HERE THE RIVER
Thames leaves the London grime behind, and winds inside a leafier landscape — just along from Eel Pie Island — that’s where you find the Meher Baba Centre. And you approach it along suburban streets so posh, you feel like a suspect burglar just for walking down them.

Inside the Centre sits the man who built it: 30s, looking fit and well, pale blue eyes, a manner that’s friendly, if often intense.

Pete Townshend is guitarist and songwriter of The Who, and his history needs no reiteration here. But whether you like The Who or not, or used to or still do or never did, Pete Townshend is always worth listening to.

Pete takes interviews seriously, and conscientiously, he approaches them with the same professional candour and rigorous thought that he’s put into his best songs (of which there are very, very many). But then, he’d argue that that’s no more serious than the music deserves. At a time like now, when the commonest stance in modern pop amounts to a coy giggle, or a hoped-for admission of futility, Townshend’s faith in the music’s potential, and its importance, is as valuable as it’s unshakable.

In a starting, but typically personal article which won him the NME in 1977, he offered this definition of rock:

“It screams for truth rather than help, if it commits itself with a courage it can’t be sure it really has, if it stands up and admits everything is wrong but doesn’t insist on blood, then it’s rock and roll.”

That definition can’t be all-embracing, obviously: few bands could live up to its almost impossibly high standards. But for year after year, Townshend has tried, and a damned sight harder than most. The least result of this is that he’s somehow made a complete dick of himself — the times when the pressure got too much perhaps. But through it all he’s carried an enormous measure of affection and respect.

I believe he still merits it, and I hope that this interview will suggest the same to you.

I’ve cut the dialogue slightly, trying to maintain the clarity. The pauses in the answers represent Pete’s attempt to get to grips with his other preoccupation of the session: a gigantic bacon sarny.

WHAT HAVE YOU done since the last Who album, ‘Face Dances’? (March ’81)

A lot of strange things, I started thinking practically immediately about a solo album, because I was really frustrated with The Who album. I didn’t seem to do anything or go anywhere, and I couldn’t quite work out why... So my first reaction was just to run like shit from The Who because they were confusing me. I never did. And I started producing material for my own record, and I went to New York and to Paris and a few other places to change my environment and I was going to form a band.

Of course the first thing I did was tour with the Who in Britain, which I enjoyed a lot. But towards the end of it, my mind started to turn into a dike, and I had almost decided to blow the London gigs. There was so much animosity around the band; a lot of us are still at odds about what we want to do. And I don’t think what I want to do as a musician or as a performer has really got anything to do with The Who at all.

Anyway, after that, I did cancel a European tour; I just said to everyone I wasn’t ready to do it, I didn’t really know what was going on in my head, but I could see trouble coming. And I started to work on my own record. At that particular time, as from early last year, I was getting used to living away from my family, which hadn’t happened to me. I’ve been married for 14 years — so that was the first year I’d ever happened, I was actually living apart from them. It was a mistake, which both my wife and I realise now, but it was something we were trying out. And I didn’t protect the kids from my lunacy which I was going through, and I didn’t help my old lady, and it didn’t help me.

But I did have a fantastic amount of free time. I saw probably more bands last year than I’ll ever see in my life. I think I saw about a hundred bands. And I did some travelling, on my own. And I got to grips with a book of short stories which I’d been planning for about a year, and that’s about two-thirties done.

And also, towards the end of last year, the band start torawl from the darkness, y’know — what are we gonna do next? A weakness of ‘Face Dances’, I thought, was that your writing seemed to get increasingly personal, to you, meanwhile you were still using Roger Daltrey as vehicle for your songs. The result was a lack of conviction.

Right. It was very short-sighted of me. It was really with the best of intentions, because I wanted the band to have material which was equally as varied as I would get on a solo album. ‘Empty Glass’ wasn’t particularly avant-garde, but it was interesting to me because I was able to do the kind of variety of material that The Who used to do, y’know? On our first two albums we did stuff that ranged from comedy songs through tender love ballads to just general insanity.

And it’s not that I want to get back to quieter, those extremes, but it is nice to be bound by limitations. Having enjoyed it as a solo performer I thought well, fuck it, why can’t the band do it? And the band can do it because they’re so wrapped up in their own traditions.

And I think the writing I’m doing now for the band has come out much more successfully, I sat around with everybody and I asked them: What do you want to fucking sing about? Tell me, and I’ll write the songs. It’s a piece of shit, I’ve been writing songs for 20 years. Do you wanna sing about race riots? Do you wanna sing about the nuclear bomb? Do you wanna sing about oyas bean diets? Tell me.

And everyone kinds went: ‘Unh-uh’. So I said, shall I tell you what I think we should be singing about? So I told them. And it actually turned into a debate, in a sense, as to what we really felt we should be doing: as to what our responsibilities were vis-a-vis our position — and this is probably more important over in America than it is here, cos in America they’re still asleep, know what I mean? But most of all, what was it that each one of us shared, our common ground?

Well, after establishing, quite quickly, that there was very little common ground, we did find that we all cared very deeply about the planet, the people on it, about the threat to our children from nuclear war, of the increasing instability of our own country’s politics. There’s the fact that we’ve actually infiltrated the establishment: In a way that younger bands haven’t been able to do. It’s taken us a long time, to do, but now we can see that even the establishment is imperfect, it’s not just us.
A lot of the experimental outfits around today wouldn’t be able to exist were it not for the fact that there is a hard central core of established, principled, traditional, experienced rock, in the centre, to buffer against . . . But if Ray Davies disappeared overnight, and if The Who disappeared, and the Stones or any of the other establishment bands — even back down the line, through to Madness, and Jam and Clash, who are establishment bands — it would render a lot of what was going on at the periphery kinda futile.

You’ve called your new solo LP Chinese Eyes. Why is that?
I was struck by a feeling last year that, particularly, had become so routine-tied, so used to externalising everything, that we don’t take responsibility for fucking anything. And that’s why the title’s about: the heroes and villains all look the same, they’re all over there, and I’ve just got away. I’ve tried to explain it in the story on the cover, but it’s very hard. I didn’t want to explain it and make it all too pat, cos I see it on a thousand different levels.

And you dedicate it to ’teenagers in love’.
Yeah, that was a last minute thing. Well, it’s also dedicated to myself, because she got me off junk. And then to my wife and myself, who are behaving like teenagers at the moment. I didn’t think I could dedicate this album to The Sex Pistols again. (Laughs)

One musician you’ve used is Revisiting Beauty Virginia’s Asley.
Well, I didn’t have to look very far for her, cos she’s my sister-in-law . . . I knew it was very fashionable last year — and I don’t mean this to demean all the genuine female talent — but there was a fashion for rowing a woman in, row in a couple of birds. Do I dare say this? The Human League did it, didn’t they? It looked like a row in to me — a very delightful one, which might develop into something substantial.

I think rock ’n’ roll is art! I wanna be patronised, for the shit I have to go through. I want me million dollars in front, mate! I’m not gonna commit to go out and go through all the shit — all the actual parading yourself in front of everybody, describing in explicit detail all your hang-ups, the inadequate length of your cock, and your predilection for custard enemas and God knows what else — and not get paid in advance for it.
Speaking of America, that must be an easier market for an establishment rock band like The Band.

Oh, yeah, a piece of piss! I mean, look at Asia the way it is right now. They can sell records with all that pretentious stuff, produce a load of records to the usual format, and then make good money.

When I met Ray Davis, I thought he was fantastic. And he was. But his band wasn’t just successful, but it’s kulele-scene was hard for him to fit back into. It was a whole new experience. And America chew out ‘Lola’ and ‘They’ll Love Each Other’.

Yeah, you have to approach it very academically to keep on top of it. You must know the songs. But you can’t have too much knowledge. It’s impossible to listen to everything there is, and live your life.

I mean, God forbid being a disc jockey these days. What must be going on through their heads. Fred to Redding, and people like Peter Powell, he’s in a state of shock and misery.

Ray may think he just needs a wimp anyway, he doesn’t know what he’s like.

But Ray doesn’t need to change, because there’s nothing he has done that isn’t 100 per cent correct. He’s just a really good guy, and I’d personally go on his door and try and tear it down.

A lot of the experimental outfits around today, they’re so concerned about what is not the fact that there is a hard core of well established, primitive tradition — that they’re not acting on a solid middle — even if the thing in the middle suffers, you get the feelings that it’s bad. It’s not the fault of the people involved, it’s their own fault.

Nowhere in the world, so far as I can see, has the experimentation been so broad. It has only happened in America. Strange to realise that: there’s a definite charmishness there where it’s always done in a way that’s, not so good, so that you can knock his front teeth out — which I’ve always admired that about people.

When it comes down to it, the feedback I need is from me. I don’t really need it from other people. I don’t need to know what people think, so people know they can get through if they wear. I want that thing of being externalised.

A new song, ‘Unphones’, sounds like a bit of ‘Quidnuncus’ revisited, but has the same general ambience as the male gang/youth cult so much more cleverly.

I really like that song, I wanted to put it out as soon as possible. It’s very much like the song ‘Wounded Knee’.

We’ve done a lot of the same thing, a lot of the same thing. It’s a common thing.

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The standard now is so much better because of the competition of money wrapped up in rock music culture. Costa Rica’s ‘Concerts’ is an example.

That’s why I like a song like ‘The Fun Boys’ Three or ‘Wow Wow’ just coming up, it’s got that established principle of producing and writing, and it’s got that established bands — it would be on the way on going on the apathy kind of fella. That’s more energetic.

All you’ve got to do is take the thing apart. In the end, the people that know what, you’re not going to make that sound, are going to make another sound.

You can’t just say that there’s nothing new in music, because there’s more that people are doing than ever before.

The rock is a lot more accessible to people now, it’s a lot more convenient, quicker to, more sophisticated equipment.

If you’ve got a certain amount of material to display, it’s a lot easier to write something down. They wanna do what they want to experience. They wanna do what they wanna do.

It’s one of the reasons why you’re seeing a lot of people who are so into it, and you’re seeing a lot of people who are so into it, and you’re seeing a lot of people who are so into it, and you’re seeing a lot of people who are so into it.

But you don’t need to know that on your own, it just seems that you’re going to welcome somebody like ‘Hair’ and some of the things, you think you’re welcome.

But you know that there’s such a difference in what you’re working on, and you just get that, you just get that. I mean, you have to understand that, you have to understand that.

I don’t think that that lack of a ‘nonchalant’ is so important.

And you know that there’s a lot of different ideas. It’s a lot more of a problem for people who are working on, and you just get that, you just get that. I mean, you have to understand that, you have to understand that.

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