

SKYLAIRE ALFVEGREN

GROKING RUSH

AMONG THEIR MANY UNHERALDED ACCOMPLISHMENTS, GEDDY LEE ET AL ARE THE ONLY ROCK BAND CITED IN THE *JOURNAL OF AYN RAND STUDIES*.

DISCUSSED: *Trash Cans*, *The Stealth of True Cool*, *L-U-V*, *The Large Hadron Collider*, *Morse Code*, *The Exploited Lyrical Motif of Us v. Them*, *New Age Soccer Moms*, *Honeydew*

In 1968, bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee, guitarist Alex Lifeson, and drummer John Rutsey began performing in the church basements and high-school auditoriums of suburban Toronto. Heavily influenced by Cream, Led Zeppelin, and Deep Purple, they released a self-titled debut in March 1974, marked as much by Lee's four-string dexterity as by his vocals—which *Rolling Stone* would later refer to as a “dog-calling falsetto.” Two weeks before the group's first U.S. tour, Rutsey fell ill. A soft-spoken farm-equipment salesman by the name of Neil Peart auditioned for the spot, his drums transported in trash cans. He turned out to be the most mania-



cal percussionist this side of Keith Moon, and a poet to boot, thus helping to create a musical unit that would go on to polarize rock aficionados like no other.

Largely snubbed by the mainstream rock press, Rush is a complete aural anomaly. Jurassic rock radio keeps them in light rotation alongside the corpses of AC/DC, the Who, and the Stones. They received only a sputter of '80s MTV attention, even with a collection of epic, high-concept videos.¹

¹ These include the eerie, Jan Švankmajer-esque “Mystic Rhythms,” the lavish, Monopoly-themed sets, and the (at the time) state-of-the-art computer graphics of “The Big Money,” the atomic-age parable replete with *Dr. Strangelove* al-

And yet the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Smashing Pumpkins, and Primus all claim them as a major influence. Members of Tool, Korn, Sepultura, and Iron Maiden have also paid them tribute.

To their fans, Rush is the Spock-tastic, demonically proficient father of progressive metal, harbinger of a singular musical philosophy. To their detractors, Rush is soulless, quasi-existential, as sexy as pocket protectors, and about as scandalous as a trio of Amish farmers. One isn't seduced by their rhythms over time. One immediately groks Rush, or one doesn't. I've made no apologies for being a Rush fan, but I have never tried to make converts.

KISS has their Army, the Dead have their Heads, and although I once called them "a sea of IT," I have come to realize that nothing unifies Rush fans as much as being Rush fans. Reviewing the band's '96 *Test for Echo* stop at the LA Forum, I noted that "tattered tour shirts abounded, from Yes to Rage Against the Machine, the Residents to Miles Davis." A casual poll among Rush fans would more likely find Fripp and Eno, John Wetton-era King Crimson, Gentle Giant and Hawkwind on the hi-fi than modern practitioners of the "progressive" genre (a misnomer to describe what is, in fact, rig-

lusions in "Distant Early Warning," and the high-tech, machinated world of "The Body Electric," wherein sheep-people "give praise to the mother of all machines" during "100 years of routine." Yet our hero, "one humanoid escaping," breaks free. (Word has it the images come from a film called *Incident at Channel Q*)

idly conservative). Bands who, on paper, boast the most striking influences—Coheed and Cambria, Dream Theater—are less likely to be embraced by Rush fans than, say, the Dead Kennedys and the Kronos Quartet.

Yet it is enthusiasm, and not passion, which Rush fans exude. Rock, by all accounts, is accessorized by sweat and soul, centered in the heart and the crotch. But not one of the 150-plus entries in the Rush songbook concerns l-u-v outright; there is the contemplative ("Entre Nous"): "We are planets to each other / Drifting in our orbits to a brief eclipse / Each of us a world apart / Alone and yet together / Like two passing ships"; and there is the tenuously optimistic ("Ghost of a Chance"): "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 / that we can find someone to love." Rush fans find romance and passion in the abstract, approaching love like cryptographers.²

This stanza, from "Chemistry," seems to express Peart's general opinion of the human condition (perhaps as it is peculiarly experienced by Rush's alien nation fan base):

Signal transmitted—message received
Reaction making impact—invisibly
Elemental telepathy—exchange of
energy

² The only other female Rush fan I've spoken to—a physicist—agreed entirely. Which is to say, I may be a Rush fanatic, but I doubt I'd ever date one.

Reaction making contact—mysteriously

Eye to I

Reaction burning hotter

Tivo to one

Reflection on the water

H to O

No flow without the other

Oh, but how do they make contact
with one another?

No band has so romanticized both the struggle and the potential of the individual—as idealist, prophet, pioneer—and, therefore, outcast. Peart's protagonists have detailed the birth of the atomic age ("Manhattan Project"), broken their fast on honeydew ("Xanadu"), plunged their spaceship "headlong" into a black hole ("Cygnus X-1"), scaled holy mountains ("Tai Shan"), participated in the French Revolution ("Bastille Day"), and survived the Holocaust ("Red Sector A").

Peart's objectivist and mythological leanings have inspired potheads and PhDs alike. Among the dissertation titles: "Permanent Change: Rush, Musicians' Rock, and the Progressive Post-Counter-Culture," and "Grand Designs: A Musical, Social and Ethnographic Study of Rush." The *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* and the scholarly *Popular Music and Society* have dissected their work. Rush is the only band ever to be cited in the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*. That article even led to a Rush-dedicated symposium on such topics as "Rand, Rush and De-Totalizing the Utopianism of Progressive Rock." Their lyrics and

album art are steeped in symbolism and metaphor. The semaphoric “*dat-duh-dat-dat-dat-duh-dat-dat dat dat... du-du-dat... dat dat dat... dat dat dat*” that kick-starts the instrumental “YYZ” is Morse code for the Toronto airport.

Though Peart was named the second-worst lyricist in rock by *Blender* magazine in 2007 (second only to new age soccer-mom heartthrob Sting), the band did receive the Seventh Annual Musicians of the Millennium award from the *Harvard Lampoon*.

Peart both paraphrases and quotes outright the likes of T. S. Eliot, Oscar Wilde, John Barth, and Shakespeare. (“Roll the Bones,” a title lifted from a Fritz Leiber short story, is one of dozens of literary references found in the Rush songbook.)³ Peart was a high-

³ Based on my anecdotal survey of the Rush resistance, Peart’s literary allusions rank second to Lee’s banshee wail as the most alienating aspect of the trio’s oeuvre. The lyrics of Peart (himself an author of numerous nonfiction books) are examined at length in *Mystic Rhythms: The Philosophical Vision of Rush* (Carol Selby Price, with theologian husband Robert M. Price, Borgo Press, 1998), *A Simple Kind Mirror: The Lyrical Vision of Rush* (Leonard Roberto, iUniverse, 2000), and *Rush, Rock Music and the Middle Class: Dreaming in Middletown* (Chris McDonald, Indiana University Press, 2009). McDonald uses his PhD thesis as the basis of his book, about which one reader commented, “The elements that made Rush appeal to many—the fantasy-escapism, the fierce individualism, the interest in technology, the love of complex musicianship—are all put in a larger cultural context [helping me to put] my own tastes, and those of my class and generation, in a meaningful perspective.” Rush is also the subject of at least six biographical works, including *Rush: Chemistry: The Definitive Biography* (Jon Collins, Helter Skelter Publishing, 2006) and *Contents Under Pressure: 30 Years of Rush at Home and Away* (Martin Popoff, ECW Press, 2004).

school dropout, and his flagrant footnoting of literature, mythology, astronomy, and even meteorology confounds many rock fans, though I for one am proof that a love of Joey Ramone and an appreciation of Rick Wakeman can coexist in the same cochlea, one that entertains rumors that the Large Hadron Collider is being sabotaged from the future.

By what barometer can one measure popularity, or success? The Beatles have sold the most albums, the Dead grossed the most live, Led Zeppelin sold the most merchandise.... but Rush is ranked third in the world for most consecutive gold (twenty-four), platinum (eleven), and multi-platinum (three) albums, more than any other rock band excluding the Beatles, the Stones, and Aerosmith. Half a million U.S. fans made their 2007 *Snakes and Arrows* tour the third-highest-grossing rock tour of the year. As the *New York Times* noted, “Rush has maintained one of rock’s biggest cult followings.”

But they’ve yet to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and they garnered their first positive profile in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2008, thirty-four years into their career, the same month they made their U.S. television debut on *The Colbert Report*. The band functioned as a touchstone for an off-putting loner desperate to find friends in the 2009 film *I Love You, Man*. *Rush: Beyond the Lighted Stage*, a full-length feature documentary

that debuted at the Tribeca Film Festival on April 24 (where it won the Audience Award), was released on DVD/Blu-ray on June 29 to coincide with the first night of their forty-date Time Machine Tour, kicking off in Albuquerque. It tells us more than we ever wanted to know about the heady Canuck triumvirate.

Peart’s unearthly stamina, bizarre time signatures, and arsenal of esoteric percussion led the readers of *Modern Drummer* magazine to award him the Best Recorded Performance a staggering sixteen times, and to vote him Best Rock Drummer nine times. Similarly, Lee has been named Top Rock Bassist half a dozen times by *Guitar Player* magazine.

On this summer’s Time Machine Tour, Rush intends to play *Moving Pictures*, their 1981 best-seller, in its entirety. The encroaching tide of synthesizers (and Lifeson’s new-wave haircut) that followed the 1982 album *Signals* led many hard-rockers to abandon the band—but by my estimation, *Signals* is among the Rushiest of Rush albums—jammed as it is with “Subdivisions,” that battle hymn of suburban torment, meditations on being human, chemistry, and space-shuttle launches. Their ’80s output, though lacking monster riffage, is just as valid as their earlier, harder, fantastical prog and their new-millennial “comeback” material, which began with 2002’s sonic supernova, *Vapor Trails*—recorded after a five-year hiatus following the unexpected deaths of both Peart’s wife and daughter.

continued on page 72

RF: Which I'll keep doing. And I've got people coming at me to write books. I'd like to start writing something memoir-based, which is where I'll have to start.

RC: Are you going to break even on this tour?

RF: Hopeful.

RC: But just barely. How old are you? Fifty-one? You're a little too old to still be breaking even on tours.

RF: In Australia, generally, you're probably playing to a thousand people a night and then you start to make money. But the financial side of it, you need a hit record, or someone monstrous to cover one of your songs, or a song in a film.

RC: Do you have someone out there flogging the studios?

RF: Yeah, yeah, yeah, we have people doing that. It can happen in a whole variety of ways. Like, Kevin Costner was a huge fan of Nick Lowe. He'd gotten Nick Lowe's

songs on the *Bodyguard* album, and Nick Lowe made a lot of money, and it was only because Kevin Costner was a fan. Maybe Ringo could do "Lee Remick."

RC: You've talked about how much you liked the solo albums of the '90s. Do you think that *The Evangelist* is as good? Even better?

RF: Much too early to say.

RC: To me, it's a remarkably strong and durable record. A record that holds up as well as the Go-Betweens, which I would not say about your other solo albums. But when you were starting, you could write ten songs in a day. Now ten songs in a year is doing really well. How do you conceive that portion of your future as an artist?

RF: I'm extremely excited about it. I might make an album in three or four years, or five years. There won't be one in two years, I know that. But I'm very happy to have *The Evangelist* as my last album for as long as possible. People will think well of me. ★

Skylaire Alfvogren, continued from page 30

Rush has seemingly ignored the blueprint trinity of sex, drugs, and rock and roll; some would say they're simply antithetical to the rawk ethos. Their intense privacy has led the overimaginative and schizophrenic to speculate wildly: in the '80s, it was whispered that Peart was dying of cancer, then AIDS. Last year, a woman calling herself Solaris BlueRaven posted online that Peart is a mastermind of MK Ultra-style mind-control, as well as a high-level Mason.

There is a magic to Rush, even if it can be, by turns, icy and isolating. Stuck in Vegas in 2004 writing a book about ghosts and UFOs, I was too broke to see their thirtieth-anniversary show. I turned up anyway, indifferently last-minute, house lights dimming, when a trio of Angelenos offered me a free ticket, which they'd won from my hometown rock station KLOS. Aside from their 1990 *Presto* tour, whose Irvine Meadows stop was

my first live rock concert, this show became my greatest Rush memory. JumboTron interstitials of a fire-breathing dragon and space-bound bobble-heads of the band members delighted the audience, as did the career-spanning set list. I was among friends, good friends, even though I had only met them that night. It was a fantastic show, and I can sum up the experience with a few choice lines from the Rush chestnut "Limelight":

*Living in the limelight
the universal dream
For those who wish to seem
Those who wish to be
Must put aside the alienation
Get on with the fascination
The real relation
The underlying theme
The real relation
The underlying dream! ★*