JOHN ENTWISTLE
POURS IT ALL OUT

The following discussions and incidents took place in Seattle during the recent Who tour of the Pacific Northwest. We joined John Entwistle and Who manager Bill Curbishley in a local bar and discussed the Who for several hours. The conversations were included two days later at their respective hotel suites.

Bill Curbishley, totally responsible for running Who tours, obviously enjoys his job. His manner is relaxed and he seems able to fill his role without the tension and worry that are usually an unavoidable result of managing the affairs of a top rock group. If anything, his fresh enthusiasm for promoting the Who would seem more appropriate for the manager of a rookie act. It's clear that he feels the band is not supported nearly as much as it deserves, particularly by its US record company, MCA.

John Entwistle ("no 'h' in my name") could write lines for Woody Allen movies; his ever-present wit is dry but humorous. He is as open about discussing Who history as on any other topic. John's answers were well thought out and went beyond simple responses, including germane facts and stories related to the subject.

As we were leaving John's suite, he disappeared into an adjoining room and brought back a drawing from his forthcoming book. It was a caricature of John Wolfe, the Who's light man and head roadie, streaking across the sky in a superman suit with a big "L" for "Laser Man." The drawing was a delight, but so was John's gesture of sharing it with us.

The interview begins, for some background on current Who activities, with Bill Curbishley.

Interview by Ed Hanel and Jon Carlson

TP: Is there anything about the recent European release, The Story of the Who, you would like to tell us?

BC: Well, it's an important release for a lot of reasons. The Who have been getting ripped off by prior management and record companies. I was asked by the Who to become their manager and put together the album. I've been with them for a long time and was a '60s fan as a kid. When I took them over I wanted to make them what they should be—the world's greatest rock band. They were already that but they didn't get the credit or the recognition they deserve. The Story of the Who is an attempt to finally package the Who as they should be packaged. That was the idea but there were problems, of course. I didn't want the royalties to go to anyone except to the people who created the music—the Who. So we took 26 cuts that actually belong to the band and put them together. They are not the 26 I would say are the Who's best and they are not all my favorites. But at least this is an album where the Who will be the ones to get the profits instead of someone else. The album is going to make #1 in England [which it quickly did—Ed.] because we will get the support we deserve from Polydor.

TP: Any singles?

BC: Yes, a maxi-single. Every band in England today is doing a cover of "Substitute," so we figured why not re-release the original which is a much stronger version. "Pictures of Lily" and "I'm a Boy" are also on it. A limited, initial release will be printed on a 12-inch record for maximum sound quality.

TP: What is the story with the release of "Slip Kid"? It received no push at all.

BC: That's an example of our problem with MCA. I—the Who—didn't want it released. It was too long a time after The Who By Numbers. But MCA claimed a release was necessary to boost the LP's sales. When it did get released it should have been promoted, but there was nothing.

TP: The edited version also makes a mess of Townsend's work.

BC: Well, it didn't even make the charts. After the break with Talmy didn't the group negotiate a contract to avoid this sort of thing?

BC: The problem is getting proper advice. That's difficult. At one point the Who had a 12-record contract with Decca. That was renegotiated to an eight-record deal with MCA. Quadrophenia counted for two and Odds and Sods and By Numbers make a total of four so far. From our view, it seems we owe our lives to the recording company.

TP: Aren't the early contracts explained by the fact that a young band has very little negotiating power—"Sign here or you don't record."

BC: That is the case and it is understandable because the company is taking a big risk. But once a group establishes itself, I think that the company and the artist should re-examine their positions and find a position that is equitable to both.

TP: Odds and Sods went gold but now it's a cutout. Any comments?

BC: That in part is explained by the nature of the record—a collection for Who freaks. However with proper promotion I think the album would have done better.

TP: Perhaps part of the problem is that MCA retains some of the old Decca image of a country, not a rock, label.

BC: That could be. I do think a major part of our promotion comes from the hard core Who freak than anything else. I mean, MCA doesn't even promote Elephant.

TP: What about the next Who album?

BC: I can't say too much; everything is tentative right now. It should be a new Pete Townsend concept LP. The idea is fantastic and possibly involves a movie as well. We have 90 minutes of film in the can going back to Marquee days.

TP: Is it fair to compare this with the "Lifehouse" project?

BC: I think that is a good comparison. It should be a double album. But if things don't come together we will release it as a single LP.

TP: When can we expect it?

BC: The band is tentatively scheduled to go into the studio in January. So shortly after that—early spring.

Doodling with the Ox;
Who tour manager Bill Curbishley also speaks
The evening spent with John covered several subjects not included in the following interview. Because of their interest to Who and Ox fans, they are summarized here.

We started off by showing John several old ads for Who singles from 1965-1969. “That’s not me, you know!” John stated as he looked at the pictures for “I’m a Boy” and “Happy Jack.” “God, did I really look like that? I joined the group just a bit back. They had somebody else in the group back then. Had to be.” John’s amusement became self-critical when we showed him some pictures from the last tour in March: “I’m bloody overweight.” It was obviously of concern to him because he had lost some weight in the right places, looking extremely fit and about 25 pounds lighter.

We asked John about Flash Fearless and what had happened to the project for either a movie or a tour. He felt the original idea was excellent but that the music was lost in the mix. Disappointed in the production of the album, he would rather forget the whole project. However, the discussion led to an important insight as to how John works on his solo LP’s. John Alcock, his producer, is the individual who produces or arranges the music, but according to John, he and Allison were on a cruise ship in the middle of the Atlantic heading for New York. The Who were concerned about releasing the single without his knowledge. So he was roused from his bed in the middle of the night, doing whatever one does on a honeymoon, to go to the ship’s radio station. There he received a radiogram asking for his permission to release the cut without his bass. John couldn’t believe that anyone would think he was the least bit concerned with such things and answered that the Who could have anyone they wanted to play bass.

In discussing Quadrophenia, John explained that despite all the audience calls for ‘Dr. Jimmy,’ the Who were not interested in performing any cuts from the LP. Although the reason was that the background tapes proved to be too confusing, John took exception. “Pete and Roger found themselves extremely limited in what they could play or sing. But I was able to stretch out during the tapes. Actually Quad was a challenge for me. I was the only one who had some freedom to play-expanded notes.”

Finally, for those keeping count of the number of John’s guitars, “I have 97. Don’t quote me because when this tour’s over, I’ll have over a hundred.”

TP: You are working on a cartoon book. How is it progressing?
JE: Well, according to the Inland Review, I am supposed to be drawing it on this tour, you see, so it’s going very well. I’m drawing (looks up, rolling his eyes) an awful lot.
TP: Will it be released in this country as well as England?
JE: Oh yeah, I should imagine roughly the same time as the next Who album. We will try to get it out then.
TP: What are the contents?
JE: It starts off with some imaginary ancestors of the band’s members. Each ancestor has a little bit of the character of one of the group. I have about four ancestors for each one of us. Completely imaginary, of course. They have nothing to do with our real ancestors. The names have been changed to protect the guilty. Then it goes into the history of the Who, written from my point of view. From when I first started playing going all the way through to when I met the rest of the band.

TP: Is there any particular viewpoint of John Entwistle on how he views the Who?
JE: Perhaps I should say not “from my point of view” but rather that I’ll be doing the history in the first person. I’m talking about my side of the story. I suppose I’ve known Townsend for 20 years now; playing with him for 20 years now, on and off.

The book will follow that.

TP: How is it that the group has been able to create a myth that is separate from the four individual members? All of you have seemed to keep your private lives very personal, except for a little opening up after the “Tommy” film.
JE: I don’t know. When we first started out, before we were all married, we used to do the interviews, the photo sessions, go out every night, and so on. It didn’t particularly matter because our private life was public. And when we did get married we cut ourselves off from the business and we keep them going as two completely separate things.
TP: Don’t you view that as unique among rock bands?
JE: No, I think we’re lucky to have succeeded in managing to do it. I agree a lot of people have tried and it hasn’t worked out.
TP: Either the career suffers or the personal relationship suffers?
JE: In my case, my wife knew me before even the Who began. I suppose I had been playing the guitar for almost six months when I first met her. So she knew what she was getting into and she grew up with it. She was about 14 and I did my first gigs when I was about 17.
TP: “Someone’s Coming” was written for and about Allison, wasn’t it?
JE: Yeah, but I put in a father figure as well. Her father had died when she was about seven.
TP: Was the band aware of Daltrey’s (first) marriage?
JE: We knew he was married and we knew when he got a divorce. But it wasn’t talked about because it was his business really and not ours.
TP: That’s interesting, because women often seem to cause disension in bands for whatever the reason. At least that’s how it appears: Yoko Ono, Linda Eastman, Cher, Britt. Yet you keep a very separate private life and can still be the Who.
JE: Yeah, I don’t know how we’ve done it actually.
TP: Maybe that’s the only answer.
JE: Well for instance, I’ve got very few Who fans around my house. When they come up I swear them to secrecy. The neighborhood leaves me alone—there’s probably because they think I practice black magic and stuff. They think I’ll put a curse on them.
TP: Your French horn is not featured much any more. At one point you even played it on stage, didn’t you?
JE: No, it was never played on stage. I did mime a couple of times on “Top of the Pops” in England. Stupidly enough, once it was to a tuba part (“Cobweb and Strange”): I don’t know why I mimed on a French horn. Horns don’t go “umpa, umpa.” It was actually the only brass instrument (the tuba) I owned. See, when I left school I had to give the horn back to the school band and I didn’t actually own one until I could afford to take out an HP agreement. I didn’t have a French horn for about three and a half years after I left school. Once you stop playing French horn it is very difficult to pick it up. It’s one of those three-to-five-hours-of-practice, every
single day, instruments to keep your pitch in.

TP: Is your French horn on Quadrophenia?

JE: Actually that's a mellaphone. It sounds like a French horn. The thing about French horn is that you have such a tiny mouthpiece, there's about 13 notes you can get without pressing any keys down. The notes are so close together harmonically, you have to be able to sing the note in your head before you play it. If you play just a slight bit off you get a split note or a tone that isn't pure. With a trumpet you just press the valves down and the notes come automatically. The French horn is a kind of singing-playing instrument and it's very easy to lose the ability to play it. I still own a couple of French horns and I still play on an occasional afternoon. But I play terrible. It's gotten much easier to play French horn parts on the mellaphone.

TP: What kind of instrument is it?

JE: It's like a marching French horn; it's a straightened-out version with valves. It's supposed to be a hybrid between the trumpet and the trombone. What it really boils down to is that you can make it sound like a French horn.

TP: The first song on which the French horn appears is "Instant Party" on the US Generation album. Is the single "Circles" a different take or a different mix?

JE: Those are different mixes of the same take. The version without the French horn (on Ready Steady Who) is a result of the hassles we had with our then-producer, Shel Talmy. He said we couldn't use the tapes with the horns. The name change to "Circles" was just an attempt to get away with putting it out as a B-side to a single... "Substitute," I think it was. But what happened was that eventually Talmy's injunction prevented us from recording at all. So we bought a song from Robert Stigwood and the Amboy Dukes, "Waltz for a Pig." Most fans know we hired the Graham Bond Organisation to play but not too many realize that both Ginger Baker and Jack Bruce play on it. Talmy won the lawsuit and as far as I know up to Tommy he was entitled to 2% of our record royalties.

TP: Turning to your solo career, which album do you like best?

JE: I think Whistle Rymes. I really liked Igor Mortis Sets In. But looking back on all four of the albums, Whistle Rymes is the most interesting. Igor Mortis is better recorded.

TP: Did you get the musicians together?

JE: That was John Alcock's work.

TP: With Peter Frampton on lead.

JE: Yeah. I did all those solos in a day. He'd fall asleep in a sitting, then we'd say "Time for another solo," and we would get him up to do it. He's been a friend of mine since his days back in the Herd.

TP: You're glad he's finally making it?

JE: Yeah, maybe I won't have to pay him the 200 pounds I owe him for doing my album. He keeps on mentioning it every time I see him.

TP: What is the problem with singles for John Entwhistle? You don't seem to get any promotion.

JE: I think MCA was worried that if any individual member had a hit solo album it might break the group up because we were going through a sticky time in our relationship. That's why Roger came over to do a film clip and some promotion for Ride a Rock Horse. He wanted to make sure the album was put out.

TP: We discussed the problems you had in making Mad Dog. Do you think it was overproduced?

JE: As far as my way of writing now is concerned, it was extremely overproduced. It cost something like $60-70,000 to make it, which is far too much money. Additionally, the stuff just didn't sound right.... Maybe if I had put my own brass parts on it the album would have been a lot easier to do. But the way it worked out we hired a brass section. I had to explain to them how I wanted it to sound and it just got too jazzy. I prefer very simple, straight block chord brass parts. I like brass parts with some impact. I don't like weird, blasting chords and crescendos.

TP: It's too bad because of some of the things like "Cell Block Nine" had great potential—even as a Who cut.

JE: The backing track was a bit lame on that. It didn't have anything. Most of the songs didn't have anything to start with until we started overdubbing. The backing tracks somehow didn't stick. The main problem I have on solo albums is that I'm leading the band. I don't really get a chance to play a decent bass part as opposed to something like "Success Story" where there isn't really a lead guitar at all. It's all eight-string bass and bass guitar.

TP: Do you still play six-string bass? You were trying to develop it as a lead instrument.

JE: I've started writing a lot on a four-string bass. That's a four-string bass strung in octaves like a 12-string guitar. And I want to start using it on stage. As far as the six-string bass goes, something very strange happens to the top two strings. The sound completely changes. If I could sort out the string problems, then obviously it would be quite nice to use it.

TP: Before we get into this too far, we have a last question about Mad Dog. What's the significance of the poster?

JE: It's just a joke. I always wanted to buy a convertible—a Morgan or Bentley—but couldn't find one. Someone asked what I was going to do when I was supposed to be walking the dogs. I said I'd stick them in the back seat and put goggles and flying helmets on them. I just followed it through. I got the Cadillac, which, by the way, is the one used in the "Tommy" movie. That's my driver chauffeuring Roger and Ann-Margret.

TP: Have you ever thought of playing regular guitar?

JE: No, I prefer to stick to bass. I really think the eight-string is the answer. The one I've got sounds like a one-man band. It's an Olympic; I've got a Rickenbacker but it's not nearly as good. The strings are far enough apart so I can play just the upper strings if I want but they're close enough to get that twelve-string sound when I want that. The actual bass has a two octave finger board—like all Olympics—so I can go really high.

TP: Do you play any keyboards?

JE: I play piano so-so and I've got a synthesizer I play around with, all one-note stuff. The thing takes five hours to set up so it's not conducive to developing any skill.

TP: Do you have any comments on your solo tour in 1975?

JE: Well, it cost me a bit; I lost about $70,000. But it was worthwhile to me. It gave me a sense of self-confidence. I had to make the announcements, play the lead, and sing. I learned a lot about my voice and its capabilities. So if I had to do it over, I probably would. There were problems in the way of a slight conflict between myself and my lead guitarist [Robert Johnson]. I hate the guy; I'd never play with him again. But all in all I learned a lot. To head off your next question, there are no immediate plans for another tour, but it's on my mind.

TP: What is it like when Pete calls up and says, "We're going on tour?"

JE: Well, it doesn't happen that way. Pete doesn't decide that. We talk among ourselves and say, "Maybe we should go on tour some time," and our manager keeps
reminding us until we do. My wife hates me going on tour. But I think she would also hate me to stay home and never go on tour because I'd be totally unlivable. I don't particularly like recording or photo sessions, interviews, that sort of thing. The only thing I stay in the business for is playing to audiences. That's when I play best. If I'm not on tour within six months, I start getting extremely restless. My wife understands I need to go on tour.

TP: After the "Tommy" movie, Daltrey said it was time to get the band back on the road, that the Who was going to tour frequently. You've been here in Seattle twice in one year. Are you going to keep up this type of schedule?

JE: Well, a couple of members—Pete and Roger—insist on touring for only up to three weeks at a time. I don't mind touring for six weeks, two months. I enjoy touring and so does Keith. However, touring depends on each member deciding whether he wants to go or not.

TP: What do you think about the Who's performances as they are today? It is sometimes suggested that Pete is tired of playing in front of audiences, for example.

JE: At one time I think that was true, but not any more. I think Pete was going on stage and finding himself playing just as he had a few years before with no progression. After the movie we just got on stage and we all cliched ourselves. We could remember how to play and how we used to be. But we hadn't developed at all. In fact after we started recording By Numbers, we realized we were not playing well together. So we just booked ourselves a rehearsal studio and jammed for three days. We would show up and just plug in. We found we could play even better together. That's what changed my mind to go back and record the album. In the old days we played every weekend and we'd only practice if we had a new song to put into the show. But we can't do that, not after not seeing each other for five months.

TP: A question you answered the other day was if you had a favorite Who cut.

JE: What did I say?

TP: "Pictures of Lily."

JE: Yeah, I think it is. It's the one I've heard the least, so it's my favorite.

TP: Is there any Who LP you prefer?

JE: That varies; the bass on Quadrophenia is well mixed, and well played, I might add. Contentwise, I think I like listening to the live one the most. I don't remember any pains in the recording of it. We recorded two shows; one at Leeds, one somewhere else. The other one didn't have a bass part because the mike broke, so we had to use the Leeds take. I like the album because if you turn the balance controls all the way over to the left, you can hear the bass. You can turn it the other way if you don't want to hear me [grinning]. We were going to put out another live album but it was basically the same set as the first one. The only track which would have carried the album was "Baby Don't You Do It." That eventually got released as a B-side [of "Join Together."]

Generally, I don't like listening to live albums. I don't like audiences screaming and all that. We purposely cut our audience out so that there wouldn't be a song ending and then a large roar. Usually it sends people running to the turntable to change the record.

TP: How do you view Pete Townshend's role in the Who? Jimmy Page, in a recent interview, says he is a tyrant and the rest of you are his robots, or something to that effect.

JE: I know that a lot of people think that most of the decisions in the band are made exclusively by Peter Townshend. He's the main writer obviously, but the rest we do collectively. We haven't got a leader. If anyone tried to pull that role, we'd have broken up a century ago. We've been making our own decisions for so long now—I mean, it's true that if Pete didn't want to do a show we wouldn't do it. But that's also true if I didn't want to do a gig.

TP: Are you much of a Who history buff?

JE: Yes, sort of. My grandmother used to cut out every article she could find about us. I've carried on since she died. I've got chests and drawers full of stuff. Some time when I get a year off I'll arrange it. By the way, good pictures are hard to come by. I need pictures of different angles or weird effects to give ideas for the cartoon book.

TP: We also wanted to ask about "Rael" on The Who Sell Out. Is it possible to get the lyrics to it somewhere?

JE: I don't know. I do remember the horrible mix that buried the bass. Our early producers had no idea of how a bass part could be used. I was supposed to only be an "accompaniment." Actually there were two different versions of "Rael." We did one version in New York with Al Kooper playing organ. The take was left in the studio overnight. When we came back the next day, part of the tape was blank. So we returned to London and recorded the version on the LP.

TP: A couple of quick questions. Why did Roger change from lead guitar to vocals in the Detours?

JE: He was a sheetmetal worker. His hands were cut up so often he couldn't play. So Pete took over.

TP: Did you play with Pete in the Scorpions? (pre-Detours)

JE: Yeah, I did. In fact I just had dinner a bit back with the drummer of the old Scorpions. He works with Sony now. When I look at my old school mates, I think, "Jesus, I'm as old as they are." All the kids who used to play with flick-knives and clean out their teeth during school lessons and get expelled are now bank managers. It's incredible.

TP: Speaking of banks, do you plan to relocate here in the US for tax reasons?

JE: No, not now. My friends and family all live in England. I would save only about eight to ten per cent by moving to America. At $13 to 14 per cent I might change my mind.

TP: Do you ever think of what your life would be like today if you had continued working for the Inland Revenue Service?

JE: I still do some odds and ends for them.

TP: You do?

JE: Yeah, I pay them once a year.