PETE TOWNSHEND CAN TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF

By Joseph Rose

Pete Townshend rubbed his eyes and swallowed a yawn in the late morning light as he stretched his legs out of the smallish chair in his hotel room and considered my question, which was, “Why don’t you have a bodyguard?”

“Ahhh, I just get beaten up,” he finally said. “It only hurts for a couple of hours.” He laughs heartily. It’s obvious that he feels well able to take care of himself, thank you.

The subject had come up because of some weird goings-on the evening before, one of the rare nights on tour when the Who didn’t have a concert scheduled. While singer Roger Daltry had stayed in the hotel to get plenty of rest and drummer Keith Moon had spent a rare quiet evening — recuperating from his wildness of the previous night — Pete and bassist John Entwistle had gone on a strange safari.

With an entourage of roadies and friends — “groupie is an ugly word and it doesn’t really mean anything,” says Pete — they had stopped in three well-known clubs in the city’s big night-life area. At each place, they sat down, had a drink and talked to whomever had the guts to approach them. Pete danced with an old friend in one club, but otherwise it was an evening full of talk, most of it dull, directed at John and Pete, who seemed to sit through it all numbly.

“Were you enjoying it last night?” I asked.

“Uh, no ... Really, the point of it is that in order to just get in tune with things and in the frame of mind where you are sort of feeling the atmosphere, you know, there are certain rounds that you have to make.

“I always go out shopping and buy a load of stuff that I’ve already got. I find that quite important, too. Either that or you can sit here and look out the window. Otherwise, you really get a shock when you walk into a place like the Los Angeles Forum and the Whiskey a Go Go has arrived in your dressing room. That’s really what it’s all about. It’s amazing how people converge, and unless you’re just in key, you’re lost.” He stopped and thought for a moment, then laughed. “Cause it’s not like this back in Twickenham, you know.”

Pete said that the two older girls who accompanied them on their bar
tour last night were old friends, whom the Who had met on their very first tours of America. "You tend to tire of trying to strike up new relationships. That's always very tricky. So it's much better if people come to see us that we know really well. What's good about it is that it doesn't really matter where you are: the actual framework of people around you is roughly the same every time you come. It gives you a sort of a sense of continuity. If anything changes on the outside, at least you're not standing upside down."

At home in England, Pete doesn't lead a wild social life either. "Like everybody, I suffer from different kinds of boredom. Sometimes having a smallish family — we've got two girls — makes it kind of difficult to get out a lot. But even before we had kids, we didn't get set very much.

"We've got a few friends in the music business. I suppose my closest friend in the music business is Ronnie Lane. We may be sort of go out and eat or go to the pictures."

With all the time he's spent in the States, I found it hard to believe Pete had no close friend here to visit instead of wasting away in hotel rooms. "You're right," Pete said, "but the point is that I don't like going to people's homes. I can't stand it. Not when I'm on tour. Whenever I'm here on tour, I always feel that one day I must come back to the States and just spend a year sort of just doing nothing, just being over here. Because I just know so many people, and I've got so many friends.

"And lots and lots of them I feel are sort of very, very important relationships. And the only time I ever see them is either for a few minutes here in the hotel when they're trying to get stage passes or when they come over to England." "Why don't you like going to people's homes?" I asked.

"I think it's because it's disarming. It's got something to do with the same thing that makes us go out to awful clubs. I don't know what it is, but if you go to somebody's house, you're somehow getting divorced from that frame of mind which is necessary to walk on a stage.

"It's a kind of an aloofness to anything that doesn't fit in. A much better way of describing it is this example: If I was to do a show, say in London, and I leave home — say the show's at 7 — I can get to the show in about 15 minutes from my home, walk on the stage and in 15 minutes be back at home again."

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“I find that incredibly strange. It reduces the level of the performance, I suppose, to the level of a job. It feels like a job. I don’t think anybody that works in the music field operates like that.

“The point is that performing is obviously a big part of what I do, but it’s not all I do. I mean, I write, I think about music at home, I’m involved constantly in the sort of fluidity of the group, the business side of the group, interviews, and in all kinds of talks with all different kinds of people, working with other musicians, all kinds of stuff. It’s a constant flow of work and involvement.

“I mean, sometimes I get told off because when I’m not working, I won’t admit it, you know. I seem to believe that I’m working all the time.

“But that really hits me, if I walk out and I go to a performance. I think it’s because a performance is such an extreme type of work. It’s so sort of hyperphysical and hyper-everything. I mean, the adrenalin count is like —

“I suppose it’s almost like being a runner and spending years in training, and then the race itself is something that — I don’t know — it stands out, but you can’t really relate to it. You can’t remember exactly what happened. You can’t remember the details. You just know that you poured a fantastic amount into it and what follows is anti-climactic.

“And that’s really why if you go to somebody’s home, and you sit there and you relax, you talk about how are the kids, how’s this, how’s that, oh that’s a nice painting, blah blah blah, you know, that kind of a trip, it makes that stage performance seem so much more extreme and so much more disarming.

“In fact, it is possible to get really put out of joint by it. If you’re not ready to walk on a stage and be a rock star, you can fucking really be knocked over by it. Sometimes you might not feel that you want to walk on and explode. You just might want to walk on and play.

“Sometimes I have to psych myself up anyway. Keith does it. Keith like raises his adrenalin up by sometimes he screams or smashes the dressing room up just before he goes on. Or picks a fight with anybody.”

Here Pete laughed heartily. Being a rock star is a serious business for him, but while he may think a lot more than the average lead guitarist, he still appreciates the ridiculous fun that is at the bottom of it all.”