

# Neil Peart, renowned drummer for rock band Rush, dead at 67

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Neil Peart, drummer for the rock band Rush, died on January 7 in Santa Monica, California at the age of 67. A statement from the band said, “It is with broken hearts and the deepest sadness that we must share the terrible news that on Tuesday our friend, soul brother and band mate of over 45 years, Neil, has lost his incredibly brave three and a half year battle with brain cancer (Glioblastoma).”

Peart was internationally recognized for his virtuosity, precision and innovation as a drummer with the Canadian rock trio Rush. Peart was also the primary lyricist for the band after he joined bassist Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson in July 1974 to replace the original Rush drummer, John Rutsey.

Numerous rock musicians paid tribute to Peart and his contributions. Dave Grohl, former drummer for Nirvana and leader of Foo Fighters, said, “Today, the world lost a true giant in the history of rock and roll. An inspiration to millions with an unmistakable sound who spawned generations of musicians—like myself—to pick up two sticks and chase a dream.”

Modeling himself after Keith Moon (The Who) and John Bonham (Led Zeppelin), Peart was distinguished by an intense and flamboyant drumming style. His 360° kit—with dozens of drums, cymbals, chimes and accessories—and structured drum solos became his signature. However, as aggressive and meticulous as Peart’s rock percussion work was, his contributions to Rush’s songs and lyrics displayed an unusual musical sensibility and creative gift of language.

Neil Ellwood Peart was born on September 12, 1952 in Hagersville, near Hamilton, Ontario. He grew up and went to school in Port Dalhousie, a town on the shore of Lake Ontario.

Peart started playing drums at the age of 13 and became transfixed by it. As he explained to *National Public Radio* in 2015, “Everything disappeared. I’d done well in school up until that time. I was fairly adjusted socially up until that time. And I became completely monomania, obsessed all through my teens. Nothing else existed anymore.”

He took lessons, played for a number of local bands and

performed in towns around southern Ontario into his late teens. After school, he moved to London and played with several bands and did studio session work. Unsuccessful there, Peart returned to Canada 18 months later.

When Rush was seeking a replacement for their founding drummer, Peart showed up for the audition with his gear stored in trash cans in the back of a Ford Pinto. Although they thought his style maniacal, Lee and Lifeson recognized his talent and hired Peart two weeks before the start of the band’s first US tour. They also later urged Peart to write lyrics for the band’s second studio album.

Peart’s love of literature is evident in the lyrics he wrote for some of the most popular Rush songs. The most obvious examples are *Rivendell* (from the 1975 album *Fly by Night*), *Xanadu* (from the 1977 album *A Farewell to Kings*) and *Tom Sawyer* (from the 1981 album *Moving Pictures*).

Peart’s interest in fiction also found its way into Rush’s longer pieces such as the seven-part, 20-minute title track from the 1976 album called *2112*. The song is a complex science-fiction allegory set in the year 2112 in a futuristic society called Megadon. The people of this computerized world are deprived of their “individualism and creativity” and forced to listen only to music served up by the totalitarian priests of Syrinx.

Speaking with *Circus* magazine at the time, Peart said the story “is a cycle of songs based on a development and progression of some things I see in society.”

Expressing the political confusion, dilettantism and outright ignorance common during the heyday of progressive rock, Peart and Rush became entangled in controversy when they included an attribution in the liner notes of *2112* to the “genius” of anti-communist Russian-American author Ayn Rand.

Along with the fact that Rush named both a song from a previous album and their record label after her dystopian novella *Anthem*, Peart gave an interview with *New Music Express* (NME) in 1978 where he directly identified himself—and thereby the band as a whole—with Rand’s ultra-right philosophy. For Rand, capitalism represented the high

point of society because it fully corresponded with the pursuit of naked self-interest, which she stupidly identified with “human nature.”

In the NME interview with Barry Miles, Peart extolled Rand’s reactionary individualism, vigorously defended free enterprise and capitalist private property and attacked the labor movement and socialism. Commenting at the end of the NME interview, Miles equated Peart’s remarks with proto-fascism.

As a result of the references to Rand, Peart’s bandmates Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson have spent a good part of the last four decades explaining that they are not and never have been fascists. Lee, born Gary Lee Weinrib, is the son of Jewish Holocaust survivors from Poland, and Lifeson, born Alexander Zivojinovic, is the son of Serbian immigrants. Both are first-generation Canadians.

Peart long ago distanced himself from his 1978 comments, saying for example in a 2012 *Rolling Stone* interview, “it was important to me at the time in a transition of finding myself.” He also subsequently referred to his political outlook as a “left-leaning libertarian” or “bleeding-heart libertarian.”

The association with right-wing views has hung over Rush for decades. The *National Review*, for example, claimed that the 1982 hit song *Subdivisions* “contributed to Rush’s popularity in conservative and libertarian circles.” With most of its audience, such political concerns probably had nothing to do with the song’s success. Suburban kids found an expression for their frustrations—similar to a good many other rock tracks of the era that focused on teenage angst—when Geddy Lee sings, “In the high school halls, in the shopping malls, conform or be cast out.”

Starting out in 1968 in the Toronto neighborhood of Willowdale as a blues-based hard rock band in the vein of the British trio Cream, Rush evolved in subsequent decades through an eclectic mix of hard and progressive rock, later incorporating punk, reggae and jazz influences. To Lee’s distinctive falsetto and running bass lines and Lifeson’s gripping lead guitar riffs was added Peart’s considerable percussive energy and power.

In the 1970s, under the influence of British progressive rock groups such as Pink Floyd, Yes, Genesis and Jethro Tull, Rush’s popularity grew internationally as they indulged in elaborate “concept albums,” unusual melodies, and complex and changing time signatures. In the 1980s, as they brought keyboards, synthesizers and digital sampling to the fore, they sold out arenas across the US and Canada and millions of LPs along the way.

As Rush went back to a heavy guitar sound in the 1990s and 2000s, the band continued to draw huge crowds, with concerts in cities across Canada, America, Mexico and

Europe. Their final studio album, *Clockwork Angels*, debuted at number 1 in Canada and number 2 in the US in June 2012. Although Rush is very popular, and sold 40 million records worldwide, it remained an enigmatic band with what rock music critics have referred to as a devoted and “cult” fan base.

However, it was this loyal and very opinionated following that forced the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to induct the band in 2013. Although Rush never had a number 1 album, by one measure—12 Billboard Top 10 albums—the band is more popular and successful than any other group identified with progressive rock.

In later years, Neil Peart dispatched some of his frenetic drumming mannerisms for more nuanced styles. These changes coincided with his involvement with the Buddy Rich family and the production of tribute albums to the great American jazz drummer and band leader. Peart’s adjustments were also influenced by the techniques of Gene Krupa and the opportunity to study under the direction of Freddie Gruber beginning in 2007.

Neil Peart suffered personal tragedy in 1997 when his 19-year-old daughter Serena was killed in a car accident on Highway 401 in Ontario. Ten months later, his common-law wife Jacqueline Taylor, died of cancer. Taking a sabbatical from the life of a rock musician, he embarked on long motorcycle trips through North and Central America over the next four years.

Peart published a book, *Ghost Rider, Travels on the Healing Road*, chronicling his travels and life during those years. He has written several non-fiction books about motorcycle riding and his career with Rush.

He returned to his bandmates in 2001 and together they produced three more studio albums and went on the road with six more concert tours. As the requirements of the performances became too physically demanding, Peart announced after the conclusion of the 40th anniversary tour in 2015 that it would be his last.



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