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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
PETE TOWNSHEND
Why, How & Who!
Townshend, now completely deaf, has been playing the same note for 17 years—and no one has ever told him!!

A lethal wit, a stubborn idealism, a wounded heart, a teeming mind and a nose that invites insult. He could be Cyrano de Bergerac, but was christened Peter Dennis Blandford Townshend. Trashed guitars were his calling cards as a young man. Fine inns were reluctant to shelter him and his carnal recklessness often required remedy by penicillin. His rage found expression in music and when that failed, he used his fists. He elevated vandalism to the level of an art.

Today, after 15 years as the primary muse of the Who, Townshend is less of a rogue. It has been some time since he demolished an instrument, contested an unseemly bacteria or altered the basic architecture of a hotel suite. But he was forced to wear a cast on his right hand during most of the recent Who tour after breaking a finger in San Diego where he slugged a wall out of—as he puts it—“sheer exuberance.”

He still scowls and spits on stage, but the angry armor he took on as an adolescent has worn translucent over the years, allowing his thoughtfulness, compassion and almost squishy manners to shine through. At a recent L.A. concert, Townshend brought a young boy sitting on his father’s shoulders up from the audience to the stage where he would not be.

"Townshend on Cincinnati: Our lawyers said not to write to the bereaved. We said fuck that and wrote anyway and they wrote to us as well."
frightened by the pyrotechnics of the Who show. His sentimentality was even laid bare on his recent solo album when he dedicated it to his wife, Karen.

Townshend has little company at his level of the rock pantheon. Elvis, John Lennon, Dylan, Jim Morrison, Neil Young, Jagger, maybe. But he seems to be the only one of these elder (sometimes former) statement to command the unflinching respect of both fellow musical war horses and the headbangers of today. His respect was earned by the invention of a brand of rock that springs not from the loins, as Chuck Berry's did, but from an addled, confused teenage brain. Tommy, Quadrophenia, "Can't Explain," "My Generation," "Magic Bus," "Anyway Anyhow Anywhere," "Won't Get Fooled Again," and "Baba O'Reiley" are all his. He has written songs about young people who are lonely, anxious, damaged and rebellious. Particularly for boys, his tunes have become anthems.

At 35, the man who wrote "hope I die before I get old" has rekindled his artistic passion. Who Are You sold faster than any previous collection. Empty Glass (Arco), his recent solo work, has not only shown commercial strength, but demonstrates an artistic leap as well. Bob Seger, who heard the basic tracks of the forthcoming Who album due at the end of '80, termed it "incredible."

There are telltale signs of Townshend's age, however. The frantic pogo jumps of

"Townshend on Bob Dylan:
I scorn him. I believe that his conversion is an explosive reaction to the facts that he let his life fall apart. When I saw him let go of a nice wife and nice kids, I lost a lot of respect for him. If he does become a good Christian, I will respect him just as I respect other good Christians."
yesterday are less frequent and gymnastic. The fire in his eyes has turned into a smolder and the band's party pace on the road has slowed a bit. His propeller stroke on the guitar hasn't lost any of its pizzazz, nor has his voice. But his doctor still insists that his hearing is deteriorating and that he will be stone deaf by his mid-50s. "I will be happy to survive with the same family, same friends and the brain," he opined.

Townshend is an unlikely hero. He rarely makes the cheap columns and lacks the classic rock star looks of somebody like Roger Daltrey. Measuring six feet on that rare occasion when he stands up straight, he currently sports modishly cropped hair and a clean-shaven face that makes him look more boyish than he has for years. "I shaved me beard because I was getting a skin irritation," he explained. "My youngest daughter started screaming when she saw me because she didn't know who I was," he recounted with some amusement. And as far as clothes are concerned, the man who made the Union Jack into apparel hasn't lost his knack for goosing fashion. To a recent interview he wore evergreen slacks cinched up with a bright lime belt, a white golf shirt, electric pink socks and grey loafers. His natural expression is that same dour look he wears on most of the Who album jackets. It disappears when he says something clever. Which is often.

Townshend lives in Twickenham (just outside London) with his wife and two daughters, Emma and Minta. "I don't think you'd call my life decadent," he says because my wife really keeps me in that score. She is somewhat threatened by the band's scope of influence and doesn't like it." He cites the time a few years ago when he'd been having trouble with his Mercedes 600 and decided to trade it in for a Rolls Royce. "I brought it home and Karen refused to ride in it. So I had to turn around and sell it the next day. Now I drive a Citroen."

As a father, he is affectionate, but not doting. He dedicated "Rough Boys" from Empty Glass to his daughters (as well as the Sex Pistols). Commenting on his off-stage demeanor, he says, "The scowl I have on stage is a result of the incredible strains of a performance and the fact that the Who have always had a macho, teamy image. A lot of that image is front. In the same way that I'm sure Muhammad Ali is sweet with his kids when he's not in public, I think I am, too."

Townshend also has a temple near his home which represents an important facet of his life. It was built in honor of Meher Baba, the mustachioed Indian avatar in whom Townshend has professed belief since 1967. He explains his spiritual conversion as a "non-mystical pursuit of logic and something decent" in his life. His discovery of Meher Baba came at the end of eight years of extensive drug use (mostly pot) and, as he puts it, "behaving badly." Conviction came in San Francisco: "Being there in the land of spiritual lunacy where there was a prophet on every block, it was hard to get away with it. I think Meher Baba is the Messiah. Even now I have no way of proving it. It's something I feel intuitively."

The only dramatic event connected with his faith happened in 1972 when he made an 8,000 mile pilgrimage to Meher Baba's tomb in India. "I had been going there day after day and every time had these gross sexual thoughts that would fill my head," he recounts. "Then one day I went to the tomb and there was this ravishingly beautiful Indian girl—which didn't make it any easier. But in front of me was this crippled man who put his head down on the block over

"Townshend on Dying: People think it's sick, but I want to die because I have a feeling about life that it is a responsibility that has been given to you by somebody else. Death means freedom from that responsibility. But that doesn't mean I run around trying to kill myself."

Michael Zagaris
YOU BAD BOY! “Never shake hands with a guy who hates pink shirts.” Pete’s mom had always told him.
Townshend signals for the stage entrance of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

the tomb. I did likewise and for about 30 seconds everything went completely black and I had this experience of me being this speck of dust in a great, black void. For the first time I felt in true perspective as to the size of the universe. I felt like nothing, which in a sense like being in the presence of God."

Secular-minded critics and fans should not underestimate the influence of the spiritual in his life, yet even Townshend issues a strange disclaimer. "I don't like to have my work measured by what other people think of Meher Baba. At the same time, I don't want Meher Baba to be judged by my behavior because it's not always as good as I want it to be."

Yet Townshend certainly does not consider rock and spiritual rapture as being mutually exclusive. "At a rock concert you can get off physically, mentally and—on a good night—spiritually as well. You can walk out of a show having forgotten yourself. You are lost among other people which is a great, transcendent feeling."

The other shrine on the Townshend estate is a full 24-track recording studio, one of the first private workshops built by any rock artist. There he puts material he has written for the Who on demo tapes and sends copies to each of the band members and the producer. They work out their parts and by the time the group lands in the studio, they're ready to lay down polished tracks.

For the better part of the past year, the studio was used to work out material for Empty Glass. A solo project, such as this one, often indicates dissatisfaction with the group. Not this one. Townshend once explained it by likening the Who to a great Mothership from which the members could take expeditions and make discoveries and return to incorporate this experience in the larger vehicle.

Speaking of his platinum solo voyage, he said, "I tried to imagine that I was not writing for a solo album so I wouldn't get into an isolating pattern of writing some things for me and some things for the Who. At the moment I recorded Empty Glass, I used the best material I had available. The same is true of the new Who album."

One thing that came pouring out of Empty Glass was the burst of artistic adrenaline that Townshend got from the British punk movement. "I had invented punk a thousand times in my head," he said, "and when it finally happened it really inspired me. It came just as rock was getting so rigid and formatted and it was a reaction to boredom. I hope my music will inspire other musicians in the same way new wave influenced me."

Whatever enthusiasm he musters on his own behalf, it's clear that Townshend believes that the Who is his primary vehicle and remains much more than the simple sum of its parts. Part of the group's vitality comes from the new configuration of the band. Kenny Jones hasn't stepped into Keith Moon's shoes, but instead has brought a fresh pair to the Who. On stage they're no longer just a four-piece, as they were for years, but now have a horn section and use Texas keyboardist Rabbit Bundrick as almost a fifth member. Said

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Townshend: “We were very worried when Keith died that that particular four-cornered magic would be gone forever.”

After years of cynicism about the band (displayed at its fiercest on The Who By Numbers), Townshend has come out of his funk. “Relationships in the band couldn’t really fail to improve because it started out in such a shitty condition. We were pretty sick people. Now we are older sick people,” he said laughing. “It has now grown into an incredible love affair. Not lawning or sickly, but genuine and based on respect and the fact that you know you can count on someone.”

Today the band is more active as a performing unit than they have been for years. They are methodically working their way arena by arena through every major city in the United States. “Besides the fact that our record-buying audience is a little different than our concert audience,” I think it is important for a band to play. I am not saying that it keeps our feet on the ground because in many ways it does the opposite, but it is important to see a few faces every now and again because recording studios are very sterile places.”

“Townshend on Nukes: I’m for nuclear power, but I haven’t told anyone because I am still hoping to fuck Jane Fonda like everybody dreams of doing who’s involved in the No Nuke Movement.”

Eagles, Joe Walsh, an old friend of Townshend’s, is producing the new Who LP and has noticed changes in the band. “They’re tighter personally and musically than they have been for a long time,” he said. “I think the push thing really stirred up Pete’s juices and his material now just explodes on the tracks. I think he’s back to writing the kind of material there was on Who’s Next.”

Of course one of the records that the new Who have already weathered together was the Cincinnati tragedy that left 11 fans dead. “We had to react very quickly at the time and our feelings haven’t changed much. The two alternatives were to stop altogether or detach ourselves and not be brought down by that sort of thing. Obviously we opted for the latter.”

And why were there no benefits for the victims? “I think a benefit would have been a gloomy, brooding affair. And besides, benefits are for people who would gain something. I mean, if the settlement pend at the present time [gets thrown out of court] I would consider doing special concerts because I think there is an obvious, clear case for compensation under American legal tradition.”

Having put that unfortunate incident and other problems behind them, the Who seem to be careening toward a momentous time with no reason to be necessarily purged by a combination of Keith’s death, the production of two essentially historical films (The Kids Are Alright, Quadrophenia) and a more vital social ambiance to draw upon. Their new approach finds expression in Townshend’s song “I Am An Animal”: “I’m looking back and I can’t see the past anymore, so easy I’m on a track and I’m traveling so fast Oh for sure I’m crazy.”

Part of their new profile is a contract with Warner Brothers Records, reportedly negotiated for a sum of nearly $30 million. “That’s hardly a humble sum for a band that has always considered themselves a ‘people’s band.’ Townshend on their behalf: ‘I don’t look at it as us taking advances away from new bands with that money. They will get their money back and then they can do what the fuck they like with it. Sign 100 new bands if they want. Unfortunately there is only so much cake in the record industry and so much audience.’

If that sounds a bit callous, Townshend is one of the few rock stars who has done something concrete to help new bands. A couple of years ago he started a cooperative record company in England designed to help struggling bands. Unfortunately, Townshend’s idealism was defied by harsh financial realities and his dream disappeared like a song on the radio.

Yet he continues to express his concern for the plight of up-and-coming groups. “Today a young recording artist is likely to measure their success by radio airplay and sales, which is at the end of a chain of pretty inhuman experiences for somebody who just wants to get their music listened to.”

Pete has designed for himself a life without leisure (“I get nervous with time on
my hands."), but when there is some by accident, he likes to go sailing. Alone, he is a kind of light industry, personally employing 35 people in addition to the large staff that works for the Who. Among his varied projects:

* A series of short stories, some of which are prose expansions of songs ("Reader’s Digest condensation in reverse") which he expects to issue from his own publishing house in about two years.

* Moral and sometimes fiscal support for the recording projects of various friends and relatives.

* He has re-worked the Lifehouse song-cycle project started many years ago (some of the material was used on Who’s Next) and is ready to turn it into a film with Nicholas Roeg directing.

* He continues to be involved in a variety of quasi-political causes. He performed at recent benefits in Great Britain for Amnesty International and Rock Against Racism.

All of these things seem to be prima facie evidence that he has that unspeakable yearning matched with genius that comes along in a musician as rarely as a Segovia or Gershwain. He finds its embodiment in loud, clanging noises, thunderbolt guitar chords and melodious harmonic strains. His works all reflect a strong personal statement, but rather than being an exercise in narcissism like so much of rock, it is a realization of the magic of shared experience.

After surviving the kind of adulation and fame that few have a chance to enjoy, Townshend seems relatively unaffected. He has the same telephone and address he’s had for years.

“Every Who fanatic in the world, I think, knows where I live,” he says proudly. “I know because I get about 20 or 30 letters a day to my home with full address including zip. Sure, an occasional loony comes to the door, but I am used to dealing with loonies.”

Townshend’s relationship with his fans has always been pretty unique given his stature. One flustered fan wrote saying, “I’ve got all your records and I listen to your music all day long and I look at your pictures all the time and I write to you and all I get is a bleedin’ autographed picture. You don’t know how much time I spend thinkin’ about you lot.” This was his reply: “You don’t know how much time I spend looking at and thinking about teenagers.”

Indeed, the word “star” comes out of his mouth like an expletive. “I am dense about stars because they don’t seem to be serious about anyone but themselves.” Beyond his commitment to fans, he is unreasonably and eloquently committed to the genre of rock. “I hold rock above most forms of art because it is one of the few forms of communication where there are people who are idealistic in the medium. And there is a very high percentage of people who listen who are looking for idealism and are disappointed when they get empty crap. I aspire to music that has brains, balls and heart.”

Yet for all this, Pete Townshend remains a jumble of contradictions. He is gregarious, but solitary; idealistic, but cynical; sensitive, but brutal. And not only does he recognize such contradictions, but fosters them perhaps with the subliminal knowledge that from that complex psychic rock springs water.