odd jobs in between trying to fulfil his musical ambitions as a drummer. He recalls:

"When I came back from there, I was disillusioned basically about the music 'business'. I decided I would be a semi-pro musician for my own entertainment, would play music that I liked to play, and wouldn't count on it to make my living. I did other jobs and worked at other things, so I wouldn't have to compromise what I have to do as a drummer."

(from Bill Banasiwicz, *Visions: The Official Biography*, Omnibus Press, London 1988, p. 15.)

Sound familiar? While in England Peart found a copy of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* on a London tube (Rand's books often seem to be discovered in places like tube trains for some reason). Peart's recollection reads like a statement by Howard Roark, the uncompromising architect hero of *The Fountainhead*.

The first Rand-influenced song is the opening track, "Anthem", from *Fly By Night*. It opens like this:

Know your place in life
Is where you want to be
Don't let them tell you
That you owe it all to me
Keep on looking forward
No use in looking round
Hold your head above the ground
It won't bring you down.
Anthem of the heart
And anthem of the mind
A funeral dirge
For eyes gone blind
We marvel after those who sought
New wonders in the world they wrought.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

And it concludes with the verse:

I know they've always told you
That selfishness was wrong
Yet it was for me not you
I came to write this song

Those lines would aptly sum up the band's attitude towards their music in the coming years.

“HUMANITARIANS ARE JUST THE SAME AS DICTATORS”

The ideas in Rand's short novel, *Anthem*, form the basis for what is probably Rush's most controversial album, *2112* (1976). Rush's version of the story concerns a future world run by a religious dictatorship — the Priests of the Temples of Syrinx. They control everybody's life and all art and expression through a massive system of computers:

We've taken care of everything
The words you read
The songs you sing
The pictures that give pleasure
To your eye
One for all and all for one
Work together
Common sons
Never need to wonder
How or why
We are the priests
Of the Temples of Syrinx
Our great computers
Fill the hallowed halls
We are the priests
Of the Temples of Syrinx
All the gifts of life
Are held within our walls

The hero of the story rediscovers a guitar, teaches himself to play it, and gradually learns that he can create music. He presents his discovery to the priests, hoping that they will recognise its goodness. Instead they destroy his guitar, telling him that “we have no need of ancient ways” and that the masses have no use for such a toy. After several days of despair the hero decides that he can no longer continue to live under the rule of the priests and takes his own life.

2112 was a very important album for Rush at the time because their previous album had been poorly received by both critics and public alike. As a consequence they had been put under severe pressure by their record company and others to come up with something more commercial. Rush responded by doing what they wanted to do, regardless of what anyone else thought. The concept behind *2112* seemed to sum up everything that the band considered as their own philosophy in regard to how they would fashion their music.

2112 was also significant in being the first work which clearly revealed their philosophical/political outlook. Since this was pro-individualist, and therefore implicitly pro-capitalist, it was eventually to stir up trouble in such quarters as the pages of the *New Musical Express*. Matters were not helped when Peart remarked soon after the release of *2112* that “humanitarians are just the same as dictators” (quoted in Brian Harrigan, *Rush*, Omnibus Press, London, 1982, p. 19).

The most notorious incident in this country, though, took place in the late Seventies, when *NME* writer, Miles, denounced the band as a bunch of Nazi fascists and issued warnings against the desirability of them playing in public. Miles's prognosis was particularly ironic given that Geddy Lee's parents were Nazi concentration camp survivors (Lee is Jewish) and his father later died from the lasting effects. On the subject of concentration camps Rush were eventually to pen the searing “Red Sector A” from their 1984 album, *Grace Under Pressure*. Though the lyrics were written by Neil Peart, Lee's singing sounds as though he has a deep personal affinity for the subject-matter, and clearly he did.

2112 also spawned the infamous Rush logo, the “starman”, which was to appear for many years on Rush memorabilia. It depicts a naked man leaning backwards in front of a star inscribed in a circle. It is easy to see how a logo such as this could lead to denunciations of the band as fascists by superficial observers. The logo actually stands for the individual rebelling against the red star of the Solar Federation (the Solar Federation being the federation of planets ruled over by the Priests of the Temples of Syrinx).

INSPIRED PRO-CAPITALIST LYRICS

2112 was significant as marking the end of the first phase in Rush's career. Up until then they had relied almost exclusively on guitars and drums. With 1977's *A Farewell to Kings* their array of instruments suddenly multiplied to include six and twelve string electric guitar, six and twelve string acoustic guitar, classical guitar, bass pedal synthesiser (Alex Lifeson); bass guitar, twelve string electric guitar, bass pedal synthesiser, Mini Moog keyboards and vocals (Geddy Lee); drums, orchestra bells, temple blocks, cowbells, wind chimes, bell tree, triangle and vibra-slap (Neil Peart). Such an assembly was all the more remarkable given that there were only three musicians to play all this stuff and, unlike some similar “musico” groups, such as Genesis, they do not use additional musicians when they perform live. In general, Rush tend to write their songs in such a way that they can reproduce them live without having to bring in extra musicians. With the increasing sophistication of computerised musical accessories it is easier to do that now than it was in 1977 when *A Farewell to Kings* came out. Lee uses programmable synthesisers but he does actually *play* the keyboards as well.

Like many of their albums, *A Farewell to Kings* boasts a particularly striking album cover. It depicts a decapitated king sitting on his throne amongst the rubble of what was his former castle. In the background we see a chimney stack and office blocks, signs of the emerging order of reason and capitalism.

Since *A Farewell to Kings* was the first Rush album I listened to I have a special fondness for it. Interestingly, it contains a song, “Cinderella Man”, with inspired pro-capitalistic lyrics written by Geddy Lee, though it reads as if it were written by Peart. But the highlight of the album is undoubtedly the song, “Xanadu”, with lyrics inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, “Kubla Khan”. Geddy Lee once said, in conversation about 14 years ago, that, more than any other song, “Xanadu” summed up musically what Rush were about. The album, as a whole, is an awesome blend of sophistication and power.

A Farewell to Kings marked the beginning of an era of musical complexity which settled into a more condensed form only after their subsequent album, *Hemispheres*. The band consider this latter album to be one of the most mentally taxing ones they have done. Geddy Lee recalls:

“We spent more time recording ‘[La Villa] Strangiato’ than the entire *Fly By Night* album. It's recorded in one take. But it took 40 takes to get it right!”

(Bill Banasiewicz, *Visions*, op. cit., pp. 38-39).

Hemispheres was also the last time that Rush were to do a concept album, in which one entire side of the record is devoted to a single story. They had done this previously with *2112* and with “The Fountain of Lamneth” from the *Caress of Steel* album.

Considering that there is only a four-year gap between Rush's debut album and *Hemispheres* it is astonishing how little resemblance the latter bears to the former. The title track, “Hemispheres”, is based on the clash between thoughts and emotions, between our rational ideas and our instinctive feelings. Peart develops this theme by spinning out a story in terms of Greek mythology. The various parts of “Hemispheres” are named similarly to the movements in Holst's *The Planets*. For example, “Apollo, Bringer of Wisdom”, “Dionysus, Bringer of Love” and “Cygnus, Bringer of Balance” (viz. “Mars, the Bringer of War”, “Venus, the Bringer of Peace”, etc., in *The Planets*). The story of “Hemispheres” is that the two gods, Apollo and Dionysus, battle through the ages struggling to rule the fate of man. But neither god alone is able to provide harmony. In the end they appoint a new god, Cygnus, who finally unites the splintered hemispheres of heart and mind.

On “Hemispheres” Rush achieve a greater musical unity and cohesiveness than they managed on “2112”. It is more “integrated”, to use a Randian phrase, though “2112” is the more important work.

The most overtly political song on *Hemispheres* is “The Trees”. This concerns a struggle in the forest between the Oaks and the Maples. The Maples are unhappy about the Oaks getting more sunlight than themselves:

There is unrest in the forest
There is trouble with the trees
For the Maples want more sunlight
And the Oaks ignore their pleas

In the end a radical solution is implemented:

So the Maples formed a union
 And demanded equal rights
 'The Oaks are just too greedy
 We will make them give us Light'
 Now there's no more oak oppression
 For they passed a noble law
 And the trees are all kept equal
 By Hatchet,
 Axe,
 And Saw ...

“I WILL CHOOSE FREE WILL”

If Rush's first four albums constitute their “raw” phase, then *A Farewell to Kings* and *Hemispheres* constitute their “complexity transition” phase.

Permanent Waves (1980) marks the start of their fully mature phase. With *Permanent Waves* Rush finally ditch the “swords and sorcery” imagery for more direct and contemporary themes. The change in the nature of the lyrics is matched by a corresponding change in the musical style. The songs are shorter and their complexity is packed into less space.

The title, “Permanent Waves”, was coined as a dig at the British music press who were continually talking about “New Wave” this and “New Wave” that. Rush were saying that there is neither “New Wave” nor “Old Wave”, there is just music. It was part of Rush's nature to continually explore different ideas, different *waves*. But this exploration was itself a *permanent* process. The opening song from *Permanent Waves* deals with the conflict between commercialism and artistic integrity. Entitled “The Spirit of Radio” it includes the following words:

All this machinery
 Making modern music
 Can still be open-hearted
 Not so coldly charted
 It's really just a question
 Of your honesty
 One likes to believe
 In the freedom of music
 But glittering prizes
 And endless compromises
 Shatter the illusion
 Of integrity

Ironically, this song was an unexpected commercial success, entering the top twenty in the UK charts. It featured on *Top of the Pops*, complete with wholly inappropriate choreography by *Legs and Co.*

The song which follows “The Spirit of Radio” is “Free Will”, which contains one of the most popular choruses for Rush concert-goers:

You can choose a ready guide
 In some celestial voice
 If you choose not to decide
 You still have made a choice
 You can choose from phantom fears
 And kindness that can kill
 I will choose a path that's clear
 I will choose free will

Permanent Waves has a radical difference in feel compared to *Hemispheres*. The songs flow more. The approach is more streamlined. Lee's vocals are more laid back. *Permanent Waves* paved the way very naturally for its equally brilliant successor, *Moving Pictures* (1981), which was one of the first rock albums to be digitally mixed and mastered. Significant songs on this album are “Tom Sawyer”, “Red Barchetta” and “Witch Hunt” (Part 3 of “Fear”). “Red Barchetta” is the story of a man in an imaginary sci-fi setting who rebels against a law (the “Motor Law”) banning all cars. He seeks escape by illegally driving his uncle's old “Red Barchetta” in defiance of the authorities.

“Red Barchetta and “Limelight” were the first two songs I heard from *Moving Pictures*. I heard them in succession, on the radio, before buying the record. It was like experiencing a musical wet dream.

“Witch Hunt” is unusual, in being part 3 of the “Fear” trilogy but actually making it to vinyl before parts 1 and 2! (Parts 1 and 2 appeared on the following two albums, *Signals* and *Grace Under Pressure*, respectively, but in reverse order.) On their 1991 album, *Roll the Bones*, there is a song called “Where's My Thing?” which is described, amusingly, as part 4 of the “Gangster of Boats” trilogy.

Soon after *Moving Pictures* came *Signals* (1982), which I think is probably the weakest of the albums produced in the mature Rush phase, though it remains a favourite for some. Its main problem is its overindulgence in synthesisers to the detriment of the guitars. Some of the songs are rather on the ordinary side but, nevertheless, this album does still boast some outstanding pieces. It's not a bad album and it still ranks way above most of the output of their competitors. But it's just a bit below par by Rush's usual standards. Part of the problem is that it came immediately after *Permanent Waves* and *Moving Pictures* which were particularly outstanding works. In fact, these two albums are Geddy Lee's favourites (something I discovered a long time after writing the preceding sentence).

“THE THINGS WE'D LIKE TO BE”

One theme which starts to emerge on *Signals* is the concern with individuals wanting to escape from the monotony of routine, or struggling to fulfil their dreams. The opening track, “Subdivisions” captures this mood very well. This song is one of my favourites:

Sprawling on the fringes of the city
 In geometric order
 An insulated border
 In between the bright lights
 And the far unlit unknown
 Growing up it all seems so one-sided
 Opinions all provided
 The future predecided
 Detached and sub-divided
 In a mass production zone
 Nowhere is the dreamer
 Or the misfit so alone
 Subdivisions -
 In the high school halls
 In the shopping malls
 Conform or be cast out
 Subdivisions -
 In the basement bars
 In the backs of cars
 Be cool or be cast out
 Any escape might help to smooth
 The unattractive truth
 But the suburbs have no charms to soothe
 The restless dreams of youth

Another very moving song on the album is the ballad, “Losing It”. This is another of my favourites. It is about losing one's creative and artistic powers. Here it is, in full:

The dancer slows her frantic pace
 In pain and desperation
 Her aching limbs and downcast face
 Aglow with perspiration
 Stiff as wire, her lungs on fire
 With just the briefest pause
 Then flooding through her memory
 The echoes of old applause
 She limps across the floor
 And closes her bedroom door ...
 The writer stares with glassy eyes
 Defies the empty page
 His beard is white, his face is lined
 And streaked with tears of rage
 Thirty years ago, how the words would flow
 With passion and precision
 But now his mind is dark and dulled
 By sickness and indecision
 And he stares out the kitchen door
 Where the sun will rise no more ...
 Some are born to move the world
 To live their fantasies
 But most of us just dream about
 The things we'd like to be
 Sadder still to watch it die
 Than never to have known it
 For you — the blind who once could see
 The bell tolls for thee ...

INDIVIDUALS BATTLING AGAINST THEIR FEARS

Grace Under Pressure (1984) and *Power Windows* (1985) are both significant improvements over *Signals*, while benefiting from the experimentation of the latter. Some of the subject-matter on *Grace Under Pressure* is somewhat on the grim side. "Afterimage" reminisces on the life of a close friend of Rush who passed away. "Red Sector A" chronicles the horrors of a concentration camp. Here is a section:

Ragged lines of ragged grey
Skeletons, they shuffle away
Shouting guards and smoking guns
Will cut down the unlucky ones

I clutch the wire fence
Until my fingers bleed
A wound that will not heal —
A heart that can not feel —
Hoping that the horror will recede
Hoping that tomorrow —
We'll all be freed ...

Reflecting the theme of individuals battling against their fears and striving to achieve their dreams is "The Enemy Within" (part 1 of the "Fear" trilogy). Here is the chorus:

I'm not giving in
To security under pressure
I'm not missing out
On the promise of adventure
I'm not giving up
On implausible dreams
Experience to extremes -
Experience to extremes

Power Windows is a brighter album thematically and is musically more cohesive. Though, personally, I rate both albums equally.

Power Windows is a look at different aspects of power, from the power of money to achieve good and ill, to political power, to the power to achieve one's dreams, to power in personal relationships. Highlights are "The Big Money", "Manhattan Project", "Marathon" and "Territories", the last being a scathing attack on nationalism. Here is its concluding verse:

They shoot without shame
In the name of a piece of dirt
For a change of accent
Or the colour of your shirt
Better the pride that resides
In a citizen of the world
Than the pride that divides
When a colourful rag is unfurled

Hold Your Fire (1987) and *Presto* (1989) are both transitional albums and are somewhat weaker than the preceding two. But they still contain some memorable songs. 1991's *Roll the Bones* and 1993's *Counterparts* mark a return to form. *Roll the Bones* integrates the experiments of the preceding two albums while *Counterparts* adds a heavier edge. *Roll the Bones*, in some ways, can be viewed as an elaboration of ideas first aired in "Freewill" from the *Permanent Waves* album. Its theme is that, despite the fact that there are things that happen to us that are due to chance or circumstance, we can still make a difference. Here is the opening to the title track, "Roll the Bones":

Well, you can stake that claim —
Good work is the key to good fortune
Winners take that praise
Losers seldom take that blame

The most moving song on the album is "Ghost of a Chance". Here is the first half:

Like a million little doorways
All the choices we made
All the stages we passed through
All the roles we played

So many different directions
Our separate paths might have turned
With every door that we opened
Every bridge that we burned

Somehow we find each other
Through all that masquerade
Somehow we found each other

Somehow we have stayed
In a state of grace

I don't believe in destiny
Or the guiding hand of fate
I don't believe in forever
Or love as a mystical state

I don't believe in the stars or the planets
Or angels watching from above
But I believe there's a ghost of a chance
We can find someone to love
And make it last

Counterparts is probably Rush's strongest album, musically, since *Power Windows*. Though I've found that my evaluations often change with the passage of time. In a few years, when I look back over their past half dozen albums or so, I may reach a different conclusion. A noticeable development on *Counterparts* and, to some extent, on *Roll the Bones* is the introduction of songs with a more conventional subject-matter, i.e., relationships. Not that these were entirely absent before, but they tended to be more abstract and so were a little harder to notice. There is even a song with the word "love" in the title — "The Speed of Love" — a very pleasant ballad that echoes "Bravado" on the previous album.

SEARCHING FOR NEW DIRECTIONS

This brings my survey to an end. I have not discussed all that I could have in Rush's work but I hope this gives the reader an insight into one of the most progressive rock groups of the past two decades.

Rush are not as popular today as they were in the late seventies and early eighties but, in my view, few artists are able to sustain such high-quality output over the length of time that Rush have. Most artists can muster only one or two outstanding albums, while the rest of their output is pretty average. A notable exception in the heavy rock genre are Led Zeppelin, one of the pioneers in the field, but their incarnation was cut short by the untimely death of their world-class, and irreplaceable, drummer, John Bonham.

One reason why Rush are not as popular these days is that they refuse to stand still. They are always searching for new directions. Lack of popularity, however, is not a reliable indicator of the quality of their music. While musical taste is, I believe, ultimately subjective, there are objective aspects to musical appreciation. Thus, over the years, it has been quite common to see Rush's music dismissed as boring and artistically poor but, nevertheless, technically accomplished. A typical response is that of *NME* journalist, Paul Du Noyer, writing in 1980:

"[*Permanent Waves*] can only serve to consolidate Rush's enormous popularity because it is undeniably superior high production heavy rock, powerful and glossy. Within the given limitations of the genre, this is inventive stuff, with a degree of intelligence and sensitivity that's not to be found around too many of their rivals."

About their lyrics, however, he wrote:

"[they are] hardly the substance of Art, however defined - more like the first faltering efforts of an averagely bright 13 year old..." (as quoted in Brian Harrigan, *Rush*, op. cit, p. 70.)

About their politics he described the band's "proudly reactionary stance" as an "ill-argued dog's dinner of Plato, Milton Friedman and Patience Strong".

A few years ago a critic said that getting rid of Rush was like trying to get rid of terminal cancer. Well, I've got news for him. The cancer is benign and it continues to grow.

Discography of Original Studio Albums by Rush:

<i>Rush</i> (1974)	<i>Signals</i> (1982)
<i>Fly By Night</i> (1975)	<i>Grace Under Pressure</i> (1984)
<i>Careless of Steel</i> (1975)	<i>Power Windows</i> (1985)
<i>2112</i> (1976)	<i>Hold Your Fire</i> (1987)
<i>A Farewell To Kings</i> (1977)	<i>Presto</i> (1989)
<i>Hemispheres</i> (1978)	<i>Roll The Bones</i> (1991)
<i>Permanent Waves</i> (1980)	<i>Counterparts</i> (1993)
<i>Moving Pictures</i> (1981)	