“My album could have been a Who album if we’d happened to be recording at the time, just as the Who album we’re doing now could have been a solo album. I just decided to offer everything to the project that’s going on at the time. I think what’s interesting is the way I do a song as distinct from the way the Who would do it. I don’t want to deny myself Who material because that’s what I am.”
LOVE, DEATH and the WHOLE DAMN THING
Part 1
Pete Townshend on the record

Interview by Charles Shaar Murray

IF any one person symbolizes the most positive continuing aspects of British rock over the last 15 years, it's Pete Townshend. His vision of rock as vehicle for rage, eloquence, ecstasy and ultimate salvation started him out as a contemporary of the Rolling Stones, Beatles and Kinks and finds him now a contemporary of the Clash, Jam and Specials. He is 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 the force for positive action it has so often pretended to be.

In 1980, the Who—and Townshend himself—are in better creative fashion than they have been for years. With a Townshend solo album popping out of the pipeline and a new Who album on the way. As part of his involvement with positive political action, Townshend has appeared—either solo or with the Who—on behalf of causes ranging from Kampuchea to Rock Against Racism and Amnesty International. He 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, revitalized him.

Our first encounter took place in the offices of the Who's management company. A few weeks later I was reconvened to cover some ground left untouched by the first interview—mainly to discuss specific aspects of his Empty Glass LP—and to amplify a few points made in the first interview.

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

PT: I shaved it off 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 fuck I was.

TP: In what way are the songs on your solo album “Townshend” songs rather than “Who” 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 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 doing 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 what's quite interesting is the way that I do a song a way distinct from the way that the Who would do it, and I don't want to deny myself all the Who-type material because y'know, that's what I am.

TP: But when you're writing, do you feel that you want to sing that song yourself?

PT: Sometimes I feel like that. Sometimes I feel that I get a thing so precious about a song, and I feel that I don't really want to hear the band play it because I like the way it is on the demo. But I'm always pleasantly surprised.

Some of the material that we've been recording with the Who I've sung with a half-English accent—as is the current trend—and I never thought Roger would be able to do it, but he just lunched right in and did it and it sounds much more natural than singing in his normal Bob Seger accent. He was pleasantly surprised and I was pleasantly surprised.

I think one of the great things about having done my solo album stuff and decided to chuck really quite nutty material in...is that the changes which have taken place between Who Are You and my solo album have affected the next Who album.

Roger really likes my album—though I don't think he's particularly mad on I Am an Animal—but everything else he really likes. He likes the sound of it, the feel of it. It's affected all of us, it's a pool to draw from. It's affected Roger's singing and delivery; he's using a much more modern delivery, and the new material needs it. I still have a tendency to get very wordy, and as it gets easier to write the longer you write, the easier it gets to see what you're really trying to say behind clever words or words that anyone who didn't get an English GCE wouldn't be able to understand.

So to have a heavier delivery, a more abandoned delivery, a more—can I just use this word once in this whole interview?—credible delivery, which Roger is more than capable of doing, it helps to get what's really in the song across, helps to get it through the words. That's what's always great about Roger doing stuff; he can smash through stuff that might be pretentious. My heavy delivery always comes across cynical rather than real guts.

TP: You mentioned the “naturalistic accent” earlier; I wish that had been adopted as early as Quadrophenia.

PT: Yeah, but it hadn't really been done up to then. There was only one band I can remember doing it, quite an arty band...but it always made me feel as if that was put on. The first band that made me feel that it wasn't being done naturally was the Sex Pistols. I really got into their albums and played 'em all the time, so when I was ready to do demos it felt quite natural just to do it myself.

It's quite weird the way the Jam uses it, because it's almost like a mixture; sometimes it's American, sometimes it's English, sometimes it's grammar school and sometimes it's it's upper class. Probably what's a bit of a pity is that everyone's very conscious of their accent, and that if they're using a particular accent, they're very conscious of it. Joe Jackson sings in an American accent, Elvis Costello sings in an American accent...it's like they actually sat down and thought, "Am I going to use this new English accent thing or not?"

I don't know if you've been in LA lately, but there's a big, big punk scene happening there in the Chinese restaurants, and what was amazing was seeing all those American bands singing in Cockney accents.

TP: At the Kampuchea concert you did, you were amazingly unselfconscious for a band who've been going so long.

PT: We're still just about alive! I enjoyed that particular day and I went to all the concerts, except I missed the Queen one because I didn't realize that it was going to start that early, but I saw all the others. I think the one I disliked the most was the Wings Night, because they were obviously underrehearsed and unconfident and seemed to feel out of place.

TP: Well, it can't be too relaxing to follow Costello and Rockpile.

PT: I don't know. I think that's what McCartney welcomes, that kind of opportunity. I think he likes to keep his feet in what's happening, whether or not it deeply affects what he does.

But on each night there were seven bands that were keen to do it. The Clash were keen to do it, and in their case it turned out to be a mistake. It was the wrong kind of thing for them to do, but they did it, and it's the kind of thing that's important for them to do. Just as it's important for us to be on a bill with bands like them, even though they actually played a different night from us.

TP: Did you enjoy the Specials?

PT: Yeah, not all. I think they're going to be enormous in America if Madness doesn't steal their thunder.

We were watching kid's telly and they had this little girl on there and she looked like she wanted to go to the toilet. She could hardly speak! She'd been to one of Madness' under-15 matinees and they'd had a press conference alter and they asked what that was like. And she said one of the most revealing statements about Madness that you could ever come across: "Oh, everyone just sat around and asked the gang questions."

She didn't call 'em a band; she called 'em a fucking gang! The thing that I like most about the Specials is that they're not just out for laughs. ...
The music is exciting and they're obviously really enjoying themselves, but there's something very serious about them as well. Perhaps Selecter are a little too serious, and it worries you; you think, "Christ, they're going to get weighed down with all the world's problems." The Specials have really got a good balance.

I really like the Pretenders, for example, 'cause Chris had no idea he was producing my solo album and I heard all the tapes and got to know 'em, but I don't think that they're a new band particularly; 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 that something like that will be easily accepted in America because, for a start, they now say it's based on vocal quality, and if you've got a good singer in the band, you've got a better chance of being 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 album 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 is going to make a 2 Tone record, but it affects you. The Who has done a vaguely reggae tune for the next album.

TP: How'd you first meet the Clash?

PT: Through Kosmo Vinyl, who used to work for [who publicist] Keith Altham and of course, I know 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 too sure of many of the chords, so I turned the guitar to one and just pretended. It was really exciting.

The Clash is still a young band, 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 it 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, it's 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 Magnavox 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 [John] 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.

What can you tell a band that comes in and asks to be on Eel Pie except, 'Why not do it yourself? We'll tell you where to go, give you $500 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. Dealers keep records of how fast things sell, so they could take the sheets into a major record company and say, 'Look, we've sold 2,000 records in a day.' 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 $20 an hour which—by '69 standards—would be of exceptionally high quality. But what fucks bands up now is p.a. because the standard of p.a. that people are used to now, even from small bands, is so high. You can go on with a Telcaster copy, but you can't go on with a shitty p.a. and unless the club or the other group have a good one, you've got to spend $350 to hire one.

In my company, we try to cut across that by forming a co-op, allowing the bands to use the p.a. and the van free, and if they get a deal they'd put money back in. But the only one who did that was Crazo—who used to be the Skunks—and that was the only band out of 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, assistance, and making sure that the band gets paid for what it does. When we started, in '61 or whenever it was, we got $25 a night down the Old Ford Tavern. Groups are still getting $25 at the Old Ford Tavern, but in those days $25 was $25. Now its 10 cents. The cost of p.a.'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 boozes.

TP: A point currently being made quite frequently is that "rock" has become a series of very much of the rituals. Certain parts of the Who's show are rituals and you've certainly stated that you're aware of this.

PT: 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 Pilots who told me, "Why the fuck do you worry about it? Just get up and play. Alright, it's ritualized. Who gives a shit? Just play!" It's was that who-gives-a-shit attitude that just got me. "So it's ritualized. 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 the old stuff. My wife went to the Dylan concert and came back ecstatic because he played a lot of old stuff and revitalized it. I'd hate to go to a current 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 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 whir around in a couple of times and it would have the same effect as a well-played guitar solo. And that da-da-da-rroomang gesture that I do: every now and then I do it and I think, "Christ. I'm fucking glad that belongs to me." It gets me out of so much trouble! [laughs]

I understand what they're saying, but what's annoying is when you realize that most of the gestures are used up and it's fucking difficult to come up with anything new, because rock is so simple and so limited and within the framework of rock so many things have been tried and explored. On the edges, though, its borders have been defined, and if you go over the edge you turn into something else, into jazz or classical music.

I think Jon Anderson and Yes and people like that are actually producing classical music, and it's very clear that Keith Jarrett playing his piano solo things work nicely in a rock form, but he doesn't stop there, he goes off into all sorts of head trips. People like Peter Gabriel occasionally step outside because they're not really interested in rock as a format. They recognize limitations of the thing and they don't really value them. But a lot of new bands do, and whether or not they call it rock, the limitations are there; the strictures, the realization that you only need so much to be able to play.

PT: What was your reaction to Public Image? Their statement is that their music isn't rock, that rock is rubbish by definition. Anti-rock!

TP: They may be right. The thing with Johnny Rotten is that I don't know whether to believe everything he says because he always says it with a wry grin on his face and you never know whether he's taking the piss or not. Maybe he's not. I suppose their record isn't a rock record, but it's a rock package. That tin is the greatest rock package I've ever seen.

Maybe it's the overfree use of the word "rock" without anybody understanding what it means by it. A lot of Americans use the word "rock" like they don't know what they're saying. They might use the word "rock" and then mention Bob Seger, Billy Joel, the Sex Pistols and the Rolling Stones all in the same sentence. I think they're all a different kind of rock. I have an image of what it means to me, but it isn't actually a form of music.

To me, talking about "anti-rock" and calling it music is a contradiction in terms. To me, rock is something almost like a pill—funny enough—which you take and it makes you fly. If Public Image makes you fly, then—in my definition of the word—it becomes rock. There are bits of classical music which make you fly, but not in the same way. I mean, I don't know many people who put on Tchaikovsky and goape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape-ape.

I think the riot at the Rainbow gig shows, in a sense, how ritualized rock concerts have become. When the most impetuous geezer in the band decides that he's not going to play an encore because he doesn't feel like it and still clings to the misconception that it's his choice, is it his choice? Fuck. He goes out there, mates, and he does it.

I've had some incredible rows with audiences. I think the most famous one was in America, when we played New York's Metropolitan Opera House. We did two shows, each two and a half hours long. That's the longest I've ever played; they were pretty close together and it was five hours of solid rock, not Grateful Dead stuff but heavy, exhausting stuff. We never did encores anyway, and I was told that we didn't have to do an encore if we didn't want to, but I should at least go on and thank the audience for their 15 minutes of spontaneous applause. Of course, their 15 minutes of spontaneous applause was about as spontaneous as an orgasm. It was extremely worked on. By the time they got out there they were already in their own private hell, bloody raw hands. I went to speak and someone threw a can of Coke at me.

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 ritualized 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 rockers for the price of their tickets.

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 is 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 skillful playing.

PT: Tell us a bit about "Jools and Jim," the song on the album about Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons.

TP: 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. Then Tony brought up Keith as well and said, "Fuck Keith Moon, we're better off without him. Decadent cunt driving Rolls Royces into swimming pools; that's what rock 'n' roll's about, who needs it?" To a certain extent I agreed with a bit of it, but I feel that it was a bit of opportunistic rock.

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 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

"A lot of Americans use the word 'rock' like they don't know what they're saying."
"I don't know what religion is... Spirituality to me is about asking, not answers."
“People in rock imagine they’re so incredibly liberated and anarchistic, but they’re not. They’re so incredibly closed up and macho.”

of thing she likes.” So I sent it to her and heard nothing for a couple of months; then I heard from him and he 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, it’s smutty.” One of the most beautiful pieces of schoolboy poetry I’ve ever written. You see it on page 7C.

And I moved towards him dot dot dot Pete Townsend 6B. Followed immediately by a pen drawing by Penariec, 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; whatever you do the heart will 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 sitting at the bar and waiting for life to come to him and say, “You have won a star prize.”

To. One of the things that struck me about “Gonna Get You” is that the guitar in the song is virtually incidental to the narrative part of the song.

That song’s nonsense. It’s just a word game. I don’t think it means anything.

TP: Well, it does whether you mean it or not. The narrator wants the girl not because of any qualities he sees in her, but because he’s uptight about himself and she’s a means of reassurance.

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

TP: On the cover, you appear with two conventionally gorgeous models while wearing a halo. Is there any reason for this?

PT: Bob Carlos Clarke did the cover. 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 he’d love to, but it had to have women in it. At one point I was going to call the album Sacred Animal.

One thing it does reflect is one of the weirdest things that’s 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 growing up as not caring about looking a bit of an idiot, saying the wrong thing or being 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 is so full of their own semi-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 discovery of women.

I wouldn’t say that it was a fulfilling thing, but the last time I took such a step forward was when I was at art school. Discovering that women actually talked to men—having been to a boys’ school. Discovering that we men were actually approachable human beings. Single sex schools breed all these attitudes...Sometimes you hear geezers in the pub going poofers this and poofers that and I feel like saying, “Try a cock up your arse sometime, you might like it.”

What’s embarrassing about it, what’s hurtful about it is that it not so much makes you question your own feelings, but it makes you realize that you’re not free. Anything that inhibits freedom is damaging in the end.

It’s not just society, but in rock. People in rock imagine that they’re so incredibly fuck-

ing liberated and anarchistic, but they’re not. They’re so incredibly closed up and macho.

In many ways rock is more reactionary than the rest of society, because the business side of it is so super-corporate, the money flow of it so controlled, and the forefront of it is so preoccupied with marketing, so concerned with uniforms and hardness.

I would never do a Tom Robinson, but it was refreshing that he nearly managed to do it within a rock framework. But it’s easier in rock ‘n roll to look tough rather than be tough; since everyone in rock ‘n roll believes what you look like anyway.

To get tough in a way. I was tough and we were tough because I decided to do what I wanted to do. If I want to go to Regine’s, I go to fucking Regine’s. That isn’t to say that Regine’s is the greatest place on earth, but neither is the Goldhawk. Neither is the arcade down Wardour Street where I also spend a lot of time, but I think I should be free to do what I want to do. I think the problem is that in rock the music has become that macho.

It’s interesting the way that certain threads of balance have started to pull their way back again. It’s slow but it’s happening. It’s almost like a reaction. It has to filter back through so much shit. Maybe it will, maybe it won’t. I mean, I can get away with a song like “I Am An Animal” but for someone new people would laugh. Roger says it’s a pompous song and I say, “If you feel pompous, be pompous.”

TP: Do you think rock will ever conquer its need to be tough?

PT: A lot of people in rock are genuinely tough; your Daltreys are genuinely tough, and I’m very brutal with words. I think, “Yeah, it has to be tough because it mirrors high energy.” In rock, low energy is only permitted if it’s sly, bitter or profaning. Rock has to be tough, and I think a lot of rock isn’t pretending. I think it genuinely is tough. I think a hell of a lot of bands that have made it are very, very tough people with an awful lot of stamina, people like Keith Richards. To last 20 years in this business you need to have an awful lot of stamina and an awful lot of toughness and to care fuck all for anybody but most of all fuck all for yourself.

The reason it has to be tough is that you need to be that way to get people’s attention, to convince people that you’re serious. If you don’t shout at the top of your fucking voice in this world, people don’t think you care. You either do it with weight of words, or—like the skinheads of this world—with the weight of fists, or with the weight of chords. But I don’t think there’s any question that it’s the weight of chords which is the most effective. D

For the less musically or verbally erudite, a bottle over the head is the next best thing. I know it’s not necessarily to be applauded, but everybody uses their own method; it has to be brutal and it has to be direct, and it has to be aggressive because rock is not just music.

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NEXT MONTH: Mr. Townshend discusses on the Who in new wave. Tommy, Lifehouse and Quadrophenia.