CHATTING WITH PETE TOWNSHEND
PART THREE

FINDING THE NEXT BIG THING
AFTER TOMMY

ZZ: Is it actually getting to that step that's important? Or that there always is a next step beyond? There have been so many things that The Who have been going to do—the Rock Farm, the movie of 'Tommy', the TV special, the Young Vic.

T: Well, in actual fact, there are all the same thing—all part of the same thing. They're all the 'after Tommy' thing that I spent a year on—there's a filing cabinet over there full of it, tapes full of it. Really, what we're talking about now is interviews, interviews with me and what I thought the next step was. Previous to that I was in the enviable position of whatever I said anything it came true. I sat down and said I was gonna write a rock opera two years before I did it. A lot of people laughed and said 'What you?' And I did it and it inside the group into a million-selling act for the first time in its career, I said we're gonna make the half-live album that's ever been made and we went ahead and did it—well, at the time it was the best, or came across like it. And also, if we took drugs we sais we took drugs, and if we decided we were gonna do this, we did it. We've always been pig-headed to that degree and 'Tommy' was the break in that because for the first time in our lives we were really successful—really taken over by the audience. Up to that point we really had been our own bosses and then we weren't any more. 'Tommy' and America—the great consumer nation—took us over and said 'There are 50 million kids that wanna see you perform; what are you gonna do about it?—are you gonna stay in Twickenham and work on your next album, or get your ass over there?' So you get your ass over there and you get involved in the standing ovation and the interviews, the 13-page Rolling Stone articles, the presentations of the Gold Albums, you know, blah blah, and that all takes two years to get out of the way and then you realize that it's gonna take another two years to work on the thing. And I started and I thought one of the best ways to get it together is to talk about it and maybe there will be some kind of commitment that the group can be involved in. The biggest thing was that what was going on in my brain wasn't going on in the group's brain—the group as a whole—and that includes me as part of the group. I live this sort of dual role—a managerial position if you like, a creative managerial position, working in conjunction with Kit and Chris and all the guys. It's a very funny, I say to myself...

'Manager: We need a tour, we definitely need a tour.'

'Group: But I don't wanna go.'

'Manager: We've got to tour, we've got to tour Japan, otherwise... blah blah, blah, blah.

'Group: But in case I can't go to Japan because I wanna stay at home and be with my family.'

'It's total schizophrenia.'

ZZ: Do you see the way out as technology? Is technology just more roads and more tons of equipment?

T: Well, unfortunately that's true. This is something we're trying to get over. Technology is often just buying the bigger and bigger synthesizer. I got involved in the Young Vic thing in a fantasy. The script was a fantasy—it was about: the future and total control of entertainment to the point where entertainment became experience and that doubled back on the fact that experience is entertainment and the best way to live is to look at life as entertainment and it's something to be looked at with respect but not gravity. The fantasy that I wrote which was really about The Who, fairly directly, was to do with future technology and the control of technology and that you can control people's experience to the point where you're very rapidly taking them through thousands and thousands of lifetimes of experience, and taking them to the point where they are infinitely alive, so that their minds transcend their physical environment, so that they disappear. And in a way it was like saying that we've played at rock concerts and I know damn well that when I walked off the stage and me and a few of the audience have had to place themselves back together again, in order to reincarnate who they were. The last time it happened, it was an uncanny experience. We were playing at Newcastle at the Flymoore—it's just the Mayfair Ballroom—and we walked off and I couldn't remember who I was—I swear it. I wandered out into the audience, I didn't go back into the dressing room and I got into a fight. Someone started making remarks and I didn't know what they were talking about and I got in a fight with this guy and he started to beat the living daylight out of me and I sort of came to get up and I started to do lots of showy things, placed myself together again, went back to the dressing room and got a drink. And then I drove all the way home at 120 miles per hour and by the time I got home I was me again. It was an amazing thing, I was out of my body but my ego couldn't stand it. My ego had to say 'You're you,' and really, occasionally at Hendrix concerts I've had that, I've watched him and gone off—and just walked out and walked about London for 17 hours or something. It's not simplicity or anything. I dunno—if you go to a really great film or the theatre you get a taste of that, like you come back from a really great film and you get in the car with whomever is at the film with you and you say nothing for two hours and the film is still with you. It's very hard to explain what happens but that experience—it made me feel that it would be possible to do it permanently, rather than temporarily.

Now I've gone back to the point where I think that experience is such as not to an end of infinite consciousness although it's crucial in terms of Karma and the various laws that relate to what we know as reality—it's much more important the flashes of insight that you have. The seemingly temporary flashes that you have into the present are very important. The awareness of the present is the most important part of infinity. The flash that you have of the present is like a taste of infinity.
And with a taste of infinity you are eternal. It's very hard to explain and this was part of the problem, I didn't really know what I was talking about. I knew what Meher Baba had said and it was very logical, I wanted to put it into fact somehow, and allow the group to become the tools of an incredible extreme—a fantasy extreme of experience in live performance. I felt that what The Who were doing could be taken several steps forward in a few months, so that when you consider it you just sat and instead of being subjected to a barrage, you were seduced out of yourself into something else and it became part of the whole thing, and the techniques to be used would be very devious and very, very thought out.

REFLECTIONS ON 'TOMMY'

ZZ: How much of 'Tommy' was preconceived, and how much done on the spot?
T: The two songs from 'Rael' and 'Glow Girl' aren't connected with 'Tommy' directly, they are utilizations of bits that were lying about, 'Glow Girl' was a separate song. I used that bit from the 'Undertone' in 'Rael', because we were doing 'Rael' in New York and 'Tommy' was being worked on for about two minutes and it wasn't working and I thought that was my trump card—because I had to have a trump card. So I thought those chords which I had and loved and played all the time to myself—and handed those over and put a bit of lyric on them—in the studio and felt when we were doing 'Tommy', that I wanted to use them again, that they were under-played. And, fxxk it, if I don't still feel that, I still feel that the 'Sparks' section that we did on stage on 'Live At Leeds' gets close to something which is in that classical rock thing. (Sings it) I always imagine a classical conductor with his hair flying. The Who and Keith incredibly are capable of those classical flourishes. That's what I really want to come across, whereas 'Undertone' and 'Rael' were really a bit limiting. They're not really connected at all. It's just that 'Tommy' was long and in the end we were digging about a bit and so we pulled from all sorts of sources. 'Tommy' is a direct illustration of the way I write a lot. I saw something on the television the other day: how Mozart would stop halfway through a piece—however good it was—if the guy decided he wasn't gonna commission him any more. He'd get the work that was done for this guy and just tear it up. Whereas other people like Bach would use everything, everything they wrote they'd fit somewhere. Like everyone else I come a bit in between, but I do tend to find that I think along a channel. Maybe tomorrow I'll think some idea that will use all the ideas that have been lying around for a long, long time, but that happened with 'Tommy'. Everything fell together like a jigsaw. I'd sit and think that I wanted a bit of a vignet like Tommy in the theatre with all the kids screaming, and I had this song called 'Sally Simpson' about this little girl what I'd seen in love with you. It's all about Tommy at all. The guy's name was Damon. It was like 'Joker James—a little thing I'd done years before and never got used. I had a little demo of it, reddied the words and there it was, 'Sally Simpson', the perfect thing. I'm Fxxk was written long before 'Tommy' was ever thought of. What else? 'We're Not Gonna Take It' with 'Listening To You I Got The Music' tacked on the end. That was written in as a suggestion of Kit's. 'See Me, Feel Me' was also Kit's idea.

You see, he really had a lot to do with it. He was thinking operettically and I was thinking rockationally. He was suggesting things to me from his deep operatic thing—which I'm beginning to get an inkling of now,

ZZ: His father was something.
T: Yeah. Conditions are always the use to be the musical director at Sadler's Wells and Covent Garden.
ZZ: Again I'm quoting you. You said there were bits of 'Tommy' that you didn't identify with. Why was that and what were the bits?
T: I suppose I don't identify with the unglamorous bits.

ZZ: What, Cousin Kevin?
T: Well, obviously I don't identify directly with that—it's not something I wrote. It definitely seems that that was out of control—whole thing. Kit Lambert never did that much, the group never did that much. I did all the draft, but it definitely seemed to be something that was happening outside of me. Something was putting it together. In a way I didn't identify with any of it. I identify much more with 'We're Not Gonna Take It' as it was originally written. It was a song about we're not gonna take fascism. It was a song about police brutality. You know—we couldn't take it from Hitler and we're not gonna take it from you. It was a British song, if you like. It was 'What Won't Get Fooled' said but a bit earlier. Applied to that situation it worked well. It was very considered writing, in that respect, but somehow the whole thing as a complete thing, including songs by other people and including all the suggestions by Kit, and including the fact that it took the group ages to do—when it was finished the cover and everything—I looked at it and thought this was my work and this is my expression. I'm taking it and I'm doing it and expanding it and found out about me and what I was intending subconsciously. But I don't suppose I ever will work in that way again because I'll never work under the influence of Kit Lambert again.

ZZ: What did you think of all the people who need round saying it was sick?
T: Well... they're just looking at the surface. Tony had once asked me a stack in his eyes for saying that on 'Top Of The Pops' on his first night announcing.
ZZ: Should've got the fxxking lot.
T: Ha, ha—Yeah. But I didn't choose the theme of a deaf, dumb and blind boy for sensofical reasons. I wanted to have someone who would dramatically draw sympathy from people, and yet someone who was dramatically remote, a deaf, dumb and blind boy was a cameo of remoteness. And a deaf, dumb and blind boy is ideal. He's cut off and yet still alive. My sort of cameo at that point was that Tommy was deaf, dumb and blind and his coming to know what it was like to be normal looks like what it was like to be a deaf, dumb and blind boy. It became infinitely conscious. It was a big step for him which was equivalent to the biggest step that we can take which is to stop living in illusion and see reality—infinite reality for the first time. This is why I originally used it. I had this idea of making something that I made him jump. He became a double person so that not only did he become normal like you and I, but he jumped beyond that into what I was parallelizing with, into being a universally conscious person. And I think back to a piece that Tony had turned into a Messiah etc. 'Tommy' was very arduously put together, clumsily put together. And it's got a grace that I just can't account for. It's a long time since I talked about it at length, I spent most of my time of the story—talking about it in the States. People over there would say, "Well, why does Cousin Kevin walk in when the mother is under the bed?" But I'd say, "No, Cousin Kevin doesn't walk in there." Because they figured that the whole thing was totally watertight. The American audience thought it was completely watertight and that a film could be made, and everything hung together. So I suppose I had to find a way of making everything fit, after the act. When we put it out we thought that people were gonna pick holes in the story, because it just doesn't work.
ZZ: It doesn't really have an ending, does it?
T: No. My whole idea was that Tommy was left behind—pogoant. You know, 'Soo Me Feel Me' and you didn't get enough of it. That would be the last thing you heard whereas the last thing you hear is 'Listening To You'. That's what I felt was one mistake. There were lots and lots of others. We could've gone on for ever and then not got it right.

RANDOM COMMENTS ON CONTEMPORARY LUMINARIES

ZZ: How about the Stones Rock 'n' Roll Circus which you were a part of?
T: What? Whatsoever happened to it? Well I suppose that's a question for the Stones really. It was finished, it was paid for.

ZZ: Was it any good?
T: From what I hear from Glyn the Stones were mad not to play. The Stones were alright. 'The Stones were as good as they ever were,' were his exact words. But they were constantly depressed by it because they'd chosen people for the acts in it who were knock outs. They ravished the time. They chose The Who because we were the natural group to choose. They chose Tull and Taj Mahal because they were the two people that they were stuck on at the time. They chose Lennon and Clapton for the supergroup because they offered to come. The circus thing was actually meant to go out on the road after the Stones had done their incredible amount of plans. Arrangements with American circuses. He'd gone into it very deeply. Hired trains and everything and, in the end, I think, it fell apart because the group weren't together. Brian was really ill—all of it. I don't know. I think a lot of it was really mental, he obviously hadn't seen the rest of the group for a long, long time and he was getting blamed for everything. This is why when he died he was really angry with the group in a way, and said so in the papers. Brian was dead before he died because he was so remote and pushed out.
ZZ: He always did look very ill. Even at the Crawladdy he looked very emaciated and pale. He never looked healthy.
T: And yet he had quite a lot of stamina. He used to live at night, I think that was it. His face never ever saw daylight. You should see Keith Richards these days. He looks like a fxxking walking airport. He really enjoyed his interview in Rolling Stone. All those bits about when they met Brian Jones on the train and on motor coaches. Really incredible. The first time I ever saw the Stones was walking away from the Ealing Club along Ealing Broadway. And I remember thinking that my hair was long—I had a fringe down to my eyebrows, but very short at the sides, 'cause you couldn't get a barber to do anything else and you had to have your hair cut or otherwise you got the teachers that taught me weren't cool.

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thrown out of your digs. And there were these long-haired blokes, I mean they had hair slightly over their ears, with dark grey suits, I thought instantly I knew who they were, scruffy, a gang of louts. It was obviously them. When we worked with them, Keith wasn't even in the group then. We were doing a few Jimmy Reed numbers then and the rest was just Beatles' songs. It was a total turnaround. From that moment, the first time we worked with them, which was at St Mary's Ballroom in Putney in 1963, from that day forward, it was a metamorphosis.

ZZ: What was Arthur Brown like?
T: He's an amazing guy.

ZZ: Is he mad?
T: I always thought he was. But I think underneath he was probably fairly calculating. I always say that because I am. No, No. [laughs]

ZZ: Well, would you set your head alight if you thought it would earn you a fast buck?
T: Well, when I first saw him, the thing that attracted me to his situation, his music, his sound and everything was the amount that he was putting in. It seemed that later on it developed into a thing where instead of putting things into his performance, he seemed to be like—I can't explain this linearly—but pouring all of his energy out and bringing them back again, then pouring them onto the ground, on the spot where he was standing. So, in fact, although he was giving out a lot, exhausting himself, he was taking it all back again and not giving the audience anything. And he wasn't taking any risks—although he was setting his hair alight—he wasn't taking any risks as far as the audience was concerned. And this is why he failed. Why he always will probably fail. But then I've read a few interviews with him and he sounds like he's sussing out for himself, so maybe it'll change.

ZZ: What, you reckon that if he'd burnt himself out they'd have taken him a lot more seriously?
T: I dunno. If he'd just treated an audience like an audience. Apart from anything else I think he was incredibly underestimated as a poet. But then thousands of poets are underestimated. Millions of poets are underestimated. Poetry is a whole, underestimated art form. It's also an incredible form of rock 'n' roll. There's a lot of poetry about that has far more to do with the streets than rock 'n' roll has.

But then it's boring reading poetry. Anyways, Vince Crane actually went mad—schizophrenia, I think he's alright now.

ZZ: Talking of poets or that sort of thing—how did Murray Roman get involved in Track?
T: Oh, I don't know.

ZZ: Is he a friend of yours?
T: I don't know. I don't know whether I like him or not. He's a real devil. He's a friend of Keith's. He's much, much more than Keith which is really saying something. He hogs the limelight much more viciously and he drinks more and can't hold it as well.

ZZ: He can be very funny, though. That bit about the Bahamaramba Band, I get the feeling that a few of those gaps have been handed down from Jewish joke books. Let's put it this way—it terrifies me when I'm in his company. I get paranoid that I'm gonna blow apart. He's one of those people that when you're in a car, you're trying to think if you should get out of the car while it's travelling at 70mph, 'cause you wanna get away from him and yet he's making you laugh. He's good company, he's just too intense a person. I know that Keith makes a lot of people like that too, so I suppose you can learn to live with it. Murray Roman's happily married, believe it or not. It's quite interesting.

ZZ: Can't Explain' has that characteristic Kinks sound and Ray Davies was a big influence on you. Was there anything besides the arrangements?
T: I think there were two things that influenced me, which came from Ray Davies. One was 'You Really Got Me' which was the key changes thing in it. He used key changes to build and that was like something I'd never heard—jumping a tone. Normally in popular music you jumped a semi-tone, just tastefully up a bit. It got to be a clichéd sound and he rocked it by jumping up a tone. Whether or not he really knew what he was doing I don't know, I've gone through my old rock records and I've not found that anywhere. 'I Can't Explain' didn't manifest it that obviously—it was just a straight lift. 'You Really Got Me' was a number one—we thought 'Let's have a go with a similar sounding record'. And we got round sounding like The Kinks by me using an electric 12-string which cut the sound a bit. In fact, it's difficult to explain the one—he backed a whole rhythm section to play for us who wouldn't let on the record in fact—Jimmy Page was there—

ZZ: Catlin?
T: No, not him. Someone else who was supposedly playing tambourine, but I think he was there to play drums but he played the tambourine on the session, and the Ivy League—a really love affair, I think I mentioned this before. I think what he was trying to do was that Catlin copy thing—which he could see was going down—maybe that's what attracted him to us. I dunno. But 'I Can't Explain' was a direct influence, but the chord change thing—the modulation—was picked up in 'My Generation' which was after all about four months later. And the next big thing that really hit me after the Kinks which really made 'em stand out to me was a track which didn't seem to get anywhere called 'See My Friends'. It was an eastern sort of thing. [sings]

See my friends shining cross the way—
And when I heard that I thought, 'This sound is gonna be the next thing'. It was the exact opposite of the other thing, it was a drone.

THE BEST IN THE BUSINESS

ZZ: Talking about tuning up five guitars, what about Bob Pridden?
T: We couldn't tune up five guitars—I wish he could, He and a couple of other guys.

ZZ: Cyrano?
T: No, not Cyrano. John Woollf is our lighting engineer and production manager, personal manager if you like.

ZZ: Is he the bald guy?
T: Yeah. Well he and Bob really run it. They have people below them. Bob looks after the sound and Wiggy looks after the money and the lights, and keeping the group together. Basically their job—and they do it better than anyone else in the business—'is to make sure that when The Who walk on the stage it is an ideal place to be. They just know our every whim. I've had Bob come into my fat.

'The stage is a bit sloppy, I'm a bit worried about the lighting—I should chuck up your amp.' And what he's really saying is that the stage is two degrees too low at the front and I'm gonna slide and trip over and sure enough 'I go out and slide and trip over and Bob knew I was going to and sprinkled a bit of sawdust down. It's these sorts of touches that you come to rely on and depend on and take for granted, until you reach the point where the Who's went where somebody said, 'What would you do without Bob and Waggy'? and we go, 'Oh, Bob and Waggy are at a group meeting, about having a percentage of the Who's—moral—that the matter is in hand, just in case you're worrying.' It's very difficult, whether to give a roadie a bit of the earnings. You can't just keep upping his wages. It just gives them a bigger tax problem. It will and up he needs a Bahame bank account. You see, the reason he works well is because he's deeply involved with the group. If we said to him tomorrow that we were gonna give him 50% of the group's earnings he'd be pleased but not bat an eyelid. Or if the group paid hard times and we had to cut his pay in half, he would bat an eyelid either. He's just that committed a sort of person. Wiggy probably works a little more for money but I suppose he's been forced to. He's the money man in the group. Makin promoters pay.
PETER TOWNSEND ESQ., WRITER

ZZ: Why did you stop doing the Melody Maker column?
T: Well I felt that I was running out of things to say, and secondly it was at a really dodgy time when the Young Vic thing was going badly. Someone said it was an astrological thing on the box the other day. He said, "Of course, all Taureans have a terrible time between blah blah blah," and I shrieked, "Well, that's the f**king understatement of the year—that is!" In fact, he said "Taureans would come close to insanity at that point in the year"—and I thought if there isn't anything to astrology it must be just coincidence because that was a period when they were ringing up saying "Your copy's due in" and I had to think up something to write about. And it was reducing me to the level of a workaday journalist who doesn't really enjoy his work. I started off because I was privileged enough to write about what journalists never get a chance to write about. So I knocked it on the head four editions before I was supposed to, agreed to do a year. The one I liked best was the first one—was on holiday when I did it. I had bags of time. I had all the nicest things I had to say. I used a lot of friends. When I first conceived it I was very enthusiastic. It was supposed to be a page, not that I wrote more than a page. I was gonna be the Pete Townsend page—not the thoughts of Chairman Townsend—just my page. I could print anything that didn't get the Melody Maker into trouble. No ads. Bit by bit that arrangement fell apart until in the end Ray Coleman and I got very pissed off and we broke up. He, because he's the editor of the paper and I because I felt he wasn't sticking to his original agreement. And then we found a happy compromise where I'd dream up a fun photograph and dream up some piece—and nobody else would be on the page—just a half-page ad or something. I just thought what the fuck. I mean—what do I want to get hung up on the politics of the Melody Maker for? I like writing but only when it's on my terms. Rolling Stone is a different story.

ZZ: That thing on Meher Baba. I got the impression it was pretty instinctive and uncontrolled.
T: Yeah, I typed it off in one go. Jann Wenner edited it a bit. I wouldn't have the time—it was about 15-20 pages of typescript typed. I couldn't have done it over and over again. I did a rough copy, then split it into sections with scissors. Cut out bits I didn't want—comes from editing tapes. I sent those bits to them—cut out bits that didn't work grammatically and just sent it. It was a very easy piece to write because it was everything I wanted to say at that particular time. I really wanted to say all that—Meher Baba lovers who came up to me and said, all shocked, "You know, my friend's still smoking pot," what I wanted to say was, "Well, I'll say if I had half a chance." What I wanted to say to people who were still smoking pot was why I turned off. It's not just "I don't smoke pot any more because of Meher Baba," because I wanted to say what had gone down before and what went down afterwards. This is what Meher Baba means to me—he isn't just a second-rate Maharishi to me. You or anyone else. To really put the depth, the breadth, the gravity of the situation across, in terms of my life. Just to sort of say, "I'm incredibly committed and if I'm committed then you should be committed and that's how much I think of myself." (Laughs) That's really what I was trying to put across—that it's no good writing about Meher Baba's life or anything to put pictures of Baba in or anything like that. Although they did print some really nice ones, Jann Wenner when he wants to can really do it nicely. He did all that. He re-edited it, reshaped it. He picked that Mike McKinnon thing to put in. It was just very, very sensitively done. When he wants to he can be incredibly "correct" about things. I just felt that Baba must have had his thumb right on Jann Wenner's head because when Jann Wenner walked into this house and said, "I want you to do a piece about Meher Baba—I'm gonna put in a section about all the new religious swami, baba blah blah, will you do the piece?" She thought, "Great, I really fancy it," I did it and it's just the rest of the stuff, against it, was too factual. He wanted more facts. Actually, when I sent the copy he said there was not enough facts, I had to get more facts. But it wasn't a factual thing. You don't wanna know about Baba as a man, because Baba's life as a man is something which to a lot of people is going to be meaningless, it's the effect of the time—the
time that we’re in to which you attribute the things that are going on spiritually at the moment. Whether you squat those with Baba’s coming and the things that he said—the very point where he said various things, certain specific events happened. This idea of spirituality happened—but to relate that to such things like dates, information, height, weight—it’s not really gonna help. So I just wrote a personal piece—it was fantastically easy. An incredible outpouring which still to this day is a piece that I’m incredibly proud of. It was certainly my celebration of the type of thing that I think is the next best thing to the guitar. Really, it’s an incredible instrument. In fact ‘Let’s See Action’ I wrote on the typewriter. I just wrote it as scat poetry and when I sang it, it all fitted.

ZZ: Have you written anything besides that—there’s a Pete Townsend ‘Taranush’ somewhere upstair?
T: No. The really interesting thing which I often take time out to read is the script for the ‘Lifehouse’ thing, which is a good laugh. One day I’d like to get that published because that would tell more about how ‘Who’s Next’ came together than anything I could say. That again I just wrote in one go. I video-copied 60 copies myself which took months, up a tattooist’s office in Greek Street, I distributed them to the lads and they keep turning up with lists on them, or wrapping mile cables, or notes to the museum. Roger’s turned his inside out and uses the blank pages to write all his words on. It’s certainly the most abused part of my life—‘The Lifehouse’.

MUSICAL COHORTS AND COMPANIONS

ZZ: Who played piano on all your records?
T: Nicky Hopkins stopped working with us on... No. I played piano on ‘The Who Sell Out’ and ‘I Can’t Reach You’. If there’s any piano before that it’s probably Nicky Hopkins. We never used anybody else. Now after that— we didn’t use Nicky Hopkins until ‘Who’s Next’—so it was all me.

But ‘Tommy’ was all me—organ and piano, it was all quite laborious—I had to do it. I used to have to do it. I used to do the demos so I’d get into things. Things like the overture I did in me sleep because I’d recorded it seventeen times in me sleep. Stuff like ‘Amazing Journey’ was written on piano so it was no trouble to do that. ‘Sally Simpson’ was clever work—it was dead simple.

ZZ: Was that Overture/Undertale thing taken from that Blood, Sweat and Tears album?
T: No, we did that as a gag. Don’t tell me Blood, Sweat and Tears called something ‘Undertale’, did they?
ZZ: Yeah, on the first album—the Al Kooper album, there’s an Overture and an Undertale.
T: Really? [amazed] Amazing. Well, it happened with me was that I never ever heard the first Blood, Sweat and Tears album, I always listened to a tape that I had of it so I never ever had any titles. Was the Undertale that strange classical thing?

ZZ: It goes into ‘So Much Love’, then at the end it goes ‘violins, the Undertale’.
T: Well, Al Kooper doesn’t give a monkey’s because he’s never ever mentioned that to me. He’s an incredible guy.

ZZ: Very understated.
T: Undertake, certainly, but a very great listener—self-mockingly—a great listener. I was really flattered because I did that thing about getting off on Elton John’s first album. And when I went over to the States he was carrying it about in his attache case, which is a record player with a pair of cans coming out so that whenever he’s on the subway he can listen to a quick dose of his favourite record, He can only get one record in, he once opened it up and there was ‘Who’s Next’, I was really pleased. ‘Best album ever made’, he said. ‘That’s what you said about Elton John,’ I said. So he said, ‘Well, here’s to the next one.’

ZZ: Leslie West and Felix Pappardeli told us that they were playing with you.
T: They did some work with us in New York. After ‘The Lifehouse’, the group was about to split. We’d done everything there was to be done and we’d go nowhere. I wasn’t willing to go back on the road, it was pointless. We had nothing and it was pointless working for the sake of working. We’ve got to have something—a film, an event. Nothing was big enough for the Who—for it to be as big as possible. The group had shown that they had no confidence in the script. Out a bit of confidence in the music. To me was a throwaway—tracks like ‘Behind Blue Eyes’, ‘Getting In Tune’, ‘Song Is Over’. They were like teasers for what was to really come. They were saying that this is what it should be about—the music. But that was because that was the way we’ve always done it—it always has been the music. So in the end it got worse and worse until I was having hallucinations and really going through an incredible thing—I couldn’t leave the group but I couldn’t do anything with it—we had meetings that were very poor and unproductive. Then suddenly Kit said, ‘Look, come to America—we’ll call at the Record Plant—the sound will turn you on and we’ll do it all quadrophonic.’ So I just thought thank Christ for Kit, He’s saved the day as usual—he’s taken the whole responsibility for the whole thing. Yet it had nothing to do with him—it wasn’t his problem. The group was trying to be free of him and yet he’d come back and made this gesture. We all trooped over to the States—to the Record Plant. We had a lovely, merry work recording with Leslie West playing rhythm guitar, Pappardeli produced. ‘Won’t Get Fooled Again’—a version of it. We did ‘Behind Blue Eyes’, ‘Pure And Easy’, ‘Getting In Tune’, ‘Love Ain’t’ For Keeps’—they were all great, like a new Who. We found ourselves and Kit was producing again—it was fantastic. By producer I mean he got to admit it getting better.
rolled up at half past seven in the evening and started to disrupt the session, but by then we had enough to get it together. But it was his gesture that had achieved it all and it was exhilarating because it was The Who again.

Well, we came back and we said what was said the weakest track, kit wasn't there at all, Papardelli didn't put it off, so we said, 'Let's do it on the Stones' mobile,' because we wanted to test it for the Young Vic, because we were gonna go back in again and do it all live.

We went back to Mick's place and did 'Won't Get Fooled Again' with Glyn Johns and it was just incredible. We couldn't believe what was going down. What with the gig at the Record Plant and the gig here the whole recording thing with the group is coming together. We just have to find ourselves, Glyn said, 'If you like this, come to Olympic.'

So we went to Olympic and we suddenly realised that it wasn't Kit or the Record Plant at all, but The Who who had discovered another facet that we could really take record like a group of session men when we were up against the wall. And produce a recording with a producer like Glyn that sounds like it was recorded by a group of session men.

Halfway through the album we were encouraged. We heard the tapes we'd done in the States and they weren't really good. If they'd been mixed in the States when we did them they might have been alright. Tapes done in America can never sound right over here and vice versa. The other thing was that Leslie played lead on a few of the tracks and I played rhythm to him, which for a Who record was impossible. We did a version of 'Baby Don't You Do It' where he plays lead all the way through. A lot of his licks I've pinched for the stage. Second hand licks.

SUPPORT ACTS AND OTHER OCCASIONAL PROBLEMS OF THE ROAD

ZZ: Talking about the struggles of a pop star, what was all this with Chuck Berry at the Albert Hall?

T: Well, that really is not such a serious thing as it might seem. We know Chuck Berry quite well. We ran across him quite a few times, at the Saville and a few other places and at the Fillmore where he backed us up, and quite honestly we were f@#king terrible.

ZZ: When was this?

T: Quite a long time ago. All we had then was the mini opera. It was just when Hendrix first started. Three years ago. Anyway, when we got the the Albert Hall, he was there and he was just doing his routines. He's got a voice that we know quite well, and we went in and said hello, and he quite likes The Who and he quite likes our records. He's actually listened to them, which is something. And I think he's incredibly accurate and I'm always flattening—which is what I should do—every time I see him.

I suppose it was a natural thing for him to do. After all, these young punks coming in here, I don't care whether they are playing the people, I'm the star. And in the way he's right. For the first show at the Albert Hall, we just said, 'Alright, take top billing, and we'll take it in the second house.' The house isn't full and if you're a big draw like you say you are, you've failed miserably. You take the blame for the first house. We'll take the blame for the second house.'

Chuck Berry wasn't the problem anyway. The problem was his audience. Throwing pennies that are sharpened. Luckily none of us got hit. Roger got one on the forehead, caught him on his head. But it was the sharp end that hit him. They sharpen one edge, like a razor, with a file. Or they sharpen them all round and a girl was throwing them with a glove. Of course, if they hit you just split your skin apart—three or four inches. If they hit you in the eye they just cleave your eyeball in two and that's what they were throwing at us. That was one point where we felt animosity towards an audience and won because the audience was with us and was eventually drawn—after being exasperated from being in the Park for the Stones—into saying 'These f@#king rockers are gonna ruin the whole day unless we get up and do something.' They didn't really mean us anything directly. They got up and they did what the rockers were doing. They jumped on the chairs and they screamed and they shouted and as soon as somebody did that the rockers stopped—they thought, 'Blimey, why are they doing it?' I didn't think that sort of thing happened.

ZZ: That was when I most enjoyed 'Tommy'.

T: It must have been the time I played most aggressively.

ZZ: No, Purley. A few feet from the stage.

T: No, the best performance of all was at Croydon, Fairfield Hall. It was the first time we played it including 'Sally Simpson' and a few other things we did specially. The sound in that place—oh, Croydon, I could bloody play there all night. You sound depressingly loud, yet the voices came over even though they've just got a couple of PA speakers. It's something to do with the fact that the front of the stage is much higher than the back of the stage, so the PA is just miraculously loud. However bad it is, it is just a good sound. That's all. It's a Though the whole place was designed so that you could hear the conductor banging on his rostrum and not the orchestra. It's a freak but it's great for rock.

ZZ: Do you play a long time at the Isle of Wight just to get your own back on Sly Stone who'd done what to you at Woodstock?

T: Absolute rubbish. What we did do to Sly Stone to pay him back was pinch his lighting act—with the big lights. Because he used that at Woodstock, and we pinched it as a gag, and there was a bit of animosity about that. But the thing never really kept off stage—they did a long set, but everybody did a set that they felt was right and that's what we did at the Isle of Wight. We didn't use the lights thing specifically to needle Sly. But it must've needed Sly. It must've been, because our singing men chose to go down, and I'm standing there thinking, 'F@#king hell, Sly are following,' and we're doing exactly what they did to us last year—and it wasn't in any way preconceived.

ZZ: That was an incredible gig. T: We didn't play it quite right, that one.

We had trouble with the lighting. We ended it once and it was perfect. Then for some reason Roger carried on singing. He did it again at the Odeon. We ended and then Roger suddenly thought—'Right, it's my turn to be creative'—[laughs].

I'm a roadrunner, honey. Well, the group can't walk off, so we had to go into that. I'd thrown my guitar up and bounced it on the ground, and of course it was grossly out of tune. It took me five minutes to get it into tune, five minutes to get me head together because the afterglow had gone down, five minutes to get enough energy to get Moon to end. You very much have to play the end of an act right. It's probably far more important for The Who than the rest of it put together. We've got to end right.

ZZ: Did you see any of that night?

T: When we're working a gig I can't bear to watch any of the other acts. It disorientates me completely. The last time I happened was at Monterrey. It turned me on so much—I swore I'd never do it again. I saw Ravi Shankar and I just thought 'Well, what the hell is it I wanna do—something just well give up.' They were applauding for about two hours, it seemed like, I went on and on and on.

ZZ: Didn't you see the Stones Gang on the last tour?

T: Oh yeah, I saw them. When we've done shows with lots of groups—like the one we did with The Herd, The Trogglets, Traffic—that was one where I got very interested in watching Traffic, because that was very early in their career and they had that incredible Mr Fantasy album out. And I thought they were a fantastically interesting group—Steve Winwood was a fantastic guitarist. I suppose I have to watch people who are not competition...
in a way, I mean, I have trouble watching someone like Ron Geesin who played a couple of gigs with us. He was gonna do the tours with us but got weasled out of it by a bit of politics, unfortunately. Ever seen him?

ZZ: No.

T: I did two last gigs with us and to put it mildly, he wiped the floor with The Who—just him, and his bits of paper and his piano playing. He’s so far ahead of his time as a performer that people just can’t pick up on it. His biggest problem, I suppose is realizing that fact. If you tell him that, it pisses him off.

ZZ: You’re playing with Quiver at the Rainbow, Ever played with them before?

T: With the whole tour. I had nothing to do with choosing them. If I’d had a choice it would’ve been Ron Geesin. If Keith had had a choice it would’ve been Ron Geesin too.

ZZ: What do you think of them?

T: We’ve played with them a couple of nights and to be quite honest I haven’t really looked at them.

ZZ: Well, they’re favourites of ours.

T: Are they? From what I’ve heard, bits and pieces—I’ve heard them loud as all hell at Querba in the back of someone’s bailiff’s car in Chelmsford. What chords they didn’t really appeal to me, but then I’ve heard them buggering about in the dressing room and really liked them. I’m sure if I went out front I’d really dig them.

AUDIENCES—HIGHS AND LOWS

ZZ: The best gig I ever saw was The Orchid Ballroom, Purley, What was yours?

T: What was my best Who gig? Oh, fxk we’ve worked more than any other band in the world. I just can’t remember—we’ve had so many amazing gigs. The best gigs we ever did were about that time—when we had that long two-hour act with ‘Tommy’ and somehow got this stamina to carry it through. It had that—towards a smash up, but not quite. The whole of ‘Tommy’, a good bit of history before it. Occasionally the mini- opera thrown in.

ZZ: Yeah, the Coliseum was a good one.

T: Yeah, I felt that was the best time the act ever was. At the moment, the act is not so good. We’re at a peak now, definitely of musicianship, and we’re approaching the Who’s next pinnacle. We’ve got a few things together to prove that it can be got together, despite the fact that there’s absolutely nothing in our heads at all, other than that we’re rock n roll band, which is something we have not been needed to prove—that is, if all else failed we could play. I suddenly Townsend’s head was empty we could still play, and we can. And this is what we’re doing. We’re waiting for the follow-up to ‘Tommy’, for the follow-up to ‘My Generation’, for the rock revolution. We’re waiting for rock to make a revolution, to indicate a direction, so that we can be part of it. The silly thing about The Who is we’ve always been followers, not leaders. We really have.

ZZ: I feel very sorry for you never having been to a Who concert—it is quite an experience. Do you get a lot of diverse reactions from the audience? What do you think of audiences?

T: I don’t really like being asked that thing. I don’t think there is a right or wrong to choose my words carefully because it’s something I’ve ever really said properly before. When the group is on the stage it’s hard to imagine, after coming off, that you know that it is that you were doing. If I project myself now into being on stage, you go through a metamorphosis. I’m a different person altogether from the one you’re talking to now. I’ve got more courage. In my own mind I’m a bit better looking, I’ve got a lot more physical strength, I can do things break a guitar over my head and not even break my arm. My head, I can tune up my guitar in two seconds whereas in the dressing room beforehand it takes me an hour, Keith and I can put one another in and out of moods like that. It works both ways, you know. I am a bit bosh bosh, and throw me into an incredible mood and just snap me out of it with another gig. So, or something, it’s a different intensity of experience. It’s like being in another world and this is really—the only one of the reasons why The Who have never stopped working, because once you’ve tasted an experience like that you can’t really do it without it. It’s not the power of being a leader or being in front of an audience. It’s rather the power to realize a bit of yourself, for your own being that you never thought was there. And you only realize it while you’re on the stage. It’s temporary. So it becomes like a drug. You just learn how to get at it, to better it, to heighten it when you’re on the stage each time. It’s temporary because of the stage you’ve still got the same hang-ups, you’re still the same person with the same problems.

ZZ: But that’s what it’s like for the audience too.

T: Well hopefully. The whole reason we go on the stage in the first place is that part of that realization is a giving and a receiving. It’s a very simple thing is what I say, but I suppose it’s a sort of loving relationship, my definition of love being happiness. Often it can make an audience happy to see a group take themselves seriously—like The Who do. Doing such absurd things, but then theatre is great in that way because you see someone pretending to be someone who died 400 years ago, scrutinizing about the stage really pretending to be that person, and being incredibly serious about it. Not only that but throwing themselves into the part, reliving this dead person’s life, as though it was important. And, of course, the life itself wasn’t important but the reliving of it is—between him and the audience.

ZZ: Is that part of the reason it took so long to develop a stage act that wasn’t built around ‘Tommy’? The audience just wouldn’t let you?

T: It’s really hard to say. [Very slowly and deliberately] We’re so wound up in ourselves that we never know sometimes that the audience is manipulating us. We think we’re manipulating the audience. Luckily I’m not contradicting something I said earlier because I haven’t said “We’ve got power over an audience”. I mean often, I have said that, but I think it would be a lot truer to say that we allow audiences to dictate to us, subconsciously. If you like, we allow ourselves to let audiences make us stay the same. Because when we try to change, audiences are confused and haven’t changed but the audience is stopping you getting into something else which you’d have to if you were a less successful band.

ZZ: If the Who came on and sat on stools and played acoustic guitars, it wouldn’t be the Who. It might be artistically valid, but the audience would be pissed off... You know the thing by Roy Hollingworth in the run about the Odeon concert. Well in a way he was right, the audience is stopping you getting into something else which you’d have to if you were a less successful band.

T: My immediate reaction to Hollingworth’s thing was, when Keith Alton our publicist read it over to me on the phone and said “What are we gonna do about this?” I said “It sounds like one man’s opinion and it sounds alarming like how I feel about the group, and I just hope the rest of the world don’t think it.” And at the time a friend had come round with his guitar and ‘they’d seen us at the Oval and this girl quite coldly said, “Of course at the Oval everybody’d come to see The Faces. Half the audience walked out when you came on.” So I thought, “Ah, that’s the way things are, they’re just jealous,” and I read this before The Cream or the Zappins, the Jimi Hendrixes coming along and taking bits of Who and often we’ve taken back, stolen bits from them. And at the moment we’re stealing bits of Faces—not stealing—but being influenced by their presence, because we’re involved with them. They respect us and we respect what’s happening. But when the feathered stop flying we always seem to be still here. So I laughed at it at first, but then I thought really there has to be a time, and this is what I’ve been saying since the Lifehouse project—we want to make ourselves into something new, and do something new and we’re the only group in a position financially and ideally to pioneer a new form of performance which, as a microcosm, denies corrupts both the rock and their role. In other words we as a group have a high enough ideal that we can do it for the music and not for the money. We have that high enough ideal and also the power and the consistency and the stamina to put on something which would help rock go on. Even though we couldn’t possibly not take the credit, because we’re not new, but we could set it up in some way and help to make it happen, even if it’s just a different way of promoting a concert.

ZZ: You talk about the ultimate as being when the audience disappears. But isn’t it that The Who should disappear and the audience just stay there?

T: Well, in a way, I went The Who to disappear as well, but I want that moment that happens in every good Who concert or every good rock concert—to be a bit more generous—where suddenly you’re up there and you’ve forgotten about everything except the music and you’re up there and you’re riding up there and you look around and when you look around you’re not brought down. That’s an important moment—when you’re high on the event and you look around at people and the group and you check what’s happening and you’re not brought down by it. You don’t suddenly see some guy shuffling someone over the head with a coss. These, to me, are the sacred moments in rock, and why, I suppose, I worship it. It happens.

ZZ: When you turn the lights on at the Isle of Wight, was this part of focusing on the audience or just a gimmick or what?

T: Sort of a gimmick symbol in a way. We said all those things—it’d be fun, etc. And then I went into the intellectual thing but really it was a gimmick symbol of the audience’s importance and the way the audience could get turned on by themselves and also look incredible and have a good time without selling the group at all. It’s like saying The Who are incredibly important but at this moment we’ve disappeared—we’re not here.

CONNOR MCKNIGHT & JOHN TOBLER

I have to admit it going better.