

Chris McDonald. 2009. *Rush, Rock Music and the Middle Class: Dreaming in Middletown*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

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I first heard the rock band Rush in 1990 when a friend in my ninth-grade science class lent me their first greatest hits collection, *Chronicles*. I was raised in a middle-class suburb of Annapolis, Maryland, and the tastemakers at my high school informed me that Rush was indeed very cool, so I better listen to them. By the tenth grade, all of my friends listened to their music and spoke with great authority about the band's superior musicianship and the deep meaning we were confident was so evident in Peart's lyrics. For us, Rush's albums were not just the soundtracks to our adolescence; we considered them a trusted font of worldly wisdom.

Rush is a virtuoso rock trio begun in 1968 in Toronto and best known for the classic-rock staples "Tom Sawyer" (1981), "The Spirit of Radio" (1980), "Closer to the Heart" (1977), and a half-dozen or so others. Each of the musicians in the trio is a perennial poll winner for his respective instrument in magazines such as *Guitar Player* and *Modern Drummer*. Geddy Lee (b. Gary Lee Weinrib) sings, plays bass guitar, and, since 1977, also plays various keyboard instruments and synthesizers. His voice is "distinctive," in that he sings in a high register that many consider an acquired taste. Alex Lifeson (b. Aleksandar Živojinović) plays guitar, and Neil Peart is their revered and ostentatious drummer. Lee and Lifeson regularly write the band's music, and, Peart, far more often than not, writes the lyrics.

Rush has had a large cult following and substantial commercial success since their breakthrough album *2112* (1976), and their first gold record, *A Farewell to Kings* (1977). My friends and I collected all of their albums, both on cassette and later on compact disc, and we scoured liner notes, tour books, VHS concert films, and Rush's terrible music videos for any morsel of information concerning this band that we loved so much. We saw them in concert each time they were in town, and proudly wore their t-shirts like medals in school the next day. And yet, though we were eager to purchase anything concerning this band, there were few book-length resources available at that time. Two slender biographies, Steve Gett's 48-page *Rush: Success Under Pressure* (1984) and Bill Banasiewicz's 96-page *Rush Visions: The Official Biography* (1988) are two exceptions, as are a number of guitar tablature anthologies, as well as Bill Wheeler's drum transcription books

Drum Techniques of Rush (1985) and *More Drum Techniques of Rush* (1989). Given Rush's commercial clout, we were clearly being underserved.

In the late nineties, however, the floodgates opened. In 1996, Peart published his first travelogue, *The Masked Rider: Cycling in Africa*, which he followed up with *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road* (2002), *Traveling Music: Playing Back the Soundtrack to My Life and Times* (2004), *Roadshow: Landscape With Drums: A Concert Tour by Motorcycle* (2006), and *Far and Away: A Prize Every Time* (2011). In 1999, Carol Selby Price published *Mystic Rhythms: The Philosophical Vision of Rush*, and in 2002, Leonard Roberto published *A Simple Kind of Mirror: The Lyrical Vision of Rush*. Also, two new biographies were published: *Contents Under Pressure: 30 Years of Rush at Home & Away* by Martin Popoff (2004), and *Rush: Chemistry: The Definitive Biography* by Jon Collins (2010). Directors Scot McFadyen and Sam Dunn also released their excellent documentary *Rush: Beyond the Lighted Stage* on DVD (2010).

Chris McDonald published *Rush, Rock Music and the Middle Class: Dreaming in Middletown* in 2009, and, beyond adding to the literature concerning Rush, his is also one of several academic books specifically concerning progressive rock that was published in the past thirteen years. These books include Bill Martin's *Music of Yes: Structure and Vision in Progressive Rock* (1996) and *Listening to the Future: The Time of Progressive Rock 1968–1978* (1998), Edward Macan's *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (1997), and the anthology *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*, edited by Kevin Holm–Hudson, which includes a chapter about Rush and individualism by Durrell S. Bowman (2002). Even the anthology *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* opens with an article concerning progressive rock: editor John Covach's essay "Progressive Rock, *Close to the Edge*, and the Boundaries of Style" (1997).

What makes this burst of scholarship both surprising and remarkable is progressive rock's relatively low cultural and critical value in the 25 years preceding Martin's first book. It is perhaps not coincidental that a teenager who listened to Yes or Rush in high school in the 1970s—which was the peak of progressive rock's popularity—would be between 35 and 40 years-of-age in 1996, a stage of life when he or she could perhaps complete and publish a book about his or her favorite progressive rock band. This would account for the mildly polemical tone that underlies so many of these works, including McDonald's. Simon Frith argues that there is a place for value judgment in popular music scholarship—that promoting your favorite artists to audiences who are unfamiliar with, or disinterested in, that artist's music is meaningful academic work (1996:8–9). McDonald's advocacy for Rush, however, may be too problematic to be justified by this argument.

McDonald's primary goal for his book is to "develop a critical understanding of Rush" using his own musicological training and the "historical and sociological literature on the North American middle class" (2009:5). McDonald is an ethnomusicologist, but his study of Rush reads more like the work of a cultural studies scholar. In his ethnography of Bruce Springsteen fans, *Tramps Like Us*, Daniel Cavicchi writes that cultural studies "is concerned more with fandom as a concept or social force, locating its meaning in institutions and ideologies," whereas an ethnography "is concerned more with fandom as a practice or experience, locating its meaning in fans' own accounting of their activities" (1998:7–8). Though McDonald does poll and interview Rush fans for his study, a majority of his arguments are supported with his own interpretation of Rush's music and lyrics, and with scholarship concerning middle-class institutions and ideologies. Unfortunately, this makes McDonald's argument cumbersome when he expands his study to encompass the lives and thoughts of both Rush fans and the musicians responsible for the music itself. When McDonald attempts to bridge the gap between the academic literature on the middle-class and the actual experiences of middle-class Rush listeners, his argument becomes fractious.

McDonald explains that Rush embodies and represents North American "middle-classness," and that the band's "music and career are a sustained and revealing response to the condition of being *of* the North American middle class during the last three decades of the twentieth century" (2009:4). According to McDonald, Rush is a perfect vehicle for discussing the middle class's relationship with rock music because of their "suburban origins," and "the vividness and acuteness with which [Rush] represents and wrestles with its suburban, middle-class identity" (2009:4). In this way, Rush's music speaks to "the dreams, fantasies, fears, and self-criticisms of a particular [suburban] slice of the North American middle class" (2009:4). Unfortunately, McDonald does not differentiate between the US middle class and the Canadian middle class, which is an omen of the ambiguity to come.

McDonald argues that Rush criticizes suburbs, as did Adorno and Mills, both as places "limited, parochial, conformist, and over-managed by experts and bureaucrats," and places that promote "individualism, capitalist free enterprise, and a respect for high culture" (2009:5–6). McDonald asserts that this cognitive dissonance is itself a particularly middle-class paradox. He goes on to explain that the band expresses this paradox because they were raised middle class; that this cognitive dissonance pervades the meaning present in Rush's music; and that listeners are drawn to the band because of the expression of these seemingly conflicting values. Ultimately, McDonald presents this analysis to legitimize Rush's music by connecting it to these particular scholarly theories concerning middle-class American values.

McDonald also touches on gender and race as each pertains to Rush and to the middle class: for example, he discusses the feminine coding of acoustic guitar passages in progressive rock (2009:36), and the masculine “cult of musicianship” prevalent among Rush fans (2009:171). He also remarks upon the creative autonomy that record companies granted to white male rock bands such as Rush in the 1970s, an autonomy that was withheld from black and female artists of the same era (2009:108). However, McDonald writes that gender and race “did not seem to say anything meaningful about Rush specifically,” so, to remain within the bounds of his objective, much of McDonald’s book concerns the music of Rush and the middle-class paradox of conformity and individualism.

McDonald’s analysis of Rush’s song “Red Barchetta” (1981) is a particularly strong example of the fruits of his larger analysis. In this example, his study concerns the middle-class desire for physical and emotional escape out of suburban confinement. “Barchetta” is a sci-fi narrative set in a near future when cars are outlawed. The protagonist “elude[s] the Eyes,” and hops a train to his uncle’s house hidden outside the government’s border; he is thrilled to escape his heavily policed city. His uncle has a “brilliant red Barchetta” sports car, preserved “from a better, vanished time,” that the protagonist races through the countryside on Sundays. On this particular Sunday, however, he’s chased by “a gleaming alloy air-car . . . two lanes wide,” and, “straining the limits of machine and man,” he outwits and outraces the antagonist by driving over a narrow bridge back to his uncle’s cottage, leaving the “giants stranded at the riverside” (Rush 1981).

For McDonald, “Barchetta” is a fantasy that invites the listener to escape from his or her reality and enter into a private, autonomous, and perhaps better interior world. He asserts that an escape into fantasy can provide “a particular experience of interiority that is rooted in middle-class and modernist ideas about individuality” (2009:40). This kind of individuality stresses a divide between the public and the private, and insists that one’s inside world can be autonomous from the outside world. Therefore, fantasy allows listeners to find their selves in an autonomous, inside world that is separate and different from the public, outside world. McDonald writes how “the pleasures of Rush’s escapist repertoire were secret pleasures that helped express a part of the self not revealed to others,” and listeners found themselves in Rush’s music, where they could think of themselves as unique individuals separate from, and perhaps superior to, the parochial Others (2009:40). This rang true as “Barchetta” was manna for high school boys like myself in 1990, helping us find our place in the spectrum between individualism and conformity.

McDonald also writes convincingly of how the exterior suburban world of the protagonist in “Barchetta” is coded as domestic and feminine, but when he escapes this world to drive the red Barchetta, he is coded as a masculine hero: he whips through the countryside illegally, he drives a two-seater alone on a private adventure, and he handles the car like an expert. McDonald presents “Barchetta” as a narrative about the individual who stands apart from society, who is in control of his destiny, and who succeeds both despite the oppressive world around him, and because of the tenacity of his individual free will. Following sociologist Robert Bellah, McDonald considers this kind of individuality quintessentially middle class, and for him this song presents the paradox at the heart of middle-class existence: the suburban exterior world is rigid, oppressive, and conformist, but a person can transcend this confinement by being an exceptional individual.

In the case of “Barchetta,” McDonald provides a strong argument for the connection between research concerning the American middle class and the music of Rush; however, not all of his arguments are so cogent. McDonald often prefers to accept various theories about Rush and the middle class *a priori*, rather than substantiate them via empirical evidence. This becomes problematic when he then proceeds to offer *a posteriori* discussion of the band and its fans. For example, in the same chapter as his analysis of “Red Barchetta,” McDonald seeks to prove that the mostly instrumental space epic “Cygnus X-1” (1977) offers listeners the “potential for transcendence through the fantasy the story provides” (2009:51). He explains how “all worldly concerns are made to seem small, unimportant, and mundane when set against more cosmic themes, and we are given license to transcend our day-to-day lives when inhabiting the world that songs like ‘Cygnus X-1’ construct” (McDonald 2009:51). “Cygnus X-1” is a science fiction narrative in which a rocket ship is sucked into a black hole that the pilot of the ship suspects is an astral door to another dimension. The long instrumental passages of this performance evoke the program detailed in the lyrics.

McDonald labels “Cygnus X-1” “headphone” music, or “music for listening and contemplation” (2009:48). He writes how “headphone listening is solitary, isolating the listener in his or her own sound world,” and compares this to “the solitary space traveler,” of “Cygnus,” “cocooned in a rocket ship, embarking on a fantastic adventure” (McDonald 2009:48). “The rocket ship and the headphones,” McDonald explains, “are both mechanical apparatuses, conduits for a journey into a very different space than the bedroom, the home, the school, or the suburb” (2009:48). McDonald writes how predominantly instrumental music, like “Cygnus,” provides two kinds of escape: one into an “otherworldly landscape” conjured by the music, and another into a kind of formalist aesthetics, as written about in the scholarship

of Carl Dahlhaus (2009:48). To substantiate the potential for a formalist discussion of “Cygnus,” McDonald narrates the ten-minute song’s changing textures, arrangements, programmatic sound effects, major musical figures, and chord progressions.

According to McDonald’s interpretation of Dahlhaus, contemplative listening “provides an opportunity to lose oneself and forsake all worldly distractions through the experience of music,” so that the listener becomes “completely immersed in an autonomous musical world” (McDonald 2009:48). McDonald then cites Leo Treitler, who criticizes musical formalism for isolating and disconnecting music from the social.¹ McDonald argues that “the world created by an all-consuming interest in musical form, musicianship, and composition is a kind of escapism through transcendence. All the earthly realities of human relationships, current events, history, the social ambivalence of race, class, [and] gender . . . are swept away by an intensely interior and technical focus on the music itself” (2009:50–51).

To substantiate this claim, McDonald quotes two Rush fans who appreciate the formalism in Rush’s music, and who therefore listen to Rush’s programmatic pieces as music without any program or story. In the context of Treitler’s comment, McDonald claims these fans separate the music from the social. The first explains how Rush’s song “Xanadu” (1977) is “mostly about instrumentation and compositional form for me” (McDonald 2009:49). “I like to sit down and put the headphones on and not have anything else get in the way,” he says; “I like to hear *everything*, even in the background” (McDonald 2009:49). Similarly, when McDonald plays the instrumental piece “La Villa Strangiato” (1978) for the second, he exclaims, “Ah, those chords—I don’t know what it is, but I just love them” (2009:50). McDonald concludes how “one could argue that the fans cited above listen to Rush in a formalist manner,” an argument he concludes by offering Treitler’s criticism of this kind of musical formalism (2009:50).

Therefore, McDonald claims that Rush fans, such as the two that he quotes, listen intently to the musical details in Rush’s music to not only escape and transcend the confinement of the middle-class suburbs, but remove themselves from the problems and inequities of the world. In other words, by listening closely to Rush’s music, fans escape the burden of social responsibility. Is that really what he says? While I agree that these fans appreciate the formalism of Rush’s music, and that a purely formalist appreciation of music does separate music from its social context, to claim these two fans listen to Rush to escape social responsibility is a stretch. Harris Berger has said of pop music scholarship, “a critical analysis only makes sense if interpretations describe the experiences of the people who make and listen to the music” (1999:16). Though there may be a kernel of truth to

McDonald's observation, it seems naïve if not unethical to write only of one resolutely determined path for listeners' motivations, and intent for modes of listening, let alone a path that would indict them as a-political.

Concerning the musicians in Rush, McDonald does support his thesis with quotes from published interviews with all three musicians. However, several key biographical details are not included in McDonald's analysis, so that rather than discuss each musician's particular suburban childhoods, McDonald *theorizes* about their suburban roots. For example, it is pertinent to know that Lee and Lifeson are first-generation Canadians, and that they each adopted Anglicized stage names to replace their birth names. It is also important to know that Lee's parents were Jewish refugees from Poland who immigrated to Canada after surviving World War II concentration camps. Though these may not be essential details for McDonald's specific project, they are nonetheless important components of Lee and Lifeson's individual biographies, and, as such, would nuance the development of theory concerning how the intersecting elements of personal history shape identity. Such inclusions would also give McDonald's work more resonance with contemporary theories of the middle class and (musical) labor as they are shaped by ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, sexuality, and other factors.

In his chapter concerning Rush's middle-class professionalism, McDonald cites the "cultural omnivore thesis" that has been written about by sociologists such as Paul DiMaggio, Richard A. Peterson, Koen Van Eijck, and Michael Emmison. He uses their thesis to explain why Rush changed their musical style every few years between 1982 and 1991 (2009:129–130). McDonald asserts that middle-class professionals must learn to "culture switch" between milieus to select the taste set that is most appropriate for their current audiences or clients. This is in contrast to past manifestations of cultural hierarchy, when it was advantageous to evoke only highbrow taste. According to McDonald, Rush "used stylistic breadth as a way of signifying continued artistic and professional growth" between 1982 and 1991, and McDonald discusses the rhythms, meters, and timbres of "Distant Early Warning" (1984) and "Roll the Bones" (1991) to demonstrate how the musicians in Rush are cultural omnivores (2009:130).

McDonald also specifically characterizes Rush's songwriting in the eighties as eclectic and cosmopolitan, and interprets this eclecticism as a new means for the band to express virtuosity and complexity in a new era. He writes, "the band had turned away from sheer virtuosity and use of classical influences as ways of demonstrating elite musicianship. Stylistic diversity could now represent complexity" (2009:128). While McDonald's observations are plausible, given the aural evidence and some of the musi-

cians' comments, it is just as likely that Rush incorporated new rhythms and sounds from the Police, Talking Heads, and U2 into their music because these sounds and rhythms were fashionable, and because they liked them. In the larger world of popular music, this aesthetic change remains safely within the rock genre, and many progressive rock bands, such as Yes, made similar stylistic transformations. In other words, it is unlikely that a rock listener in the 1980s would consider Rush's music eclectic because it included these more contemporary musical ideas. Berger would label McDonald's musical interpretations as "textual empiricism," which he defines as "any scholarly approach that treats the text alone as its object of study" (1999:3–4). By focusing on Rush's musical development only within Rush's own larger oeuvre, and not considering musical trends throughout the larger rock music culture, McDonald often misinterprets the band's potential motivation to alter their musical style. By discussing their music as autonomous and therefore separate from, or even perhaps above, larger cultural trends, McDonald provides an incomplete picture of this band's music and its meaning to its fans.

This leads to an overarching criticism of the tone of this project: for McDonald, Rush's music is infallible, and this prohibits him from providing a truly critical discussion of Rush's music. As noted above, scholarly work concerning progressive rock tends to push for a positive reassessment of artists within this genre. McDonald's textual empiricism insists that Rush's music is uniformly successful, and that it therefore always communicates a precise meaning to the listener. In the case of McDonald's interpretations of "Red Barchetta" above, "Tom Sawyer" as an expression of individualism, and "Freewill" (1980) as indicative of middle-class detachment, it is plausible that many listeners would make the same conclusions as the author. However, his discussion of the desire to escape in "The Fountain of Lamneth" (1975), for example, loses steam because the song suite itself is ineffective as a narrative: unlike some of their later epics, the music here is far less programmatic, and the story does not present itself clearly when sung. This is only one example of how McDonald ignores the potential for multivalent readings of text throughout this work.

The author's assumption of the band's infallibility is also frustrating in the chapter concerning Rush and rock criticism. McDonald correctly notes that Rush's reputation for provoking consistently negative reviews is exaggerated, and that most reviewers simply reported that the band "aimed high even if it sometimes came up short" (2009:186). However, McDonald insists that critics undervalue Rush's music because Rush was middlebrow, and therefore "mediated high literature and highbrow concert music for a

mass audience” (2009:203). He argues that most rock critics were middle class just like Rush, and insists, “the distance rock critics articulated from [Rush] reveal [*sic*], in part, an anxiety about belonging to a middling educational, social, and occupational position. As the critics aligned themselves with the outer extremes—highbrow aesthetics and lowbrow culture—they quite pointedly distanced themselves from anything suggestive of a middlebrow position” (2009:203). This may be true of some critics, but given the lack of evidence either way, it is just as likely to not be true at all. For example, to claim critic Robert Christgau is ashamed of his middle-class suburban upbringing, McDonald needs to offer us more than just Christgau’s brief Rush review to prove it, especially given that Christgau was raised working class in Queens, New York (Ubl 2008:7).

In the end, McDonald’s most basic argument in *Rush, Rock Music, and the Middle Class* is convincing: Rush’s music does include philosophical themes which do resonate with values discussed in much sociological and historical scholarship concerning the North American middle class. At this macro level, many of his observations and analyses are thoughtful and apt. However, when McDonald then connects these themes and theoretical premises to the actual words and lived experience of both Rush’s fans and the musicians responsible for Rush’s music, his conclusions become far too tenuous. While it is likely that many Rush fans share McDonald’s particular readings of Rush’s music, and that many of these same fans believe in the values that McDonald attributes to Rush’s music, McDonald does not provide nearly enough empirical evidence about said fans, the musicians in Rush, or individual music critics to support the very precise middle-class values he ascribes to each. If Cavicchi’s dictum concerning the differences between cultural studies and ethnography is correct, McDonald’s text would benefit profoundly from a greater attention to the ethnographic details of Rush and their fans, and from a more nuanced understanding of the complex, heterogeneous popular music culture in which they reside.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, the ideas and terminology McDonald cites are not present on or near p. 12 in Treitler’s *Music and the Historical Imagination*. I expect this page number was given in error.

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