The pinball wizard

Out of Pete Townshend's preoccupation with pinball grew the first—and the best—rock opera, 'Tommy'.

Back feature: how Tommy was born

2nd House.
Saturday BBC2 Colour
Who's Who.
Saturday Radio 1 Stereo
Programmes for 5 October

**BBC2 Saturday tv**

9.10 Colour: New series

2nd House: The Who

Introduced by Melvyn Bragg
In 1964 a rock group called The Who made their first public appearance at a pub in Harrow. The line-up was Pete Townshend (guitar), John Entwistle (bass), Keith Moon (drums) and Roger Daltrey (lead vocals).

Ten years later the same band held an undisputed position among rock giants. The first programme in a new series of 2nd House examines this phenomenon, and Melvyn Bragg talks to Pete Townshend, leader of the Who.

9.40 The Who play live

at Charlton

The second part of the programme features the first TV broadcast of the band's extraordinary stage performance.

Before 80,000 rock fans, at Charlton Football Ground, South London, they play a selection of hits including ' Substitute,' 'Baba O'Reilly,' 'My Generation,' 'Magic Bus' and extracts from Tommy and Quadrophenia.

Production team Tony Tyler
Mark Rose, Dennis Marks
Producer Tony Staveacre
Editor Bill Morton
Radio1, Radio2

IN WHICH OPERA DID THE SONGS 'I'M FREE' AND 'FIDDLE ABOUT' APPEAR?

Alan Freeman pops questions: 7.2 pm R2

7.2 Free Spin
Alan Freeman is your questionnaire master for this new quiz in which your general knowledge of music could win you the records of your choice. Compiled and produced by Son Oliver Secombe. If you would like to take part, please send your name, address and an evening telephone number to 'Free Spin,' BBC, London W1A 4WW

'Music's one of those things that brings people together against all possible odds,' says Pete Townshend (top left in 1964, the early Mod days). Who's Who: 2.0 pm R1

Radio1: 247m and VHF at times: see page 93

2.0 pm Stereo: New series
Who's Who
Also on VHF
In four parts
1: Pete Townshend
In which Pete talks about himself and the group with some assistance from John, Keith and Roger.
Producer Stuart Grundy
Cover story

2nd House, Saturday 9.10 pm BBC2 Colour; Who's Who Saturday 2.0 pm Radio 1 Stereo

Pete Townshend is the Who's guitarist: he writes many of their songs and composed the rock opera 'Tommy,' the story of a deaf, dumb and blind boy who has no contact with the world - except through pinball.

"It wasn't the obsession with my own physical ugliness that is the root-key to Tommy: although that's what motivated me to be a pop star," says Pete Townshend. "I was teased at school about having a big nose and I was never very tall. I felt great vengeance at all the kinds of teasing, especially the most subtle kinds. I had quite a lot of hate but I don't think any of this manifests itself in Tommy.

"It's a fairly brash analytical explanation, but I chose a deaf, dumb and blind boy because I have always been interested in symbols. Tommy is deaf, dumb and blind in the physical plane, the way we are all deaf, dumb and blind to the spiritual world around us.

"At the same time, I hate to think of myself as one who always works with symbols. The pinball machine was a game. And Tommy's pinball games were his first effective communication with young people. You know that I wrote "Pinball Wizard" for Nik Cohn (see article, right). I like Nik's ideas, he's always made me think.

"I used to play a fantastic amount of pinball. Sometimes I played pinball with Nik and Arfur (the little American Pinball Queen). I also played in a place near the office on a machine called the Apollo 13. While on an ordinary machine you score 1,000, on this machine you could score a million. The bloke next to you was scoring thousands and you were into the millions and the trillions and he really thought you'd achieved those scores.

"Why pinball instead of snooker? When it comes down to it there are so few games of basic skill that you can play where there is a minimum amount of eye involvement. It helps to see and it helps to hear but you can get incredible scores just from letting the ball do what it wants to do. I couldn't imagine Tommy grooping a Go board.

Pete Townshend has been quoted as saying that Tommy wouldn't have happened if Kit Lambert hadn't been around. Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp managed the Who: they're usually defined in print as 'pop entrepreneurs' and often qualified by the adjective 'extraordinary.' It was Kit who conceived the idea of an extended pop work. He suggested that we write an opera to fill in a ten-minute gap in an album called While He's Away. I said to Kit: "No one writes a ten-minute song. How can you sustain their interest?" Which seems ridiculous now. I linked up about six pieces of music and it was very successful.

"I didn't write Tommy in any chronological order. I already had some of the material - the Doctor song, "Pinball Wizard" and the finale. The first rundown of the idea I put down on a graph. It was intended to show Tommy from the outside and the impressions going on inside him.

Take Uncle Ernie, one of the characters in the opera. While he fiddles about with dirty hands and a grubby mac, from Tommy's point of view it's just sex and it's lovely. Tommy isn't aware of the accompanying garbage.

One of the difficulties in making the film version with Ken Russell has been to try to make Tommy into a real person. Does he carry a white
The Who started life as the High Numbers: they were discovered in 1964 singing ‘maximum R & B’ in the Railway Tavern, Wealdstone. Managers Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp changed the name. They became popularly known as a group who smashed their guitars into the sound equipment; they were also known as a group who had their finger on the button of contemporary taste: Mods, Carnaby Street, the ‘Youth Cult’. Lead singer Roger Daltrey stammered ‘My Generation’ as though he were drugged on the Mods’ favourite stimulant, amphetamines (‘Why don’t you all f-f-f-fade away’). Then came Tommy in 1968, the first—and the best—of the ‘rock operas’. Written by Who guitarist Pete Townshend (above), Tommy has now sold millions of copies worldwide; it’s been performed with the LSO roped in as backing group; Ken Russell’s forthcoming film of it features such exalted stars as Jack Nicholson, Ann-Margret, Oliver Reed. Sonya Lopez asked the begetters of Tommy how Tommy was born; she talked to Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey, journalist Nik Cohn and illustrator Mike McInerney

stick, does he bump into doors? The detailing is hard to make decisions on. Ken Russell is good to work with. He has a very clear spiritual outlook on life, though not as open-ended as mine.

Nik Cohn is a novelist, a journalist and pig-farmer: he’s written ‘Arfur, Teenage Pinball Queen’, ‘Aavopoboloopalopabamboom: the Story of Pop’, ‘I Am Still the Greatest Says Johnny Angelo’. He was a friend of the Who’s managers, Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp, and introduced Pete Townshend to pinball. He wrote the first article about ‘Tommy’ for the ‘New York Times’.

TEN YEARS AGO, I used to play pinball. I played it every day and every night and it was the greatest passion of my life. I went to the Lots O’ Fun Arcade in Charing Cross Road and played Gottlieb’s soccer from opening to closing time. Pinball was the only thing that made me care at all.

About the same time, I first met the Who’s managers Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp and through them I came to know Pete Townshend. I thought that Kit and Chris were very clever and very funny (and very dangerous), and anything that they were involved in was liable to be exciting. So I listened to early Who records and learned to sing along.

‘Later on, I met Pete and played some pinball. He beat me. Everybody beat me, even Kit, and in the end I had to substitute a kind of alter ego, who was Arfur. She was 14 years old and I promoted her as the greatest pinball artist the world has ever known. She lived clean, she thought clean, she shot clean pinball. She was the absolute Champion of the World and she proved it by beating Gold Studs Johnny Ace, a rocker from Tottenham.

Regrettably, Gold Studs was very dirty in the mouth, so he had to be deaf and dumb. As far as I know, that was the embryo of Tommy.

‘Pinball was very much an echo of capital-P Pop. I was 18, 20, 21. Pop was a new and glittering toy. I played it passionately. With utter addiction. On the other hand I knew it was ridiculous. So the cult of pinball was, in part, an obsession and, at the same time, complete mockery.

‘My creative importance in Tommy was absolutely nil. I’m not over-modest; I know what I do and roughly how well I do it. I didn’t hear a note until the album was complete. Pete was cunning: he slipped in a song called ‘Pinball Wizard’ so that I would be seduced and write a rave article for the New York Times.

‘Of course, I fell for it head-on and immediately leapt into print in the New York Times, announcing that Tommy was the greatest thing since...’

Writer Nik Cohn, a pinball wizard from way back, at the Lots O’ Fun Arcade in London’s Charing Cross Road. ‘Pete was cunning... he slipped in a song called “Pinball Wizard” and I fell for it’
"Cosi Fan Tutte" and "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles".

When I finally heard the music, I thought that it was good commercial stuff. But I'm amazed and appalled at how pompous the whole thing has become. Two years ago, I went on tour with the Who in America and Tommy had become a full-scale religion. When the "See Me, Feel Me" sequence came on, the entire audience would leap to its feet and go into instant frothings.

What was so depressing was that the next night they would froth for Jesus Christ Superstar, while their younger brothers and sisters did the same for the Osmonds or Gary Glitter. As religious experience goes, it was about as profound as the wrapping on a Hershey bar. Thank God for Elvis, I thought, and good old-fashioned blasphemy.

When I remember pinball, I remember Mr Alexander. He has been at the Lots O' Fun Arcade for 37 years as cashier, guru and keeper of the archives and he knows more about pinball than any man alive. When Tommy first came out I dropped in and told him that the silver balls were famous, that pinball was Nirvana. "Oh, aye," he said, "take your tanner and play."

Mike McInerney is an artist and illustrator: he designed the LP sleeve for 'Tommy.' In the mid 60s he worked for the underground press, and became greatly interested in the philosophy of Meher Baba, the Indian mystic. McInerney believes that it was Pete Townshend's discovery of Meher Baba that 'sparked off the opera

'Before I was asked to design the sleeve for Tommy, I hadn't ever designed an album sleeve. I was working for what is euphemistically called "the underground"—doing posters and acting as art editor for the International Times.

Everybody had open doors to open houses, like Karen, Pete Townshend's wife. She designed the clothes for my wedding in Hyde Park and I think it was through her that I first met Pete. And it was just by chance that he was burning for something.

At this time, Pete Townshend had just gone through a bad LSD experience which had shaken a lot of his principles to their foundations.

'I had an immediate strong feeling for Pete and felt that I would like to give him some books on Meher Baba [the Indian philosopher whose basic teaching is "Don't worry. Be happy."] Baba has a way of grabbing you fundamentally and then hanging on. He observed silence for 40 or so years but he was always threatening to break his silence.

There was a lot of Baba activity in London at the time and Pete just picked up on it. Baba acted as a catalyst and sparked off the opera. In the end, I think because of Baba, Pete asked me to do the record cover.

By the time Pete came to me, Tommy was pretty well resolved. I listened to the cassette recordings, track after track, and that was enough to get the gist. But it's very hard to combine the visuals with the music because you have to acknowledge the autonomy of both. In the end, I concentrated on the libretto and tried to understand what Pete was trying to do—it wasn't difficult, because it was linked so closely to what I felt about Baba.

What I tried to do was catch the idea of Tommy's world—to give it a sense of unlimited space and to give some idea of what a deaf, dumb and blind boy's world was like. Which is pretty difficult to do in pictures. On the cover I..."
Who lead singer Roger Daltrey, on the film set of Ken Russell's Tommy: he plays the title role. If Townsend is the ideas man of the Who, Daltrey is the one who comes alive on stage. 'Tommy didn't strike me as anything special until we got it on the road.'

Roger Daltrey is the Who's lead singer: he plays Tommy on stage and will be taking the part in Ken Russell's forthcoming film. In some ways, Daltrey is the personification of the rock 'n' roll star, dressed in fantastic, fringed costumes - the man who just wants to 'go out and boogie.'

'I may play 'Tommy' but I'm definitely not 'Tommy,' says Roger Daltrey. 'Though I do realise that after the film is released thousands of people will believe that I am Tommy.'

Ken Russell's film of Tommy is due to be released some time next year: it stars all four of the Who, Pete Townshend, Roger Daltrey, Keith Moon and John Entwistle, as well as featuring such well-known Russell names as Oliver Reed and Robert Powell, and rock greats like Tina Turner and Elton John. Not to mention Jack Nicholson and Ann-Margret... 'It all happened so long ago,' Daltrey goes on, 'and so much water has gone under the bridge that I guess I'm a bit sick and tired of talking about Tommy. An American came up to me on the set and asked me what Tommy meant to me. What could I possibly say about it after all this time?

'But I have enjoyed working on the film with Ken. It's the first modern film that he's made and it's going to shock a lot of people when it comes out: suddenly a lot of people will realise just how very good Tommy is. There's no dialogue in the film but the story-line is so strong that combined with the music and the visuals, it will all make for an exhilarating experience.

'Do you know, back in 1968, when Tommy was first released, I suggested that maybe Ken Russell should direct the film, and I was howled down. But here we are in 1974, and he is directing the film. 'Tommy didn't really strike me as anything special until we got it on the road. I hated the recording and behaved like a caged tiger. If the Who hadn't taken Tommy on the road, it would have sat on the shelf, just gathering dust. It's all got too overblown. We should just realise that the Who is a good rock 'n' roll group, and we should go out and boogie. If we go on trying to be first all the time we're not going to last five minutes.

'Pete had this idea of a deaf, dumb and blind boy and it was Kit Lambert's idea to turn it into an opera. It all sort of grew from that. Pete used to write a song a night and we spent three months in the studio - which was a long time in those days.

'But for me, it was as though I was just singing Who songs until the second time we played it on the stage and then I realised that I was becoming something else. As a singer it was fantastic, even though the band might have got tired of playing four-four. It was good for me because it taught me how to sing.'

'But where do we go from here? Tommy was just one rung on the ladder. I'd like to go back on the road. The best stuff that has been written was while we were playing to audiences like Tommy. Rock 'n' roll is just a mirror of the people you're playing to.'