

# BMW OWN



*AN INTERVIEW WITH*

# Neil Peart



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MOTORCYCLING:

# THE PERENNIAL





# GIFT



## AN INTERVIEW WITH NEIL PEART

*Musician, Author, GS Rider and BMW MOA Member*

By Richard J. Atkins #93162

*"It's a perennial gift, motorcycling. It doesn't get old. The same roads don't get tiresome."*—Neil Peart

Months before, I had contacted Neil Peart (BMW rider and drummer for the band 'Rush') through his management office to discuss the possibility of an interview for *BMW ON*. We determined that a visit to the West Coast in December would work best to discuss his motorcycling and writing experiences. Hoping to ride the area as well, I contacted Wolfgang of Dubbelju Motorcycles ([www.dubbelju.com](http://www.dubbelju.com)) in San Francisco and arranged the rental of an R1150R.

Sadly, the weather forecast for our scheduled interview was not in our favor. According to the meteorological professionals we could expect: thunderstorms, damaging winds, flood advisories and a few mud and rockslides. Imagine how pleased I was when my phone rang and Peart informed me that the weather seemed to be clearing. "Do you still want to ride today?" he asked. Well, there is only one answer to that question.

We met at a Union 76 gas station on the Pacific Coast Highway and set out going north. A number of miles up, we stopped at Neptune's Net, a seafood shack in Malibu, where we could talk over lunch. >>

*"Picking Up Some Gas Money," Red Rocks Pavilion, near Denver, 2004.*





PHOTO BY RICH ATKINS

Neil, Outside Neptune's Net on the Pacific Coast Highway.

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**BMW ON:** *What drew you to BMW Motorcycles?*

**NP:** I always said, someday I'll have a motorcycle, and it'll be a BMW. I always knew that, even being totally ignorant of motorcycles. When I saw a BMW, it just looked right to me. The R1200GS is the most versatile, most satisfying motorcycle I can imagine right now.

**BMW ON:** *What would you say was the role of motorcycling in your life?*

**NP:** It's a fairly central role. When I first got the R1100RS in about '94, my friend Brutus and I went on our first tour down around Eastern Canada and realized that we really liked it and liked traveling together. So, the following year, we got to Mexico and got very hooked on the idea of motorcycle touring.

When we were starting to plan our Test for Echo tour and I was thinking, *how can I work motorcycling into this?* I put together, basically, a framework of having a tour bus with a trailer so we could sleep on the bus and ride our bikes all day. And on days off, take off anywhere we could get to in the part of the country

we were in and then make it to the show on the show day. So, I had Brutus come out with me on that Test for Echo tour in '96 and '97. And we rode, I think, 40,000 miles over the course of a tour—just everywhere we could get to. He was great to have because he has a great attitude about seizing the day. And he would find all the interesting roads and destinations. While I was onstage working, he'd be on the bus with a magnifying glass and tour books and maps, figuring it all out... That put a whole new spark of life in it, which you need, being away from home and all the other hardships of it. So that just transformed everything and became a big part of my life.

Just after that, in the summer of '97, I had suffered some bad family tragedies and motorcycling became a therapy for me. The book, *Ghost Rider*, describes my journey of healing through that terrible time in which I rode 55,000 miles all over North America: from Newfoundland to Alaska and the Arctic, and down through Mexico and Belize, and basically found my way back to life again through the greatest tragedy, probably, a person can live.

Following on that, the band did a

Vapor Trails tour in 2002, which again, I did it all by motorcycle. And we just did our 30th anniversary tour in the summer of 2004. Again, I did about 20,000 miles of motorcycling on that tour and finished in Europe, which I hadn't had the opportunity to do before. I guess we rode about 5,000 miles in three weeks of touring.

**BMW ON:** *Any comments about BMW MOA?*

**NP:** I've only been riding about 10 years and I'm absolutely still learning. Our own magazine, *BMW ON*, is great; it concentrates on the practical aspects of motorcycling. Actually, that's one of the things that I value most about the 'MOA... that kind of input on riding skills, choices, accessories, wardrobe and what other people have done and learned and what they can pass on to me. Just coming in the mailbox every month and having that *conversation*—I guess is what it is—there's a constant give-and-take going among the readers of the magazine. Many people bring their wisdom and their knowledge to different aspects of riding, all of which are interesting to me.

**BMW ON:** *What was your first motor-*



cycle/favorite motorcycle?

**NP:** The first one was the R1100RS. Shortly after that, when the GS came out... Brutus and I, both had an interest in unpaved roads and roads that end. Roads that end somewhere are always an inescapable attraction. Both of us wanted to go places like the Sahara and Baja California and that sort. So, the spirit of the GS seems totally in tune with the spirit of us as motorcyclists. So, as soon as that first R1100GS... well, the oilhead GS, we knew right away that was probably the bike for us. Both of us went out that year, in '96 I guess, and bought 1100GSs. So that's, for me, for long distance comfort and for flexibility, that became exactly the right bike. I'm on my third GS now.

I had an 1100 which now is in retirement—semiretirement—with 100,000 miles on it. And then my 1150 that I've just put up for sale, having bought the 1200. I couldn't resist getting a 1200 for all the improvements that they made. And now, I've got about 18,000 miles on it since May of this year.

I have a sense of utility about things and whether it's a car or a motorcycle or a set of drums or whatever, it's got to be used. I can't stand having something around just to have. I'm not that kind of

acquisitive person where I need to have something just to have it or just to buy it. I always need to know that it's going to be of use, of value to me.

**BMW ON:** What would you say to newer riders?

**NP:** Hmmm... training and equipment! There's so much to learn in both riding technique and the stuff you want to have with you, not just the hardware. I was mentioning today even, just to go for a day ride along the Pacific Coast Highway, I have three pairs of gloves with me. I've always loved the saying, "There's no such thing as bad weather, only the

**Top:** The GPS leads Neil and Michael down a Vermont "road" that dwindled to a ski trail, then descended into a trackless bog, but they made it to the next day's show in Hartford, Connecticut, 2004.

**Right:** "Happy Rider" Neil Peart, reflected in his mirror at a rest stop in upstate New York, en route to a show in Saratoga Springs, NY.



TWO PHOTOS BY MICHAEL KOSBACH



## A Brief History...

For those who know music, Neil Peart (pronounced *Peert*) is the drummer and lyricist for the legendary band, Rush. Many motorcyclists know him as an avid BMW enthusiast, BMW MOA member, and also

the author of the popular book, *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road*. *Ghost Rider* details Peart's 55,000-mile epic motorcycle ride around North America, as he tried to find his own way back to life after his only daughter

(aged 19) was killed in a car crash and, just ten months later, his wife succumbed to cancer. Neil's other writing credits include the books, *The Masked Rider: Cycling in West Africa*; and most recently, *Traveling Music: The Soundtrack To My Life And Times* (all from ECW Press, [www.ecwpress.com](http://www.ecwpress.com)). He is also the subject of a fine art photography book, *Rhythm & Light*, by Carrie Nuttall (Rounder Books, [www.rounderbooks.com](http://www.rounderbooks.com)).

When asked to give a brief bio of himself, Peart replied, "Well, I've been playing drums for 40 years, been in the band Rush for 30 years, I've been motorcycling for 10 years—a short biography." To add clarification, the Canadian trio named Rush has released 29 albums in its illustrious career, 21 of which are gold or better, totaling more than 35 million copies sold. Peart has motorcycled over 200,000 miles—almost all of which have been clocked on BMWs. As an author, his books have sold over 100,000 copies.

PHOTO BY ANDREW MACNAUGHTAN



Neil Peart, keeping up with journal notes at a rest stop on I-40 between Los Angeles and pre-tour rehearsals in Nashville, May 2004.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL MOSEBACH





**Above:** Backstage in Indianapolis, 2004. Neil's tour bus with trailer and motorcycles.  
**Left:** "Three Amigos." Bus driver Dave Burnette with his Heritage Softail, riding partner and security director Michael Mosbach with his R1150GS, Neil and his R1150GS backup and new R1200GS main ride.

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wrong clothes."

I started out learning initially with a course similar to the MSF course in the United States. It was a college in Toronto that did a three-day course starting with classroom and walking the bikes around and drilling into your head for all time, the importance of shoulder checks and conscientious riding. I would say that has stayed with me and certainly saved me many, many times. When I was sure that I was on a wide-open stretch of road, and did the obligatory shoulder check anywhere, guess what—there was a truck there. Those kind of fundamental things sound kind of boring but I would certainly always address them. Other courses along the way, any opportunity to learn—like I took a racetrack course with the Freddie Spencer school in Las Vegas that absolutely made me a better street rider immediately. As soon as I was riding away from there, I could feel an increase in, not just confidence with the

machine, but in perception—being able to perceive things at racetrack speed and process information at racetrack speed.

I always have a personal mantra about riding—if I'm ever startled, I blame myself—that I should never have allowed myself to be in a position where I could be surprised. Of course, the whole idea of scanning and identifying, predicting, decide, execute—that useful acronym, is exactly that. You're always predicting what could happen, and always aware of vehicles around you and what they might do, so that nothing should happen that might be unexpected. You should be so far ahead of it that you just react but you're never in a position, *Oh my God, I almost died*. If I'm ever in that position, I really get down on myself—how did you let that happen, that error could have cost you your life? Those are things that are more than just experience, I think they start as an attitude. Riding a motorcycle, like many things, didn't come easy to me. One of my motorcycling mentors, Mendelssohn Joe said, "it's always your fault."

There's one thing I realized in Europe, riding over there... I would love to send every American driver to Europe for two weeks just to learn how to drive—courteously, responsibly, and with some sense of respect. The people there use turn signals and they have respect for the lane they're in, and there's such a thing as a passing lane in Europe. And I can say in 5,000 miles of riding there, I never encountered one dangerous situation because of another driver or rider. There was just that level of competency about drivers in Europe that was a revelation to me.

**BMW ON:** What gear do you use (not drums)?

**NP:** Well, basically, I dress in layers. The fundamental wisdom is having a flexible [wardrobe]. I have just two leather suits: a summer perforated one that I can work around with layers, and if you get cold, put your rain suit on. And invaluable things, like the electric vest; I discovered early on how that can expand your riding season. Or, for me, where if I had been on the road with the band, it might be November and I'll be in Minnesota. I can't change that. But I can change my wardrobe to suit. So, regardless of the





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temperature, as long as there's not ice on the road, I'm going to ride.

I have long underwear, I'll wear a balaclava under my helmet if it's 32 degrees. The heated grips and heated vest are essential, really. If it gets much below 40 degrees, you're probably going to die if you don't have those. It took me so long to realize the rain suit was a cold weather item, too. Now, my rain suit gets much more worn out from dry weather... when it's cold enough that that layer of plastic makes all the difference. Sock liners and different pairs of gloves. I think every motorcyclist shares that. Gloves are pretty key... and the protective side of it is really important to me, too.

I would never ride, even just around town, without full protective gear on. We could go back to what I was saying before about how a good training course sets you up from the beginning with a responsibility to yourself. When I see someone improperly dressed, wearing shorts and a T-shirt, I see it as a failure of imagination. They can't imagine what can happen. I cringe, because I can imagine what can happen to them and they seem unable to.

**BMW ON:** *What about improving riding technique?*

**NP:** It's basically about you and the road. If you come around the corner too fast and there's a bit of gravel there, and something could have happened, that scares me almost as much as if it had happened. And I become determined never to have the feeling again. You know, I really dislike fear. I dislike pain the most, but second to pain, I think fear is not a pleasant sensation, and it's one that I try to avoid. But on the other hand, I like excitement, so there's a certain balance of riding a motorcycle that is exciting, riding it aggressively is exciting. And if you happen to be on a twisty bit of road pushing the physics of that corner, leaning the motorcycle over farther, using your lane as well as you can—all of that is really fun and satisfying.

To me, being prepared mentally is part of putting the right gear on. I check my tire pressures, check my oil and get

**Top:** Neil Peart, on Pacific Coast Highway ride. **Left:** End of the show—run for the bus, sleep, ride, drum, repeat.



a full tank of gas. I ride way faster when I'm confident. I know my tires are okay, I know my oil is okay, and I have much more confidence in the machine. And then, I work on my own confidence, and being dressed properly gives me more confidence. So all of those make riding more fun for me.

**BMW ON:** *What are some of your best roads/best rides?*

**NP:** Of course, the Alps are forever motorcycling Nirvana. When I was just rambling around in '98 and '99, my favorite part of the country was California and Utah. I think Utah just has some fantastic scenery and great rides. That combination is pretty much unbeatable. I think California wins in variety, having the Pacific Coast, the redwoods, the desert, as well as the Sierra Nevada. Some places that are less celebrated—like Idaho—has some fantastic riding and it's not a place you always hear about. Also, Washington State. I was saying earlier that I've now motorcycled in, I guess, every state but Hawaii. And every state really does have some place worth seeing and some road worth riding.


In the summer, of course, it gets very hot in lowland parts of California, but you have the mountains. Going up into the Sierras is wonderful just to take an

overnight trip and camp up at 7,000 feet or something, and breathe that air, and see the sublime beauty of that kind of scenery. You can go into Mojave Desert and to Death Valley, and it makes a wonderful overnight ride, and it can be done in December and can be done in January. And that's tremendously valuable. And California really is, surprisingly, I think, underrated in terms of what there is here, having lived here almost five years now in southern California, what I can do in a day, on a motorcycle—where I can be. I mean, I can get up early in the morning and be on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon for lunch, or anywhere in Baja California, go up to Big Sur overnight, which is another incredibly beautiful part of California. I love all the national parks through the Sierras: through Kings Canyon, Sequoia National Park, Yosemite—all of that is within a day's ride for me, here. And Arizona, Colorado, and Utah—all of that is literally my backyard here. So I really don't, personally, underestimate what it's like to live here. I really value it. I love all of those motorcycle rides. I like having the American Southwest so close here.

To go out for a day-ride sometimes, in the summer I go up into the mountains, and in the wintertime I go out in the desert, or where we are today,

along the Pacific Coast Highway. I love that and never get tired of it. That's the other thing, these roads, I can ride them over and over, and it's always beautiful. I mean, looking at the Pacific Ocean is always beautiful. The Sierra Nevada is always beautiful. The Mojave desert is always beautiful.

It's a perennial gift, motorcycling. It doesn't get old. The same roads don't get tiresome. I always describe it like, if I go to do an errand, it's somehow an adventure on the motorcycle, where it wouldn't be in the car. You know, you're just going to the grocery store—and again, the process of getting suited up both mentally and physically. I never put my foot over the motorcycle without getting into the motorcycle mentality. It's never casual. Riding a motorcycle is never a casual undertaking in the way that it is getting in the car and driving to the store. So that's a constant reward, is that level of concentration in what you're doing and taking it that seriously and getting that much reward out of it, this constantly renewable resource.

I hit the "stop" button on the tape recorder and gave Neil the *thumbs up*. "You just gave me the title for this article," I said. Motorcycling is a *perennial gift*. Thank you, Neil! 



Denmark, 2004, between a show in Hamburg, Germany and a show in Stockholm, Sweden.