Stone Cold Sober with PETE TOWNSEND

The Rolling Stone Interview by KURT LODER
The Guitarist Faces Up to Alcoholism and the Final Days of the Who

By KURT LODER

Pete Townshend has met the enemy— and recognized the bleary eyes staring back at him across the chasm of the last two decades as his own. Townshend and his band, the Who, were the subject of a story in the first issue of ROLLING STONE, and over the last fifteen years, the magazine has published at least a half dozen substantial interviews with the guitarist (as well as such self-penned pieces as "The Punk Meets the Godmother," RS 232). This is Pete's third full-fledged ROLLING STONE interview; in the two years since his last one, he has suffered something very much like a middle-age breakdown. With the Who typically drifting in the wake of their 1983 album, "Face Dances," Townshend moved out on his family (wife Karen and daughters Emma, 13, and Minta, 11) and plunged into London's heady new nightlife. He made the scene with the New Romantic kids at a Club for Heroes. He saved all night at the venerable Venue. And he found himself gravitating— naturally?— toward the society types at the Embassy Club. The nights became a blur of boozing and cocaine and pills, until one sobering day he realized he had become an alcoholic and a drug addict. He nearly died.

Townshend says he survived his two-year binge with some help from his family and friends, and that he has now started a new life. The Who may not be a major part of it; the group will probably continue to record, but Townshend will increasingly occupy himself with outside projects (such as "Ball and Chain," the track he worked on for Elton John's new "Jump Up" album, and the duet version of "That's Why the Lady Is a Tramp" he recently produced for New Romantic artist Steve Strange and a frog-voiced French female singer named Ronny). He hopes to complete a book of short stories, and he'll continue turning out solo albums. His third, All the Best Cowboys Have Chinese Eyes, is his most expensively intimate—and personally revealing—to date and features some of his strongest, most assuring singing. Its visceral power would seem to confirm Townshend's contention that he's over whatever private horrors precipitated his extended bowl of dissolution. But traces of pain and even confusion are apparent in the album's lyrics, and in the interview that follows.

It was conducted a few weeks before Townshend's thirty-seventh birthday and four days before he and the other members of the Who— Roger Daltrey, John Entwistle, Kenney Jones and perhaps a second guitarist, Andy Fairweather Low—were to begin work on the band's next album, due out later this year. We met in a softly carpeted anti-deco suite in the St. James's Club, a discreet sanctuary tucked into the cul-de-sac of Park Place, a few minutes' stroll from St. James's Palace, but very far indeed from the rock & roll streets of Townshend's youth. Pete sat on a pale blue velvet sofa looking very English-centric in boots-and-hose bow tie, brown-and-beige saddle shoes and baggy checked trousers with a long, looping key chain. An Oriental water brought a lunchbox trolley topped with a single, perfect pale pink rose. Townshend ate a small, grilled beefsteak. Wine was poured, but Pete drank milk.

The title of your new solo album, All the Best Cowboys Have Chinese Eyes—what's that mean?

Basically, it's about the fact that you can't hide what you're really like. I just had this image of the average American hero— somebody like a Clint Eastwood or a John Wayne, somebody with eyes like slits, who was basically capable of anything—you know, any kind of murderous act or whatever to get what was required—to get, let's say, his people to safety. And yet to those people he's saving, he's a great hero, a knight in shining armor— forget the fact that he cut off fifty people's heads to get them home safely. Then I thought about the Russians and the Chinese and the Arab communities and the South Americans; you've got these different ethnic groups, and each has this central image of every other political or national faction as being, in some way, the evil ones. And I've taken this a little bit further— because I spent so much of my time in society, high society, last year— to comment on standards of power and drug use and decadence, and how there's a strange parallel, in a way, between the misuse of power and responsibility by inept politicians and the misuse of power and responsibility by people who are heroes. If you're really a good person, you can't hide it by acting bad; and if you're a bad person, you can't hide it by acting good. Also, more to the point, really—that there's no outward, identifiable evil, you know? People spend most of their time looking for evil and identifying evil outside themselves. But the potential for evil is inside you.

I think the album is fairly cathartic in some ways. The writing ranged over the last two years, which have been very, very peculiar for me, 'cause I've been through a lot of really weird things. I went through the normal, continuing heartsearchin' over the Who, and I lived away from my family for quite a long time as well; we have a house in the country, and I was living there, mainly. I made a lot of deliberate pleasure trips to New York and L.A. I spent some time in Paris, a lot of time in the country working on a book of short stories and other times just knockin' about with some of the London club-scene people.

I enjoy a lot of that life, in a way. But all the time, behind the scenes, I was writing songs and recording in fairly long spurts. Then, late last year, I had to abandon recording the solo album because I couldn't work. I was quite capable of spending all night doing nothing, but as soon as I actually tried to apply myself to something, I seemed to get physically exhausted. And very much unlike me, I had sort of drifted into the drug scene, because it's so much part and parcel of the club life, you know—taking cocaine to keep going all day, things like that.

That really bugs you.

Yeah, and I hadn't realized quite how much. Because what happened was that I decided that it was a drinking problem, that I was an alcoholic. And I went to several doctors who confirmed that. So I stopped drinking, and I spent five days in a clinic, initially. A lot of hypnotherapy, individual therapy with various people. But I carried on with the drug thing a little bit. And then I realized that both things were really affecting me, that in order to assist me gettin' off alcohol, I had used a lot of tranquilizers. One in particular: a drug called Ativan, which is of the Librium-Valium variety. And I became addicted to it. So in January, I went to Meg Patterson in California; she helped Eric Clapton get off heroin. And she said that Ativan is more addictive than heroin.

Anyway, once I stopped taking everything—not just drinking, but doing anything at all—and started to be careful about my diet and got into a routine of regular exercise, the transformation was instant. Now I feel superhuman. Also, I had managed, with a lot of assistance from my wife, to reestablish myself in the family, and that's great for me. I mean, it's something I desperately missed.

Had drugs and drinking been the central causes of your family problems?

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHALLEY DAVIES-CAROL STARR
I'm never gonna drink again. I didn't want to be a rock casualty, just another headline.

The Stones have got fuck-all else except rock & roll. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. But that's all they've got. And we've got a lot more. Nothing as important as what we've achieved, but we've got a lot more. Enough to allow us, I think, to even consider a last dance, as it were. As far as our recording career, I don't know how many more records we'll do together or whether I'll continue to work with Roger the rest of my life. I don't really know.

What's the difference between the two groups that would allow that to be so?
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Will the Who still tour to support the next album?
Yeah, I don't see any reason why we shouldn't do a certain amount of work. But after that, I really think we've had enough. At least for now, we seem to have to know that we're making one last big effort. We have to feel that there is an end to it; otherwise, I don't think we could really go in with the right mood.

Would you personally approach touring with a new attitude this time, trying not to get wiped-out on the road?
Yeah, I would have to, because I'm never gonna drink again. In a way, I'm quite looking forward to it as a test. I'm happy to have sorted out my family problems once and for all. I always felt and hoped that it was possible. I didn't want to be a rock casualty in any sense, because I've always felt that one more rock casualty is just another headline for a couple of weeks, and then everybody gets real - not only bored, but everybody feels betrayed. Because although rock casualties make good copy in the NME Book of the Dead, they don't make good copy in the lives of rock fans, who have a slightly higher emotional involvement in the musical form than its just being, you know, like a circus, full of Berlinesque, decadent assholes who don't know how to spend their money, et cetera.

Your wife must be a remarkable woman, bearing up under all this public trauma.
Well, she doesn't like me to talk too much about us, but we met at art school in 1963, started going out together in 1965, when the group was established, got married in 1968, had our first child in 1969 - and really, apart from a few ups and downs, we never suffered any major problems until the last couple of years. And we both feel that one of the problems was that I did overdose when I took on a solo career. It was a great strain. And living in the same house and everything, we literally became estranged - we were like strangers. And it was only when I actually became so ill that I couldn't work that we had to sit down and talk. And then we stopped being strangers and we became friends and love again, and life is back to the way it was. Our marriage was made in heaven, there's no question about it. But you've got to work at marriage, and it's a different kind of work from what you do normally, and it's got a different end product. I'm sure this stuff is familiar as hell to everybody else, but it's all new to me.

You spent some time at Steve Strange's Club for Heroes, which was a mecca for London's New Romantics. What did you make of that scene?
I loved it. The only thing was, I barely died there one night. The first night I went, I was with a couple of friends, and I ended up in the blue - my heart practically stopped. I thought at the time that I'd probably gotten so drunk I didn't know what I was taking, and that I took some terrible drug. But I think I actually drank so much bravery I gave myself alcohol poisoning. I just went black. And that was my hero's entrance to a Club for Heroes; a seven-foot bouncer carried me out like a sack of potatoes.

But I did get to know Steve Strange quite well as a result of that, 'cause I went back later to apologize. And he turned out to be an absolute sweetheart. Very, very egalitarian, in a real sense. Superficially, totally preoccupied with image and everything, but underneath, not like that at all. And just stupidly vain like - for Christ's sake - every woman on the planet, every Western woman, is stupidly vain. We let them get away with it, you know: "Listen, the bomb's gonna drop in five minutes, but I can't go into the fallout shelter until I've done my makeup." That's okay from a woman, but for some reason, if Steve Strange says it, he's criticized.

I think people sometimes see you as one of the last of the greats, with Keith Moon gone, and Kit Lambert, your former manager, having died last year, have you felt this image bearing down on you - a sort of compulsion to go out sailing all the time?
No. I actually feel torn in a number of directions. The thing I feel most conscious of is the responsibility to stay alive. Take Mick Jagger, for example. Mick is just being great at the moment. I think it's incredible to see him fascin' up to who he is: workin', stayin' fit, living the kind of life he wants to live, and still being involved in rock & roll. And never compromis- ing on one single issue. And stayin' alive.
I don't see the Who going on for very much longer.... The tension is just too much.'

look a bit wider afield for subject matter. There's always plenty to get miserable about temporally.

So just because you’re happy, it doesn't mean you become John Denver.

No, I mean, if you’re unlucky enough to be born John Denver, there’s not much you can do, really. But there are moments when I’ve listened to John Denver and he has actually gotten across to me the joy he feels from standing in the Colorado mountains. It’s just that he does it in every song, and I get a bit bored with hearing about the mountains and the spring flowers and the trees and everything. I think they’re going to look just as black as New York City when the bomb drops.

I gather you actually like New York quite a bit.

I love it. I've got a lot of friends there, like David Bowie. But there’s something weird about it. I mean, I’ll go to New York and ring Mick up, and I’ll go and see David Bowie. But they’re both over here now, and I wouldn’t even dream of rings for him. It’s peculiar, it’s a different kind of life for me. I like New York, but I don’t see a hell of a lot happening. You know the AM/PM club is just full of the same old musicians who’ve come from the same old gig, doing the same old thing.
I don’t know what Eric really wants out of life anymore. I know that some of the things Eric finds very important, I don’t give a damn about. You know, he was very hurt when he stopped being voted number-one guitar player in various guitar magazines. And I thought, “Well, how shallow.” But that was important to him. I think he thinks of himself far more as a musician than as a “star.” He’s self-conscious of his image, I think, and to a degree, his responsibility. But he’s much more complex than appears on the outside.

Clapton duets with Jeff Beck on the ‘Secret Policeman’s Other Ball’ album, and although neither of them seems to be trying too hard, Beck seems to walk all over Clapton. I think Eric’s admirers wish he would step out and play a lot more.

Yeah, I do think Eric’s made some fundamental mistakes that he can’t reverse. You can’t change the past, unfortunately. He was a heroin addict for two years. He lost two years of his life and career. And, unfortunately, a lot of the effects of heroin are irreversible, as you can see by reading William Burroughs. You know: Page one, crap. Page two, more crap. Page three, more crap. And the more the disciples gather round and read the crap, the more that crap comes out of the man.

I really do love Eric a lot, otherwise I wouldn’t have involved my life with him so much. And I don’t see him doing anything wrong at all. I really enjoy what he does. I don’t think it’s necessarily the maximum of his potential, but then I don’t see why he should work at the maximum of his potential, because that’s not what he’s pursuing. He’s pursuing a kind of music that has more to do with finding a groove or expressing an emotion. Jeff, I think, is a much more troubled individual, much more torn, because he’s capable of expressing anything, practically. Without doubt, the finest expressive rock player we’ve got—and yet, he seems to have nothing to express [laughs].

Robert Fripp once told me he admired Jimi Hendrix because Hendrix had it all inside and his struggle was to get it out, whereas Fripp has all the technique to get it out but has a problem finding it inside.

What a wonderful thing to say, because it would hurt me to say it about somebody as nice as Robert Fripp, but, I mean, it’s true. And I don’t think I’ve ever really gotten to the bottom of what happens when I play the guitar.

More and more bands, particularly English ones, are dispensing with guitars in favor of synthesizers.

Yes, I think the guitar will be gone within ten years, myself. Microchips.

I’ve been listening to ‘Tug of War,’ Paul McCartney’s new album. It may be the best thing he’s done in a while—it sounds real nice. But it seems to have virtually nothing to do with rock & roll.

Do you think he ever really had anything to do with rock & roll? Well…

No, he never did. You know, I could sit down and have a conversation with Paul about rock & roll, and we’d be talking about two different things. He’s got a couple of years on me, but it could be ten years, we’re so different. If he talks about rock & roll, I think he is talking about Little Richard. Whereas I don’t think Little Richard mattered, you know?

But one of the reasons I’m excited about Paul’s latest project is because it’s him and George Martin working together again; because he’s making a conscious effort to really get into serious record-making, rather than pissin’ about in home studios—which I, for one, think he’s terrible at. When “Ebony and Ivory” came out, everybody was saying, “Christ, have you heard it? It’s terrible.” Well, I heard it, and I thought it was fuckin’ amazing! I thought, “That’s it, that’s McCarty!” He’s actually taken black and white, put a bit of time around it, managed by hook or by crook to get Stevie Wonder to sing it, sit on black and white piano keys on a video…. It’s wonderful! It’s gauche! It’s Paul McCartney!

I’ve always said that I’ve never been a big fan of the Beatles: to me, rock was the Stones, and before that Chuck Berry, and before that, maybe a few people who lived in fields in Louisiana. But I can’t really include the Beatles in that. The Beatles were over with Herman’s Hermits. That’s not rock & roll. I was always very confused about the American attitude of thinking that the Beatles were rock & roll. Because they were such a big pop phenomenon. I’ve always enjoyed some of their stuff as light music, with occasional masterpieces thrown in. But with a lot of their things, you can’t dig very deep. Either you come up against Len-
Townshend

non’s deliberately evading what it is that he’s trying to say, so it’s in- scrutible, or Paul McCartney’s self-imposed shallowness, because he sees music as being...I mean, he’s a great believer in pop music, I think. But I wonder whether McCartney, perhaps, rests a little bit on the laurels of the Beatles.

Even an ostensibly glittery group like Abba seems to me much more tied to rock & roll. Absolutely. I remember hearing "S.O.S." on the radio in the States and realizing that it was Abba. But it was too late, because I was already transported by it. I just thought it was such a great sound, you know — great bass drum and the whole thing. They make great records. Also, what’s quite interesting is that Abba was one of the first big, international bands to actually deal with sort of middle-aged problems in their songwriting. And it was quite obviously what was going on among them — that song, "Knowing Me, Knowing You." Are you familiar with any of the Oi bands; the punk rock skinhead groups? Some of them have apparently been co-opted by the neo-fascist National Front, and Oi fans played a part in last summer’s youth riots in Brixton. Possibly, but who would you call an Oi band?

Cocksparrer, Infa-Riot, any of those bands on "Strength Through Oi!"

Yeah, see, I probably just haven’t heard any of that. I mean, if somebody gave me an Oi record to play, I probably just wouldn’t play it. Because I object a little bit to... I know that there are a lot of little kids with their hair shaved off who wouldn’t know who Hitler was if you put him to bed with them.

Yeah, that’s what’s so insidious about it: the message, you viciously, but the message — not always, but sometimes — is horrifying.

This is the thing. There’s a lot of people who are unfortunately putting into practice what Jerry Rubin and John Sinclair and Abbie Hoffman were talking about back in the late Sixties. Which was: "We’re gonna use music for the revolution." And they believed that they were right, and that rock music should be used for what they thought needed to be done. But rock can be used for anything. It’s a very, very powerful and potent force, and it can also be used for fairly distasteful purposes. I remember being horrified seeing Alice Cooper beheading live chickens on stage. And it didn’t really redeem him that I had smashed guitars, you know? Somewhere, there was a line. I don’t know whether it was just because it was live, or because it was real blood. But the fact that he later went on to make some great records didn’t redeem him, either. He’s sick, tragic, pathetic — and will always be that way. I’ll say hello to him in the street, but I’ll never tip my hat to him.

The pathetic thing about Oi music is that it’s supposedly to be helping their cause, then I’m afraid it isn’t working, folks. Because there you go, I won’t even play their records. If I see an interview in the paper, I flip past it. So they’re not gonna get to me with their bullshit, because I just don’t even read it.

because I think Marc Bolan had a very suspicious history. A lot of the early mods — which Marc claimed he was — used to stand outside the Scene, used to be homosexual prostitutes to raise money to buy leapers [amphetamine]. And if Marc was there at the time he said he was, then it’s unfortunately inevitable that he was one of those prostitutes.

I thought John’s Children were a bit shallow. But Simon Napier-Bell is probably one of the few people who really did understand what it was going through, and the fact that Kit, as a homosexual in a very macho area of rock & roll, couldn’t really display his homosexuality, couldn’t find that very, very important person, that opposite, to fall in love with. Which, more recently, Elton John has publicly professed thinking it’s never too late — and never too soon — to start something like that. I’m not just talking about the need for a global, intuitive reaction against nuclear weapons, or the need for a kind of global stance on ecology. They’re important issues. But it’s something else, in a sense. I feel something else happening. I feel like there’s an opportunity out there at the moment that mustn’t be missed. I don’t know quite what it is, it’s just something I feel in me bones.

What about the European antinuclear movement, which argues that the presence of American missiles here could turn Europe into a battleground between two remote superpowers — that the battle itself might have little to do with Europe. Why not just forbid America to put any more missiles in Europe?

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