Pete Townshend talks about the Cincinnati concert tragedy, Keith Moon & their powerful new music

From top: guitarist Townshend, drummer Kenny Jones, bassist John Entwistle and singer Roger Daltrey
THE WHO AND PETE TOWNSEND FACE A TOUR AND THEIR FEARS AFTER CINCINNATI

Still rocking after 16 years, Townshend, The Who's brooding genius, contemplates the endless road in a Vancouver rail yard.

Photographs by Harry Benson
The '60s Who (below, from left, Keith Moon, Roger Daltrey, John Entwistle and Townshend) sang 'The Kids Are Alright' as an anthem for rebellion. But last December their kids stampeded right outside Cincinnati's Riverfront Coliseum, and 11 of them died.

Song

'If I thought we'd been responsible,' says Roger Daltrey, 'we wouldn't tour again'

Rock groups pay a price getting to the top, but for The Who staying there exacted a far heavier toll. Long known for its fractiously warring egos, the band nevertheless hung together for more than 15 years despite the centrifugal tug of relentless touring, nightly smashed guitars, trashed hotel rooms and even critics' jeering during a fallow period in the mid-'70s. Then, in 1978, the solidarity that had kept their original lineup intact longer than either the Beatles or Rolling Stones among the trinity of British rock bands was broken by the stunning death at 31 of their beloved bassist, drummer Keith Moon, of a lethal octane of booze and downers. Yet, incredibly, worse was still ahead. Back on the road again last December with Moon replaced by ex- Faces drummer Kenny Jones, The Who stormed into Cincinnati's Riverfront Coliseum—and disaster. In the worst tragedy in rock history, 11 fans were crushed to death outside the hall in a frenzied rush for unreserved seats.

Numbed and shattered, the band stumbled through its remaining commitments. The normally ebullient lead vocalist, Roger Daltrey, felt 'ripped apart inside' and found himself forgetting lyrics during concerts. "I didn't come out of it until I got home," he recalls. As after Moon's death, The Who again considered quitting. Instead, they not only stuck it out but were this week about to finish an emotionally trying but triumphant 18-show tour of the U.S. and Canada. Indeed, the double trauma of Moon's death and Cincinnati seems to have intensified the band's commitment to the same blistering rock that may have made both tragedies almost inevitable.

The Who's return to action amounts to a personal vindication for one of rock's most oddly fascinating figures: its co-founder, chief songwriter and spokesman, Pete Townshend, 35 this month. Understandably, Townshend and the others at first felt paralysed after the Cincinnati deaths—even though the promoters and stadium officials were responsible for security, crowd control, access and other arrangements (including the controversial first-time "festival" seating). The Who, in fact, were never even aware of the tragedy until after the concert. Then came exonerating calls and letters from victims' families which, says Townshend, "were very encouraging and warming. It's given us a whole new insight into the American character."

In The Who's current tour, festival seating was forbidden—though it had been permitted during the group's post-Cincinnati concerts in Europe last March. In theory Townshend still defends the freedom of festival seating "to enjoy the total release of a rock concert" under carefully supervised circumstances. "I like it, the kids like it," he says.

Indeed, to some, rock music is the most fatalistic art this side of bullfighting. Townshend now looks back on Moon's death as the shock that shattered the band's creative lethargy in the '70s. "We used to be the most self-conscious, narcissistic and over-idealistic band in the world," he admits. "Keith's death broke that spell—we were able to start over and face a new public without the sadlebag of our old image." Yet Townshend himself had not been able to accept Moon's death "until I saw the body. I thought it was an elab-

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Despite acting ambitions, Daltrey, 35, is focusing on The Who: "I do solo work when I feel trapped. I'm not trapped now."

Entwistle, 35, is doing his fifth solo LP but feels recharged by The Who's new music: "We're not moaning about being old."

Townshend says Keith Moon's replacement, Kenny Jones, 31, "fired up" the band. Here Kenny warms up backstage.
orate joke, and that he’d pop out of the coffin, laughing."

The arrival of Jones, whom the band knew so well from his days with Rod Stewart’s old Faces that an audition was unnecessary, was, Pete says, "a powerful and positive force, like a blood transfusion." The replacement also instigated the band’s musical adoption of a stripped-down power rock that owes more to the Sex Pistols than, say, the 1975 Who by Numbers LP. "Rock had been swamped with miserable stuff, heading in the wrong direction," charges Townshend. "Jet-set parties, gentleman farmers, far removed from the gut-level realities of the street. Bands like the Sex Pistols were on the front line, like kamikaze troops sent in to clear the field for others to follow. Without them," he insists, "I’d not have survived musically."

For proof of Townshend’s rejuvenation, one has only to listen to Empty Glass, his first-ever solo LP (1977’s Rough Mix was a collaboration with ex-Face Ronnie Lane), or The Who’s current show, a two-hour orgy of diamond-hard rock in the rough. Two innovations help. One is a new three-piece brass section; the other is the addition of an American: Texan John "Rabbit" Bundrick, who joined the tour on keyboards, takes bows and is all but a fifth member of the group. With the added manpower, Townshend is freer than ever onstage to roar off in solos, and he clearly loves every lick. He’s taken on some of Moon’s pranks—though seldom more daring than slipping butterballs inside ladies’ shoes or tossing lobster claws and grapes backstage. "After a show," reports Pete, "I feel completely exhilarated, almost superhuman." To come down, he parties through the early hours with band members at disco or in hotel suites, listening to tapes of "everything from Tchaikovsky to Little Feat."

Such exuberances are increasingly perilous for a man whose body shows the scars of rock stardom. In 1976, suffering from chronic earaches, Townshend was told that the constant battering of amplified sound could leave him deaf by age 40. (When his touring subsided, his hearing improved, yet he now nonchalantly claims to have "stopped worrying about it" and doesn’t use earplugs during concerts.) Townshend packs barely 155 pounds of nervous energy on his spindly, six-foot frame and habitually gnaws his fingernails to the nub. He freely admits to drinking "too much" (mostly brandy, wine and beer), but is off pot and the amphetamines of earlier days. "I still sometimes get smashed and turn quite ill," he says. "But I could get run over by a bus too. I’m alive. I’m happy."

Music has been Pete’s life ever since he grew up in London, where his father, Clift, played sax and clarinet and his mother, Betty, sang in the Squad- ronaires, a Royal Air Force band. (They now run a London b-c-a-brac shop.) Despite a fascination with early Bill Haley hits, Peter preferred Dixieland. "Rock was unglamorous in its early days," he declares. "The stars were homosexual or suspected of it. Jazz had respectability." So at 12 he picked banjo in his Acton County school band, in which John Entwistle played bass. When Pete enrolled ("with a blank mind") at Ealing Art School, his main interest was newspaper layout. But in three years he left Ealing, teamed up with Entwistle, Moon and Daltrey in the Detours (later the High Numbers) and by 1964 was rocking as The Who. (The name came just because the group thought it was arresting.)

In 1966 Townshend married fashion student Karen Astley, the daughter of composer-arranger Edwin Astley, who scored movies like The Mouse
that Roared. She has always kept away from the rock scene, and Pete cracks: “She doesn’t want to be my Britt Ekland.” He admits that because of his touring their marriage has been “not entirely stable,” and confessed to one interviewer that “screwing around didn’t help either. I don’t know why I did it, because I don’t think the feeling after casual sex is a good one.”

Peter, Karen and daughters Emma, 11, and Minta, 9, live in a five-room Georgian house on the Thames outside London at Twickenham. Peter’s studio and offices are in a nearby boathouse that doubles as a temple for the late Meher Baba, an Indian guru who even Pete’s mother says was the stabilizer that “prevented him from floundering on his own success.” Townshend has a country place on stilts up the Thames in Oxfordshire because his avocation is rowing and sailing. But Townshend’s modest material tastes run to small boats and a red Citroën, instead of yachts and the customary rockworld Rolls. “My wife and I have never been interested in amassing a fortune,” he claims. “Anyway, we’re not snobs. We’re quite happy leading a middle-class existence.”

Lately Townshend has branched out into publishing seven children’s books under his own imprint, professing to see analogies between rock lyrics and children’s verse. Three years ago he set up a management co-op to help get young bands off the ground—a venture that itself proved to be a “disaster” for lack of sharp management and promptly folded. Most important, Townshend has continued to be interested in film ever since the group’s seminal 1969 rock opera, Tommy, was made into an excessive if memorable Ken Russell extravaganza. The group’s two films, The Kids Are Alright, a documentary, and Quadrophenia, have reached cult status. So far, though, Townshend, unlike Daltrey, has not pursued acting.

The Who will return to the U.S. next month for 20 more shows. The short stretches on the road, while less profitable, enable the members, all married

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“No one,” says Roger, “sings Pete’s songs like I can, not even him. And no one writes better songs than Pete.”

with young children, to spend more time at home. Though their commitment to performing may be tempered by family ties, their fans won’t let go. “The kids have a terrible possessiveness that has nothing to do with music,” broods Townshend. “They let bands do their living for them.”

Yet, with their personal animosities at a new low, The Who might oblige them. Daltrey says his long-difficult relationship with Pete, who once fractured his nose, has warmed into “a distant friendship closer now than ever before.” Roger, in fact, figures the band’s good for four more years of live shows, but assures that “even if we can’t get away with it any longer, when the energy isn’t there onstage, the records will go on.” Townshend, he says, “is one of the most mucked-up persons I know; but I hope he never sorts himself out because then he’ll stop being creative.” Pete himself, who wrote in *My Generation* in 1966, “Hope I die before I grow old,” now feels drastically different about aging. “Picasso,” he points out, “still had a shining light in his eyes at 76.”

FRED HAUPTFUHRER