



Rush: 'You have no freedom. You do what you're told to do. By the socialists'

As Rush kick off their R40 Live 40th anniversary tour, takes a trip back to 4 March 1978, where Miles, writing for New Musical Express, questions the band's supposed 'proto-fascism'

Miles

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And here, over the portals of my fort, I shall cut in the stone the word which is my beacon and my banner. The word which will not die, should we all perish in battle. The word which can never die on this earth, for it is the heart of it and the meaning and the glory. The sacred word: EGO - Closing passage of Ayn Rand's Anthem

I got the job of interviewing Rush because I was the only one on NME who knew who Ayn Rand was - simple as that. Ayn Rand? Oh, she's an obscure ultra-right-wing American cult writer of the late 30s and early 40s and, yes, Rush follow her ideas. The epic 2112 is a rewrite of her book Anthem and they also name their Canadian record label after the same book. But more about her later ...

I did a crash course on Rush: played their albums, read interviews, reread a couple of Ayn Rand's books and went to their concert at the Hammersmith Odeon.

I didn't think the concert was quite as bad as last week's NME review: I mean, they're just a power trio in the grand tradition of Cream, Nice and Blue Cheer updated into the later 70s with voice echoes, foldback EQ, phasing on the drums and a very sophisticated lighting system. Nothing to worry about.

Drummer Neil Peart explains: "Hard rock is our kind of music, the music we grew up on. It's what comes naturally to us. We just look at it as something that we're trying to keep contemporary. We're not trying to play the music of the late 60s. We're trying to play the music of the late 70s - which has grown out of the 60s. We're trying to take a modern approach, in the way the Beatles took a modern approach to Chuck Berry and so on ... for us, the people we followed were Jeff Beck, the Who, Cream, Hendrix - mainly British bands."

This could be the key to their great success here, explaining why they are so much more popular than other heavy metal groups like Aerosmith or Kiss:

"One would like to think it's because there's stronger British influence in our music, our culture as Canadians, and because we're trying harder," Peart grins. And adds: "For me, the mystery with Aerosmith is not that they are not successful here, but that they're successful anywhere else!"

To return to the Hammersmith gig, vocalist Geddy Lee has an interesting voice: very high-pitched and not unlike David Surkamp of Pavlov's Dog (as he's no doubt sick of hearing). At dynamic peaks in the music, he breaks into high castrati shrieks and yelps like a throttled blackbird clamped to the PA.

Alex Lifeson is a reasonable guitarist of his genre (I've been to too many Hendrix, Cream and Zappa concerts to say better than that). He and Geddy - who also plays bass and synthesizer - trot about on a white stage-sized Cossett carpet like excited poodles while a Cape Canaveral-style light show keeps up the ol' visual excitement.

Neil Peart sits behind a massive double drum kit. I remember when Keith Moon's double kit shocked America on the Who's first US tour, but now it's become mandatory heavy metal equipment. Peart takes it to its logical conclusion with highly amplified runs around the toms and occasional use of phase-shift. He plays very simple shapes - needed, in fact, in a trio with no rhythm guitar - but on the night I saw him, I thought his timing was defective.

I asked him about the concert. "I was depressed. I wasn't playing like I should have been playing. There's a barometer there that says, 'This is what I'm shooting for tonight for that perfect show, and when I don't reach that level, it's not right.'"

Geddy: "By the same token, Alex and I both thought they were good nights."

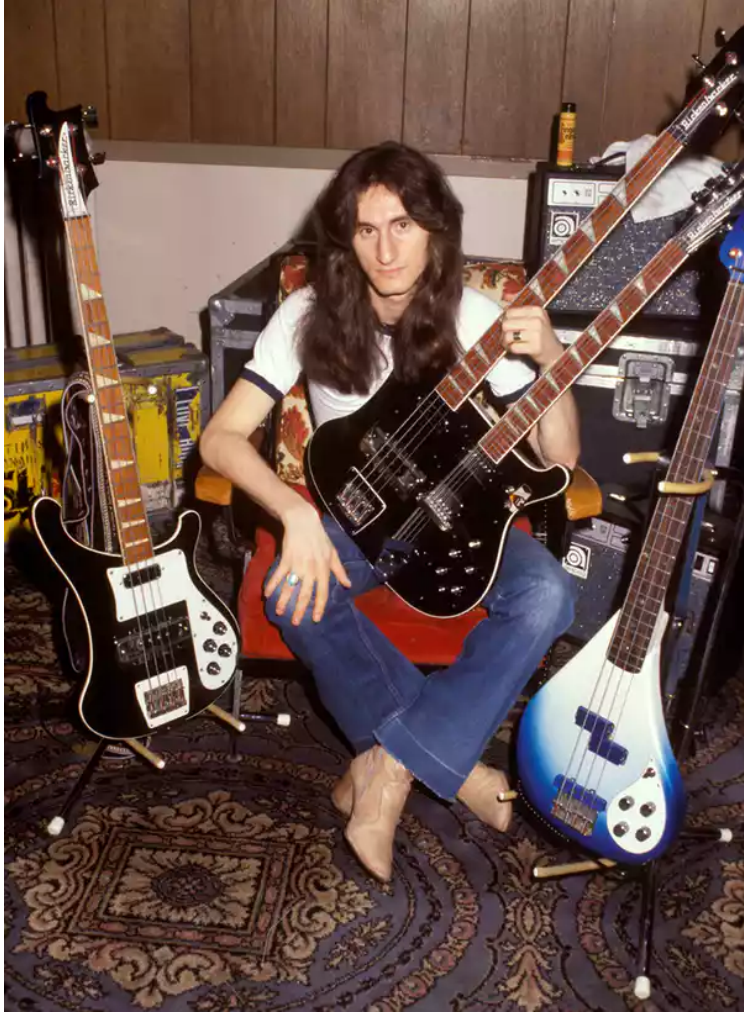
Alex: "On the American tour, towards the end of the last month, I had that same feeling that I was not putting out like I should. But you just get to a point where fatigue is so deep, that you just can't."

Geddy: "When you do as many shows as we do, you are bound to slump sooner or later."

The Hammersmith gig was the 120th concert of their current tour.

Neil: "It's extremely elusive. I would say that out of all those shows, there are only three that I would consider as the standard - as the ideal show - so I've got to figure that all those other 117 were substandard. Well, I don't mean they were *substandard*, but that they were below the perfect level."

Geddy: "We don't expect the audience to know the standard. It's purely a personal measure against past performances."



Geddy Lee backstage with his collection of bass guitars. Photograph: Fin Costello/Redferns

This brought up the matter of their attitude towards their audiences. At Hammersmith, the audience was the usual HM crowd, pretending to play the guitar and giving power salutes at the end of each number. Rush didn't seem to take any notice of them despite their obvious enthusiasm, if not fanaticism.

It seemed as though Rush's performance existed as closed-off totality of its own, quite separate from anything the audience might do, and could have been performed the same just as easily anywhere on the planet. It wasn't a two-way thing at all.

Neil agrees and seems surprised that I should think that this was a bad thing. I said that I thought of a performance as an interaction *with* the audience. Geddy answered: "From their perspective it is, but not from ours. We just have a goal to achieve and a certain standard to get to. And if you don't get that, no matter how wonderful the audience was to you, you still know it when you come off stage."

Neil: "It's just got to be the best possible show we can possibly put on."

I complained that they seemed to make no effort to put their individual personalities across to their audience to show anything of themselves. "It is all there. We're so imbued in our music and our performance that ... what you're seeing, I guess, is just a level of professionalism. We just couldn't put more of ourselves into it. Are you talking about telling jokes to the audience or telling them when our birthday is?"

It just seemed to me that with the Stones or Zappa, who are also very professional, that the individual personalities come across, whereas Rush behaves as *one*.

Alex: "That's always been our goal. The whole point of being in a band is to be one unit."

Neil: "We don't want to be Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones. That type of thing wasn't what we were after. It was most important for each of us to be equal in input and output - each of us has to pull the same amount, musically, in composition and in every sense of being in the band. All of us have to pull together. It seems to me that's the only way you can have a truly creative aggregate of people is if they're all contributing in different ways."

With all the discussion about individuals, it was inevitable that the conversation should turn to Ayn Rand - high priestess of the ultra-right reds-under-the-bed brigade. It seemed very odd to me that a 70s rock group should dig up a cold war hero and warm her up.

Neil: "She's just a very brilliant woman, an excellent writer, but a brilliant thinker as well. She has a great clarity of thought."

Geddy: "I think she's brought forth a lot of concepts and philosophies that have confirmed for us a lot of different things. I've just found it very positive. I've found it very positive. I've found a lot of truth in what she writes."

Ayn Rand's philosophy, in her own words, is that "To be free, a man must be free of his brothers. That is freedom. That and nothing else." (Anthem, 1937).

In other words, the exact opposite to Christian charity and the whole European humanist tradition. In fact, she regards "altruism as incompatible with man's nature, with the requirements of his survival, and with a free society." This is the theme of her book *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*.

Ayn Rand is, naturally, fanatically anti-Communist. Her books are dedicated to "helping to prevent ... a socialist America" and are filled with constant attacks on the evils of "collectivism". By this she means such communist horrors as free medical care, free schooling, unemployment benefits, sick pay, etc. Under the system of laissez-faire capitalism she advocates, it would be a return to a total free-for-all with no controls at all on employers and with no welfare state at all. It's a system long ago regarded as absolutely unworkable, even by such well-known communists as David Rockefeller ... but there are still a few extremists left on the far right in the States and, surprisingly enough, Rush side with them. Our conversation went like this:

Neil: "We're certainly devoted to individualism as the only concept that allows men to be happy, without somebody taking from somebody else. The thing for me about Ayn Rand is that her philosophy is the only one applicable to the world today - in every sense. If you take her ideas, then take them farther in your own mind, you can find answers to pretty well everything on an

individual basis. Putting the individual as the first priority, everything can be made to work in a way that it can never be made to work under any other system.”

I began to object to this statement, but Neil interrupted excitedly: “You’re living in the best example! Look at Britain and what socialism has done to Britain! It’s crippling! And what it’s done to the youth. What do you think the Sex Pistols and all the rest of ‘em are really frustrated about? They’re frustrated because they’re growing up in a socialist society in which there’s no place for them as individuals.

“They either join the morass or they fight it with the only means left. They have literally no future, and I lived and worked here, and I know what it feels like, and it’s not very nice.”

Do you really think they’re a product of socialism?

“Yeah! What else? What else are they fighting against if they’re not fighting that?”

Fighting against socialism? I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“Yeah! Why is there no future in England? What other reason is there? I really think that’s the root of it. You could find all sorts of fancy answers, but when it comes right down to the root of it, the reason that those kids are growing up and feeling that there’s no future for them is because there simply isn’t. If they don’t join the union and go to work with all their mates, then they’re lost, there’s nothing else they can do.”

I didn’t really see how there would be much else for them to do under a capitalist free-for-all such as he was advocating. I said that the multinational corporations - the most developed form of capitalism - infringed human rights all the time. This annoyed Neil, who responded: “How? By giving you a job? You can quit!”

So now I understood the freedom he was talking about. Freedom for employers and those with money to do what they like, and freedom for the workers to quit (and starve) or not. Work makes free. Didn’t I remember that idea from somewhere? “Work Makes Free.” Oh yes - it was written over the main gateway to Auschwitz concentration camp ...

Neil: “You have to have principles that firmly apply to every single situation. I think a country has to be run that way. That you have a guiding set of principles that are absolutely immutable - can never be changed by anything. That’s the only way!” (Shades of the 1,000-Year Reich?)

“The government’s only functions are to protect the rights of the individual, therefore you need a police force and an army. You need an army to protect the individuals and a law court to settle their disputes ...

“You set up this subjectively defined law, system of laws, that are immutable and incontrovertible, and the economy is totally laissez-faire capitalism and everybody’s free. That’s it. Bang! Boom! Go for it. You’re on your own, Jack! And things like trade unions can still exist. I don’t think those things are wrong - obviously they’re necessary when you have a group of a few thousand people bargaining with one - but not government-sanctioned and government-supported and government-involved trade unions.

“Just one trade union for one factory. One group of employees have one person that deals with their affairs.”

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I had to ask the obvious: if it was true freedom for the workers at a factory to bargain with the boss, why wouldn't they be even more free if they did away with him altogether, and simply ran the place themselves as a workers' council - after all, they do all the work?

Neil: "Because then your freedom is negated. You have no freedom. You do what you're told to do. By the socialists. By the good of the people."

I really didn't see the difference between doing what the boss told you to do for the good of his fat bank account and doing what was best for the workers at the factory. Neil spelt it out, country-simple ...

"The guy next to you may have four kids, needs clothes, and he may have an aunt who has dyspepsia of the spine who needs \$10,000 for an operation ..."

So my fellow worker's needs might influence my own financial position? But the factory owner's need for a Rolls Royce, a mistress and a yacht also influence my position. What made the boss right?

"He's taking steps to achieve his needs, through his own initiative. I've got problems too, but I take care of them."

Where does the boss's influence over the factory come from? He didn't build it, he may not work in it?

"He owns it. Private property. The most inviolable individual right of all. If you own it, it's yours. Simple truth. If you won it, it belongs to you. You do what you want with it. How can you say it's otherwise?"

Well, I didn't want to get into an argument about ownership of the means of production being a different matter from personal property - particularly since I'd had to wait some time at the Holiday Inn bar before Rush could see me. The trouble with this argument was that Rush haven't the faintest idea of what socialism is. I said there were no truly socialist countries, but Neil thought otherwise:

"Well, most of Europe is, isn't it? Canada is."

What? A few nationalised industries? That's at best state capitalism.

"State capitalism? What's that?"

Instead of a multinational as boss, you have the government.

"You have the government that owns airlines that lose money, school systems that lose money, build roads that lose money, hotels that lose money ..."

You don't think free medicine is a good idea?

"Again, obviously not. Where are all the good British doctors right now?"

The good ones are still here.

“Oh yeah? You think so? Where are all the British scientists?”

Probably in the States.

“Yeah! Hahaha. So why is Britain in the state it's in? If it's not socialism, what is it? Why is British technology 25 years behind America? If free enterprise had come in after the war, this country would be fine ...”

I won't bore you with our discussion about the war and American capitalism, but it turned out that Neil didn't even think America was capitalist ...

“It doesn't exist anywhere. Even in America it's a mixed economy now. It's not true laissez-faire capitalism.”

I went back to the national health question and grumbled: Suppose I was an orphan and I was sick. I'd like to think that I would get free medical care.

“At whose expense?”

At the state's expense.

“The state? Well, where does the state get this marvellous magic money?”

Tax.

“Exactly. Well, maybe I don't wanna pay tax. There's the Salvation Army and all those voluntary organisations. Don't you think all those could look after those welfare systems where they are necessary? I'm not talking about the dole or all those kind of things which are abused, obviously.

“Are you aware of the medical care that the people who work at IBM get, for instance? I think that you'll find that they get taken care of very satisfactorily.”

Oh God, sell your soul to the company. I hope none of you went to the Rush concert on dole money. That wouldn't fit in with Rush's philosophy at all.

Even though he had just told me that Europe and Canada were already socialist countries, he went on to tell me the full horror of what happens to art under socialism:

“Ayn Rand makes a statement in one of her books about art - that any artist who thinks the businessman is his enemy is a fool.” (Well, I'm sure that every musician or group who has been ripped off by his manager, record company or promoter will be pleased to know that!)

Neil continues: “What would you advocate instead? An artists' guild? Say there was a guild of musicians, and all the musicians in the world belonged to it, and then, say, they wanted to run a concert here in London. They tell the artists' guild and say, ‘Ok, we need a band’. They pick five people at random, put ‘em together and bring ‘em to Hammersmith Odeon and put on a concert for the people.”

Whaaat?

“That's the only way it could be done. How would you do it, then? How would you do it, then? How is the government gonna put bands together and send them out for people?”

To me this is getting too absurd to answer, because the whole extreme-right position is so illogical and irrational.

The thing is, these guys are advocating this stuff on stage and on record, and no one even questions it. No one is on their case. All the classic hallmarks of the right-wing are there: the pseudo-religious language (compare their lyrics to the Ayn Rand quote at the head of this article), which extends right down to calling the touring crew – road masters instead of road managers. The use of a quasi-mystical symbol – the naked man confronting the red star of socialism (at least I suppose that's what it's supposed to be). It's all there.

They are actually very nice guys. They don't sit there in jackboots pulling the wings off flies. They are polite, charming even, naïve – roaming the concert circuits preaching what to me seems like proto-fascism like a leper without a bell.

Neil: “The example that we're trying to create, we live by. We don't want to get up on stage and be like John Lennon, for instance, and ram the message down people's throats. Again, it comes down to choice. Those things are in our lyrics, and if people feel like paying attention to our lyrics and trying to get something out of it, it's there for them. If they don't, fine, and well – we've got other things to offer as well.”



Guitarist Alex Lifeson and drummer Neil Peart at the Odeon in Birmingham on 12 February 1978. Photograph: Fin Costello/Redferns

Geddy: “Exactly. It's trying to have that kind of depth, that kind of a range in what we present. The choice is strictly up to the individual as regards on what level they're going to choose to be entertained by us ... whether they be stimulated by what we have to say lyrically, entertained by what we have to present visually, or interest in what we have to play. It's all choice.”

Just before my tape ran out, Neil scoffed at the idea that a welfare state could provide the things needed to make people free: “For some people, freedom is freedom from worry about medical care, for instance. But these things cannot appear magically, you know. This is the overlooked factor.

“For me, if I'm gonna be free, I have to be free from worrying about medicine, free from worrying about a job, free from worrying about food and free from worrying about a home. You provide that to me. That's what a government has to provide me to make *me* free. Obviously that's ridiculous, that's ludicrous ...

Funny - I would have thought that it was something to work towards as a human right in the technological age. Rush would like to return to the survival-of-the-fittest jungle law, where the fittest is of course the one with the most money.

Make sure that next time you see them, you see them with your eyes open, and know what you see. I, for one, don't like it.

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