

Pete Townshend's Lifehouse

A look at two new box sets that, nearly 30 years on, demonstrate just how far ahead of its time Townshend's legendary project really was.

by Simon Ward

between the people, via the Lifehouse's musical interpretation of their personalities. Townshend's original, ill-fated premise was to use the Young Hotheads as a communal space where the audience would virtually live with the film and, eventually, the band would be able to begin interpreting the world through music. In a point where the lines between performer and audience could no longer be defined.

That's a very simplistic reading of an extremely complicated — and in places, convoluted — story. But it didn't work, and the project brought Townshend to the brink of a total nervous collapse, and the rest of the band to the end of their tether. Ultimately, the selected highlights were assembled to form one of the 1970s' great albums — 'Who's Next'. Here, with the release of two box sets, we have the fuller picture yet into the inspiration and process of the remarkable project.



In 1970, Pete Townshend had a vision of the future of rock'n'roll. It's a vision that has continued to inspire his ambition for the last part of three decades. Here, finally, he's revealed to the public a version of his great, unfinished project, 'Lifehouse'. The story is anything but simple and has mutated over the years. The setting is a future Earth, where a totalitarian government is suppressing the middle classes — who live underground — through the creation of 'experience suits', which lead the masses with authoritarian propaganda. Those who remain on the surface are hippies, musicians and other outcasts, who lead a free existence but lack emotional or spiritual sustenance.

In the original version of 'Lifehouse', the idea was that the people would send out their personalities through music, 100% interpreted by the computer 'Lifehouse' — the film — so as to achieve a spiritual communion



"THE LIFEHOUSE CHRONICLES"

The 40/50 set comprises two CDs featuring the 1981 video play of the "Lifehouse" story, two CDs of Townshend's songs to songs that provide the framework of the concept, and CD of Townshend's own themes, along with classical operatic that inspired him during the writing process, and a four disc of themes and three from various stages in his career.

The CD set is atmospheric and fully conveys Townshend's ideas about humanity and its need for community. Particularly poignant are the exchanges between the humans Mary and the CD, whose character replaced the Virus as the power behind the Lifehouse.

It's not clear to me how prophetic Townshend's ideas about the society of the future were. In the end, the music complements the story line, although there are a few moments which could have maximized the dramatic potential had they not had songs falling in. As previously reported in *MC* there is no new "Who music" in the play. Despite that, it should still be heard by Who fans, as it clarified the lyrical and musical themes of



The original "Lifehouse" cassette featured material that has remained unissued until now.

different but vital came before.

CD 3 is a relatively uncut solo featuring mostly Peter, Ginnie and Scarlett, alongside Townshend's own synthesized thematic arrangements. In their files alone, Peter's "Fantasia Upon One Note" and "The Garden Road Drive" find us just why they inspired Peter's writing. The pieces flow seamlessly into one another, creating a mesmerizing soundscape that perfectly evokes the themes of the radio play. However, it's the final CD which underlines Townshend's commitment to redefining his music. The new version of "Who Are You?", first presented at his Shepherd's Bush Empire gig in 1988, is the most profound indication of how far he is still in tune with the culture of today. Blood, perfume, flame, and violence leech over a shimmering drum machine melody, before Townshend comes crashing back with the verses, a spiraling fusion of the past and present that should be pursued further. Meanwhile, there are beautiful new versions of "Pure and Easy", a version of "Won't Get Fooled Again",



CD 2 of the 4-disc set featured two songs that surfaced on "Who's Next".

and Wendy's movement from "Psychodrama", along with the previously unreleased track "Can You Hear The Old You Plants Grow", which sounds like a Dylan-esque acoustic work-in-progress.

Ultimately, as with all projects of this size, the question is, is it worth buying? If you're a fan of Peter Townshend, and particularly his conceptual works, the answer is undoubtedly yes. It's as complete an audio record as there's probably ever be of how "Lifehouse" was meant to be, along with glimpses into other areas of his solo work. For that reason alone it's essential.

"THE LIFEHOUSE METHOD"

The fact that "Lifehouse" has finally emerged in the 21stst century means that Peter's original desire to create an interactive work can now be realized. "The Lifehouse Method" comprises the six CDs of the other format, plus an additional CD, also entitled "The Lifehouse Method" — a reimagined version of a Radio 1 documentary about the project. It's been updated to include excerpts from the radio play, and is linked by spoken word segments from Peter himself. It's an illuminating listen, although some interview material was slightly obscured by Peter's voiceover. What will attract buyers is the opportunity to have their own piece of music personalized on-line, which can be sent to Peter to be considered for integration into a "Lifehouse" experience once that he's currently putting together. Every piece of this list also gets a token to one of the shows. This is a unique chance to, perhaps, become a part of Townshend's work in the way that he originally intended, and as there are only 1000 sets on sale, demand is guaranteed to outstrip supply. A well-purchase is recommended. The set's some cheap, however, and at the time of going to press, the predicted price was around £660. One for die-hard fans only.

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the "Who live" album. It's a fascinating document for a film viewer. I enjoyed the film and budget to create with the concept. You also feel the recording of the play is suitable on its own, as just of the BBC Radio Collection, while there's a script book published by Simon & Schuster.

CDs 2 and 3 comprise original demos of songs that it around the "Lifehouse" concept, which means that fans get to hear the early template for "Who Are You?", alongside the more familiar "Who's Next"-era material. Some of these demos have been available before ("Pure and Easy" and "Shepherd's Bush" for example), but taken as a whole, we get a fascinating insight into Townshend's recording methods. Not only do they demonstrate what a versatile musician he is, but they also indicate how much of his work was nearly complete before it was given to the "two-headed monster" that was the Who.

The results are also a revelation, as Peter reveals hidden depths of religion, sounding particularly tender and fragile on the above tracks. Additionally, the embryonic versions of the likes of "Strange Behaviour" (later "Play"), and "Won't Get Fooled Again" have a greater resonance today, with their predictions of a future in which society would gradually separate, and the "evolution" (the new boss) wouldn't be rebornly



The "Who's Next" album package's surreal "Lifehouse" marks history.

TOWNSHEND TALKS

Steven Ward and Matt Kent hook up to the grid with Pete Townshend to discuss the project that refused to die.

Starting now, writers like radio play, do you have a clearer vision of a film project?

No. And I have no intention of pursuing one in which I am creatively involved. If someone comes to me with an approach for a treatment, I may consider working on it as the writer. I didn't write the actual radio play. It was developed with Jeff Young, who is an established radio writer.

Do you think people need to listen to the whole package rather than just the play to gain a full idea of the concept?

Yes. That's if they want the whole concept, as it has evolved over the decades. The radio play will be enough for most, if you like my music. You will like the package, and you will appreciate my overall concept. The radio play of the package — it's the best of things I could do.

How does it feel playing the songs that aren't there a sense of closure?

No. The songs going to its wherever they've been, I think. Some of them have been given new life, especially "Behind Blue Eyes," which has truly grown up.

All that can be said of 'Lighthouse' for certain is that no-one, except for maybe including, Townshend ever had much idea of what it was — and that it refuses to die!

Dave Marsh Before I Got Old, 1982

Would you consider a full 'Lighthouse' show with the film and theatrical elements intermingled?

I don't know. This is not as clear and direct as "Quadrophonia" and "Tommy," where the band played with each original project to its conclusion. "Lighthouse" never happened. Simply speaking, it's not a who project at all.

What do you think about the fans who believe misinterpreting songs like "Who Are You" with an ill or schizophrenia?

I haven't met any yet. It does seem that I like many for them. They must see every line show as an opportunity to pretend nothing has changed, by standing the same football game over and over again, and your team never wins. I see the show as a chance to try a new way

Pete Townshend
Quadruphonia CD, Columbia

1.	Our Relationship	3:00
2.	Quadruphonia	10:00
3.	Who's Sorry Now	3:00
4.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
5.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
6.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
7.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
8.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
9.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
10.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
11.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
12.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
13.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
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42.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
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44.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
45.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
46.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
47.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
48.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
49.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
50.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00

Pete Townshend
The Lighthouse CD, Columbia

1.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
2.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
3.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
4.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
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48.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
49.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00
50.	Who's Got The Final Say	3:00

of doing songs which are interpreted or heard as CD.

I don't think how they really are, but interpretation is just that, it's only my interpretation. I welcome it when younger artists do it, when Roger does it, or John. I

Left: Tom Corbett from 'The Lighthouse Method' has an interesting but very different take on material

welcome it when the director at TV commercial stations do it. Why should I apologise for doing it myself? I know some people don't like I what I do. Sadly, there is no reason for some people, the stage is mine. Theater — lucky for them — is free.

Do you think current musical forms like rap are elements you'll see more frequently in your future work?

No. What other musical forms are there that are new? Rap isn't new either really. I used to hear at Stephen's Bush Gardens. He was around in my life, helping out on the drama-workshop for "Lighthouse", and in a brilliant teenage hip act. You never know what you're going to get out of him. I may work with rap's again, but, hopefully, with me helping him but not him. He's entirely his own man.

Are you aware of artists like the Flaming Lips and their experiments with sound collages?

No. I'd really like to hear what they're doing. Steve Naylor's wife uses sound collages in her band Fourwinds. I enjoy that very much.

Do you think comedy is spiritually beneficial?

No. But for dramatic purposes, it's useful sometimes to examine society so though it may spiritually benefit. In fact, I think there's a big move back to spiritual matters, are will see whether it ends up in the silly place it did in the 60s, or whether this time people really realize they need to do something solid to save themselves, not just wear labors and start writing.