NEVER TOO LATE THE HERO

The Who's John Entwistle is back with the Eagles' Joe Walsh and heading for the album charts

THE PHONE rang, two short rings, then again. I pick up the receiver, hear static: typical British connection. Through a sea of fuzz I hear John Entwistle say hello. I yell hello back. His connection is as bad as mine; time for a characteristic Entwistle joke. "Oh, there goes the pacemaker," says the Ox, who's just celebrating a birthday on the bearded side of thirty.

Entwistle is the jovial and completely unaffected bassist for The Who, a stolid and invaluable contribution to that band's stage sound who has managed to be almost totally overlooked down the years because of his distinct distaste for self-promotion. Recently his songs have featured more prominently on Who albums than since the halcyon days of *A Quick One While He's Away* (1966) — *Who Are You* contained a record three Entwistle tunes and this year's *Face Dances* had a pair of Ox songs.

After a hiatus of nearly half a decade Entwistle has resumed his solo career with his fifth LP, *Too Late the Hero*, recorded with ex-James Gang and current Eagles guitarist Joe Walsh and Walsh's drummer sidekick Joe Vitale.

Entwistle's solo albums have been eccentric delights that have appealed strongly to a devoted cult following without crossing over to a wider audience. *Smash Your Head Against the Wall* gave him a chance to record his classic "Heaven and Hell" on his own, *Whistle Rhymes* developed a songwriting personality with a distinctively devilish bent and featured the best recorded guitar work of one Peter Frampton, while *Mad Dogs* and *Rigor Mortis Sets In* showed Entwistle's penchant for turning '50s song styles into strangely ironic cameos. *Too Late the Hero* breaks dramatically from this tradition — it's easily the most commercial record Entwistle has ever produced.

"As far as I'm concerned this is my first solo album," he says. My other albums don't hold up individually. I could probably make an amazing double compilation LP but each record isn't that great as a whole. When I first started to make solo albums it wasn't really the right time. Now the climate for solo albums is a lot more healthy. Before people would think "He's in a big group and he's bored, he's got nothing to do so he's making a solo album. My earlier solo albums appealed to a minority. I liked to write songs filled with minor chords. I stayed away from minor chords on purpose this time, so the album has a happier sound overall, although there's still a few minor keys in there."

Too Late the Hero reunites Entwistle with one of his favourite guitarists, indeed one of the few who could fill Pete Townshend's ample shoes. When Walsh was with the James Gang in the early '70s that group supported The Who on a legendary English tour and the two have remained close friends since. "I've always wanted to play with Joe," Entwistle explains, "ever since I first saw him with the James Gang. We've been talking about playing together for a long time. When I did the Ox gigs in the States we were special guest to Joe Walsh and Barnstorm. We talked about playing together then because we've always admired each other's playing."

That mutual admiration gives a collaborative sense to *Too Late the Hero* that is missing from the other Entwistle solo efforts. The two riff back and

forth furiously, and Entwistle seems to challenge Walsh to the hardest rock playing he's managed since leaving the James Gang. "Some of the chord sequences and tempo changes were definitely written with Walsh in mind," Entwistle points out, "especially at the demo stage. I would get out my eight string bass and throw in a few Walsh riffs. I think I influenced Joe to play a lot heavier on this album than he does with the Eagles."

The title track, which has just been released as the first single from the album, indicates a new outlook for Entwistle's writing. "There were other obvious singles," he says, "like 'Talk Dirty' and 'Fallen Angel,' but I've lived with 'Too Late the Hero' for so long and that song seemed to be the key to the album. 'Too Late the Hero' and 'Fallen Angel' deal with disillusionment, sort of like 'Had Enough.' (from *Who Are You*). I've always gone out of my way to be Mr. Nice Guy and I only found out that Mr. Nice Guy always gets shat on, so I made a conscious decision to be more out for myself."

Most Who followers assumed Entwistle had shelved his solo career in order to devote his energies to helping the group get back off the ground after the death of Keith Moon. But Entwistle explained that he stopped writing "Because I was going through a difficult period with myself. Every time I went into the studio I came up with another flipping '50s song. So I stopped writing. When I went back to writing I played back my old demos and discovered that that was the direction I should have been going in. I had been working on a concept science fiction LP but it was so similar to Lifehouse I shelved it. This was the project after *Whistle Rhymes* and instead of pursuing it I went on to make all those '50s records but when I rediscovered these old demos of songs like '905' and 'Had Enough' I realised I'd made a mistake."

So now Entwistle has resumed his solo career with a vengeance that suggests that *Too Late the Hero* could well be the blueprint for his post-Who activity. "I don't know how much longer The Who are gonna carry on on stage," he explains. "When they do decide to stop touring in two or four or even ten years I'm going to want to carry on touring myself and I can't go on and play 'Won't Get Fooled Again' and 'Baba O'Riley' so I've got to build up material on my own that's better known than 'Do the Dangle' or 'Roller Skate Mate.' The Who can't carry on forever."

Entwistle insisted, however, that The Who intend to carry on for the present, contrary to recent breakup rumours. "I've always said I know we'll go at least to the limit of our recording contracts. So I know there's at least two more to go, not counting compilations. We play so well together that we want to carry on, anyway, but for some reason we've never gotten our stage sound in the studio, which may explain why we have such a hard time selling records. I think we're going to try to do something about that by producing the next album ourselves in our own studio at Ramport. It's an amazing studio, perfect for The Who because it sounds so live.

"I was talking to Pete about our live shows," Entwistle concludes, "and it seems like maybe out of the whole stage show maybe only about one-third of it we like playing. The next album has to be nine or ten songs that we like to play on stage and that we can use to retransform the stage show. The other thing we were talking about doing which has been taboo up until now is to bring in some of the solo material to the stage show. There's good stuff that we could use, particularly things like 'Rough Boys' and some of Roger's songs."