

. . rush vault . .

video, lyrics, tabs, and commentary for each and every Rush recording

Excerpt: May 5, 1979, NME Interview with Neil

Editor's note: The New Musical Express (NME) on May 5, 1979, published an interview with Neil by one of its correspondents, John Hamblett. Rush had just played the Apollo in Glasgow, which Hamblett had attended, and then later he met Neil to talk about the show and also Neil's unhappiness with a previous NME piece which portrayed the band—and Neil in particular—as fascist because of the band's rejection of socialist solutions to economic equality in favor of individualistic solutions. Here's a partial transcript of the Hamblett interview:

1. The threat to our nation's youth

Rock against right-wing rock being called fascist

. . . in which capitalist H.M. technoflash dealers RUSH reckon they've been badly done by and talk to John Hamblett

. . . [I]t's not every day a bunch of Longhair Mystic 'Fascists' from across the water obligingly lay their collective neck on the butcher's block, offering the intrepid young reporter a prime chance to strike a blow for the forces of contemporary music and social equality.

. . .

Firstly, however, it's only fair to make clear my position regarding the band and the music they play. Does he like them? I hear you ask.

The answer, perhaps unfortunately, is no. I think the music is dull and boring. Neither can I find any solace in their romantically mysterious, cumbersome and pompous lyrics.

So why am I writing this article? The simple answer is that I'm interested; interested in the appeal and effect this music has, interested in the motives, and interested in the possible ramifications.

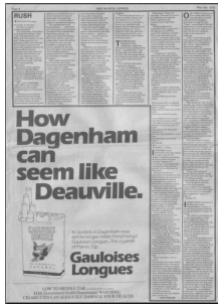
And so to business.

. . .

Rush are singularly successful in their chosen field.

Their albums sell in huge quantities. Their tours are guaranteed sell-outs. Artistically, it could be argued, they are also successful (though this point is not nearly so self-evident as the former), as they are powerfully competent musicians whose skills more than satisfy the apparent cultural requirements of their audience. Indeed, their fans would insist that





they are inspired musicians and nothing less.

[Hamblett turns his attention to an NME piece written a year earlier by Barry Miles in which the writer labeled the band fascist. To introduce this part of the interview, Hamblett quotes the closing line of Miles' piece.]

“Make sure that the next time you see them, you see them with your eyes open, and know what you see. I, for one, don't like it.” Thus ended the last Rush article to appear within these hallowed pages. Penned by Miles, it was the only article I'd ever read about the band—a fact I pointed out to Peart during the course of our conversation.

[Neil:] “Hell, what did you expect to meet after reading that? You must have been expecting to be introduced to a bunch of Nazis (the thought had crossed my mind). What Miles said in that interview was that basically we are a bunch of nice-guy Nazis—which of course, is not true.”

You feel you were misrepresented?

“Oh, absolutely. That was a very dishonest article. I was under the impression that Miles and I had gotten on very well. I even gave him my address in New York and told him to stop by any time he was in the neighbourhood. All that so-called political dialogue took place after the interview had finished; we were just chatting, really amenably, I thought, and he twisted it all round. I just feel that it was basically dishonest.”

But surely if you actually said the things that Miles quoted you as saying, and you sincerely believed them to be true, you have no right to be upset or surprised to see them in print.

“Oh, you're absolutely right. When you're in this position you have to be prepared to be on trial all the time.

“My argument is that he misrepresented the things that were said; took it all out of context. As far as I was concerned all I was doing was taking up a contrary stance in what I considered to be an essentially philosophical argument—and he made it appear to be political dogma.

“He represented us as fascist fanatics . . . and if that were the case we would have the world's first Jewish Nazi Bass Player (laugh). It's ludicrous. We're not fascists. We're not racists. I was very upset when I read that article. In America when you call someone a fascist it's the worst, y'know? It's the pits. But over here, I now realize, that in certain quarters anyone who isn't a socialist is, by definition, a fascist. (Laughs).”

Rush makes no secret of the fact that they don't align themselves with the socialist cause; they are in fact self-confessed 'capitalists'.

A capitalist, as far as I am aware, is not the same thing as a fascist. Fascism, and stop me if you've heard this one before, initially was an authoritarian, and nationalistic right-wing political movement founded in 1919 in Italy by Benito Mussolini; now the concept has broadened in general usage to encompass any right wing, anti-Communist, or racist party, or political ideology—plus schoolteachers, football supporters, the police, sub-editors, GPO, KGB, CGI, NCB, and a whole host of other individuals and public bodies depending on just who's pointing the finger.

Rush are not racist, they are not nationalists; and they firmly believe—rightly or wrongly—that the extreme left are just as likely to implement an authoritarian government as the extreme right.

“Basically we absolutely believe in the total freedom of the individual. Politics only constitutes the tip of the iceberg in that respect. I'm not so much concerned with politics as an end as with the role they play in a broader philosophy. To present a picture of us as a right-wing political band would be totally false; it would be a totally warped picture.

“It’s like the National Front’s television broadcast (shown that night). They were presenting a totally false picture of themselves and their policies; they were only showing the tip of the iceberg—coming on TV all smiles and charm, skimming right over the top of all of their most offensive policies, when everybody knows that they are racist and right-wing fanatics.

“This may sound corny, or banal, but when people call me a fascist it hurts. I’m a sensitive person, and I don’t want to be identified with people like the National Front. I was working over here in England when they got their first wave of publicity, and I know what they’re all about and I don’t like it.”

The messianic filibusters of the reactionary, dogmatic left would have us believe that Rush—and their like—will be damned out of their own mouths. But all anyone has to do is listen to their lyrics; world domination does not come into it.

You could say they were reactionary, though.

“Lyrics are definitely of secondary importance as far as I’m concerned,” says Peart. “When I joined the band I had no intention of writing lyrics, but somebody had to do it, so . . . actually, quite often I’ve got a tune in my head while I’m writing the words; so I’m writing the lyrics to fit a melody.”

Yes, but surely you must have an idea in your head that you want to communicate when you sit down to write a song. Lyrics don’t come from thin air.

What about ‘Trees’ for example? That seems to me to be a definite and resolute dictum against trade unionism and organized labour.

“Really (apparently surprised at the suggestion), I can assure you that that wasn’t the intention. Initially that song came about as a cartoon. I sat down after a gig somewhere and it came to me all of a sudden, this very vivid visual cartoon. It was the fastest song I ever wrote; I wrote it in about five minutes, actually.

“I suppose it’s basically about the crazy way people act. This false ideal of equality they try and create. I simply believe that certain people are better at doing certain things than other people. Some people are naturally talented—they have a gift or whatever—and some people aren’t. This doesn’t mean that these people are greater human beings, by virtue of that talent, it merely means they are more talented.”

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

The trouble with the Maples
(And they’re quite convinced
They’re right)
They say the Oaks are just too
Lofty
And they grab up all the light

Now there’s no more Oak
Oppression
For they have passed a noble
Law

And the trees are all kept
Equal
By hatchet
Axe
And saw.”—Trees

If in some moral referendum we were asked to cast a vote on the subject, hopefully we would all put a cross in a box marked ‘Freedom of Expression’; but that would necessarily mean that we agreed on the definition of the term?

Should freedom of expression be allotted to only those who would express the things we feel should be expressed in a manner in which we, ourselves, would choose to express them?

Should, in fact, Neil Peart be allowed to write songs like ‘Trees’ and play them to who knows how many thousands of young (impressionable?) people, whether or not the views articulated through these songs are politically fashionable or express principles that you and I deem morally unjustifiable?

In a nutshell, should freedom of expression be accorded to everyone, regardless of whether or not they would utilize that freedom in a manner we would consider ‘good’—feeding the starving millions in Biafra, writing classic literature, helping old ladies across the road etc—or ‘bad’—molesting children, denying similar freedom to others, appearing on The Old Grey Whistle Test etc?

It’s a big question, and one you should not allow anyone to answer for you. While you’re thinking about it ponder on this:

“There is hardly a vice or crime (according to our own moral standards) which has not at sometime or other, in some circumstances, been looked upon as a moral and religious duty. Stealing was accounted virtuous among young Spartans, and among the Indian cast of Thug. In the ancient world Piracy, i.e. robbery and murder, was considered a respectable profession. To the Medieval Christian religious persecution was the highest duty, and so on.”—Canon Rashdall.

One thing I found more than mildly disturbing was the obvious relish with which the Glasgow audience chanted through ‘Trees’. I asked Peart if he had been aware of the community singing, and if so, was he not worried that the audience might misconstrue its message.

“Yeah, I heard the singing. They sang through ‘Closer to the Heart’ too, it was great. I don’t think I agree with you about the audience misinterpreting the message though. As I said before, it’s an emotional response we get from our audience. I don’t know how aware they are of the lyrics, generally speaking.

“And anyway, if they do misconstrue them, am I responsible for that? Can I take responsibility for what all these people might or might not think? How long could I maintain my artistic integrity if every time I sat down to write a song I had to worry about whether or not it was open to misrepresentation? All I can do is carry on the best I can, and hope people can see me for what I am.”

If the lyrics are of so little importance how come you bother to print them in your album sleeves?

“Well whatever I do, I try to do well. I try to do the best of my ability. I put an awful lot of work into my lyrics and I feel they deserve to be seen. I can only tell the truth as I see it, right? I know it’s a big responsibility being a rock star, and believe me there are some sides of it that I find very seamy, and there are some aspects of it that I resent.

“For example I resent the infringements on my privacy; ideally I would like to be completely anonymous when I’m not on stage.

“And there are the facets over which I have no control, like the people who sell programmes and badges, and the kid who buys a scarf and then walks home in the pouring rain, and by the time he gets there, his scarf is ruined, and his mother gets straight on the phone and says, ‘Heh, my kid just got home with a scarf he just paid two dollars for and its all shriveled up.’

“There are all kinds of things like that which I really resent, but what can I do? Can I be held personally responsible for all of that?

Good question. Can the artist be held morally responsible for the possible reactions his work may trigger off in the psyche of anybody who happens to view it or hear it?

Surely not.

I asked Peart whether he felt the artist had a responsibility, or duty, to mirror the prevalent political or social climate through his work.

“Ah, now you’re asking me a very big question: what you’re asking in effect, is Should the Artist Imitate Life, or should Life Imitate the Artist? I’m not sure that I’ve got an answer to that one. I feel that an artist can only strive to honestly express what he feels.

“A point many people seem to overlook in discussions of this kind is that the artist is only a human being, and if he portrays his or her feelings, then chances are that he or she will be showing many people what they are feeling. I guess that’s the best answer I can give, though it doesn’t really answer your question.”

Before we shook hands and effectively went our separate ways I asked him if he had an ambition: “Yeah to continue to improve as a drummer and lyricist. I would also like to write a book. I don’t know whether or not I could do that. I suppose lots of people have tried and failed. But there are a lot of things I would like to say, so I’m determined to try.”

Remember, as someone once said, ‘The next time you see them, make sure you see them with your eyes open, and know what you see . . .’