Music

COVER STORY

Rock’s Outer Limits

Through turmoil and triumph, The Who makes music that will last

Time enough, in 15 years, for three new generations and a dozen new audiences. The Who has outpaced them all. Time enough for a bewildermment of pop styles to flare, settle, burn out. The Who has outlasted them all. Too much time for most rock bands to survive. The Who, in every sense of the word, has outlived them all, and outclassed them too.

The Who has sustained—indeed, defined—the vaunting, unstable strength that is the soul of rock, the barefoot boogie along the keen edge of the blade. There are lots of scars and some wounds that will never heal. The music remains intact, inviolate. No other group has ever pushed rock so far, or asked so much from it. No other band has ever matched its sound, a particular combination of sonic onslaught and melodic delicacy that is like chamber music in the middle of a commando raid. No other group, in return, has ever had so much asked of it by an audience which takes it as an absolute article of faith that, every time out, The Who plays for mortal stakes.

In performance the band seems to play possessed. The music itself is animated by excess, insists on, and receives, a response in kind. Who audiences are some of the most fiercely loyal, and some of the wildest, in rock. Abandon is the aim, and to reach that The Who acts in concert with the audience; “They bring you alive,” as John Entwistle, the bass player, puts it. The excess they want, group and fans together, is a release, an explosive culmination of energy, a detonation of good will and great music. “Rock’s always been demanding,” says Pete Townshend, who writes most Who songs. “It is demanding of its performers, and its audience. And of society. Demanding of change.”

Society sometimes does not get the message, and that only seems to push The Who harder. The power and unpredictability of the group, along with its longstanding and much vaunted intramural volatility (“We’ve been breaking up ever since the day we started,” says Vocalist Roger Daltrey), are a large measure of its appeal and, ironically, the core of much of its strength. It is also the source for a good deal of discomfort and antagonism among those who take rock music
casually, and especially among those who
would like never to put up with it at all.

Last week, playing a concert date in
Cincinnati during the first week of an 18-
day blitz of the East and Midwest, The
Who found itself performing after a crowd
stampede that killed eleven people. The
tragedy took place outside Riverfront Col-
iseum as thousands of kids holding un-
reserved seats charged across a concrete
plaza toward two unlocked entrances. The
group had not yet come onstage. “If it
had happened inside,” said Townshend,
“I would never have played again.” The
musicians could not be blamed and, in-
deed, did not learn what had happened
until after the concert. They were shat-
tered, and, for a time, considered that in
some way they might be responsible. The
Who knows as well as its fans that, since
the group’s beginning, it has always lived
at the outer limits of rock. That is the dan-
gerous borderland where the best rock
music is made, the music that lasts and
makes a difference. Elvis Presley lived
there. So did Chuck Berry and John
Lennon, Van Morrison and Bob Dylan
and Bruce Springsteen. Buddy Holly, Sam
Cooke and Jimi Hendrix died there. And
The Who has taken up permanent resi-
dence. The danger that pervades this ter-
ritory is not a matter of threat, but a kind
of proud, blind, spiritual recklessness,
forming a musical brotherhood that could
be bound by the words of Russian Poet
Andrei Voznesensky: “To live is to burn.”

For a long time, back in their early
days, the four received a great deal of no-
tority for smashing their instruments at
the end of each performance. It was, at
first, a flashy, frightening and finally ex-
ploratory thing to see. Drummer Keith
Moon blew up his
drum kit, and Townshend
rammed the neck of his guitar into his
amp, while Daltrey slammed his micro-
phone against the stage and Entwistle
held tight to his bass, playing stubbornly
on like a shipwreck’s lone survivor trying
to keep dry in a leaking lifeboat. There
was too much discussion about how all
this was rock’s reflection of Pop art, hap-
penings and autodestruction, how the de-
molition was an action critique of ma-
terial values. But until the destruction
came to be expected and then required,
all this razing was never phony. Anyone
in the audience could tell those instru-
ments were extensions of, even surrogates
for, the four blessed, blizzato maniacs in
the band. That was not Pop art onstage;
it was a gang war.

There were no separate peace. Only
nightly shards of instruments lying on the
floor of the stage like jigsaw fragments.
“We’re always trying to cut each other
onstage,” Daltrey says. “All of us are a
bit mad. We’ve stayed together for 15
years because we’ve never stopped fight-
ing,” adds Townshend. “The Who’s like
an open book. It leads to a kind of un-
witting honesty. That’s what I think the
fans really get fanatic about.”

Whether witting or withdrawn,
like savings, from some secret
zinc-lined stockpile, the hones-
ty of the performance and of the
music was armor piercing. “The Who
sound came from us playing as a three-
piece band and trying to sound like more,”
Entwistle told TIME’s Janice Castro. “I
play standard bass, but I combine it with
long runs where I take over the lead while
Pete leashes out chords. Townshend's guitar style—a sort of flywheel progression from rhythmic chords to melody and back again, all performed with whirling arm, split, slides and high jumps—attacted as much attention as his songs. An early Townshend tune like My Generation, with a chorus of stuttered defiance (“Why don’t you all f-f-f-fade away”) and its refrain like a middle-finger salute (“Hope I die before I get old”), put everyone on notice. In the 14 years since that single came out, The Who has lost none of its power. Townshend may have refined the song musically, shaped the message a little more coherently, as in Won't Get Fooled Again, but the spirit remains the same and just as impossible to tame. That spirit turns Won't Get Fooled Again into rock's best and most furious political manifesto. Its sardonic observations on the biameral process (“The parting on the left/Is now the parting on the right”) and the bitter truth of its conclusion (“Meet the new boss/Same as the old boss”) make it a fine anthem for any election year, anywhere.

The Beatles fell prey to divisiveness, disarray. The Rolling Stones traveled fast, turned gangrenous. The Who kept its distance, stayed strong by staying stubborn, contentious. Buoyed by the great breaking wave of British rock during the '60s, the group managed to swim clear. "We've sometimes been able to hide behind bands like the Beatles and the Stones, who got so much flak," Townshend says. "Yet we were significantly stronger than other contemporaries. Stronger in live performance, for example. And much more daring with material."

Not only does The Who's old material sound vital now, the new songs are as powerful as anything the punks or the new wave set down. There are other supergroups, like the Eagles or Fleetwood Mac, who turn out a kind of well-tuned pop that beats The Who in the charts. There are even other hard-rock groups, like Led Zeppelin, that lay down a kind of sugar-lined bombast that can rattle and dazzle the record buyer. The Who's cumulative sales exceed 20 million records. The members' individual wealth—Townshend, Entwistle, Daltrey and the millionaires several times over—is nothing to laugh about, even if the band is not in the highest OPEC aristocracy of rock. This is a matter of no particular moment to the group. It counts past trends and floats over sales curves just by staying a little outside and to the left of the main current.

One of the few major alterations in the promoters, Cal Levy, who told him this was not possible. The musicians had not completed their rehearsal inside the hall, and not enough ticket takers had arrived.

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The Who is that for years there has been no breaking of instruments, "Sometimes I got the feeling," says Entwistle, 35, "that the people wished we would just come out, smash the lot and leave." An additional, sad change occurred when Keith Moon died of drug overdose at 31; he was replaced on drums by Kenny Jones, 31. The group still puts My Generation across with enough swagger and insinuation to get you giddy or make you feel like you are being stalked down a dark street. When Townshend, 35, called himself "the aging daddy of punk rock," he was not being entirely facetious. Who music can match the tough street impact of punk, especially as Daltrey dishes it out. At 35, he may be one of the oldest kids in the playground, but he is still one of the toughest. Townshend melodies like Pure and Easy, Baba O'Riley and Music Must Change have the structural sophistication of music that is usually presumed to be more "serious." They also have a visceral challenge, a rush that only Springsteen, among Who contemporaries, can rival.

The rush is the path into the music. The way to the center and out again is a good deal more complex and subtle. Townshend's obsessions are the audience, music itself and a certain evasive, almost evanescent kind of spirituality that has its roots in the teaching of the Indian mystic Meher Baba, to whom Townshend is devoted. Tommy, which became the most widely known Who work, was a two-record "rock opera" about a deaf, dumb and blind pinball champ who was raised into a kind of pop artfact and rock-'n-roll godhead. It sold more than 2 million copies, bought the band out of years of accumulated debt from broken instruments, leveled hotel rooms and erratic U.S. touring. It also brought the members of The Who a flash of stateside fame they had not previously known. Before Tommy they had been notorious; now they were celebrities. Also in 1969, The Who appeared at Woodstock. "It was all very lovely," Entwistle remembers. "People standing up in tents sunk three feet in the mud, no toilets, peace and love. Backstage I had a couple of cups of fruit juice and found out someone had put acid in it. I wanted to kill him." Onstage The Who sliced through the flower power like a chainsaw in a daisy garden, played with an intensity that took the show away from such Mallomar bands as the Jefferson Airplane. Abbie Hoffman scrambled up to join the proceedings and Townshend responded, as he recalled later, by "kicking [his] little ass in a proud rage."

In the midst of all these pyrotechnics, it was easy enough to lose sight of the fact that The Who stood in defiance of the Woodstock generation. "You've got to remember that Tommy was antidrug in 1969," Daltrey recalls. Townshend, who had been through his own phase for a cancellation. So The Who played its standard two-hour set, and were then instructed to keep the encore short. When the four came offstage, Curbishley told them the news. Kenny Jones slumped against a wall. John Entwistle tried to light a cigarette, which shredded in his shaking hands. Roger Daltrey began to cry. Pete Townshend went ashen quiet. Daltrey thought the whole tour should be canceled. Then Townshend spoke up. He said, "If we don't play tomorrow, we'll never play again."

The next day in Buffalo, the promoters and hall operators worked with the Who management. There were 237 security men, ushers, ticket takers and general staff working at Memorial Auditorium that night. Roger Daltrey told the sellout crowd, "We lost a lot of family last night. This show's for them." The Who had to work hard to get through it.

Some first reactions to the tragedy were full of freelooking instant blame. A Cincinnati editor called the kids in the audience "animals." Other commentators were more thoughtful, including a cousin of one of the Cincinnati victims, Linda Mancusi-Ungaro, 19. She appeared before a public hearing in Boston that was called to determine whether the Who concert scheduled for Dec. 16 should be allowed to take place. Mancusi-Ungaro said that it should, and afterward explained why: "The Cincinnati incident was a loss, but to set a precedent for canceling rock concerts based on that tragedy would be inappropriate. Someone at the hearing asked me why this happened at a Who concert, instead of some other group's. I told them it wasn't the band, or the type of crowd. It was the ticket system."

Fewer than 20% of the Cincinnati tickets were reserved seats. The rest were for so-called festival seating, a sort of first-come-best-seated system that many of the country's major rock venues have long since given up as unworkable. Says Tony Tavares, director of the New Haven Coliseum where The Who will play this week: "When you sell a general admission ticket, you're challenging your crowd to get to the best seats in the house first. You're creating a system of pandemonium." New York City's Madison Square Garden, which brings its 20,000-capacity crowds in through four separate towers and a series of separate entrances, has never permitted festival seating. The Garden had 200 security people, 100 ushers and 20 supervisors at their Who concerts in September. "I paid $7,800 for security and staffing fees," says Curbishley. "Where was that security Monday night?" Riverfront Coliseum concerts by Elton John in 1976 and Led Zeppelin in 1977 had resulted in serious crowd incidents. Now Curbishley and The Who are talking to other rock groups, lobbying for legislation that will establish some guidelines for large concerts. "But," says Kenny Jones, "do eleven kids have to die before you hire a few extra guards?" Cincinnati will hold public hearings on two new proposed ordinances, one that would give police total authority over crowd control and one that would ban festival seating Said Mayor J. Kenneth Blackwell: "These are issues which are above debate."

Still being debated, however, was the question of responsibility. Promoter Levy denied that he or his organization had anything to do with determining the number of security officers used inside or outside the coliseum. By week's end, the coliseum management had not broken the official silence it had maintained since Monday night.
with drugs, was not only using Tommy as a mirror for Baba's own drug experiences but was also putting refractions of Baba's teachings into a rock context. Tommy ended by pulling the rug out from under false idols, directing the search for salvation inward, and out toward the audience. What Tommy sang to his disciples, freeing them, was also The Who's address to its audience, both thanks and a supplication: "Listening to you, I get the music/ Gazing at you, I get the heat/ Following you, I climb the mountain/ I get excitement at your feet."

All of this, which seems clear in retrospect, got muddled up in the psychedelic Zeitgeist of the waning '60s, and then confounded even further by the buoyantly bonkerish minstrel of the Director Ken Russell, whose wildly successful 1975 film version of Tommy was like Busby Berkeley on a bummer. By that time, The Who was working on extensions both of Tommy's form and its themes. Quadrophenia (1979) was an even more ambitious, although less flashy, success, a two-record chronicle of the desperate life and ironic resurrection of a poor London Mod kid in the early '60s. (It has just been released in a street-shred, roughhouse movie adaptation. The sound track, remixed by Entwistle, sounds even better than the recorded original.)

Another project, conceived after Tommy but so far unrealized, is a futuristic tale about the rediscovery of music in a society that is totally programmed and controlled. Called Lifehouse, the piece was intended to be a kind of environmental theater event. Some of Townshend's best songs were written originally for Lifehouse: Baba O'Riley, with its synthesizer line running like cold water down the spine, mixing with an old Irish fiddle reel and the memorable lyric refrain. "Don't cry/ Don't raise your eye/ It's only teen-age wasteland"; the aching, almost elegiac poignancy of The Song Is Over and Pure and Easy. All these songs concerned music and the compact of trust between audience and artist. As compositions they enhanced and extended the possibilities of rock. As Townshend wrote those songs, and The Who performed them, the truth of Townshend's contention became clear: "Rock has no limits." All that, and they can be danced to, too.

As individualistic as those Townshend compositions are, they remain a group statement. Townshend, who has no use for modesty, insists, "I can still use The Who more effectively to speak to people heart to heart than I ever could on a solo album." Daltry observes, "Did you ever notice that nobody ever does Townshend's songs? The Who are the only people who can play them. That's one reason we've survived. None of us is very good on his own. It's only as part of The Who that we're great."

The four parts remain in uneasy alliance. When Drummer Keith Moon was alive, he was like a self-contained chain reaction, "our little bit of nasty," as Daltry calls him. Moon died of an overdose of Heminevrin, a drug he was taking to combat his alcoholism. Moon's passing forced a crisis within the group, the three surviving members re-examining their loyalty to rock, and to each other. Daltry told Townshend: "Keith's life and death were a gift to the group. A sacrifice, to allow us to continue."

Townshend recalls thinking at the time, "How can I agree with something as 20th Century-Fox as that? But I felt it too. That besides being a sacrifice, Keith's death had given me a stronghold."

The Who asked Kenny Jones to replace Moon, and set about trying to re-create the delicate balance of the group. Jones, as affable and easygoing as Moon was looney, plays with all his predecessor's fine fury, matching or surpassing him in musicianship, while wisely avoiding any attempt to duplicate Moon's madcap charades.

If, as Daltry says, The Who is like a family, then Kenny Jones is still perhaps the orphaned cousin from overseas who has come to start a new life. "The others were a bit arrogant at the outset," Jones reports. "We'd start playing one of their songs, and they'd be shocked I didn't know it. But why should I know who they were? I had my own band." After a decade and a half spent playing and warring together, the three senior Who members may be like brothers, but with undercurrents of the Karamazovs and an overlay of the Daltons. It is not only a matter of maintaining a punishingly high musical standard; The Who has the weight of its own myth and the burden of its own history to support.

Daltry got the band together. At 15, he left school in London, took on a job as a sheet-metal worker that he held for five years. He also made his own guitars and formed a group called the Detours. On the street one day, he spotted "this great big geezer with a homemade bass that looked like a football boot with a neck sticking out of it," and recruited Entwistle on the spot. Soon after that, Daltry decked the Detours' lead singer and took over the vocals himself. Now the Detours needed a rhythm guitar player. Entwistle mentioned his school chum, Townshend, whom Daltry recalls as "looking like a nose on a stick."

"The greatest bloody triumph of my schooldays was when Roger asked me if I could play guitar," Townshend recalls. "If he had ever said, 'Come out in the playground and I'll fight you,' I would have been down in one punch. Music was the only way I could ever win. But I've despised him ever since."

All were from a working-class background in London. Daltry's father was a clerk, Entwistle's a mechanic. But both Townshend's parents were dance-band musicians. "My dad's a great player," Townshend says. "Not a cowboy, but a great player. My mom was a singer. She was a bit of a cowboy." The band found its own cowboys, or showboat, one night when a half-drunk rowdy took the stage, dislocated the drummer and gave an uninvited audition that ended when he kicked over the drum kit. Keith Moon was a member of the band on the next date. A publicist named Peter Meaden assumed informal responsibility for managing them, molding them into front men for the flourishing Mod movement. Representing a sort of secret style, a sly, dubious attitude and a way of life in which the work week was a lingering funeral and the weekend a temporary resurrection, Mod was a kind of berserk street friction of traditional English clubmanship. Having the right clothes and shoes was important. Riding the right motor scooter was important. Gobbling the right pills in the right quantities and listening to the right music were important. All this has been captured well.
with a nose that had been broken "playfully" by Pete, Moon continued his spiritual dedication to rock-'n'-roll excess, working as much havoc on his own body as on the rooms he inhabited during tours. A hotel manager once appeared in Moon's room when he was playing a cassette at top volume and insisted he turn down "the noise." In a flash, Moon reduced the room to splinters, announcing, "This is noise. That was The Who."

Moon, who could also be wonderfully benign and sweet-tempered, a sort of rock-'n'-roll Shakespearean fool, commanded perhaps the greatest affection from the audience. He was also dosing himself for disaster, and he began to undermine the group. During an American tour in 1975, he failed to show up for a sold-out concert in Boston and, Daltrey says, "Pete never forgave him." Townshend and Daltrey had wrangled bitterly over Quadrophenia, and during the first half of the '70s each member of the band had spent as much time on his own solo projects as he had on band activities. Each put out at least one solo album. By 1976 the band had effectively stopped touring, and there were rumors that it had collapsed.

Torn like a page of parchment, Townshend brooded about all of this, decided that he was finally going to say, "Right, that's it. The Who becomes a business." He expected the others to turn him down. Instead, sensing that he was in a state of crisis, they supported him. The strongest backing, to Townshend's considerable surprise, came from Daltrey. "He said to me, 'I don't care whether we tour or make records or don't make records. I just want you to be able to work with you, always be able to sing..."
Like Townshend's, it has been impaired by long exposure to maximum amplification. "When it's noisy," he says, "I have to lip-read."

Townshend lives with his wife Karen and their two daughters Aminta and Emma in a house in suburban London or, as mood and convenience dictate, in another, larger establishment in Oxfordshire. Townshend tried not having a studio at home so he could spend more time with the family, but he finally succumbed and installed some recording equipment. When he was laying down a rough vocal track, his daughter, not at all certain of her father's occupation, burst through the door wanting to call a doctor because Daddy sounded in pain.

Entwistle and his wife Alison have been married for twelve years, have one son, Christopher, and two daughters. Alison Entwistle has a different attitude. "I hate being at home when he is on the road. I know groups are part of it, and I hate them all," Heathen Daltrey says she doesn't bother about such things. But Townshend, who has had ironic songs about his life called "Romance on the Road" and "One of Those Days" and "Lamb of God," has a different view. "The music is so good that you can't see it," he says. "I don't think the group would be here if Keith hadn't died." Townshend says, and the others agree.

"We certainly wouldn't be doing the kind of things we're doing now." He means not only making plans, which include for the next year a new Who album, Townshend and Entwistle solo efforts, two more mini-tours of the States, a handful of further film projects, including a Daltrey star role as an English con man called "McVicar," and the elusive "Lifehouse." He also means making the kind of music that sets the standard and makes The Who the band to beat.

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Daltrey lives a safe two-hour drive from the others, in a 17th-century mansion surrounded by 300 acres of lush farm land in Sussex. He has an American wife, Heather, two daughters, Willow and Rosie, and a son by a previous marriage. He exercises to keep in trim, but had to give up working with weights because his broadening shoulders only exaggerated his stature or, at 5 ft. 7 in., his lack of it. There is nothing much he can do about his hearing.

"The Hairdresser" by the rest of the group for his high standard of grooming. Indeed, in this mob he looks like a hopeful young actor fallen among thieves. Jones has a house on the outskirts of London, which he shares with his wife Janet and their two sons Dylan and Jesse. Jones enjoys the pleasures of a square, himself, including riding to hounds, which he insists in calling "riding to hounds."

Life on the road tends to be livelier than home on the range. "I'm never fully alive unless I'm on the road," Entwistle says. "Groups are part of that. They build up my ego, make me feel that I'm a star." Alvin Entwistle has a different attitude. "I hate being at home when he is on the road. I know groups are part of it, and I hate them all," Heathen Daltrey says she doesn't bother about such things. But Townshend, who has had ironic songs about his life called "Romance on the Road," has a different view. "The music is so good that you can't see it," he says. "I don't think the group would be here if Keith hadn't died." Townshend says, and the others agree.

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"We certainly wouldn't be doing the kind of things we're doing now." He means not only making plans, which include for the next year a new Who album, Townshend and Entwistle solo efforts, two more mini-tours of the States, a handful of further film projects, including a Daltrey star role as an English con man called "McVicar," and the elusive "Lifehouse." He also means making the kind of music that sets the standard and makes The Who the band to beat.

This should not be taken as any certain indication that the collective group temperature has lowered away from the torrid zone. The Who has no formal leader. Entwistle insists it has no leader at all. But Daltrey says he and Townshend are the leaders. With Entwistle having a string bass, "If the lines of authority remain unclear, perhaps deliberately, personal lives are kept away from business as much as possible."

Daltrey lives a safe two-hour drive from the others, in a 17th-century mansion surrounded by 300 acres of lush farm land in Sussex. He has an American wife, Heather, two daughters, Willow and Rosie, and a son by a previous marriage. He exercises to keep in trim, but had to give up working with weights because his broadening shoulders only exaggerated his stature or, at 5 ft. 7 in., his lack of it. There is nothing much he can do about his hearing.

"The Hairdresser" by the rest of the group for his high standard of grooming. Indeed, in this mob he looks like a hopeful young actor fallen among thieves. Jones has a house on the outskirts of London, which he shares with his wife Janet and their two sons Dylan and Jesse. Jones enjoys the pleasures of a square, himself, including riding to hounds, which he insists in calling "riding to hounds."

Life on the road tends to be livelier than home on the range. "I'm never fully alive unless I'm on the road," Entwistle says. "Groups are part of that. They build up my ego, make me feel that I'm a star." Alvin Entwistle has a different attitude. "I hate being at home when he is on the road. I know groups are part of it, and I hate them all," Heathen Daltrey says she doesn't bother about such things. But Townshend, who has had ironic songs about his life called "Romance on the Road," has a different view. "The music is so good that you can't see it," he says. "I don't think the group would be here if Keith hadn't died." Townshend says, and the others agree.