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Pete Townshend
John Mills
Andy Roberts

Teach yourself:
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Flamenco guitar
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Bass guitar
Guitar harmony
The Who have recently returned to the music scene with a blockbuster of a double album called Quadrophenia. Amazingly, the group have been together for ten years. Here Pete Townshend talks about his guitar history and some of the innovations he brought to rock music.

The first guitar I ever had was a £3 Hyra, bought for me by my grandmother when I was eleven. Then I had one from my mother's antique shop which was a lot better. It was a Czechoslovakian guitar, good fingerboard and everything. It lasted quite a long time, but it got pinched in the end. Then I had a very cheap Harmony.

This was before the Who started to go places.

Yes, when the group began to move I was into Rickenbackers. A lot of our enthusiasts will remember that fact. We played them because the Beatles used to play them — that's why I liked them!

You must have listened to someone before the Beatles?

The Shadows. Hank Marvin is still one of my favourite guitarists.

Because of his clean sound?

It was the cleanest sound around, but it still sounded dirty in those days. At least, it sounded mean. I also used to listen to quite a bit of trad jazz; I liked the Acker Bilk band, especially the banjo sound. I was playing tenor banjo then, tuned like the top four strings of a guitar. After trad I got into R and B, and people like John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed, Lightnin' Hopkins...

Where did you make your first public appearance?

John Entwhistle and me, we played together as kids, we buggered around from the age of 12, at school. Then we were
in this trad band, I was on banjo and John on trumpet. Then he started to go on bass guitar: he made it, in fact, from lumps of wood, piano strings, things like that. Our first public appearance was at the Congregational Church, Churchfield Road, Acton. It was known as the Congo Club. That was the trad group, me on banjo. Very nervous I was.

*Had you developed a guitar style by this time?*

Well, I didn’t have an amplifier, so there was nothing like feedback. I only really became an innovator in the early days of The Who, ’64-’65. You could hardly innovate on a three-chord banjo strung up as a guitar.

*So how did your distinctive guitar style originate?*

When I first got amplified with big speakers, I used to have them at wall level. I could never work out why most people played with them on the floor. I wanted them being in my ear-hole. So I used to put mine on a great stand so the speaker was actually firing into the guitar pick-up dead level. Feedback started by accident and I started to use it. Simple as that.

The more I used it, the better I got.

On a Rickenbacker I can still play a tune on feedback — through breaking harmonics and picking up the partials and feedback — without actually touching the strings, just depending on what angle you turn to.

*How does it work?*

You’re actually shortening the feedback vibration, the actual sort of path. The distance you are from the speaker affects what partial of the particular note that’s feeding back is going to stand out most. Like it might be the root note, or the first or second partial — you even get sevenths and quarter notes. You can’t get some of them any other way; there are only seven usual partials: you can get them on those — what do you call them? — wind things, wind lutes, I think they’re called. The wind blows across about twenty strings that are all tuned to A, and you get these strange haunting partials thrown up, just from the music. On the guitar, with feedback, you get all these, and even things like the leading note. That’s a pretty difficult harmonic to get, but you can get it easily with feedback.

*When did you start setting the guitar on fire and wrecking the instrument, throwing bits to the audience and all that?*

That all came about by accident too. It first happened at the Railway Hotel, Harrow. I was sort of torturing the guitar to try to get sound out of it, you know, wringing the neck, banging it on the ceiling and stuff like that. Well, it hit the ceiling and made a hole in it. I thought, that’s great! Then as I pulled it out the neck fell off. Rather than look an idiot, I continued to smash it to bits, just to stop people laughing. Then I picked up a Rickenbacker 12-string, after doing in the 6-string, and carried on with the act as if nothing had happened. Nobody in the band batted an eye-lid.

So everybody rolled up next week to see me do it again. My friend Barney, who used to promote gigs, and who used to share a flat at the time, put fly-posters up announcing The Guitar Wrecking Maniac — and it all started being something which was an extension of my feedback playing. Amazing. I occasionally feel now that the ceremony, the occasion, is much bigger than I am... but it gets smashed up just the same.

*Do you think your guitar playing has changed over the years?*

Yeah, I think I’ve improved slowly. Though I’ve never sat down and practised and practised. I’ve still got a sound that’s peculiar to me, you know, dirty and edgy.

*Do you adapt your guitars at all to get your sound?*

No, not really. I find I can get the sound I want from any guitar. At the moment I’m using Gretsches with double-pole pick-ups. In the studio I use a Chet Atkins-type Gretsch. On stage I use the ‘Les Paul’ Gretsch. It’s the same shape as a Les Paul, but it sounds like a Gretsch. Those pick-ups have a fanciful sound, but I think it’s mainly the set-up, you know. I’ve got amps specially made for me by Hi-Watt. They don’t make it any more for the open market, but they do especially for me. They’re incredibly robust, very loud, distorted in the right way, and clean when I want them to be clean. It’s the only common denominator about my sound. I swap guitarists around, I use Gretches, Gibsons and sometimes Fenders, for their strength. I know people like Ronnie Wood had their guitars especially made for them, custom made. Never been moved that way myself. I can get away with anything because the amps are so good.

*What’s the difference between playing on stage and in the studio?*

I’m more abandoned on stage, more liberal. I don’t rate my guitar work highly on record. I know what I can do; I know my limitations. I’ve spent far more time learning to play the piano, operate the synthesizers, drums, learning to play the bloody violin now — all the things that might help me as a guitarist. I don’t feel like a guitar player per se; it’s obviously my dearest instrument, but funny enough I compose on the piano or the tape recorder, or even on manuscript.

*You seem to use the guitar as an extra voice in the band.*

Well, the way I used it was more as a weapon! I’m still not a guitarists’ guitarist in the traditional sense. But I feel it’s certainly an instrument that lends itself incredibly to style, bringing out the personality of the individual who’s playing. I still admire Eric. Sort of pure and unaffected... it rings in a way. There’s something about it I really enjoy. I like playing rhythm guitar with Eric. I occasionally hear Jeff Beck: I like the cleanliness of his sound. I like listening to Ronnie Wood, Keith Richard and Stevie Marriott. I particularly like Stevie Winwood’s guitar playing. A lot of people don’t know that side of him now.

I used to watch Hendrix whenever I could. He embodied everything that was perfect in balance and musical virtuosity. I felt he combined, transcended that was good about Eric and all that was good about my showy style. Hendrix was showy and aggressive, with no respect for the guitar. He used it as an extension of himself, rather than something to sort of polish.

*What’s it like playing with The Who?*

They’re not an easy band. The limitations, the traditions, the disciplines are so strict that they’re hard to transcend. And it isn’t so easy with someone like Keith who doesn’t just go on so boringly and predictably. Same with John: he’s not a foundation bass player. He’s a guy that contributes to the musical structure and decoration. I mean, we’re only a three-piece, so you have to play a lot of notes and make a lot of noise to fill in the sound picture. Consequently, I don’t think much of jamming. If ever you see Keith and John jamming at a club, you can bet your boots they’re taking the piss out of somebody. The last jamming I ever did was with a band called the Doobie Brothers, for a couple of hours or so. But they’re all sensitive: I was just incorporated with them. But bands which rise on the spur of the moment and jam are not my scene. I’m just not keen on playing with another group—we’ve got enough problems of our own, thank you.