NEIL PEART

by Scott K Fish

SF: Ten years ago you'd been with Rush for one year. Did you ever feel that you'd be such an influential drummer today?

NP: No. Certainly not. I was just trying to be good, really. I had a very humble opinion of my abilities. I was just trying to play in the big leagues. My aim was to try to get as good as the people I admired and learned from. So, it was a learning process, and the only standard I was working towards was a good professional standard. I certainly wasn't trying to prove myself to be Mr. Bigshot in the world or anything.

SF: Do you remember when you first realized that you were influencing many young drummers?

NP: Yeah. It was the first time I was ever mentioned in an MD Reader's Poll. When I first heard about that it spun me around. I just hadn't expected that kind of respect of my peers. It came totally unexpectedly and out of the blue. It unbalanced me. Instead of boosting my confidence in myself it actually undermined it. We were on tour in England when I heard that I was in the poll. The next gig we did was in Glasgow. I was onstage the whole night feeling like such a fraud. Every little inaccuracy I committed; any small error, suddenly seemed gigantic in my mind. I felt like I was cheating everyone; that drummers sitting out there who had voted for me would think I was a fraud.

SF; Have there been any people, styles or technological advancements in the last ten years that caused you to grow, or changed your style of drumming?

NP: Certainly there have been, although it tends to be less one figure than it is the old passing of the torch, where one drummer develops things

to a certain extent; passes it on to someone and so on. It is very much like a relay race in the progress of almost anything, but particularly in drumming, because it's such an interior field, restricted to the people who do it and to the people who really care about it. It kind of goes on behind closed doors, but that advancement is always moving forward.

In retrospect, the largest advancement over the last ten years is electronics. Love it or not. It is a major thing. The people who lead the field in that, to my mind, would be Bill Bruford and Terry Bozzio in different ways. The explorations that these guys make work to everyone's advantage. I don't want to go as uncompromisingly electric as Terry Bozzio has gone, but at the same time, I can enjoy and appreciate what he's doing and admire the courage and techniques that it takes to really do it well. You can listen to electronic noise and know that it doesn't mean anything, but when you watch Terry Bozzio play electronic drums it is exciting and essentially musical, because he has the technique to back it up. And Bill Bruford too, with his more rhythmic, ethnic kinds of explorations.

Even a non-drummer like Thomas Dolby, for instance, uses a lot of electronic drums and drum machines, but as a musician, he has a great sense of rhythm. I find it satisfying as a drummer to listen to. Peter Gabriel is another example of that. He's not a drummer, but he has a great sense of rhythm, what rhythm is and what it can do. Consequently, his music is very influential on me, even though he uses a number of different drummers and sometimes just drum machines. He has the ability to make it all have rhythmic integrity, especially drawing from such ethnic sources as he does.

SF: Recently I had a telephone conversation with a good friend. He's a well-known drummer who's very much involved and interested in drum electronics. He had played on the last 11 albums of a major artist. On the

twelfth album a drum machine was used instead. My friend's snare drum sound was processed onto a digital chip and used on the album. So, he wasn't on the album, didn't get paid and yet in a real sense he was on the album soundwise.

NP: There's a real new morality that has to be developed for sampling. In looking ahead to the next ten years, the biggest thing that's happening is that ability and facility of making your own digital chips; sampling any sound under the sun and having it as part of your drumkit. This is something that I'm moving into right now and I'm sure I'm not the only one. It's so intriguing to have otherwise unattainable sounds. It's not going to come even close to replacing my acoustic drums. My drumset isn't going to get any smaller or look any different. But, the electronic things that I use will be used in so many different ways.

The morality of it comes in in just such an instance as you mentioned. I ran into that during the recording of our new album. We were looking for a particular sound and somebody suggested, why not take it off so-and-so's record. I said "No, no, no!" It's <u>their</u> sound. The work it takes to create a sound is sometimes comparable to what it takes to have an idea towards a song. Stealing someones sound is akin to stealing their song, as far as I'm concerned. You can't help being <u>influenced</u> by a sound. You may even try to imitate it. You may try to imitate a song. It's still not the same as out and out copying. For instance, we set out to get African sounds out of my drums. That's not the same as taking a sample off of another guy's record and making a chip out of it. It works both ways. I wouldn't be happy if it were done to me either. I know what it takes sometimes to get a good snare drum sound

and the amount o f work, experience, knowledge and tuning ability that it takes. Not to mention the engineer's ability of placing the microphones and putting it on tape properly. There are an awful lot of people's lives literally involved in that process. For somebody to just swipe that off a record rubs me a little wrong.

SF: My friend's reaction to it was a loss of enthusiasm towards drum electronics.

NP: Yeah. Again, it can work both ways. An example is one song off the new album where we were playing all of my Simmons drums with samples. I rented a whole pile of African drums; some big giant ones covered with some strange kind of skin, some Indian tabla drums and all different things. We went through them all and chose the ones I wanted to make a drumkit out of. Two tablas, a talking drum and a giant African tribal drum became my four tom-toms. I was able to play the instruments myself, make the sample from it, have a chip made and that became my drumset. When you take that further, where you can have the sound of cars being crushed, the sound of glass breaking or garbage cans falling over -- any one of these sounds can have the potential of being part of a percussion ensemble. That's where it becomes exciting; where it becomes honestly innovative and exploratory. Copying off other people's records is incestuous.

Drum machines have the same potential. I think they are starting to become less prevalent on records. More and more peopel may be putting something down with the drum machine, but have a real drummer come in and make it feel good. Drum machines are for songwriters. As a songwriting tool they're invaluable. You can't begrudge them. They help the drummer

out a lot by giving an accurate picture of what the songwriter really wants to hear. During the new album these things came more clearly into focus.

Rush is a three-piece band where the other two guys write the music, basically, and I write the lyrics. A lot of times, when I'm off working on the words, they're working on the music and I'm not there to be a rhythmic part of it, but they can program a drum machine to give me some idea of how they're thinking. It becomes a springboard. I could never play a song the way a drum machine would, particularly because I'm a hyperactive player. But, I certainly use it as a foundation and often a very interesting one. Sometimes it points me in a way that I wouldn't otherwise have explored. Sometimes they come up with something on the drum machine that sounds deceptively simple, but it can be a springboard into interesting areas.

Many bands or songwriters have to work on their own. They don't want to have to call the rest of the band in just to put the song in shape. A drum machine makes it easier for a songwriter to work at making his presentation to the rest of the band -- specifically the drummer -- that much more clear. The drummer certainly should be free to take that foundation, have a lot of fun with it and be free with it. It's accurate communication at it's best for the songwriter and for the songwriter to communicate with the other musicians. Used in that respect, I've found it to be very healthy and sometimes helpful.

SF: An acquaintance phoned me a half-hour before this interview. He predicts that by February, 1986 we'll see the return of progressive rock bands like Emerson, Lake & Palmer, that were so popular in the '70s. Do you agree with that prediction?

NP: There might well be a resurgence that way. The long-term benefit that that would serve would be to reestablish those standards. There is, hopefully, a resurgence in musical values going on. That can never be bad. If it necessitates bringing some old music out of the closet for a while to shake out the laundry -- then so be it. That's fine. I'd hate to have things stagnate such that it had to go back like nostalgia. Nostalgia is not something that I personally have any use for or appreciate in others. I honestly don't like hearing old music at all. I have an insatiable appetite always for new things. If it's old music that I haven't heard before, that's one thing. I'm constantly watching what new music is coming out. When I do find something that I like I have to hear it pretty well everyday. Then I start knowing it all by heart and there's no sense in playing it anymore. Perhaps that's why nostalgia doesn't carry much weight with me. I have a pretty good memory. Any song that I lked ten or 20 years ago, I pretty well still know, beat by beat. So, there's no point hearing it again.

SF: You're admired as both drummer and lyricist. Phil Collins is admired as singer/songwriter/drummer. Stewart Copeland has been writing movie soundtracks in addition to his drumming. Do you think that this role expansion by drummers is a healthy sign that we'll see more of in the future?

NP: I would have to think so. It's difficult to know. I think they're the same mental facility. The ability to organize words is the same as the mathematical ability to organize beats and subdivide times the way that drummers do. For me, the transition to words is a natural one, because I feel they're the same kind of rhythm; the same kind of division of time. I had a sensitivity towards words before music. From the first

time I went to school I was always in love with language. It may be that they are two seperate things in me. I don't know. I tend to think that drumming does have a lot in common with words, but they may not always go together.

If people are at least thinking of other things, certainly more drummers would think about singing through Phil Collins's work, about getting more into composition and textural works as Stewart Copeland has done, or perhaps think about writing lyrics. All of these can contribute so much to a band. It seems to me that arrangements are the natural area for drummers to move into first. That's where I think I started to get a little more adventrous in music before I ever thought of writing lyrics. I use to like to contribute arrangement ideas to the band -- intros and outros -- because they're fundamental things that a little imagination can help you communicate, and you don't have to develop your theoretical knowledge. There's probably a trend now -- maybe you'll know this better than me -- for drummers to be better educated harmonically. They might have started on or learned another instrument contemporaneously with drums, or they learn harmony in school.

SF: In my optomistic moments I agree with you. However, I see much evidence to the contrary, where many young drummers are asking "What's the least amount of work I have to do, in order to get the most from my drumming." I've stated Max Weinberg's theory before that we might be seeing people who strive to master the drum machine instead of the drumset.

NP: Drums are such a physical instrument though. That would already require a different mentality. One of the things that I liked about drums from day one was that you hit them. I don't think that will change in a

lot of cases. A kid who gravitates toward the Linn, for instance, would probably otherwise have been a keyboard player or a computer programmer. His affinity for drums wouldn't have been the same as mine. Mine was very much a physical affinity. First of all I very much related to the physical way that drums looked. The first time I ever saw a set of drums I thought they were beautiful things. Second, of course, is that you hit them to play them. It was a physical relationship that I responded to right away. I was a lot more interested in that than tinkling a piano, tinkling strings or blowing into things.

A drummer who comes into it with that same kind of metod would maybe go towards electronic drums and start on them. Electronic drums have a lot of learning advantages, really. As the pad surfaces become more perfected, which they seem to be, there will be no disadvantage in that. It will give you the advantage of being able to practice a lot of times when I wasn't able to, because of how loud drums are. That's a limitation in a physical sense, too. Hopefully, drummers would study both acoustic and electronic drums, and hopefully, things like touch, dynamics and subtleties of playing -- that only real drums can ever give you -- won't be lost. It may be that a person who can afford an inexpensive acoustic drumset will, instead of saving for another acoustic bass drum and tom-toms, be saving for a supplementary inexpensive electronic set. They will get less and less expensive. All those types of machines do. It will be possible for a person to have a small acoustic set and a small electronic set, instead of expanding an acoustic set too quickly, or buying a lot of things for which they have no use.

SF: There's an aspect of the professional use of electronic drums and devices that must be frustrating to young drummers. Your use of African

drums on digital chips is an example. It seems that unless a young player has an awful lot of money, there's no way that he's going to be able to duplicate many of the sounds he's hearing pro drummers use on today's recordings.

NP: Yeah. That's a dangerous situation. I wouldn't like to see that happen. In my case, I'm using all natural sounds. There's another group of Simmons sounds that we used which I haven't mentioned. In a couple of cases, instead of using the conventional Simmons sound, I actually sang or vocalized the sound I wanted the drums to have and they sampled that in the control room. Consequently, when I triggered my Simmons drums, I was triggering my own voice singing the sounds that I wanted the drums to have. It's not that far off a real Simmons sound, but it has a different quality.

Our producer works all the time in London. He's become very jaded about the Simmons sound. He didn't really want to hear it. We found other ways of getting around that. There were times when I vocalized a little single-stroke roll and that's exactly what you hear -- my voice doing a single-stroke roll. That was exciting; a very natural way of using electronic drums. The African drums were really the most primitive kinds of drums there are and I was using the cutting edge of electronic technology to reproduce them. It's interesting to do and it's natural enough, so that any sound I'm producing can be reproduced close enough on a small drumkit. The characters are natural characters that the drumset has.

It is true, when you listen to Terry Bozzio or Bill Bruford, especially the stuff Bill's doing with King Crimson, it's really difficult to reproduce without some pretty sophisticated equipment. It's still nothing like the nightmare that the keyboard player faces. With drums you can go

buy a Clap Trap for a couple of hundred bucks and get some interesting electronic sounds to play with. What you have to have nowadays to be even remotely on top of the leading edge in keyboard technology is frightening. Keyboards are getting smaller in size, higher in price and greater in capabilities, which means that you have to learn so much more. How many years does it take to learn to play a piano properly? Then add the amount of knowledge that you have to further acquire to understand and explore fully the abilities of electronic instruments.

For drummers it's getting like that too. I'm a little daunted by what I'm having to get into to do what I want right now. I don't have the kind of mind for which electronic things are immediately crystal clear. I have to spend a lot of time sweating over the manuals. I've taken steps to acquire the latest Simmons E-Prom system so I can make my own chips. I'm really excited by the potentiality of that. I wouldn't let myself not do it, but at the same time I know I'm letting myself in for a lot of aggravation and headaches. Beyond the 20 years that I've spent trying to make myself a reasonably proficient drummer; all of a sudden I feel like I'm starting in kindergarten again.

SF: Do you have a reaction to the flood of cosmetic drum products we're seeing now? In a recent MD article, one drum manufacturer was attributing the cosmetics to the rise in popularity of video.

NP: I've always been into the visuals of drums. I've always liked a good-looking drumset. Video hasn't changed that for me. Since it's my workplace, I like to have my drumset neat and looking nice. It could be that these cosmetic products are due to what I described, or it could be due to video. In many cases you don't even see a drumset in videos. They either have a little token snare drum, bass drum , Simmons kit or no drummer. Sometimes

a guy is hitting a piece of wood!

SF: Ten or more years ago, drum manufacturers would credit their endorsers in advertisements, as having the qualities of great drummers. The angle was that a great drummer demands a great instrument, to allow him to play to the best of his ability. Most of the drum ads today have gone 180-degrees away from that philosophy. The new angle says that it's the instrument and not the drummer that makes the difference, as if the instrument cosmically possessed the qualities and skills that great drummers have.

NP: That's a true point you're making. I haven't thought about it enough to have framed a real opinion, but the more you say, the more it's true. Now you just see a picture of a famous guy. That ad doesn't say anything about him or the instrument, really. It's just a picture that gives the brand name and says "Here's the famous face with the famous name." That's all the information that's given. That is kind of sad. It's an unfortunate trend toward the superficiality, but I don't know if it's really that changed. Maybe there's just more advertising now.

SF: Are today's drums better made than the drums you played ten years ago?

NP: There's no question that they are better. The standards of quality have certainly improved. I don't know if they <u>sound</u> better and that has to be the bottom line.

SF: Putting endorsements aside for a moment, is there any drumset you've owned that you felt was better than any other drumset you've owned since?

NP: I couldn't say <u>that</u>, but the first good drumset I had certainly meant more to me than any other could. That's only natural. I started out with a really cheap set of Stewart drums. When I went to a set of Rogers, it was the greatest thing. How can you describe that? How they compared soundwise to today's drums, I don't know. The sound hasn't gotten worse.

That's for sure.

SF: You had a great deal of input into the creation of Tama's Artstar drums. For some time after those drums were on the market, you were shown in one of Tama's ads as playing their Superstar drums.

NP: That was a mistake. The drums I'm using now are still the prototype for the Artstar series. I think the ad you're referring to was run last year. They had my setup all wrong too. I wrote them a letter correcting it. Somebody had written to me through MD asking "What is this all about?" I said "Yes, you're right. What is this all about?" After I sent my letter to Tama that was the last I heard about it.

SF: You don't seem to be influenced much by jazz.

NP: Fusion, moreso. I must admit that I like the side of jazz that deals more with the thrust and organization of rock. When jazz lacks that it tends to lack me. Heavy Weather by Weather Report was a very influential album for me. The stuff that Bill Bruford did on his three or four solo albums was all also really, really great.

I have to tell you that I recently got to play on Jeff Berlin's solo album. On one track I got to play together with Steve Smith. Steve actually did most of the playing. I just came in on the choruses for that "thunderous double-drum effect." That was a lot of fun. A real exciting challenge. The album's coming out as we speak, but I don't know what it's called. It was a major milestone for me to walk into a situation like that, with no rehearsal and all I'd ever heard of the music before was a living room demo with a beat box.

SF: Isn't that the first time you've recorded with someone other than Rush?

NP: No. I did a similar thing with a musician named Ken Ramm in Toronto. That record was released in Canada.

The session with Jeff was great because of the quality of musicians there and the limited time factor. I finished some gigs in Florida with Rush, flew out to San Francisco, used a rented kit, borrowed cymbals, sticks and heads. It was all strictly a last minute thing. I had intended to bring out one drum case with my snare drum, cymbals and footpedals, but the case never showed up. We had to do quite a bit of scrounging to pull it off, but we got it in one or two takes. No rehearsals, no click track and no editing.

SF: How about some drummers who've influenced you, other than the ones you usually mention?

NP: There certainly have been some, but they're always so hard to pull off the top of my head. Stewart Copeland has been one. Jerry Marotta as well. Between Jerry and Phil Collins and their work with Peter Gabriel, particularly, I like the ethnic ideas. I liked Rod Morganstein a lot. He's a good player and a lovely guy. I'd also like to add Omar Hakim and Alex Acuna to the list.

SF: The same person who telephoned me and predicted the rise of progressive rock bands, had a question regarding the new Rush album. He felt that Rush's last two albums were more commercial than usual. Was that on purpose? Is the new album going to be more progressive?

NP: Well, if we were trying to be commercial we failed. It's the continuing stages of growth as far as we're all concerned. The more we learned about technique, arrangements, compositions and all that, the more we got involved with it and less and less does the instrumental panache become important. Once you've done it it ceases to become important. Once you've done a few long instrumentals in 7/8, 9/8, 21/16 and what have you, there's never any point in redoing it. The fact is that we've done it and it will

always be a part of our music. There's a nice long workout in 7/8 on the new album, because we've found a new way to use an idea like that. On the last album there were dabblings in odd-time, but it's become less important. That's all. We know ourselves that we can do it and we've explored its possibilities.

We had to go onto something else, which for us was song structure. We took that technical ability along with us and now when we go to arrange a song, nothing stands in the way of trying any kind of different permutations or rhythmic shifts. More and more you look for different ways of achieveing texture, different ways of using melody and computing song arrangements, where you place the verses and choruses, what kind of intro you develop and how you work the instrumental sections into the pieces of the song. All of that has gotten really fascinating for us.

We don't see the face of our music change from having been progressive to not progressive. For us, we're progressing. That's all that progressive music can be and it's just as difficult for us to think of and to play. To us it's totally satisfying and progressive. Perhaps from an outsider's point of view, who judges only on the superficiality of technique, it might seem simpler. Believe me, it's not.

SF: Looking ahead ten years, would you like to take a stab at what you might be doing and what other trends and styles of drumming might emerge?

NP: It's tough to play soothsayer. Electronics moving into the area of sampling; being able to make your own chips -- this is a very important turning point. With the miniaturization and availability of these things to the average learning musician, the trend towards having both acoustic and electronic drums will grow from the beginner's point of view. That's very healthy, but it has to always be good for a drummer to start on real

drums. They have subtleties and tonalities that I don't think electronics will ever manage to totally imitate. It's just not possible. They have become a seperate thing unto their own. They've become a percussion instrument, really, more than a drumset. The potentiality, especially for percussion, of having your own drum chips of any sound at the hit of a stick or the tap of a footpedal is an enormous growth. It has to be good. But, the things I mentioned earlier are all percussion ideas. I don't think they're going to add to a fundamental drumset. They can't replace what an 8X12 tom-tom sounds like, anymore than they can replace what a 24" bass drum sounds like. The electronics have really failed in their emulating sense, but at the same time they have opened up so many doors toward different things that are really exciting.

Improvement in pads will be a very big road in the future. They definitely have to get better. Just about every year a new design in pads comes out with better response and more lifelike response. But, it's still an enormous gulf between getting lifelike pads in response and lifelike pads in terms of sound reproduction. How many different sounds can a snare drum make? It's enormous what an acoustic snare drum can produce. To program each of those variables and each of those sound possibilities electronically? I think we're a long way off from that, if in fact that ever becomes possible.

SF: So, you don't forsee the death of the art of acoustic drumming?

NP: I'll be brave and say no. All the predecessors dictate the rightness of that. The grand piano isn't gone yet. The acoustic violin isn't gone. The acoustic guitar is still here and look at the competition it's had! I'll take a chance and say that acoustic drums won't be gone either.