CONVERSATIONS WITH

PETE

ON AN UP WITH BRITAIN'S LONGEST SERVING HONEST MAN OF ROCK - BY CHARLES SHAAR MURRAY

IF ANY one person symbolises the most positive continuing aspects of British rock over the last 15 years, it's Pete Townshend.

His vision of rock and roll as vehicle for rage, elegance, ecstasy and ultimate salvation started him out as a contemporary of The Rolling Stones, The Beatles and The Kinks and finds him now as a contemporary of The Clash, The Jam and The Specials; not simply the guiding spirit of The Who, but a man whose ultimate concern has always been that rock should live up to its frequently broken and tarnished promises, and actually become that force for positive action that it has so often pretended to be.

1980 finds The Who — and Townshend himself — in better creative fettle than they've been for years, with a Townshend solo album just popping out of the pipeline and a new Who album on the way. Townshend has appeared — either solo or with The Who — on behalf of causes ranging from Kampuchea to Rock Against Racism and Amnesty International as part of his re-involvement with positive political action, has quietly and unostentatiously used his money and facilities on behalf of several new bands and is contributing once again to a scene which has — in turn — revitalised him.

The first Pete Townshend interview took place a few weeks ago in the offices of The Who's management company. Last week, we convened to cover some ground left untouched by the first interview — mainly to discuss specific aspects of the 'Empty Glass' album — and to amplify a few points made in the first interview.

The text as presented here is more or less complete (barring a few sections erased as a result of cassette breakdown and human error) and presented more or less in the order in which it occurred.

CSM: First of all, let me congratulate you on your new-found beardlessness.

PT: I shaved it off about a month ago, mainly for medical reasons. My face started moulting, so I shaved it off and my kids started screaming and my wife started screaming. I've had a beard since 1970, so my youngest kid has never seen me without one except for when I played Widow Twankey in the pantomime. At that time the Kenny Everett false chin was not available, otherwise I would have worn one. The director said I had to shave. Nobody knew who the lads were in what way are the songs on your solo album 'Townshend' Townshend songs rather than 'Who' Townshend songs?

PT: I don't actually know if I make that distinction. The only distinction I made was that if I was really going to do a solo album deal properly — and I'll tell you the reason why I did it later on — the only way I could do it would be to take the best of any material that I had at any particular time, rather than knock together solo projects of any sort based on material that The Who had rejected. So my album — though I was able to take a lot more risks with the material than The Who would — could have been a Who album if we'd happened to be recording at that time, just as the Who album that we're going now could have been a solo album.

I just decided to write — to write straight from the hip and offer everything to the project that's going at the time, not earmark stuff. I think that's what's quite interesting is the way that I do a song as distinct from the way that The Who would do it, and I don't want to deny myself all the Who-type material because you know, that's what I am.

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While we were making it, we saw a lot of thing starting, and some of the kids told us that The Who's new single was a week out of a group called the Stockton Footlets who were a mod band. And they had a track which sparked off a skinhead fashion in the Midlands. It retained a very clean image; it wasn't all top-hats and tails and doffing your hat. It was like an American cool with a nod and a wink and a cheeky little smile. They were just uncommonly straight in their style, and lightweight philosophy, but that was it.

And I certainly don't like being a thing to try to influence kids to do, don't like to get into the exploitative things which have followed a lot of people, you know. Yeah, but you endorsed the Quadrum.

I had very little to do with it. That's with the Rolling Stones.

Kenny was very interested in going to see the fashion people had been to see the fashion people. And find out why he doing it, because it was a whole lot of kids who were involved in clothes. I never met them.

I wouldn't mind a Stain, anything! The film was about 300 quick. But you'd like to have a mod as the shop would get the idea of being the clothes of new attitude, or a Quad label or whatever we got. Because as the Who, it was a lot of other bands. It was wearing the bloody who's bands. You're not going to do a concert. I couldn't resist going up and one day, I say, 'Have you ever seen the Who before?' And this kid turned round and he said, 'I would never have heard of tickets and I don't think I care very much. It's a sell-out and I don't really feel bad about that and I suppose I really mean it. It's not bad for the band. It was for the kids. It was in the Arena. It meant a lot.

The people most responsible for the fact that Woodstock got started, and we were just the lucky ones.

You see, it costs so much to make a film when you make one you've got to make it, you know, back. We're just proud of the fact that we made a pretty good film with entirely English money, but McVie could go on and say that.

Kids Are Alright was made all out of this.

It's great to be able to look back on a movie that we've been involved with. We'd had the first funny idea of what it could be done in the first place, you know, or something. It's making films interesting. You can only think we can make it well, you know, Saturday Night Live. You get an interesting, but that's our own.

We used to do an interview with someone, I suppose. I'm not sure I know, but I've certainly we did all this.
very serious about them as well. Perhaps Selector are a little too serious, and it worries you: you think, 'Christ, they’re going to get wrecked down with all the world’s problems'. The Specials have got a really good balance. I really like The Pretenders, for example, ‘cause Chris Thomas was producing my solo album and I heard all the tapes and got to know him, but I don’t think they’re a new band particularly, and the whole sound of the band is to do with something that leads on a bit more from establishment music, and I think it’s far more likely it’s something like that will be easily accepted in America because, for a start, she can sing! It’s based on vocal quality, and if you’ve got a good singer in the band, you’ve got a better chance of getting played in the States.

When I was there, they were playing a hell of a lot of Pretenders and a hell of a lot of Clash in LA, which I was amazed at, and they also seemed to know which were the best tracks on the albums to play. They were playing ‘Clampdown’ all the time. It’s a bit weird for us at the moment, playing in the states, because all the influences that the new bands have had on our stuff starts showing up in our music before those bands actually get there themselves. I ain’t exactly saying that The Who are going to make a Z-Tone record, but it affects you. The Who have done a vaguely reggae tune for the next album.

How’d you first meet The Clash?

Through Kosmo Vinyl, who used to work for Keith Altham (Who publicist) and, of course, I knew the old boy — Ian Dury — pretty well from Kilburn And The High Roads, and it was through his involvement with their camp.

I got persuaded to go down to Brighton to see them live properly, and it was one of the best concerts I’ve ever seen. It was fucking incredible. They asked me to go on stage and play, which was a bit embarrassing because I’d only had ‘London Calling’ about a week, and I wasn’t aware of many of the chords, so I turned the guitar to 1 and just pretended. It was really exciting.

The Clash are a young band and they’re working incredibly hard on the road, and so you can get patchy gigs, and I’m really glad that when I saw them was as good as it was.

I liked their first album a lot, but one of the problems I have see, playing albums at home is that our house is quite small and Clash music needs to be played pretty loud, and I can’t stand listening on headphones. And it disturbs the kids. I could never play ‘God Save The Queen’ or any of that stuff, the kids would actually start to cry, get disturbed, get out their painting-by-numbers books and switch on Magneto to define reality. So I’d just stick it on a cassette in the car and blast myself while driving around.

I used to get most of my records actually sent from the bands at around the same time as the radio stations and I always listen to the Peel show or have it recorded for me when I’m in the States, so I hear all sorts of stuff from bands with their own labels. Which was very encouraging, and so I put my own label together, which didn’t really happen properly, but I’ve still got the Eel Pie label.

You can tell if a band who come in and ask to be on Eel Pie except Why not do it yourself? We’ll tell you where to go, give you £200 and that’s it. Pay us back off the top. We’ve done it three or four times now. To press 2,000 singles costs nothing, and dealers keep records of how fast things sell, so they could take the sheet into a major record company and say, ‘Look, we’ve sold 2,000 records in a day’. So I’ve gotten out of that, but I still get sent a hell of a lot of stuff direct.

Anyone can make a record now for £9 or £10 an hour which – by 1965 standards – would be of exceptionally high quality. But what kicks bands up now is PA, because the standard of PA that people are used to now, even from small bands, is so high. You can go on with a Telecaster copy, but you can’t go on with a shitty PA, and unless the club or the other group have a good one, you’ve got to spend £150 to hire one.

In my company, we try to cut across that by forming a co-op, allowing bands to use the PA and the van free, and if they get a deal they’ve put money back. In the only one who did that were Craze – who used to be The Skunks – and they were the only band out of all the original four or five who actually managed to take advantage of what we were doing and then feed money back.

But what’s more important than gear even is management: day-to-day encouragement and assistance and making sure that the band get paid for what they do. When we started in ’61 or whenever it was, we got £12 a night down the Old Ford Tavern. Groups are still getting £12 at the Old Ford Tavern, but in those days, £12 was £12. Now it’s fourpence. The cost of PA’s and guitars has increased tenfold, but groups are still getting paid about the same. The same old rip-offs... club-owners... but then that’s probably a reflection of their problems. One should never be too hard on people who sell booze.

A point currently being made quite frequently is that ‘rock’ has become a series of empty gestures and rituals. Certain parts of The Who’s show are rituals and you’ve certainly stated that you’re aware of this...

Well, in the end... for ages, my reaction to that was just to stop.

For two and a half years we didn’t do any shows because I just refused to play, but then I started to hang around with a few bands and it was probably Steve and Paul from the Pistols who told me, ‘Why the fuck do you worry about it? Just get up and play. Alright, it’s ritualised. Who gives a shit? Just play!’ It was that who gives a shit attitude that just got me: ‘So it’s ritualised. Who gives a shit? Yeah!’

That’s what I feel at the moment. Bits of The Who’s show are still rooted in tradition, and we go through the motions to a certain extent because people do wanna hear old stuff. My wife went to the Dylan concert and came back ecstatic because he played a lot of old stuff and revitalised it. I’d hate to go to a recent show and just hear that one bloody album and gospel songs and not hear him do any of the other stuff.

In a way it’s a really sensational, daring thing to do, but I don’t think it’s the kind of thing you’ll ever find The Who doing; just doing a new album and some other stuff, ignore what went before and try to be completely different. What you’ve got to watch is the hypocrisy of pretending that you’re not proud of what you’ve done, and the hypocrisy of pretending that you don’t enjoy and are able to lean on the value of those gestures.

At the end of a two-hour show the lasers were fucking helpful, because then you could stand still and let them do the stuff. Or if I was having a problem playing a decent guitar solo, I could whirl my arm a couple of times and it would have about the same effect as a well-played guitar solo. And that
People in London are very jaded, just like people in New York and LA because they see such a lot of good music, but it's still less ritualised than the American tour market, or the heavy metal venues like Wembley Pool, where people who've been into rock for ten years expect a particular kind of show, a particular kind of value-for-money and they're disappointed when they don't get the price of their ticket.

Obviously I'd rather go to a Clash gig, but I like a few heavy metal bands because some of them play all right. I think the head-banging thing's a good laugh.

It was what always used to frustrate me—which is why I got reasonably good at words—because there were so many things that I couldn't do musically. A lot of the heavy metal records that I've heard recently just have an incredibly high standard of musicianship, very skilful playing.

OUR Lifehouse project is going to be filmed by Nicolas Roeg.

Well, I sent him a script.

Via Nick Lowe?

Yeah, via Nick Lowe (laughs).

Roeg is loosely interested, but I don't know if it's the kind of thing that he would want to do, but I really love the films he's directed, he's English, and his new film Bad Timing just smashed me.

The most important development was that a treatment was sent to Ray Bradbury, because I fancied getting someone like him to finish it off. I'd done a couple of scripts for it, but I can't see the wood for the fucking trees sometimes. Anyway, he's interested, and if he did the script, then maybe someone like Nic Roeg would probably be a great director for it, but I don't think he'd agree to do it without having control over the script.

Lifehouse was originally a fiction, almost a science fiction, concept with a concert at the heart of it. The action—which was a story about an approaching army heading toward this concert and busting in at the climactic. But the two things would be shot separately and inter-related.

At one point I was imagining a 10-week concert, not just with The Who but with lots of other musicians as well. The idea was that it was to be a sort of illegal concert which they were trying to track down and stamp out. Like an expanded church: the lost art of rock and roll.

When they finally break in, the concert has reached such a height that the audience are about to disappear (laughter).

It was kind of a nutty idea at the time, but I've since brought it a little bit down to earth, rationalised it a bit.

But still what excites me about it is that it does contain a concert and a story, and it does contain a lot of my feelings about what rock is and what music is, and why music has a spiritual value and why the effect of rock music has a spiritual value.

Well, that theme runs through a lot of your work with The Who: the extremes of spirituality and violence.

The two coexist anyway; can't wriggle out of it. One of the things that I've always loved most about rock is that it's not ashamed of any of the things that it sets itself up to be.

I know it's fashionable, probably less fashionable now, but at one period it was fashionable to knock the fact that most of the established rock elite had become interested in Indian mysticism of some sort at some point. Whether or not they needed it is debatable, but it was fashionable to sneer at it, and all that coexisted with the violent side of...
It depends what trigger is required to get you to that point of being desperate enough to actually ask to do it.

THE line "He laid me back like an empty dress" in 'And I Moved' is the weirdest line on the whole album.

I don't really know what that's about. Originally I wrote it as a song about a voyeur, but it went through some permutations. A lot of people feel that it's about me and my father or me and Meher Baba or me and a relationship with a woman, but I listened to it last night because I wanted to hear the pressings. But I thought it was a bit like an admission of a homosexual tendency. "Rough Boys" is more of a paternal thing, but 'And I Moved' is very personal and I think it probably best not to try and explain it.

But originally I wrote it when Bette Midler's manager had written to me and said that she was doing an album and she liked what I wrote and asked if I could send her a song. He said, "Make it a bit dirty, because that's the kind of thing that she likes". So I sent it to her and heard nothing for a couple of months, and then I heard from him and said, 'I couldn't really give it to her because it's smutty'. I said, 'What? You asked for something dirty'. And he said, 'It isn't dirty smutty'.

One of the purest pieces of adolescent poetry I've ever written. You see it on paper: 'And I moved towards him dot dot dot Pete Townshend 68'. Followed immediately by a pen of people, making 7C.

This thing that I was talking about before about the empty glass, it's this whole thing about the innocence and purity of the heart, and spirituality to a degree, it's something to remain pure.

But you have to go out and suffer life; you can't just sit there going, 'I am pure. Peace will come to me'. The song's about this guy saying he's already sorted it out, not having to go to him and say, 'You have won a star prize!'

One of the things that stuck me about 'Gonna Get You' is that the girl in the song is virtually incidential to the narrator. That song's nonsense, it's just a word game. I don't think it means anything.

Well, it does whether you meant it or not. The narrator wants the girl not because of any qualities she sees in her, but because he's upright about himself and she's a means of reassurance.

Isn't that the only reason anybody ever pulls anybody? I'm talking about pulling, not falling in love.

O N THE cover, you appear with two conventionally gorgeous models while wearing a halo. Is there any reason for this?

Bob Carlos Clarke did the cover, and he normally does semi-erotic stuff, a bit like Helmut Newton but better. British photographer: he has to have women in his photographs. I asked him to do the cover and he said that he loved it but he had to have women in it. At one point I was going to call the album 'Sacred Animal'...

One thing it does reflect is that one of the weirdest things that happened to me over the last three or four years is that all of a sudden I've initiated this process, not so much of arranging up for getting about looking a bit of a idiot, saying, 'If you're not really told that you're wet. That's one of the most important requirements if you're going to pull successfully. There's nothing more annoying than someone who's got a high sense of self-consciousness that they can't be themselves in front of you. And the last three or four years of my life have been so full of the most of a difficulty that I wouldn't say it was a fulfilling thing.
A few of us spent the 4th from Monkey through the Baba books when they were recording at Oceanic — which is the studio at the Baba centre — and they didn't find anything deeply at odds from what they believe. A few of the Baba people came to talk to them because they were interested in Rasta. But I know a lot of people who are involved with different gurus and the different sects that are about in California, and the only time that I've ever been able to find out what they're about is when there's been some mutual respect.

And yet there's a part of me that's cynical and British and jaded and I think 'Fuck all this! There's this obvious loony that they think is God in human form' and maybe they're thinking the same thing, and maybe we're all loonies anyway. But what redeems the whole concept of searching is that it can draw people together. Everybody's got to respect people's need. This incredible, violent modern attitude that man needs nothing, that he's got to stand alone, that his strength is just in his mere existence is obnoxious to me. It's an indication of the nastiest medico-psycho-bullshit that I've ever come across.

I find it most hard to talk to psychologists, psychoanalysts and doctors about things like Meher Baba. In the end, one doesn't. You just try and respect the fact that obviously through their work they've found some kind of answer to their needs, but to actually deny anybody the need for something... once you admit there's a need, alright, you can call it what you like, you can use any fancy word or violent word or psycho-dependency or whatever you like, any kind of terminology. But they're all aggressive. They're all a snarl... Ahhh, you're wallowing.

See, I'm very heavily into Meher Baba, but I also drink like a fish, I'm not the most honest person in the world. It's difficult, but I do at least know what's happening to me. I accept that there is a larger reason for me being alive than just being a rock star. It's not just because I need something to hang onto that I believe in God. If all there was as a pinnacle of human achievement was what I achieved, then there's not enough. It is just not enough. I could not live believing that what I'd achieved was all that was achievable. To many people it would be a dream come true, and to me it's my childhood dream come true, but it's still not enough. It's not high enough, and it's not pure enough.

I'm not there yet, and that's what life is about: having to aspire to. You have to aim higher, and if you're going to aspire to anything you might as well aspire to the universe as opposed to aspiring to the house next door, or to someone's tits.

Do you know what I mean?

We all a bit about 'Jools and Jim', the song on the album about Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons.

I wrote the song after someone from the Guardian wrote an article about them to promote their book, and he got very animated about how they didn't give a shit about Sid Vicious going down. And then Tony brought up Keith and said, 'F**k Keith Moon, we're better off without him. Decadent cunt driving Rolls Royces into swimming pools, it's just rock and roll's about, who needs it? And to a certain extent I agreed with a bit of it, but I felt that it was a bit of opportunistic cock.

I don't know if they care, but I'd like to see this fucking Rolls Royce in the swimming pool. I spoke to the guy who bought his house, the drummer from 10cc and he said there was one in there, but I got the feeling that someone wheeled it in just to validate the story.

The most interesting Keith Moon stories aren't about Rolls Royces being driven into swimming pools. The secret of Keith Moon's driving problems was that he couldn't steer. When he was behind a steering wheel he wanted to go left he'd go right and when he'd go to drive in his own garden.

I just wrote the song as a reaction. I rang Tony up the day after I'd written it and said that I'd written it and explained. I was going to send him a copy, and then I decided I wouldn't send him one until it came out after I'd decided that it was a good song to go on the album. I thought, 'F**k it, he'll get it in the end.'

I only read their book the other day, and I thought that they were just a bit wrong to 'Jools and Jim' because it's not directly about them, it's about ever taking a stand and being what you read. It's just another 'Don't Leave What You Read' song. I think it's one of the best songs on the album. The energy's great and I really like the singing on it.

But I was amazed at how well-written their book was. I hadn't read much rock press for a long time, because when that incredible first rash of new bands appeared and NME got very fiery, I got confused and I couldn't keep up. I'd go away to the States for a month and when I came back everything would have changed. You needed to read it everywhere very carefully, and I just like flicking through them, so I stopped altogether. But I read something Julie wrote recently — the Radio 4 piece — and I could see her ending up writing for The Listener, but I thought their book was great. It was the sort of thing that I would be very proud of having written if I'd written it. It was almost like a challenge. That's what it was to a lot of people like me. Their presence really shook me. Their book is about hypocrisy, pretty exclusively, but I think you can accuse anybody of hypocrisy and be right. I think everybody's a hypocrite in one way or another. There is no bigger sin than hypocrisy.