The Who in rehearsal

EXCLUSIVE BEHIND-THE-SCENES REPORT — CENTRE PAGES
His voice on the other end of the telephone was harsh; its tone urgent. It was Keith Altham, publicist for the Rolling Stones, The Police and the Who.

He wanted to meet me, he said, in the Southam, a pub next to Surbiton railway station: be there at one this afternoon, he barked, and he'd take me down to Shepperton studios where the Who were rehearsing for their British tour.

The receiver clicked at the other end. The line went dead, I went to Surbiton.

An hour later, I was ordering my first drink (a vodka and orange; for, please), I was thinking about Pete Townshend, standing by the Southampton's比bake, punching out P9, Robert Palmer's "Cherry." There was no sign of Altham.

Four vodka later, there was still no sign of the man.

I began to panic. Altham had blown me off? I'd been set up. The bastard! Clearly, this was his revenge for some unknown deed I'd committed. Or maybe he'd decided it was all too risky, smuggling in a journalist to eavesdrop on a Who rehearsal.

A minute later, I was on the telephone, fumbling for ten pence piece.

"Hello, Keith Altham's office. No, sorry, he's not in. He's gone to see the Who at Tringford. We don't know when he'll be back. No, there's no message for you.

The panic began to subside. I was feeling numb, beyond caring. The bugger Altham had probably heard me out in an attempt to get me the sack; oh, well, there go our Cheering Keith.

I ordered another drink. I'd just handed over my money to the barman when Keith Altham strode in.

"Paulo, mate," he said. "Been waiting for you.

"Hour and a half," I replied nonchalantly.

"Sorry, Paulo," he apologised. "Been one of those mornings. The wire crushed her eye, been dealing with that all morning.

"Oh, yeah—so what about your secretary's claim that he was at Tringford oh, never mind.

"Hungry?" he asked.

I said I wasn't. I never eat before work; too nervous.

"Well, I am," he said. "And he was deated off the pub bar for a plate of steak and kidney pie. He tucked in, mopping out the afternoon's schedule between mouthfuls.

"To begin with," he began, "there's no way you're going to get an interview with Townsend or anyone else while they're rehearsing.

This was beginning to sound very daunting.

"Do you know," he continued, "you're the first journalist I've taken down to a rehearsal without them knowing about it.

"This was beginning to sound ominous.

"I'm probably going to lose my account," he reflected, popping in a piece of pie.

"There's just one other thing," Altham concluded. "They might not be at the studios today. You never know with them.

"Oh, great. Just fine. There I was, out in the bloody stock, on my way to Shepperton to meet the Who only they might not be there; and if they are, I can't talk to them. Just watch and listen, trying to keep up the way of a good fucking. "

Jesus rock groups. What a load of(less) money, attention, glamour, security and their bloody nonsense surround them. Really - is rock 'n' roll worth all this trouble?

I think so, in the end.

So does Pete Townshend, I guess; otherwise he wouldn't go through all this, year after year, continually reached by self-doubt about the purpose and relevance of rock. Technically, I discover it's another member of the Who that's plugging most by inner conflict at the moment.

The day before, Roger Daltrey had been asking all the questions. Like me.

If you ever decide to give an interview of their rehearsals, you'll either find them at the first studio room you get to, on the left, or up at the old house, as it's called, just a little further up the drive.

It's here at the old house that the Who business is settled and drawn up, and it's also here that an old lady who used to inhabit the house, before committing suicide, haunted the ancient staircases and rooms.

When she does haunt, she sees just exactly where all that massive Who revenue goes. Like into the latest business that Woody, their bald headed stage man runs. Or the road company, MID, which is now busines us into itself, hiring out labour and lights when the Who aren't touring.

In this old house, companies merge into companies, work is begun on renovation, lots of people dash about looking for the house, Altham explains the background to the whole complex operation.

But I'm no good with makeup, so I get impressed as hell at the right (grues and crunch across the gravel towards the sound of a guitar playing a loud blues riff.

As we pass a Portahabbin and head into the building, the noise builds and builds until we open the door to the studio, and it blazes all over us.

In front of us, Pete Townshend, in an elegant purple overcoat (which has to be cut down to fit the cold he'll keep on for the rest of the day), is attacking his guitar with all his customary vigour.

Behind him Kenny Jones is adding a drum beat for a minute or so and then stops.

He gets off the drum stool, fiddles with a symbol, takes a swig of water, and then goes back to work.

Altham grabs my arm as we settle by the side of the room against flight cases with "The Who" stick-on labels over them.

"Cheers Everwhile's had a haircut in a massive way," he hisses. I glance over at a distinctly slimmer, healthier man: sure enough it's true. He's not even bothering to dye his hair now. So it rests on his head, grey and black, very short, matching a very short beard. In fact, he probably looks more like Pete Townshend than Pete Townshend does these days. This elegance is further enhanced by the unmistakable run tan that shows up on his face.

Hope he grows as peaceful before I die.

All around us are heaps of equipment, all with impressive lights flashing on and off. Over at the far side of the room it's a stack that damn well nearly reaches the roof; amp is piled upon amp is piled upon tape recorders is piled upon God knows what else. If equipment is your thing, then a thousand sleepless nights are staring you here.

Pete Townshend forces out another searing guitar break, and then notices us standing there.

A look of concern flickers across his eyes, and I nod to him, his weary face returning the compliment. Last time I saw him was when he and Paul Weller met for the first time over my tape recorder. I thought he looked tired then. By comparison his present appearance he looked positively bursting with good health that day.

Today, his eyes are drooping, his face wears a mending, permanent scowl. His movements look half-hearted. He comes over to talk. He's making nothing of an effort.

"He thought the article on me and Weller was really good," he says pleasantly, "Interesting idea.

"I think him, and ask him about the after-event impressions of the young heir to the throne.

"He thought he was very solid. He's obviously thought everything out and was shot up. Very impressed.

He inquired about the copyright arguments and the legal troubles that are happening over there. And that..."