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Man

“O

KAY, SO TONIGHT we've established my gender, my marital status and the fact that you lot have been drinking far more than I have. . .”

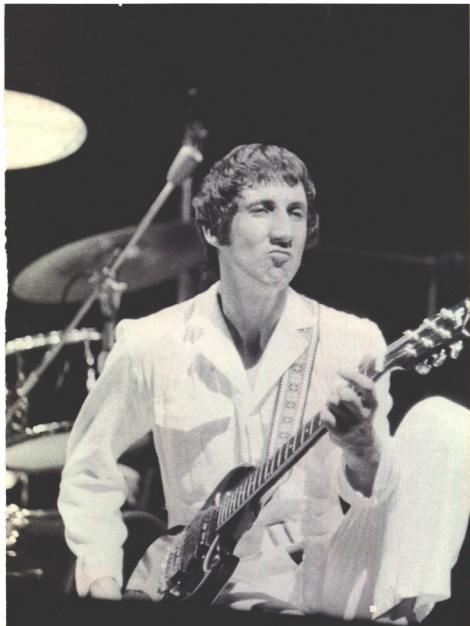
With these words, Pete Townshend bids good night to a sea of jubilant faces inside L.A.'s House of Blues. Lyrically speaking, it's been another evening of sex, drags and rock and roll, Townshend-style. On his own or with the Who, Pete's gigs have always been equal parts entertainment and psychotherapy. The only question is whether they're more therapeutic for Townshend or his audience. On this particular night, backed only by

keyboardist Jon Carin, the tall, gaunt, once-again-sober rock legend has taken his listeners on an amazing journey, from the early Who gems “I'm a Boy” and “A Legal Matter” to grown-up songs of marital strife, alcoholism and grappling with God—“Slit Skirts,” “Let My Love Open the Door,” “Rough Boys” and even the relatively obscure “Parvardigar,” from *Who Came First* (Atlantic), Townshend's very first solo album in 1972.

by Alan di Perna

Pete Townshend, now in his fourth decade as a rock giant, remembers every blessed and brutal moment of a spectacular career.







PINBALL WIZARD:
Townshend stands like a statue, c.1990.

This summer promises to be a great time for Who fans and Pete-o-philic of every stripe. The stage production of the rock opera *Tommy* (MCA, 1969) is now on the road in America, and another production has recently opened in London. The *Tommy* CD-ROM has hit the streets, and Atlantic has released *The Best of Pete Townshend*, a well-paced selection of Pete's biggest solo tracks. The disc helps establish that even if all traces of the Who were tragically lost to posterity, Pete Townshend would still have a secure position as one of the best songwriters of the rock era.

Fortunately, though, the Who's legacy is very much alive today. By the time these words appear in print, Townshend, Roger Daltrey and John Entwistle will have climbed on-stage together for a momentous Who reunion gig at London's Hyde Park, sharing the bill with Eric Clapton and playing *Quadrophenia* (MCA, 1973) in its entirety. One of the Who's most popular albums, *Quadrophenia* has always presented problems for the group in live performance. Now Townshend's ready to take another crack at it. He's also hatching

"When you pick up a modern, fine-tuned electric guitar and put it through a batch of modern electronics, you can make it tickle in any way."

plans to launch a full-blown stage production of *Quadrophenia*, very much as he did with *Tommy*. At one point in his L.A. show—some two months before Hyde Park—Pete gave an emotional performance of *Quadrophenia*'s "Why Should I Care" at the grand piano. Bringing the song to an appropriately theatrical conclusion, he turned to the audience and said, "See, it will work!"

Pete Townshend has always been unusually willing to share his innermost feelings, doubts, insecurities and thought processes with his audience. In this regard, he's perhaps the most unguarded, "emotionally naked" member of the classic rock community. He has also consistently pushed the boundaries of what can be done with a rock performance. In his youth, he used an electric guitar, mountains of amps and unprecedented amounts of volume, violence and vitriol to push those limits. In later years, he's used everything from computer electronics to traditional theater techniques to give life to his larger-

than-rock ideas. The results have been intriguing, challenging, occasionally puzzling but always adventurous. Much like a conversation with the man himself.

GUITAR WORLD: Did the idea for the Hyde Park gig grow out of a desire on your part to mount a stage production of *Quadrophenia*?

PETE TOWNSHEND: Yes. But it also grew out of a need to find some elegant way to reopen my relationship with Roger Daltrey. The two are of equal importance; I couldn't possibly do *Quadrophenia* in the park without Roger. So when I agreed to do the show, I was telling myself, "Hey, you're going to have to ring up Roger on your knees! And accept any conditions he imposes on you." Which was something I gladly did. Now I can say to a journalist, "It was fucking difficult. He just didn't want to do it." [Daltrey has often complained to the press of Townshend's unwillingness to play live with the Who.—Ed.] And it was difficult to get him to do it. He has lots of complicated issues regarding the Who at the moment.

But for us, this is the beginning, hopefully, of a creative, collaborative partnership, which is something very different from anything we've ever had before. When I was younger, I simply wasn't able to have

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that kind of collaborative partnership with someone to whom I was that close. Within the Who, Roger was the only normal soul, living his life in the middle of a bunch of very complicated, substance-dependent individuals. He has his own addictions, but unfortunately, he can't talk about them in public. And they have nothing to do with sheep! So, for the both of us, preparing to do *Quadrophenia* in the park has been a period of readjustment. That's what's exciting about it. We're sitting with pieces of paper in front of us and discussing a script. We never did that with songs. In the Who, I'd just take a bunch of songs in to Roger and play them for him and he'd say, "This is really great, but I can't do this one, that one or that one." I'd put the rejected ones aside and later think, "What's wrong with that one? Why can't he do this one?" But that wasn't something we discussed. It wasn't a collaboration—it was the editing process of a diva. So now I'm looking forward to having a real collaboration with Roger. It's a scary prospect, but I think a healthy one.

Originally, though, my motivation for doing *Quadrophenia* in the park was exactly as you said. I thought, "Here's an opportunity. Master Card will put up the money. It will be a big audience, an appropriate time, a celebrity concert..." You know that what got Tommy on the stage was doing a series of celebrity concerts for charity. So I thought if I just copycatted that with *Quadrophenia*, it might have the same effect. As it is, it's turning into something very different and taking on a life of its own.

GW: As Tommy is reincarnated in various forms, does its meaning change for you? Do you discover new themes in it?

TOWNSHEND: Yes, I've made some discoveries. For me, songwriting is very much an unconscious process. It's only from a distance of a great many years that I can look back and say, "Oh, that's what I was writing about." You have to understand that I didn't set out to be a songwriter. I set out to be more of an "idea man" in a band. I wanted to sit somewhere way off to the back—kind of like Brian Eno with Roxy Music—and give the band my great ideas, like, "You just need to wear a target t-shirt, man, and you'll be happening."

But increasingly I found that songwriting was becoming very therapeutic for me. That's definitely what happened to me with Tommy. Since writing Tommy, I've done a bit of actual therapy, and remembered things that I hadn't remembered at the time I wrote Tommy. I'm not saying that I find instances of an Uncle Ernie—of actual child abuse—in my life. [Uncle

Ernie was the child molesting character in the rock opera.] But there were instances like friends of my father coming back from the pub a bit too drunk and playing a bit too rough.

And I found a few other things in that. In my first rock opera [A Quick One While He's Away (1966)] I could never figure out where this man Ivor the Engine Driver comes from. [Sings in a heavy Northern English accent] "My name is Ivor, I'm an engine driver..." He's a dirty old bugger, basically. He's the one who has an affair with the girl while the hero of the story is away in Australia, or wherever he is, and then he comes home and forgives the girl. So that opera's about two things: You can't trust old men. And you can't trust women, 'cause they'll have sex with old men when you're away, but when you come back you'll have to forgive them. That was the moral of the story. And I was thinking, "God, this is a misogynist, ageist piece." But that's what I was! I was a misogynist, ageist little git, basically.

But anyway, I was talking to my mother about it and she said, "You know, you used to travel by train down to your grandmother's all the time, in the care of the guard." We used to have this system in the U.K. where you could put a child in the care of the railway man. And I absolutely used to love it. You could walk up and down the train with the guard, or you might be in the back somewhere with the dogs and the Royal Mail. You felt part of the whole industry of the railway. But you know, I was somewhere between four and 11 years old and anything could have happened. I don't remember that anything did.

But at some point in my life, my benign trust of men in uniform changed into an absolute distrust of men in uniform. I think that's perfectly healthy, by the way. But it's interesting when you look back at your early work thinking maybe the lyrics will tell you things. That has been happening to me a lot, recently. No great revelations, but interesting.

GW: The compositional and conceptual dimensions of Tommy tend to overshadow the guitar work. But what kind of staff were you playing on that album?

TOWNSHEND: I was playing a fair bit of piano in the composition. It was the first time that I'd really started to be confident that I could play the piano. But I was also working with the 12-string [acoustic] guitar as a free composition element. So on stuff like "Sparks" and "Underture," I used a big Harmony 12-string, Leadbelly-type guitar, sort of a copy of an old Stella. And I'd been tuning it down, probably to C, and getting into a kind of pick-driven ragtime. For example, I might play a drone on a D [sings a rhythmic quarter note pattern] and

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play chords on the top. I used that to some extent on "Welcome," as well—"Come to this house, be one of the comfortable people . . ."—which is quite an interesting song. It was entirely written in free time. It's in 6/8, but there's no strict rhythm, just a gentle, "homey" kind of style that was produced on the guitar rather than in my head. It came from the feeling that I got from playing the guitar, from approaching the guitar as a comfortable, domestic kind of instrument.

But in the opening of the play ["Overture"], you hear what, in a sense, is very much a personal style of pick-driven acoustic guitar playing that not many other people do. I don't know what it grew out of—I think it was through a mixture of listening to blues and jazz, particularly to Mingus, at the same time. [Pete sings a dotted 16th note pattern on a single tone.] That two-finger thing that Mingus used to do on the piano all the time [i.e., two fingers playing alternately on the same piano key]. It's there in the "Captain Walker didn't come home" bit, with a little bit of country stuff thrown in. I still love to play that way today.

GW: Did your solo career liberate you, in a sense, from the guitar-hero role that was part of your identity with the Who?

TOWNSHEND: Yeah, it did, I think. That's a role I've never been entirely comfortable with. I don't want guitar players reading this to think that I'm whining about this, 'cause I'm not.

I really love the guitar. I think it's one of the great instruments of the last two or three hundred years. It's so expressive, particularly in its electric form. When you pick up an acoustic guitar—which is supposed to be the great new instrument of the modern, "unplugged" fucking age—you realize what a crude, horrid box it is. It doesn't sing. It's a fantastic rhythmic instrument; it's a fantastic accompaniment to the human voice. But when you pick up a modern, fine-tuned custom electric guitar and put it through a batch of modern electronics, you can make it fucking do anything.

I really love the way the guitar is a product of the technological age, which has produced a finer and finer voice. And I like the players who exploit that, whose lineage extends back to jazz as much as to blues.

But for me, the moment of separation [from the guitar] was working with Jimi Hendrix. And when I say working with Jimi Hendrix, I mean it: I worked with Jimi Hendrix. The Who used to do concerts alongside his band in the very early days. And I had to make the decision then: Was I seriously going to learn to play or just keep doing what I was doing? And I decid-

ed that I couldn't possibly learn to play. I rather foolishly got involved in comparing myself to Jimi, 'cause it seemed to me at the time that I was the only competition he had. Possibly me and Eric Clapton. There was kind of a conceit—a vanity—in that. I could only see me and Jimi; there wasn't anybody else.

And I remember having a conversation with Eric at the time, where it became apparent that he could only see *him* and Jimi. I confessed to Eric that, fucking hell, when I first saw Jimi play, I wanted to go and kill myself. And he said, "Well, I did too. But I didn't think that would've affected you. I mean, he wasn't in your arena." But he was. Jimi was someone who was working with showmanship, which was one of the directions where rock and roll was inevitably going at the time. Whether this was a good or bad thing is another matter. But rock and roll was inevitably going to get bigger, and Jimi was one of the people who showed that there was something you could do in the curve of an arm or the movement of the tongue, the stance of the body or a hairdo, where you combined showmanship and stagecraft. It was the beginning of a great genius that, unfortunately, had nowhere to go. But at that time, I decided to concentrate on *not* being a guitar hero. I'd already established a whole *modus operandi* and stylistic stage stuff. I never felt very comfortable with it, though.

GW: You were working with feedback and destroying guitars on stage several years before to Hendrix. Did you feel ripped off when you first saw him?

TOWNSHEND: At first I did, yeah. But it was interesting. There was a lot of justice in it, wasn't there? I did feel slightly ripped off. Only briefly, though.

GW: When was the first time you saw Hendrix?

TOWNSHEND: I saw him in London, in a club behind Piccadilly. I can't remember the name; I think it was called 21. Then I saw him at Blazes, which is another club in Soho. And on that occasion, everybody was there. Mick Jagger and Paul McCartney were there. I was with Eric . . . again! We used to go around together back then, hanging on to each other like children. And I remember that concert being absolutely extraordinary. The first time I met Jimi, the Who were recording in I.B.C. studio. We could well have been recording *Tommy*—I can't remember what we were up to. But we were in the studio and [Hendrix manager] Chas Chandler brought him in to meet me. Jimi was covered from head to foot in dust. He looked like he just come out of what we call a "skip" in England—a place where you put builders' rubbish. He was very, very scruffy and his military jacket had obviously seen better days. His skin was bad. He

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was very pale, extremely nervous and shy. He couldn't speak—didn't speak. I just put my hand out and said, "I've heard a lot about you." 'Cause he'd been signed to our label [*Track Records, in England*]. And Chat said, "Jimi wants to know what kind of rig to buy." And I said, "Well, you catch me at a strange time, 'cause I'm just shifting from Marshall to Spund City, and at the moment I'm using both." Chas said, "Well, that's what we'll do."

A couple of days later we appeared with them at the Saville Theater, which was owned by Brian Epstein, the Beatles' manager. I believe the Who and the Jimi Hendrix Experience were the first rock concert to play there. Jimi opened for us, and he had exactly the same rig as me. I actually felt like I'd given too much away—it was a bit like giving your enemy your weapons. Because to me, those were weapons. I felt I was very much on the leading edge of weapon building, and the guitar was my machine gun. It was always me who went to people like Jim Marshall and Dave Hill—who started Sound City, which became Hiwatt amps—and pushed them to make bigger, better and cleaner-distorting big amplifiers. And I handed all that

to Jimi.

I've never really recovered from that. 'Cause what I *didn't* do was practice. What I should have done was look at Jimi and think, "Here is a teacher. Here is somebody I can learn from." I should've looked at his sources, his background, looked at the music he'd grown up with and studied what he'd played. Some of it was because he played upside down. He played both ways. He played a normal left-handed guitar with the strings reversed. But he also had a thing where he could play a normal guitar upside down, left handed—in other words, with the high strings on the top. I once gave him a guitar—it may have been at the Saville. He had a problem with his guitar and I gave him mine, and then I thought, "Well, it's strung the wrong way for him." But he could play it. When he first came to Britain, he was definitely playing with the little string at the top. He used to take a normal guitar and flip it around and play it.

GW: Lets get back to your music. Your solo work deals with many of the same themes you dealt with in the Who, but from a far more personal perspective.

TOWNSHEND: I certainly hope so. The Who material was very much written for the Who. "I Can't Explain" has high falsetto harmonies like the Beach Boys because Keith Moon was an absolute surf music

fanatic and wouldn't play the song if it didn't have those harmonies. On the other hand, there was a need to deal with very serious issues of my own that were developing out on the street—the violent side of the Mod scene, which was really where Roger was at the time. To some extent, really, he still is. But that's another conversation. So there was all that on the one hand, and all these pinkie voices across the top. In my early writing for the Who, I spent a lot of time attempting to satisfy the needs of the members of the band. And also, more bizarrely, to satisfy the needs of the person that I became when I was onstage with a guitar. Onstage, I became a completely different person from the one who sat in his room writing songs. Something I wanted to sing about all alone in my room might seem like complete crap to that person up on stage with his guitar.

But always the most important thing was to write for the audience. That runs all the way through my work, hopefully. I tell myself that. I hope it's true. I hope I tend to the emotional needs of the audience that I've carried with me throughout the Who and into my solo career. I feel that, as a solo artist, I was given permission to speak about myself. It wasn't self-indulgence. People said to me, "I like when you do that. I like when you talk about your inner fears,

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because I can't do that. You say things that I identify with and it makes me feel good that someone who has, in a sense, a protected kind of life still suffers from the same human frailties that I do." Particularly in the department of gender identity, sexual identity, failure in relationships... everything but politics, in my case!

GW: Even in your earliest writing for the Who, there are things like "I'm a Boy," which is one of the best songs about gender identity ever written.

TOWNSHEND: Yeah. I'm gonna do that one in my shows. It's a good song. It gets better too, 'cause it's such a straightforward song about gender. And ultimately it suggests something about where gender might lead you.

I don't think any of us in the Who realized quite what we were doing in 1967, wearing eye makeup on *Top of the Pops*. I didn't really connect with the fact that a lot of the violent, punky kind of stuff that the Who drew out of the Mod movement denied, to a great extent, that there was a strong feminine, "peacock" expression running through it. The idea that boys cared about fashion at all. That's something that really didn't exist prior to Mod. Earlier on, you had the sense that Elvis Presley just put on a leather jacket

quite by accident. He just happened to pick it up. He didn't spend an hour in front of a mirror posing to make sure it was the right cut—presumably.

GW: It's interesting to compare "I'm a Boy" with "Rough Boys," one of the pivotal songs of your solo career and the lead-off track on *The Best of Pete Townshend*.

TOWNSHEND: What happened there is I was looking at my own physicality, my own sexuality. But, as I said earlier, it was all in a very unconscious way. I'd grown up surrounded by a very cosmopolitan and fairly wild bunch of people: Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp, Chris's brother [film actor] Terrance [Stamp], and [model] Jean Shrimpton. These were some of the hot shot glitterati of London's King's Road scene in the Sixties. I'd been involved with that on the one hand, and with the Mods on the other—violent, tough street kids. There was all that in my past. And at the time of writing "Rough Boys," I was also feeling threatened—although I couldn't figure out why—by what had been going on with punk. And that brought forth a whole tumbling array of ideas.

I still use that technique when I write songs—brainstorming onto the page and trying to make sense of it later. But at those times, I wasn't even trying to make sense of it. I was just brainstorming, period, and

letting it appear on record. That was something that worked on that album. [*"Rough Boys" originally appeared on 1980's Empty Glass (Atlantic).*] So I continued with it. On a song like "Slit Skirts," from *All the Best Cowboys Have Chinese Eyes [Atlantic, 1982]*, I brainstormed right on the page and it was all personal grief, self-loathing, self-pity, a feeling of failure in marriage... A lot of people were put off by it, like, "We don't want to listen to that." But others came up and told me how deeply they were touched by that song.

GW: What kind of role did you have in putting together the *Tommy* CD-ROM?

TOWNSHEND: In the beginning, quite a big role. But it went through a couple of phases where the direction of it changed. It's become a documentary, in a way—an archive of views, information and history that apply to where *Tommy* is today. And it's a good piece. Been a long time coming. It's nice to see it.

GW: The last time we spoke, in the summer of '94, you said you were thinking about doing a CD ROM of *Lifeline*. [*Lifeline was an ambitious, multi-faceted film project of Townshend's that was never completed but was the source for many of the songs on Who's Next (MCA, 1971).* —Ed.]

TOWNSHEND: Yeah, I probably was. I think

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Lifefhouse would make an interesting challenge for that medium. But what I'm actually doing with *Lifefhouse* at the moment is much what I'm doing with *Quadrophonia*. I'm just trying to develop them as dramatic musical works for live performance. I'm more interested in that. The thing about CD-ROM, movies, TV, CDs, the Internet and all those media is that we can disguise ourselves far too well in them. All these electronic pathways between people create the potential for an incredible degree of intimacy.

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Unfortunately, we can also hide in that area. For example, we don't really know who Sharon Stone is. I don't know if many of us care. But if we want to know, there's no way of finding out. Our "access" is very selectively controlled and manipulated.

You can't really do that with live performance. You might try to. You might say [*in an assertive voice*], "I'll tell you exactly what this is going to be about." But when you're in front of a group of people and some guy's yelling out, "Play fookin' 'Magic Bus,'" and some beautiful girl down front is showing you her body and mouthing the words, "I love you, I love you; you can have me," it just breaks up the whole process. And you think, "Oh, my God, this isn't what I intended. Everything's out of control!" But *that's* good. And so I'm drawn back to live performance all the time. On this trip, I'm playing small concerts. I said often—I don't know if I really honestly meant it, but I *said*—that one of the things I liked about working on *Tommy* was being in theaters that only hold 1500 people. Big rock and roll shows are strange. And what's strange for me is that my first opportunity to develop *Quadrophonia* in front of the public is going to be in front of 150,000 people—possibly more—in Hyde Park. But I think the most important thing is that it'll be 150,000 *real* people. ●