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DALTRY - FILMING TOMMY

RORY GALLACHER'S IRISH BLUES.

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EVERY couple of years the Who go through one of their ‘quiet’ patches. That rumbustious, temperamental, lovable collection of musicians who are possibly one of the very few really enjoyable and lasting bands around – surviving time and taste and amassing a fervent dedicated band of followers – sink into a kind of outward silence.

Their latest has gone on for just about a year. That they can manage to hold attention for that long with so few surface dynamics – except the odd Moon freak out – bears witness to the strength of their position in the rock world. But then, maybe, their silences are endured better in the knowledge that sooner or later the Who will break out with something more startling, colourful and important than any other band around.

Which is what’s going to happen in a few months’ time when the film of ‘Tommy’ comes out. Ken Russell’s personalised, and hence outrageously vivid, celluloid trip around Pete Townshend’s traumatic deaf, dumb and blind boy.

All the Who have been involved in the 15 weeks gruelling filming – taking them from coast to coast in England. But none of them is currently more ‘up’ and more convinced that this is the band’s most important step that they’ve taken since they raved out as the High Numbers, than Roger Daltrey.

CONTRIBUTION

It is Daltrey, delving into the role of the child who survives every worldly horror to emerge like a contemporary Bill Budd for the third time in his career, who is convinced the film will prove a personal zenith in the life of the Who.

In his typically modest way he almost brushes aside his own important contribution – the fact that he has become so much ‘Tommy’ in the eyes of audiences everywhere that nobody could stomach the thought of anyone else taking on the role – to discuss what this film will mean to the Who collectively.

As he sees it, he says, sitting on the current film set in Ladbroke Grove where interior shots are being done under Russell’s eagle eye – ‘Tommy’ is exactly what the Who need right now.

‘It’s going to make us bloody enormous’, he enthuses. ‘I don’t know how the music critics are going to take it at all, but then you never can be sure about them. What I am sure of is that it’s going to give the Who another dimension and more status and that’s exactly what we need right now to make us something really big to reckon with. And then the really important thing is to follow it up and get ourselves together on the road’.

continued on page 9 ➤
Daltrey is an incongruous sight today. He's sitting in a boxer's
dressing gown, his fair curls shooting wildly round his head.
Exposed are a pair of dark brown legs, tanned from the weeks
filming on the south coast, complete with heavy clogs on his feet.
Very little else appears to attire him - but then the next scene
calls for a near naked Tommy shut up inside the Acid Queen for
the LSD sequence.
Personally 'Tommy' is already proving a triumph for the
Who's lead singer.
He has emerged not only as a man with superhuman strength
and courage (Russell has, as usual, pushed his lead actor to perform
feats of courage that involve such innocent pastimes as practically
being burnt alive, knocked out and forced to walk barefoot across
broken glass) but has delighted the director so much that his next
film role - as the brilliant and complex composer Franz Liszt -
is lined up for January.
Daltrey's own career then is winging its way to natural highs.
But first and foremost our boy is a singer with a rock and roll band
and, much as he's enjoying the novelty and discipline of filming,
it's that role that is his great love in life and that band that has and
always will be his main concern.
And so back to the Who - the first group to have the opportunity
on film to do what the Beatles once achieved in the '60s.
'Quadrophenia' - their last record - came and went and somehow
never quite did either of the things everyone set at its door. It
neither came up to meet the enormity of 'Tommy' as a complete
work nor give the Who a raw musical kick in the pants. Daltrey
agrees:
'I think we tried to do too much ourselves again and it just
wasn't a good old Who type rock and roll album - which is
something we need and we've got to get on the next album. And
we need to really slog it out on the road. One of the things that's
been wrong with the Who lately is that we're not gigging enough.
So when we do go out to do concerts we just haven't got into it.
I mean we haven't been BAD but then we're capable of being
bloody brilliant, and it really gets me down when we're not'.
Daltrey's master plan for the Who has been the subject for
discussion on practically every meeting. The group and the
musicians in the band that the young Londoner grew up with really
are like his family. These days it's his constant frustration that
occasionally they don't really appear on the surface to be more
than just everyone's favourite band.
And, more than any words, his real sense of dedication to the
band is displayed best in the fact that when he does his next film
he's determined to have two nights a week free to gig with the
Who.
Idealistic to an extreme in this day and age you may think him,
but Roger sees no reason why all aspects of the Who shouldn't
be concentrated on and combined to elevate the whole band.
This, he says, means all the solo projects, all the live work and
all the recording going full pelt. Easy, you may think, but time
and energy consuming. And a difficult achievement to combine the
violent rough energies of gigs with the sophistication of film and
TV films. Still, if Roger could wrap up all the talent and direct it
in the right course with his own hands, you get the feeling he'd be
rolling his shirt sleeves up right now and get cracking.
As it is, the situation remains one of ragged promise. But with
'Tommy' waiting to explode on the sidelines and knowing the
Who can come up with the goodies when anyone least expects it,
the situation will not remain unresolved for long. And, quite
honestly, even if the Who go on just as they are they're still
horribly amazing.