

# **R**elevant HETORIC

## **Rush's Lyrical Rhetoric of Oppression and Liberation: Extending "Freedom Songs" into the Progressive Rock Genre**



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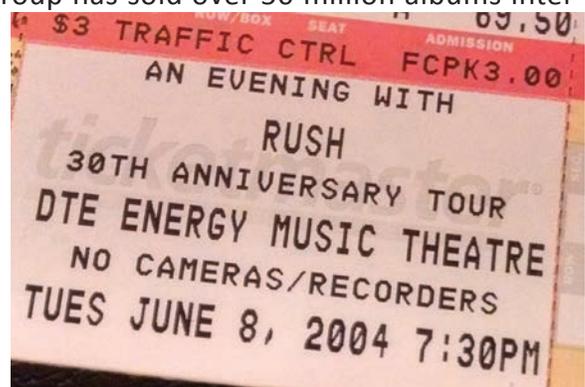
On April 18, 2013, members of the Canadian power trio Rush were among the artists inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, a well-deserved honor that was long overdue. Formed in August 1968, Rush would join artists like Pink Floyd and Yes in shaping the music movement that would come to be categorized as “progressive” rock, or “prog rock,” a rock music sub-genre that



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also developed in the late 1960s.<sup>1</sup> As reflected in the music of Rush, progressive rock involves more advanced musical forms, including an expanded instrumental palette and increased complexity in terms of instrumentation, as well as more sophisticated lyrical themes ranging from unconventional subject matter to increased social commentary. After years playing on the Toronto music scene, Rush formed their own label, Moon Records, and shortly thereafter released their first album, *Rush*, in 1974.<sup>2</sup> Rush's self-titled debut album did not garner much attention until Cleveland's WMMS (100.7 FM), widely regarded as one of the most influential rock radio stations in North America, added the song “Working Man” to its regular rotation.<sup>3</sup> With interest in the band generated by WMMS radio play, Rush's album was picked up by U.S.-based Mercury Records, and soon rock music fans in both Canada and the United States were introduced to some of the most potent and influential songs of the decade.<sup>4</sup>

After releasing a series of successful albums in the 1970s, Rush's fan base quickly extended well beyond the boundaries of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.<sup>5</sup> Today, Rush is considered “one of the most beloved progressive rock bands ever,” and the group has sold over 50 million albums internationally as of 2015.<sup>6</sup> Beyond album sales, Rush's wide-scale popularity can be witnessed in the fact that the band continues to sell out arenas around the world.<sup>7</sup> Rush's continuing popularity can also be evidenced in the many works that reference the group, incorporate the band's songs, or have been in some way inspired by the band. Some examples include an animated Rush appearing on the cartoon *South Park*, Pepsi's Rock Band commercial using a Rush song as its soundtrack, and the music rhythm



game *Guitar Hero: Warriors of Rock* including Rush's seven-part opus "2112," as well as a variety of Rush-inspired imagery (e.g., the band's iconic Starman emblem).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Rush references in popular culture, as well as literary and theatrical productions inspired by Rush, are so numerous that there is a website that provides a chronological listing of known occurrences.<sup>9</sup> Rush's endurance is reflected in the fact that in July 2015, more than forty years after their debut album, the band appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* and was featured in an eight-page article.<sup>10</sup>

Well before being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Rush received critical acclaim for their musicianship by the music industry. Not only had the band already received several Juno Awards (Junos), the Canadian equivalent to the Grammy Awards, but Rush was also inducted into the Juno Hall of Fame in 1994.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Rush had already been nominated several times for Grammy Awards in the "Best Rock Instrumental Performance" category, and each member of the band -- singer/bassist/keyboardist Geddy Lee, guitarist/



keyboardist Alex Lifeson, and percussionist Neil Peart -- has been individually honored for his musicianship. In discussing Rush's music, Tyler Friel, an on-air radio personality at WLER-FM in Western Pennsylvania, writes "they crafted a unique sound that really hasn't been paralleled since."<sup>12</sup> As described by *Rolling Stone* magazine, "In Rush songs, instruments wrap themselves around intricate, often epic-length musical structures..."<sup>13</sup> Rush's intricate music is balanced by complex lyrics, lyrics which have been considered worthy of commentary by various authors.

This essay analyzes lyrics contained in a sample of Rush's greatest hit songs and identifies themes inherent in those songs. The analysis may help reveal why Rush's music has had such long-standing and widespread appeal. In examining the group's song lyrics, this essay provides a perspective from which the reader can view Rush's hits songs as types of "freedom songs," a category of songs prevalent during the civil rights movement of the 1960's decade in which the band was formed. Through such an examination, the band can be viewed as extending freedom songs beyond roots in gospel and folk music and into the progressive rock genre.

## Method

The songs analyzed in this essay were drawn from Rush's most recent greatest hits album, "The Spirit of Radio: Greatest Hits 1974-1987."<sup>14</sup> The album contains 17 of the band's most popular songs from their musical heyday, including a music track, "2112 Overture," which includes a single verse, and thus was deemed as an instrumental for purposes of this study.<sup>15</sup> Once the sample of songs was identified, the records on which the songs debuted were accessed at a large Midwestern university's sound recordings archive. Although the lyrics were included with the records, the songs were listened to in their entirety to help ensure accuracy.

Rush's song lyrics were analyzed through intrinsic rhetorical analysis (i.e., examining for inherent elements) rather than utilizing a predetermined rhetorical lens.<sup>16</sup> An organic method of examination, intrinsic rhetorical analysis is appropriate when a researcher has no preconceived notion of what themes are inherent in rhetorical artifacts. Not bound by predetermined param-

eters, intrinsic rhetorical analysis enables the researcher to discover a wide range of meanings that may be imbedded in rhetorical artifacts and to determine what themes emerge from those rhetorical artifacts, individually and collectively. Intrinsic rhetorical analysis provides the researcher an effective means by which to identify dominant themes inherent in rhetorical artifacts, and the approach is especially useful in examining song lyrics, rhetorical artifacts open to myriad interpretations. Thus, researchers often utilize intrinsic rhetorical analysis in examining song lyrics. For example, Makay and Gonzalez utilized intrinsic rhetorical analysis in examining the lyrics of Bob Dylan's biographical songs and determined that the "myth of the outlaw hero" was a dominant theme inherent in those songs.<sup>17</sup>



An intrinsic rhetorical analysis of songs on Rush's most recent greatest hits album revealed that oppression and liberation are the dominant rhetorical themes found in a majority of the band's hit songs. Accordingly, the 11 songs adhering to the dominant rhetorical themes of oppression and liberation are analyzed individually below, and each analysis summary is followed by a brief discussion as to why the songs' lyrical narratives may have struck a responsive chord with so many listeners.

### Themes of Oppression

During Rush's musical evolution, oppression remained a theme that consistently appeared in many of the band's hit songs. What is more, although some of these songs involve extraordinary settings and characters, the themes remain ones with which most people can easily identify and be moved to a catharsis of emotions. For purposes of this essay, oppression is defined broadly as any form of constraint on personal freedoms imposed by some "agent-of-control."<sup>18</sup> Viewed broadly, oppression can range from the overt oppressive acts of elites to freedom subtly denied to non-elites whose lower statuses require them to make personal sacrifices in order to make a living. This section demonstrates how the shared theme of oppression, and the characteristics that help to build and sustain this theme, are exhibited in six of Rush's greatest hits.

#### *Working Man (1974)*

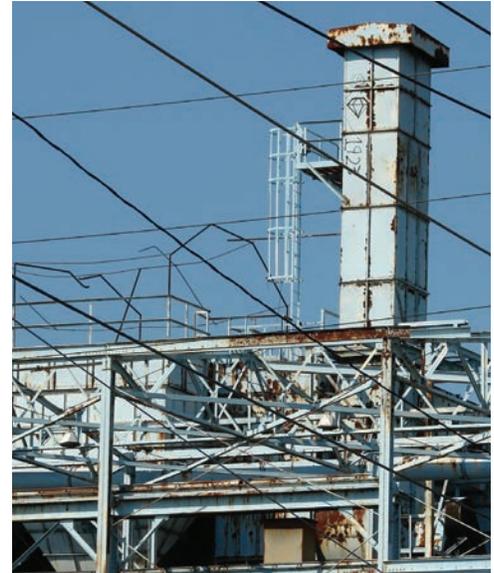
An examination of "Working Man,"<sup>19</sup> the most popular track to appear on Rush's self-titled debut album, reveals a concern for the oppressive circumstances under which individuals are sometimes forced to live, a theme that would recur throughout the band's hit songs for years to come. As its title suggests, the song describes a man who works for a living, a circumstance that the man believes has quite literally come to define him merely as the "working man." Positioned as the narrator of his own story, the working man begins his first-person narrative by expressing dissatisfaction with his unfulfilling life, explaining he has "got no



time for livin'” since he is “workin’ all the time.” The narrator goes on to describe the monotonous existence of a working man, an existence nearly consumed by having to “get up at seven,” “go to work at nine,” and get “home at five o’clock.” Upon returning home, the working man seeks a little reprieve by taking “out a nice, cold beer,” thus marking the end of another work day. Yet, even at the end of the day, the working man further contemplates a life unfulfilled and wonders why “there’s nothin’ goin’ down here.” In the chorus, the working man reiterates his discontentment:

It seems to me I could live my life  
A lot better than I think I am  
I guess that’s why they call me  
The working man  
Well, they call me the working man  
I guess that’s what I am

The theme of work-related oppression embodied in “Working Man” is one to which virtually all listeners can identify. “Working Man” speaks to the oppressive requirements generally imposed on individuals who must work for a living, whether they are full-time, part-time, blue-collar, or white-collar workers. What is more, the working man’s dissatisfaction with having to devote too much of his life to his job is a sentiment shared by all who must submit to the employment grind and, perhaps for this reason, are unable to pursue more life-fulfilling endeavors or seek more personal pleasures. In identifying with the working man’s frustration about his lack of personal autonomy, listeners are able to empathize and possibly even purge themselves of similar negative emotions.



### ***The Temples of Syrinx (1976)***

With “The Temples of Syrinx,” from Rush’s first platinum album, “2112,”<sup>20</sup> the trio continued their trend of speaking to the oppressive conditions under which people are sometimes forced to live. Preceded by its companion track, the almost exclusively instrumental “2112 Overture,” “The Temples of Syrinx” has a futuristic setting.<sup>21</sup> In the song, Rush’s newest member, Peart, offers an Orwellian vision of non-elites subjected to thought control in a mass-mediated society ruled by power elites, the “Priests of the Temples of Syrinx.” The Priests of the Temples of Syrinx, who provide the story’s narration, appear to represent the heads of the economic, government, and media centers that influence and control the dissemination of information to the masses. Within the first stanza of the song, the Priests reveal their elitist, overbearing nature by asserting:

We’ve taken care of everything  
The words you read, the songs you sing  
The pictures that give pleasure to your eyes



It's one for all and all for one  
 We work together, common sons  
 Never need to wonder how or why

Believing that non-elites, referred to as “you” and “common sons,” are unworthy of freedom of choice, the Priests control the dissemination of all information with which members of society can be influenced, be it lyrics, prose, or visual depictions. In the chorus, the Priests boast that their “great computers fill the hallowed halls” and “all the gifts of life are held within” their “walls.” The Priests’ self-praise regarding the mediated society they have created is even more evident when they later proclaim, “look around at this world we’ve made” and “oh, what a nice, contented world.”

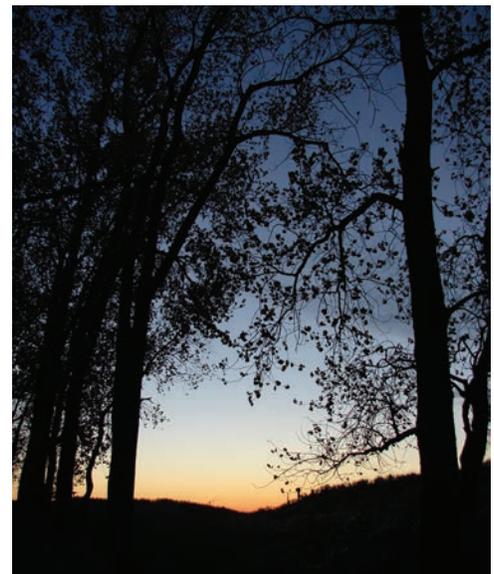
Despite its futuristic setting, “The Temples of Syrinx” echoes, albeit implicitly, modern-day claims that mass-mediated content is largely elite propaganda characterized by censorship, bias, and a lack of diversity. As in “Working Man,” “The Temples of Syrinx” involves a form of oppression to which most “average,” non-elite members of society can relate. By using the term “you,” Rush addresses those of us similarly frustrated by the partiality and homogeneity that often permeate media content, especially news content, in societies where mass communication channels are controlled by a limited range of power elites. At its core, “The Temples of Syrinx” deals with the denial of freedom of choice. Thus, to the extent that choice is important to all individuals who place value in a robust and unfettered marketplace of ideas, the song has the potential to induce a catharsis in listeners who may feel they have been denied that freedom at some point in their lives.

### *The Trees (1978)*

The theme of oppression appears again in “The Trees,”<sup>22</sup> a song on side two of Rush’s album “Hemispheres.” The tale of “The Trees” parallels that found in “The Temples of Syrinx,” the oppression of average citizens by the elite members of their society. “The Trees” describes a conflict where non-elites, the lowly “Maples,” are forced to resist the oppressive conditions being imposed upon them by elites, the lofty “Oaks,” in a society referred to in the song as the “Forest.” The societal conflict is revealed in the opening lines of the song:

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 Maples, unhappy with the restrictions imposed upon them by the elite Oaks, claim “the Oaks are just too lofty, and they grab up all the light.” As representations of average members of society, the Maples are seeking more freedom, referred to as “sunlight” and “light,” and in doing so, encounter resistance from the elite Oaks. Sharing the “Temples of Syrinx” Priests’ sentiment that non-elites are unworthy of personal freedoms, the Oaks “wonder why the Maples can’t be happy in their shade.”



Provoked by the Oaks' indifference to their pleas, "the Maples scream 'Oppression!'" to which "the Oaks just shake their heads." In view of the Oaks' unwillingness to accede to their demands, "the Maples formed a union, and demanded equal rights" asserting, "We will make them give us light." Before the song's close, listeners learn that the Maples' union forced the enactment of "a noble law" in which the trees were "all kept equal," thus effectively putting an end to their "Oak oppression."



"The Trees" is not only a song of oppression but also a song of liberation in which freedom prevails, and the narrative's use of easily identifiable metaphors makes the song accessible to individual interpretations. The song speaks to the sense of injustice that people from various backgrounds have experienced and the social inequity that continues to force individuals to attempt to secure equal rights through strikes, marches, sit-ins, and other forms of protest. As a song of oppression, "The Trees" serves to actuate an emotional catharsis in listeners who have been impacted by oppressive acts in society. At the same time, the song's tale about a successful fight for equality is one towards which all people who value a free society can gravitate. As a song of liberation, "The Trees" serves to instill positive emotions in listeners through its hopeful message that individuals working together for a common cause can achieve liberation from the oppressive circumstances in which they may find themselves.

### *The Spirit of Radio (1980)*

Named for the groundbreaking Toronto-based station, CFNY, "The Spirit of Radio"<sup>23</sup> is the opening track on Rush's "Permanent Waves" album. Although describing the medium of radio as an inherently positive source of human companionship, "The Spirit of Radio" is an editorial regarding the negative aspects of the music industry. After praising the spiritual qualities of listening to songs broadcast over the airwaves, Rush turns to a commentary on how the integrity of music is in danger of being sacrificed due to commercial interests. The threat commercial interests pose to musicians' personal creativity is articulated in the following lines: "one likes to believe in the freedom of music, but glittering prizes and endless compromises, shatter the illusion of integrity, yeah." According to the song, however, artists can retain their musical integrity despite the



fact that some aspects of their profession, such as creative control, have been infringed upon by commercial interests:

All this machinery making modern music  
 Can still be open-hearted  
 Not so coldly charted  
 It's really just a question of your honesty

Speaking to the extent to which financiers will pressure musicians to produce commercially-successful music, the song closes with "for the words of the profits were written on the studio wall, concert hall, and echoes with the sound of salesmen, of salesmen, of salesmen!"

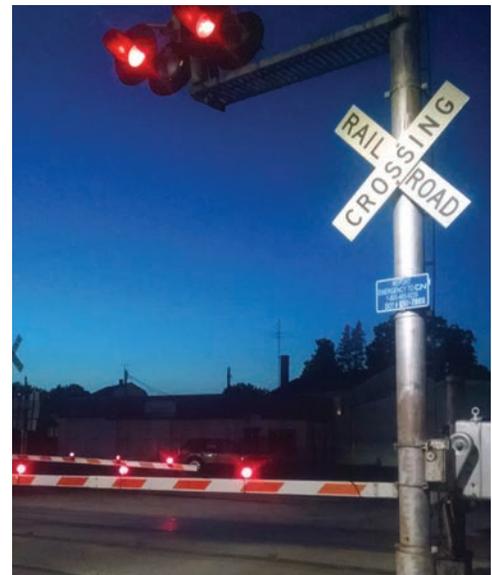
"The Spirit of Radio" reflects age-old concerns about the corrupting influence of money. More specifically, the song addresses how oppressive demands imposed by commercial interests can suppress musicians' individual creativity. While "The Spirit of Radio" may have special meaning for artists who have had to relinquish their creative control to placate financiers, the song also serves as an outlet for frustrations felt by anyone who has been pressured to conform to the will of others.

### *Subdivisions (1982)*

Named for the myriad of cookie-cutter-style housing comprising the suburban landscape,<sup>24</sup> "Subdivisions"<sup>25</sup> also deals with demands for conformity. In this track from "Signals," Peart appears to be reflecting on his experiences growing up outside of Toronto<sup>26</sup> "on the fringes of the city." "Subdivisions" is an anthem about the oppressive demands for conformity that adolescents and young adults living in suburbia often have imposed on them. These demands for conformity are described in unambiguous terms within the song's lyrics:

(Subdivisions)  
 In the high school halls  
 In the shopping malls  
 Conform or be cast out  
 (Subdivisions)  
 In the basement bars  
 In the backs of cars  
 Be cool or be cast out

Stifled by an environment that "seems so one-sided, opinions all provided, the future pre-decided, detached and subdivided," "the dreamer or the misfit" are left "so alone." Later in the song, "the dreamer" and "the misfit" are confronted with the "unattractive truth" that they are indeed outcasts and take "flight" and "drift into the city" in order "to soothe the restless dreams of youth."



Of all songs examined in this essay, the theme of oppression described in "Subdivisions" is probably the theme to which listeners can most easily identify. Peer pressure, whether subtle or

overt, is a nearly universal form of oppression. Even individuals who never faced peer pressures, or at least never submitted to them, certainly know of someone who did. Moreover, most listeners are aware of how peer pressure can cause fissures to form between individuals. In speaking to the oppressive demands for conformity that virtually any listener would have experienced, or have knowledge, "Subdivisions" has enormous cathartic potential.

### ***The Big Money (1985)***

With "The Big Money,"<sup>27</sup> from "Power Windows," Rush extends the lyrical narrative about the evils of money articulated in "The Spirit of Radio" by describing how money can be used to oppress people generally. Ascribed with the human abilities of speech and action, "big money" epitomizes wealthy entities that wield their influence. Within the song's narrative, "big money" has "a mighty voice" and is able to "pull a million strings," "weave a mighty web," and "lock you underground." Possessed of such powers, "big money" is also capable of:

Sometimes pushing people around  
 Sometimes pulling out the rug  
 Sometimes pushing all the buttons  
 Sometimes pulling out the plug

Near the end of the song, listeners are again reminded, "big money got a heavy hand, big money take control."

In discussing the oppressive power of money in general terms, "The Big Money" provides a lyrical narrative that is highly accessible to listeners of all socioeconomic statuses. Ever aware of the substantial power that wealthy entities exert in society, listeners can easily relate the narrative to their own lives, be it in the political arena, corporate world, or other areas of life. Just as the power of money has the potential to threaten individuals' freedom of choice, so too can "The Big Money" move individuals, especially non-elites, to a catharsis with its theme of oppression.



With six of the songs in this sample sharing a common theme of oppression, Rush's success may be attributed in part to how the band frequently created songs involving rhetorical themes of freedom denied that resonated with listeners. What is more, the sampled songs contained themes of oppression pertaining to issues (e.g., peer pressure, suppression by power elites, dissatisfaction with one's circumstances, lack of creative control and freedom of choice) that most people can easily identify with and be moved to a catharsis of negative emotions by.

### **Themes of Liberation**

Although themes of oppression pervade Rush's lyrics, themes of liberation are just as prevalent in the band's hit songs. As a counterpart to the emphasis placed on stories about the restriction of personal freedoms, many of Rush's songs focus on individuals' refusal to live with constraints, themes of liberation with which all people can easily identify and find inspiration. For purposes of this essay, liberation is regarded as any means by which individuals attempt to remain unconstrained in their lives. According to this definition, liberation can include exercising one's free-

doms of action, thought, or will. This section demonstrates how the common theme of liberation, and the characteristics that help to build and sustain this theme, are exhibited in five of Rush's greatest hits.



### *Fly by Night (1975)*

The title track on Rush's sophomore album, "Fly by Night,"<sup>28</sup> as its title suggests, is a song of liberation. Marking a departure from Rush's theme of oppression, the theme of liberation inherent in "Fly by Night" would also recur throughout the band's hit songs for years to come. With references like "playing" and "leaving my homeland," "Fly by Night" appears to be inspired by Lee and Peart's experiences touring in support of the band's debut album. The song was, after all, written while the band was on the road.<sup>29</sup> Yet, the first-person narrator never makes direct reference to music in the song. Unsatisfied with what he views as an unfulfilling existence, the song's protagonist announces his plans to exercise freewill to seek out a "new life" with grander purpose stating, "It's time I was king now, not just one more pawn." Throughout the song, the protagonist reiterates his intention to seek self-fulfillment with statements such as "start a new chapter, find what I'm after." During the chorus, the narrator similarly explains that he is going to embark on a life-altering journey in order to achieve self-fulfillment:

Fly by night, away from here  
Change my life again  
Fly by night, goodbye my dear  
My ship isn't coming and I just can't pretend

As the song progresses, the protagonist intensifies the inspirational tone of the story by expressing hope that his metamorphic flight will result in positive change. Speaking optimistically about his decision to abandon his current situation, the protagonist states, "no fright or hindsight, leaving behind that empty feeling inside." Near the end of the song, the protagonist tells listeners, "my life begins today," indicating his metamorphic flight has begun.

While it may have been based on events in the lives of traveling musicians, "Fly by Night" involves a theme of liberation that anyone can relate to and be inspired by: a person's journey to find self-fulfillment. Like the song's protagonist, individuals longing for self-fulfillment have exercised, or considered exercising, their freedoms of will and action to somehow better themselves, whether in terms of education, employment, social relations, or some other aspect of their lives. With its empowering message that individuals can achieve self-fulfillment in their lives despite

their current circumstances, "Fly by Night" is a source of inspiration for any listener who needs to change some aspect of his or her life.

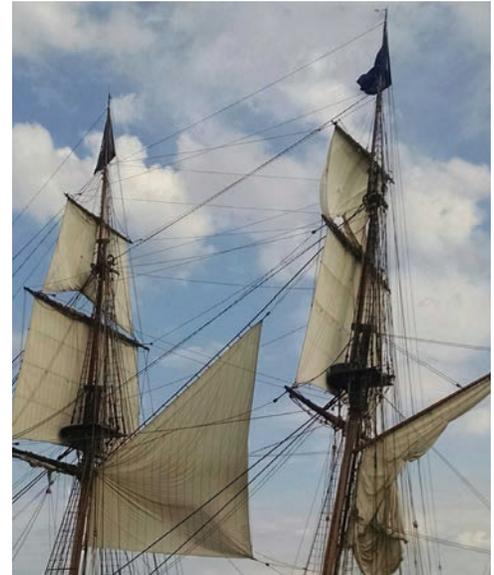
### *Closer to the Heart (1977)*

Rush extends the narrative regarding the liberating potential of freewill with "Closer to the Heart,"<sup>30</sup> a track from "A Farewell to Kings." By describing how individuals from various walks of life are capable of achieving self-fulfillment, the underlying message contained within the song's lyrics is that persons can find their destinies by following their own hearts. According to the song, by keeping with an instinct to stay "closer to the heart," "the men who hold high places" are able to mold "a new reality," "the Blacksmith and the Artist" can "forge their creativity," and "Philosophers and Ploughmen" are able "to sow a new mentality." Having described how individuals from all walks of life can achieve their destinies by simply following their hearts, "Closer to the Heart" then invites the listener to embark upon a journey:

You can be the Captain  
And I will draw the Chart  
Sailing into destiny  
Closer to the Heart

Within the context of the last verse, "Captain" embodies an individual's freewill to follow his or her heart, the inner force that guides one's actions. The song's use of the term "you" invites the listener to embark upon the metaphorical journey to find his or her destiny.

With its tale of persons who are pursuing their destinies, "Closer to the Heart," like "Fly by Night," is a story of self-fulfillment and freewill. Given that, at some point, all individuals embark on a personal journey to find their true calling, it is especially easy for listeners to identify with, and find inspiration in, the liberating lyrical narrative of "Closer to the Heart." Although the song's narrative is composed of few lyrics, there is perhaps no greater source of hope and inspiration for listeners than a message that persons can fulfill their destinies by simply exercising their freewill.



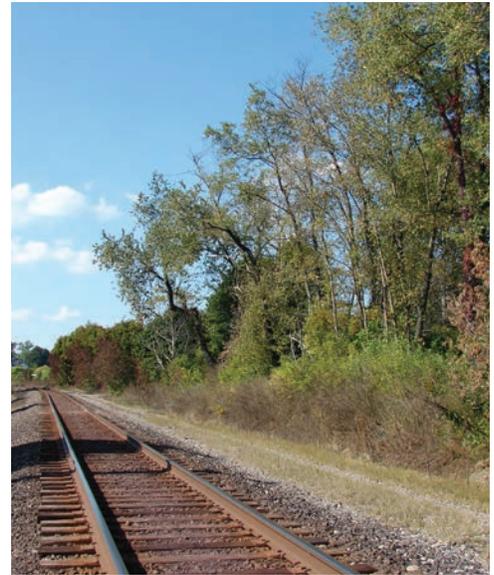
### *Freewill (1980)*

Like "Closer to the Heart," "Freewill,"<sup>31</sup> another track from "Permanent Waves," also deals with a person's "hunt" for his or her destiny. However, as its title suggests, "Freewill" has a more explicit message pertaining to the control individuals have over their destinies. During the lyrical narrative, the song's main character rejects the notion "life has nothing left to chance." To those who would claim that in life "they were dealt a losing hand" or that "the cards were stacked against them," the main character responds:

You can choose a ready guide in some celestial voice  
If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice  
You can choose from phantom fears and kindness that can kill  
I will choose a path that's clear  
I will choose freewill

Thus, for the person who views herself or himself as “a prisoner in chains, a victim of venomous fate,” the song’s protagonist would point out that individuals have “uncertain ends” and are free to exercise a measure of control over their own fortunes.

Of all songs examined in this essay, “Freewill” contains the most overt theme of liberation. Listeners are encouraged, in no uncertain terms, to take it upon themselves to break the “chains” that bind them in their lives. To the extent that all individuals are prisoners of some restrictive fate at one point or another, all individuals can relate to, and be inspired by, the song’s freewill theme. Audience identification is made all the more easy given that “Freewill” is written in the first-person, allowing listeners to position themselves in the protagonist’s role.



### ***Tom Sawyer (1981)***

“Tom Sawyer,”<sup>32</sup> the opening track on “Moving Pictures,” the group’s highest selling album to date,<sup>33</sup> is also an uplifting story about freewill. The song’s protagonist, “today’s Tom Sawyer,” is an ordinary person battling to overcome his state of discontent by “riding out the day’s events” with a “mean, mean stride” and a “mean, mean pride.” According to the song, this “modern day warrior” remains hopeful in spite of being discontent by using his “reserve” as “a quiet defense,” an exhibition of freewill Rush goes on to applaud:

No his mind is not for rent  
To any god or government  
Always hopeful, yet discontent  
He knows changes aren’t permanent

As a tale of day-to-day struggle with discontentment, “Tom Sawyer” speaks to all individuals who face struggles but, like the song’s central character, nonetheless persevere and get “right on to the friction of the day.”



Like “Working Man,” “Tom Sawyer” deals with the daily struggles faced by average persons. However, as a story of a person exercising freewill as a means of remaining optimistic and mentally independent, the primary theme of “Tom Sawyer” is one of liberation. Like his namesake in the Mark Twain novel, Rush’s Tom Sawyer is resistant to pressures for social conformity. Even while “Tom Sawyer” addresses the plight of average members of society, the song is also a story about the strength of human spirit in the face of adversity, a theme with which virtually all persons can identify and find inspiration.

### ***Limelight (1981)***

“Limelight,”<sup>34</sup> another song from “Moving Pictures,” builds upon the theme of liberation and, much like “Fly by Night,” offers listeners guidance for achieving self-fulfillment. In the song, Peart

comments on the downside of fame one can experience as a well-known musician, living “on a lighted stage” and “caught in the camera eye.” As “Limelight” suggests, being a celebrity can be like living in a “gilded cage” where one is asked to do the “unreal,” like pretend a stranger such as a fan “is a long-awaited friend.” However, the song advises that individuals “ill-equipped to act” when “cast in this unlikely role” of stardom can stay “in touch with some reality” and “keep oneself intact.” Although based on a celebrity’s experiences, “Limelight’s” commentary regarding how individuals can liberate themselves from an unfulfilling existence and achieve self-fulfillment by remaining grounded in reality is one to which anyone can relate. As the song states, “all the world’s indeed a stage, and we are merely players, performers and portrayers, each another’s audience, outside the gilded cage.” The need for individuals to remain in touch with some reality in order to achieve self-fulfillment is expressed further in the chorus:

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

Remaining consistent to his analogy between performance and human existence, Peart assigns identical requirements for persons who desire to “seem,” a synonym for “portray,” as some performers do, and individuals who want to “be,” which is synonymous with the term “exist.”



In “Limelight,” Rush again invokes a universally identifiable topic with its call for listeners to try to achieve self-fulfillment by exercising their freedoms of thought and will. In its call for individuals to abandon their feelings of alienation, which virtually all people experience at some point, and “get on with” their lives, “Limelight” serves to inspire all listeners, especially those who feel disconnected from certain social cliques or from society in general.

With tales of various endeavors to achieve self-fulfillment and to exercise freedoms of will and thought, Rush’s songs of liberation appear almost as frequently as the band’s songs of oppression within the sample of greatest hits. Given that five of the songs in this sample share a common theme of liberation, Rush’s success may also be attributed in part to how the band frequently created songs involving rhetorical themes of freedom desired that resonated with listeners. Similar to how Rush’s songs of oppression included topics that most people can easily identify with and be moved to a catharsis of negative emotions by, Rush’s songs of liberation included subjects that are easy for all people to identify with and be inspired by.

### Summary and Conclusion

To better understand why Rush’s songs have had such widespread popularity with and, perhaps, influence on listeners around the world for so many decades, this essay analyzed lyrics contained in a sample of the band’s greatest hit songs to determine the themes inherent in those songs. An intrinsic rhetorical analysis of the sampled songs, which were drawn from the band’s

most recent greatest hits album, revealed a consistent oppression-liberation thematic pattern. On one hand, the band's hit songs often deal with themes of oppression, topics with which many people can easily identify and be moved to an emotional catharsis. With tales of freedoms denied by agents-of-control, Rush's songs of oppression allow listeners to vent their pent-up frustrations about the lack of personal autonomy they have, or have had, in their lives. At the same time, however, songs examined in this essay involve themes of liberation with which all people can easily identify and find inspiration. With stories about individuals endeavoring to live their lives without constraints, Rush's songs of liberation serve to encourage listeners to exercise their own freedoms of action, thought, and will. Given the frequency with which these rhetorical themes reverberate throughout their hit songs, Rush's music may especially resonate with listeners who can identify with these experiences, and who may respond to the emotional chords the songs' themes strike.



Taken together, the majority of Rush's hit songs might be viewed as types of "freedom songs," a category of songs prevalent during the civil rights movement of the 1960's decade in which the band was formed. Similar to many of the freedom songs that were popular in the 1960s, Rush's hits are frequently anthems about the oppression that people often experience in a world ruled by social elites. Moreover, just as the popularity of freedom songs in the 1960s may be largely attributed to their references to issues of concern in the civil rights movement, Rush's songs of oppression may have resonated with a mass audience by remaining grounded in issues of oppression to which many people can identify. Rush's songs of oppression not only address concerns about how elites can use their power or influence to restrict non-elites' personal freedoms, but the band's songs also speak to the subtle feelings of oppression that many people experience as workers and consumers. Moreover, Rush's songs of oppression also remind audiences that sometimes the most oppressive conditions that individuals are forced to endure are those brought on by their peers, a nearly universal experience.

Also like many of the freedom songs of the 1960s, Rush's songs of liberation tell listeners that they can overcome their oppressive conditions through the forces of personal action and will. What is more, Rush's songs of liberation suggest to listeners that they can escape the oppressive realities of their lives by embarking on a personal quest for self-fulfillment, a journey the band describes through the metaphors of flight and navigation. Whereas the freedom songs of the 1960's civil rights movement often addressed liberation in terms of social equality relating to race specifically, Rush's songs of liberation focus on individuals' refusal to live with constraints generally, something which could account for the songs' mass appeal. After all, any individual yearning for personal autonomy can potentially find inspiration in the generalized themes of liberation that Rush weaves into the lyrical narratives of their songs.

Given the consistent oppression-liberation thematic pattern inherent in Rush's hit songs and the songs' rhetorical similarities to freedom songs of the 1960's civil rights movement, Rush can be viewed as extending freedom songs beyond roots in gospel and folk music and into the progressive rock genre. Within the progressive rock genre, Rush's freedom songs are able to resonate with a mass audience numbering in the millions because the songs are possessed of more generalized themes of oppression and liberation that are highly accessible to many people.



Similar to how freedom songs generated positive emotions in, and served as a negative emotional outlet for, civil rights activists during the 1960s, Rush's freedom songs provide listeners with a sense of inspiration and a vehicle for the purgation of negative emotions.

This essay furthers our understanding of the rhetorical nature of Rush's lyrics and the role the lyrics may have played, and may continue to play, in attracting millions of listeners to the trio's songs. Given the critical acclaim Rush has received for their musicianship, future studies could examine how the band's music and lyrics may work together to attract listeners, thus building on previous studies examining how music and lyrics function together rhetorically. As with this essay, an examination of how Rush's music and lyrics may work together to create meaning for listeners would increase our understanding of the rhetorical potential of popular song, an area of study that will continue to demand the attention of scholars from various disciplines.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Hegarty and Martin Halliwell, *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock Since the 1960s* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); "Rush Biography," *The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum*, <http://rockhall.com/inductees/rush/bio/> (accessed August 14, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> "Rush Biography," *The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum*, <http://rockhall.com/inductees/rush/bio/> (accessed August 14, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> "Rush Biography," *The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum*, <http://rockhall.com/inductees/rush/bio/> (accessed August 14, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Christopher McDonald, *Rush, Rock Music, and the Middle Class: Dreaming in Middletown* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); "Rush Biography," *The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum*, <http://rockhall.com/inductees/rush/bio/> (accessed August 14, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> All information cited from the Recording Industry Association of America's (RIAA) online "Gold & Platinum Searchable Database" was obtained by entering "Rush" into the "Search" section, selecting "RUSH" from the list of options, and clicking the "SEARCH" button.

<sup>6</sup> "Rush Biography," *Rolling Stone*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/rush/biography> (accessed August 14, 2015); "Gold & Platinum Searchable Database," *Recording Industry Association of America*, [http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?content\\_selector=gold-platinum-searchable-database](http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?content_selector=gold-platinum-searchable-database) (accessed August 14, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Bukszpan, *The Encyclopedia of Heavy Metal* (New York: Sterling, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Chris Barth, "Video: Rush on Bringing '2112' to 'Guitar Hero,'" *Rolling Stone* (July 20, 2010), <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/video-rush-on-bringing-2112-to-guitar-hero-20100720> (accessed August 14, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> "Rush Pop Culture References in Literature and Film," *Anthem Entertainment*, <http://www.2112.net/powerwindows/main/RushReferences.htm> (accessed August 14, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Brian Hiatt, "From Rush With Love: Is This the End of the Road for the Geek-Rock Gods," *Rolling Stone* (2015, July): 40-47.

<sup>11</sup> "Artist Summary," *The Juno Awards*, [http://junoawards.ca/awards/artist-summary/?artist\\_name=rush&submit=Search](http://junoawards.ca/awards/artist-summary/?artist_name=rush&submit=Search) (accessed August 14, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Tyler Friel, personal email communication, July 22, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> "Rush Biography," *Rolling Stone*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/rush/biography> (accessed August 14, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Rush, *The Spirit of Radio: Greatest Hits 1974-1987*, 2003, compact disc.

<sup>15</sup> Rush, "2112 Overture" by Geddy Lee, Alex Lifeson and Neil Peart, on *The Temples of Syrinx*, Mercury Records, 1976, vinyl recording.

<sup>16</sup> Unlike an extrinsic (i.e., expert) rhetorical analysis, intrinsic rhetorical analysis allows individuals to conduct rhetorical analyses even if they are not rhetorical scholars. Thus, intrinsic rhetorical analysis is appealing and useful for non-academics interested in analyzing rhetorical artifacts. However, intrinsic rhetorical analysis is sometimes used by rhetorical scholars as well.

<sup>17</sup> John J. Makay and Alberto Gonzalez, "Dylan's Biographical Rhetoric and the Myth of the Outlaw Hero," *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 52 (1987): 165-180.

- <sup>18</sup> John J. Makay and Alberto Gonzalez, "Dylan's Biographical Rhetoric and the Myth of the Outlaw Hero," *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 52 (1987): 175.
- <sup>19</sup> Rush, "Working Man," by Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson, on *Rush*, Mercury Records, 1974, vinyl recording.
- <sup>20</sup> "Gold & Platinum Searchable Database," *Recording Industry Association of America*, [http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?content\\_selector=gold-platinum-searchable-database](http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?content_selector=gold-platinum-searchable-database) (accessed August 14, 2015).
- <sup>21</sup> Rush, "The Temples of Syrinx," by Neil Peart, on *2112*, Mercury Records, 1976, vinyl recording.
- <sup>22</sup> Rush, "The Trees," by Neil Peart, on *Hemispheres*, Mercury Records, 1978, vinyl recording.
- <sup>23</sup> Rush, "The Spirit of Radio," by Neil Peart, on *Permanent Waves*, Mercury Records, 1980, vinyl recording.
- <sup>24</sup> Carol Selby Price and Robert M. Price, *Mystic rhythms: The philosophical vision of Rush* (Berkeley Heights: Wildside Press, 1999): 35.
- <sup>25</sup> Rush, "Subdivisions," by Neil Peart, on *Signals*, Mercury Records, 1982, vinyl recording.
- <sup>26</sup> Brian Harrigan, *Rush* (London: Omnibus Press, 1982): 14.
- <sup>27</sup> Rush, "The Big Money," by Neil Peart, on *Power Windows*, Mercury Records, 1985, vinyl recording.
- <sup>28</sup> Rush, "Fly by Night," by Geddy Lee and Neil Peart, on *Fly by Night*, Mercury Records, 1975, vinyl recording.
- <sup>29</sup> Brian Harrigan, *Rush* (London: Omnibus Press, 1982): 18.
- <sup>30</sup> Rush, "Closer to the Heart," by Neil Peart and Peter Talbot, on *A Farewell to Kings*, Mercury Records, 1977, vinyl recording.
- <sup>31</sup> Rush, "Freewill," by Neil Peart, on *Permanent Waves*, Mercury Records, 1980, vinyl recording.
- <sup>32</sup> Rush, "Tom Sawyer," by Neil Peart and Pye DuBois, on *Moving Pictures*, Mercury Records, 1981, vinyl recording.
- <sup>33</sup> "Gold & Platinum Searchable Database," *Recording Industry Association of America*, [http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?content\\_selector=gold-platinum-searchable-database](http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?content_selector=gold-platinum-searchable-database) (accessed August 14, 2015).
- <sup>34</sup> Rush, "Limelight," by Neil Peart, on *Moving Pictures*, Mercury Records, 1981, vinyl recording.