THE WHO: Quadrophenia Reconsidered
by David Marsh

Philadelphia on Tuesday night is nobody's good time. Nonetheless, because the Who were not coming to New York on their fall tour, it was worth it to go there to hear them. After all, I've been saying for years that they were the best live band in rock.

The Who didn't play New York for reasons of their own. The smart money is saying it was because they plan an extravaganza in the spring. But it would have been an almost unbearable disappointment to me not to have seen them at all. Last time in 1971, I stood still for five full minutes after they were done, partially because I couldn't believe it was over, partially because of the roar in my ears.

This isn't such a bad thing. At the proper volume, the Who's sound is as potent as a jack hammer in the bone marrow. Which is its own kick. One of the best things about the band used to be that it was playing with enough volume to fill Madison Square Garden, even though the places they were playing were one tenth the Garden's size. Seeing the Who at the rock ballroom on Friday night was a grand thing, if you didn't mind running the risk of not being able to hear the alarm one Monday morning. With luck, on Tuesday, if an air horn went off next door you might think there was a fire in the room.

Being too loud used to be half the point. The Who are now famous for doing their rock opera, Tommy. Pete Townshend once explained to me that the opera had added a whole new dimension to the band's fans. "Now," he said, "Some of them think the bard's named Tommy and the opera's called The Who." That's the peril of success.

Now the Who have another opera, Quadrophenia. Both Quadrophenia and Tommy are closer to soap opera than the Met of course, but both have their merits. They're deeper, and far less pretentious than they seem.

The Who's longevity - a decade - is central to the new opera's conception, only the Band and the Rolling Stones.

Dylan and Elvis have survived so long. But the Who, and particularly Townshend, have been much less victimized by success and time.

Their decade has been glorious. Hearing their first few singles was like witnessing the events which lead up to On The Beach. "My Generation," their best, was an anthem, self-conscious, bitter, angry period. It had no history and no future. "Things they do look awful e-0-c-o-l-d/ Hope I die 'fore I get old." It was just like us, or just like we thought we were.

Peter Townshend is the very model of the intellectual 60s popstar. He is self-conscious, but in control. Dylan's smarter, Jagger more charismatic, Rod Stewart is sexier, but Townshend has it all under his thumb. If the Who smashed their equipment by accident the first time, they never did again. The guitar smashing was inspired. Not only did it make the Who famous, it was better than all of the stage-play which has followed: Townshend does more with a guitar than Alice Cooper with an electric chair, gallows, and a guillotine.

Quadrophenia's concern is with all of this: pop history from 1963 to now, the Who to Alice Cooper. Appropriately, it is on the pop level, the level on which the Who's success was first based, that the record falls. Mod, the early 60s British style craze out of which the Who was born, was all flash - its substance was its lack of any. It exploited planned obsolescence, turned it into a concept. "All of a sudden," said one ex-Mod, "you tore your sweater and realized there was no need to repair it. You could always get another."

But, like all good things, Mod came to an end. Many rock and roll fans wish this were not true, and many Who fans feel that the band's best work was done for - or at least, about - the Mods. But Mod died when the British economy fell apart, and because it wasn't meant to last. Neither were the Who, which is their problem.

Quadrophenia isn't rock, because it doesn't have to be. Its story, of a young Mod named Jimmy who gets stranded off Brighton Beach, the scene of much Mod hellraising, is not a mournful looking back, but a step into the 70s. The Who, always the most engaged of British rock bands - it was they who sprang to the defense in 1967, when three of the Stones were arrested - are still the most challenging. The Stones of Goats Head Soup can admit they have doubts, but must also feign assurance. The Who admit, but never pretend, one...
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of the best things a rock band can do is challenge itself and its customers to own up. That's just what the Who do with *Quadrophenia.* History (particularly pop history) matters now, in a way it couldn't in 1965. We're not like that anymore, so why act like our troubles can be rocked away?

The Who's '60s and roll on stage, of course, but it is different. *Quadrophenia* is the least accessible part of that stage show, but it is also the most intelligent, and the most important record of that year. I like the *New York Dolls,* more, but that is an artifact. *Quadrophenia* is alive, and it is deep; it grows on you, which is why it takes three months to be able to hear it. (In addition, Townshend has thrown in a couple of red herrings. *Quadrophenia* is about the Who's inter-relationship, and it is about Mod, but the Who and Mod happen to be excellent metaphors for the problems of transition between the '60s and the '70s.)

If *Quadrophenia* does not work musically that is just more proof that music is not the most important part of pop. "Who has all the power gone?" I asked in a Newsday record cap. The answer, if not the power, is here, at least in part. If you gave me a choice between partial answers, or even good questions, and powerful rock, I'd still take the former. I don't wish *Quadrophenia* were easier to hear at all; I just hope more people hear it.