OBVIOUSLY FOUR BELIEVERS

TEN YEARS ON WITH THE WHO
by David Marsh

Sly Stone's wedding, held at Madison Square Garden, and attended by 20,000 who, for the most part, were more interested in going "Higher" than his nuptials, was an attempt to create a memorable pop event, something like a more personal Woodstock or Watkins Glen. Mott the Hoople tried to arrange an event of similar significance by becoming the first rock group to play Broadway, with their week-long Uris Theater engagement. Both groups played well, but neither one made the kind of lasting impact they might have wished. Ultimately, nothing was left but another evening's relatively expensive entertainment.

But the Who, playing a relatively simple four-night engagement at the Garden — the sort of stand the Moody Blues, Chicago and Jethro Tull book as a matter of course these days — managed to excite imaginations and provide the sort of thrills to which the others only aspire. The Who set New York abuzz in a way that only Dylan and the Stones are able to do — they did it with their mere presence, no gallows humor, no dry ice, not even a hint of costuming or choreography.

From the opening chords of "I Can't Explain," their ten year old Greatest Flop, to the final moments of their set — what guitarist/songwriter Peter Townshend called "the definitive version" of "My Generation" — the Who came out on top. It would be deliberately provocative to label any band the greatest live rock act in the world, but in The Who's case, there is truth behind the rhetoric. The show is substantially altered from the one they had presented on their tour last fall. They didn't attempt the whole of their last opera-album, Quadrophenia, but instead took several songs from it. Nor did Townshend and Daltrey introduce the Quadrophenia material with the long — and ultimately confusing — expository raps which slowed the autumn show. But the differences were also musical. Somewhere amidst the communal strength which is the Who's greatest and most obvious virtue, Keith Moon has once more discovered the source of his incredible drumming; having overcome November's disastrous lapses, he is again the best. Still, most of the songs, and most of the hi-jinks — Daltrey's latest routine with the mike, Townshend's patented leaps and bounds, Entwistle's abnormal stasis — had been formalized long ago, even before the heyday of Tommy, during the era when Townshend could
joke about Greatest Flops because there weren’t many hits to kid.

Oddly enough, the Who, once the gaudiest of rock groups — so much so that they were at first confused for part of the Pop Art movement — now seem strikingly unostentatious. It is not because they do not use make-up — if they don’t, Roger Daltrey is still preternaturally pretty — or that their costuming is ragbag (albeit expensive ragbag) or even that the once outrageous storming of the amps and demolishing of guitars and drums are now cornerstones of many rock acts. The Who are, above all, professionals, and their auto-destruct, their sloppy costuming — or costumed sloppiness are simply better than almost anyone else’s. Like every pop genius from Presley to Hitchcock, their artifice and their act are one. Others smash and leap, but the Who do more; they have perfected their limited but skillfully chosen arsenal of gimmicks, pared down the fluff. Rock ‘n’ roll demands excess; the Who simply understand the correct proportions.

They make no pretense that they are anything other than what they are — aging rock and rollers — but they not only celebrate that fact, they focus their performance upon it. They manage to do it with so much elan, and so little embarrassment, because we share our history with them. That history is shared, not because the Who are sole survivors of the ’60s — even the Stones have undergone a personnel change — but because they have always evidenced a concern for history. Their passion for our collective autobiography transcends nostalgia; it is a critical chronicle of the rock age.

That passion, and the tenets of the Who’s criticism of it, is made most visible in Quadrophenia but it is unquestionably, equally apparent beneath the surface of Tommy. The latter appeared during the dwindling romanticism of the 60s, a time when gurus were dime-a-dozen, and the bottom was dropping out of the market. Still, in 1969, most of us were still true believers, holding forthright convictions about obsessions so varied and absurd as rock ‘n’ roll and astrology, revolution and Scientology.

Tommy is so deeply imbued with the mythology of true belief that it at first seems that the opera is written in support of the very processes it ultimately derides.

It was easy to think so, because Peter Townshend, who wrote both Tommy and Quadrophenia, is a follower of Meher Baba, the perplexing Indian holy man who remained silent for the final 30 years of his life. But, like the rock ‘n’ roll he is, Townshend is not bound by the contradictions of his faith. He is as capable of writing an anti-guru rock opera as fundamentalist Christians like Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard were of singing “devil music.”

What most critics have missed about Tommy is that its denouncement concerns not a revelation about the guru on the part of his followers, but precisely the converse. In the end, even the protagonist is a skeptic, with no fantasies left about his own godhood, or anything else. “We not gonna take you! We forsake you! Gonna rape you! Let’s forget you better still!” the crowd sings to Tommy. And it is then that Tommy sings: “See me, hear me, touch me, feel me,” then that he realizes that “Listening to you, I get the music.” Listening to who? Listening to his audience, like any good rock ‘n’ roll he knows he should: it is at this moment, during the Who’s performance, that the magnesia of the spotlight shifts to the crowd.

Townshend is the best rock critic we have ever had. When the Who decided to perform a surprise number at Madison Square Garden, they chose an obscure track from The Who Sell Out. But “Tattoo” isn’t a random choice; the song is about sex roles, and the disfiguration of one’s body in the pursuit of ambiguous beauty. It concerns getting tattooed and there’s no more important historical precedent for contemporary unisex fashion than that ugly, painful process.

The Who’s special magic is their ability to call upon the entire history of

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ock, and make it fit immediately. They don't do it by imitating Elvis — Eddie Cochran's “Summertime Blues” is as close as they come, and the Who's version is so different from the original, it's barely the same song — but by playing unbelievably effective, tight,

hard, loud music which sounds like everything that's already happened and some of the things which may. It's there in "I Can't Explain" — the title says it even better than "Do You Believe in Magic" — as well as in "My Generation" in 1965, when it first appeared, I really thought he was going to sing "Why don't you all f-f-f-... fuck off" — Tommy and Quadrophenia.

There are rock songs about rock songs — lately there seems to be almost nothing else — and there are movies about movies but all of them — save Townshend's — are worshipfully nostalgic. Having been through the rock mill for ten years, Townshend understands the clay feet of the golden age. Our Golden Decade, he maintains in Quadrophenia, among other places, was also a Giant Drug.

Many, maybe most, of us already believe both parts of that. In fact, Quadrophenia has its cinematic equivalent in Sunset Boulevard. Everyone already knew that the motion picture industry was crass and that it destroyed more lives than it created, but because Sunset Boulevard presented that common wisdom with such enormous affection, because it was first of all a good movie, and then an anti-Hollywood track, it brought the fact home. Quadrophenia does the same for the Rock Age; it does it, furthermore, without denying the most exhilarating moments of the 60s, which is a wonder in itself. In fact, it is so fair that it has been confused as both an attack upon the 60s and as a celebration of them. It is neither; it's just a piece of criticism, which assesses the relative value of components which make up a whole at once attractive and repulsive. That's about all you can do with a gory movie like The Wild Bunch, and it's also about all you can hope to do with a song as perplexing as say, "Sympathy for the Devil," or "Midnight Rambler."

Those examples come from the Rolling Stones, because they have always made ambiguity their stock in trade. The Who, particularly Townshend, are moralists; they are a lot clearer about what they think is right, and what's wrong — it was they who made the jailhouse singles when the Stones got busted, a gesture which it is unlikely the Stones would have reciprocated — with the world rock has created. Not that they don't wind up in some strange double-binds themselves — that, too, is the subject of both Tommy and Quadrophenia.

They couldn't do it all, naturally, if they weren't among the very best rock has to offer. They leave you with images — Townshend leaping, Moon grinning (someday, I suspect, Moon mooning), Daltrey swaggering — and a few lines that don't begin to bring solace. They are, because they are critical, the reality principle incarnate of rock 'n' roll, without even trying to be. When they project that confusing, frustrating persona effectively, as they did in New York, it is one of the greatest experiences rock has to offer.

"Gimme Shelter" cry the Rolling Stones.

"We're Not Gonna Take It" answer the Who. I'm with them.