

Let It Rock

"THE WORLD'S BEST ROCK READ"

THE WHO
WHAT, WHEN,
WHY AND HOW

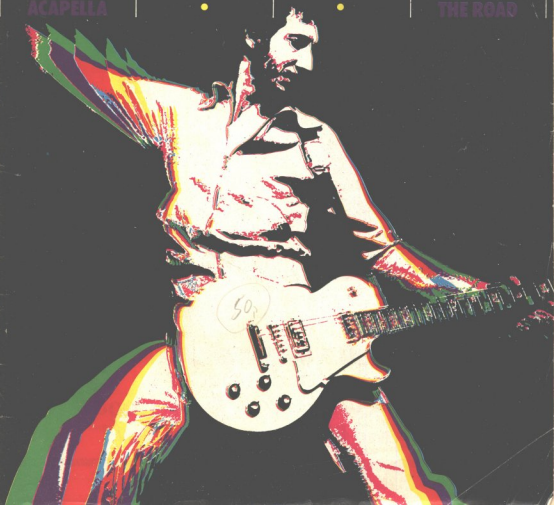
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ACAPELLA

CARL PERKINS
THE ORIGINAL
ROCKIN'
GUITAR MAN

PLASTIC ONO
MUSIC
THE END
OF AN ERA

LYNYRD
SKYNYRD

•
BOWIE ON
THE ROAD







WHO'S WHERE IN THE SEVENTIES?

Tommy was hailed as a masterpiece which changed the map of rock. It also made the Who millionaires. The next problem was how to follow it. Gary Herman charts the course of the band's work over the last five years.

In early 1971, not two years after Tommy had been released on an unsuspecting public, we did an interview with Roger Daltrey and spoke about the Who, Tommy, the future and that sort of thing. Towards the end of the interview we asked Daltrey about the ideas of communication and confrontation with audiences forcefully implied, at the very least, in songs of the period like 'The Seeker', 'Sally Simpson' and 'We're Not Gonna Take It' (the last two from Tommy). Daltrey listened patiently and thoughtfully as I rambled on about how these songs reflect a concern with the group's relationship to their audiences, and then eagerly replied:

"That's basically what the film is about. It's a whole group-audience-environmental experiment... with sound and music... So there you go. See what I mean about the Who; can you believe it? I mean you've read it all along, I didn't know it was like that. I don't look on it like you do because I'm more into it... but you've seen it coming, and then that's our next project. Let's face it, it's fucking strange."

The strange part was not that the Who should embark on a project like the *Lifhouse* film. After all, we expect artists to develop themes and to follow them through into various different projects. What was remarkable was that a group—four people who rarely saw each other outside performances and recording, whose characters were (and are) so disparate and who never seemed to really like each other—should operate with such a single-mindedness, such unity of ambition and such exceptional harmony.

The *Lifhouse* film never actually got off the ground. Since that time Daltrey had a solo album out and has blossomed (so we are given to believe) into a more than capable actor under Ken Russell's direction; Entwistle has had three albums outside the Who (*Smash Your Head Against A Wall*, *Whistle Rymes* and *Rigor Mortis Sets In*) and now has a band affectionately called by his nickname—the Ox; Townshend has released a solo album of Meher Baba songs and has performed solo, at the Roundhouse last Easter and with Clapton at the Rainbow;

and Keith Moon has continued to smash things up, play with the likes of Nilsson, acted with Frank Zappa and Ringo Starr, looned with Viv Stanshall, and is at time of writing in the course of recording an album with a lot of famous people which started out—badly, by all accounts—as *Rat Up A Pipe* and has since become the somewhat less recherché *Who's Keith Moon*.

Several singles have been released: after 'Pinball Wizard', 'The Seeker' and 'Summertime Blues' during 1969/70 we had 'Won't Get Fooled Again'/'Don't Know Myself', 'Join Together'/'Baby Don't You Do It', 'Relay'/'Waspsman', 'Let's See Action'/'When I Was A Boy' and '5.15'/'Water'. As for albums, there's been *Live At Leeds* (1970), *Who's Next* (1971) and *Quadrophenia* (1973)—as well as the compilations of oldies (*Meaty, Beaty, Big And Bouncy*, 1971) and unreleased material, *Odds And Sods* (1974). If you include all the tours, concerts, individual appearances and films, it's probably been a far busier and undoubtedly enormously more profitable period than the five years of pro-dom up to 1969. If we are to believe a recent *London Evening News* quote from Pete Townshend, the film of *Tommy* will make each member of the group around £1 million. You can't ask for better superstar credentials than that. The only question that remains is what has happened to the Who and their music?

A friend of mine is fond of saying that all the really great novels—*Tristram Shandy*, *Ulysses*, *Moby Dick*—destroy the whole idea of the novel. I suppose he should have said that they destroy the old idea of the novel, making the realisation of new ideas possible, opening up new ways of expressing and new ways of experiencing. The novel survives, even though its character changes. On that basis, *Tommy* is a great piece of rock music. It has its faults—an element of pretentiousness, its occasionally overburdening lyrics, a tendency towards mystification, its confusion and strained balance between romanticism and gritty realism—and the consequent uneasy marriage of classical modes and rock'n'roll. But *Tommy* did destroy a lot of old

ideas about rock.

For a lot of people it probably threatened rock itself. *Sgt. Pepper* was one thing, but a performance at the Metropolitan Opera House, the LSO, a ballet and a film by the notoriously decadent dahling of liberated Hampstead intellectuals the world over, Ken Russell, is surely more than enough to make even Chuck Berry roll over. Well, that's a point of view; one no more nor any less valid than the one that says rock'n'roll isn't music. Co-option by the trendy arts world only suggests that *Tommy* succeeded well enough in one respect. Remember *Tommy* also appeared at Woodstock and before more 'traditional' rock audiences every where—and usually went down a storm.

It is neither a defining characteristic nor a categorical imperative of rock that it lack ideas or the capacity to articulate them. Quite the reverse—it's precisely MOR pap that either has no ideas beyond those about hard cash, or else has only cast-off ideas from other music. Ideas, the exploration of concepts and the construction of meaning are as much a part of 'Tutti Frutti' as they are of the Jackson Browne songbook.

The key, of course, is song and dance—the historical roots of music in communication and movement. The instrumental is a product of capitalism, representing the ultimate purity of compositional technique and the ultimate alienation of music from its popular roots. All music strives to be song and dance, voice and body. And where there's dance, there's movement; where there's songs, there's ideas. You can analyse music into its components—frequencies, tone colour, duration, harmonics—but finally it's the synthesis that matters. Rock'n'roll was a new synthesis and, like anything meaningful does, its songs grew out of and helped develop a new context—a 'public' in a situation in which it was meaningful.

The Who, as much by design as by accident, effected such a synthesis. As everybody must know by now, they weren't mods. But their music meant something special in that context. 'I Can't Explain' was not just about confusion, nor was 'My Generation' just a song of

defiance. They created a music that struck home through its power to move and its power to convey ideas. But rock, at least great rock, isn't just a "mirror of the people you're playing to," as Daltry judged it in an interview with *Radio Times* last year, nor a "barometer" (a term Townshend is fond of using), because it shapes and transmits as well as reflects. In other words, it transcends contexts and helps create new ones. And that's just what *Tommy* at its best did.

Until *Tommy*'s easy to see the Who as existing within a steadily growing atmosphere of youthful disaffection, to which the mods were seminal in this country. Townshend's songs develop, in a confused way, along lines set down by their choice of mod image. As the roots of the mod stance became more and more apparent in much larger scale social attitudes, the songs grew in complexity and flirted with alternative approaches—heartfelt love songs about individual isolation; now raucous, now satirical; a "mini-opera"; classic blends of Beach Boy harmonies and power chords with triumphal, soaring choruses. And yet the thematic elements of deception, separation, isolation and group solidarity remained in varying proportions throughout. Townshend himself experimented with drugs and then with religion and universal love—Meher Baba's brand of sufism—Mohammedan mysticism. He came up with *Tommy*.

Whatever *Tommy* is to sufism and psychology, it is also, and most importantly from our point of view, a work that grew out of the Who's own performing situation, and reflects concerns that developed in that situation. Thus it turns the context of rock performance—the audience-performer confrontation—as a sort of self-conscious parallel to the relationships that the group had been talking about up until then. A generation meets itself on the way up and that gives them a basis from which to question a few of the presumptions about music that were flying around at the time. If Townshend offered a solution that was confused and not wholly acceptable, that doesn't diminish *Tommy*'s impact or the possibility of finding other solutions. The problem was that music had, to some extent, become a diversion and the revolution was at CBS. Rock grew up with *Tommy*—even if it was almost immediately to fall back into an arty second-childhood. It represented a growing awareness of the problem of music's social role. Thus Townshend is capable, by a curious reversal, of saying on a TV interview last year: "I'm not a great champion of the revolution any more... and I'm a harsh critic because of the fact that I am accused of letting the side down, as it were, by our fans... For example... you can't stop doing what you're doing because you'd let down all these people. It's not just people saying 'Listen, you'll disappoint your fans if you don't go on... you know, you must go on otherwise all those people will be so upset.' It's 'you've gotta go on man, otherwise all those kids, they'll be finished, they'll have NOTHING TO LIVE FOR!' That's rock'n'roll."

The "revolution" was, of course, Woodstock—the object of Townshend's criticism—and it's a strange irony that *Tommy* got one of its first airings at Woodstock. Unfortunately, if the Woodstock spirit is dead—and if it is dead, it's partly due to *Tommy*—there's not

much there from the Who's point of view to replace it, apart from unbridled energy and good old brotherly love. They never did succeed in breaking through the barrier between themselves and their audiences—and it doesn't look likely that they ever will.

That's probably why Townshend emphasizes this passive, "barometer" aspect of their music, arguing that "music is a spiritual medium... an elevator of the spirit... You become part of an industry which is self-sufficient, and a proud industry in a way—which makes a lot of money... and... is supported by the people—like football is supported by the people—you start to realize... that... you're holding water, because what you're doing, what elevates you, also elevates them."

I can't help thinking that's a cop-out because it makes us responsible for a failure of the music to achieve its aim. The "pivotal song" (Townshend's own description) of the *Lifehouse* project was to be "Pure and Easy".
*We all know success, when we all find our own dreams
And our love is enough to knock down any walls
And the future's been seen as men try to realize*

*The simple secret of the note is in all
If the walls stay standing, it doesn't seem to me because of any failure to love hard enough. That answer begs the questions—why should we and how would we? And in the case of *Lifehouse* the walls did stay standing.*

I don't mean any of this to sound like naive intentionalism. It's really quite secondary what the Who's intentions are in making and performing their songs. On the contrary, it's the words themselves situated in particular contexts and open to certain interpretations that matter. Townshend's mysticism is also the result of his material situation, and *Tommy*'s mystic/romantic element (vital to any analysis of the work) is marginal to the context which gave *Tommy* significance. Nor did *Lifehouse* fail because anybody's intentions were impure or incorrect, but rather, I suspect, because it leaned too heavily on a formalism that ignored the context in which it could have worked—the actual performances of the group. *Live At Leeds* was altogether a more successful conception.

The Who's material situation after *Tommy* was one of increasing success and increasing affluence which was reflected in a remarkable series of songs written in the few years after the rock-opera. These songs seem to fluctuate between celebrations of isolation and separation, pleas from the heart of isolation and celebrations of community and commitment. Most often they contain two or three of these positions in confused and confusing combinations. "Won't Get Fooled Again" is surely a celebration both of individualistic freedom and collective action. "Relay" and "Let's See Action" have similar ingredients and while "Going Mobile" (from *Who's Next*) is simply a paean to the rugged individualism of the caravanning life, there's an interesting note of uncertainty in "Don't Even Know Myself".
*I don't mind if you try
Once in a while,
I don't mind if I cry
Once in a while,
The doors are not that as tight as they seem,*

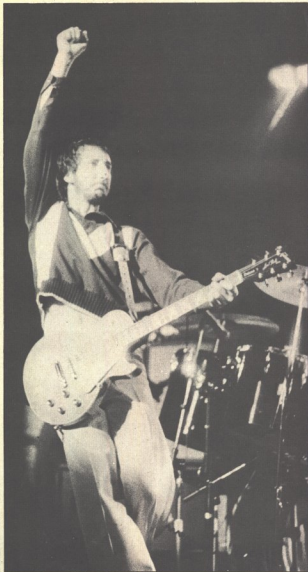
I'm just trying to fight my way out of this dream.

Like "Behind Blue Eyes", this song has an almost confessional quality—the familiar aggression and braggadocio are moderated by an acknowledgement of isolation and insecurity. The remarkable thing is that when the songs are more obviously about the Who themselves, the sense of isolation and insecurity remains just as strong, but (as with "Going Mobile") the tone is now one of individual exploration. "Don't pretend that you know me 'cause I don't even know myself" becomes the almost exultant tone of "Join Together" "We don't know that we're going/But the seas are dry from knowing/I want you to join together with the band". Lack of direction is almost a positive quality, and Townshend writes "It's the singer not the song/That makes the music move along/I want you to join together with the band". I suppose if music is Townshend's variety of spiritual experience, that must be right. "It's only by the music/I'll be free" ("Time Is Passing").

Quadrophenia, in many ways the culmination of these confusions, is much less of an own-up than most people have assumed it to be. *Tommy* and subsequent songs already confess to a distance between audience and performer and *Quadrophenia* tends to perpetuate a situation Townshend so succinctly described on the recent *Who's Who* radio programme: "It would be much more easy to identify who the trendsetters were from up on the stage than down in the audience, in a way. You could keep a close eye on the trendsetters, then merely mimic them."

In that way, he concluded, the four guys who'd been dressed as mods by their early publicist, Peter Meaden, and who could never become "out-on-the-street" mods because they were working at being performed, could eventually become respected as trendsetters in their own right. "Pete Townshend liked it (the mod image) straight away". John Entwistle says, and when the band did eventually begin to indulge in its own fantastic trends, Townshend was probably the one who regretted it most. He argues that the Who's audiences never really believed in the "pop-art" or "autodestructive" images because they could see through the blatant superficiality of them, and he writes *Quadrophenia* partly in homage to the Who's first, mod audience.

But *Quadrophenia* doesn't ring true as a simple mod's tale. It's too overloaded with Townshend's self-conscious and arty interpretations; it's too much of what he thinks mods should have felt. There are nit-picking details like Jimmy (*Quad*'s hero) having a progressive, existential psychiatrist in the Laing mould. Unlikely at the time of the action and with Jimmy's background, I'm not too sure there were ever trains to Brighton at 5.15, and I'm certain they didn't leave from Waterloo. Nor did they go within miles of any large off-shore rocks. But these are nit-picking details once you accept *Quadrophenia* isn't a documentary. The problem is that Townshend's moral tale is couched in the language of a materialist approach to history that are very nearly convincing. In fact, if *Quadrophenia* has anything to do with mods it's as a record of Townshend's own idea of what he would have



Pete Townshend: "People say 'you've gotta go on man, otherwise all those kids, they'll be finished, they'll have NOTHING TO LIVE FOR!' That's rock'n'roll."

been like had he *actually* gone through the mod experience. It's the view from up on that stage and it's worse than romanticist—it's idealist.

That's why the final song 'Love Reign O'er Me' is an unsatisfactory resolution. Described as "Pete's Theme" it was written some time before the most part of *Quadrophenia*, and is one of the two tracks produced by Glyn Johns. It bears a

minimal relationship to the story of Jimmy, but is absolutely vital to Townshend's conception of the religious experience: love, nature, God and me—we're all one, and by recognising that, we overcome the base problems of an anguished life. It's the ultimate joining together, the final programme; Pete's theme, but not Jimmy's.

You see, there isn't really any Jimmy

at all. Jimmy is the sum of four themes each representing, in Townshend's mind, one member of the Who. It is, as Townshend himself admits, a gimmicky concept but there's a lot more behind it than just a clever idea. *Quadrophenia* was conceived as a quadrophonic work but, according to Ron Nevison who engineered and assisted in the production, the technical problems were too great. Part of the recording had to be done from Ronnie Lane's mobile while the Who's studio was being completed. During the recording Nevison had to install 16-track equipment in the mobile and eventually Townshend regretfully decided to settle with stereo. I wouldn't be too surprised if someone didn't also point out that it would be a little silly in a live performance to see Roger Daltrey on stage with John Entwistle singing the Entwhistle theme and to hear his voice from the back right-hand speaker.

You can see the logic of Townshend's position—a musical work with four themes, performed by a band with four members and centred on a protagonist with four corresponding aspects to his character, seems a natural for four-channel recording. It's impeccable logic if you see the important thing about *Quadrophenia* to be formal elegance and the adventure of new recording technique. The argument is not quite so neat if you see *Quadrophenia* as performance oriented. The conclusion is that Townshend evidently didn't.

So what have you got if there's no context of performance to relate the work to and no character with the consequent non-history? You've got what's left after *Lifehouse* collapsed—a handful of songs that don't really connect with each other and may or may not have something to say about the world outside. You've got a collage of sentiments whose only point of reference is itself, because as a whole it doesn't really exist except as limited by its own boundaries.

I can't really bring any critical judgement to bear on *Quadrophenia* because it doesn't really exist. Some of the songs are nice but too meandering; if they'd been singles they wouldn't have been like that. Some of the ideas are nice but Townshend has pretensions that won't let him settle for the small but well-considered idea. Formalism and subjectivism have always been the result of growing distance from an audience and this particular formalism has made the Who turn in on themselves. The fade on 'The Kids Are Alright' at the end of 'Helpless Dancer' (Roger's theme); the dialogue in 'The Punk And The Godfather' between the long-standing fan and performer turned star, suggest a self-consciousness verging on history. "The group... are all splitting off in different directions", Ron Nevison observed. And there is no stronger impression left by *Quadrophenia* than one of fragmentation. For the central character is Townshend's composite of four characters—aggressive (Roger), devil-may-care (Keith), romantic (John) and spiritual seeker (Pete). Are we then to assume that the Who are no more; that their isolation from audiences turned in on themselves and destroyed their own peculiar and special unity? Isn't that what *Quadrophenia*'s about and isn't that why it sounds craftsmanlike but unexciting? There's no solution to that, not only a question: who holds the gun and who holds the wound? ★