Pete Townshend says I look familiar. Well, think I, we did meet face to face once before—kind of. It was a rainy April night in London last year at the Venue, one of that city’s more chic rock showcases. I spotted Townshend moments after I entered, standing with his arms looped behind the high railing, his considerable frame sagging forward as if in mock crucifixion. Ah, yes. Good ol’ St. Pete, the Patron
A danger of middle age in rock is that it's too simple to take the easy way out. You have to be very angry to stay honest.

Saint of Rock 'N' Roll, dying for its sins. With his million mile stare and sorrowful countenance he looked like pure hell that night. When a mutual friend offered to introduce me, I declined. I mean, what do you say to somebody in that state, what gesture is appropriate? A sponge dipped in vinegar?

Pete Townshend didn't fulfill his wish to die before he got old. He did, however, come close over the last year or two. Damn close. In fact, Pete Townshend almost pulled a Moonie on us, indulging in an alcoholic binge of epic proportions, deposing wife and family, finally winding up addicted to the tranquilizer Ativan. But in the end Townshend rallied his considerable inner resources, and with the help of de-tox expert Meg Patterson, he kicked his nasty habits and reconciled with his wife, his band, and seemingly, with himself.

Sitting before me over a year later in the sunlit offices of his Twickenham studio, Pete Townshend is still a somewhat uncomfortable and complicated man, but a man who has clearly emerged from his dark night of the soul with a new lease on life and a renewed commitment to his art, family, band, wife, and more recently, political activism. But the re-born Pete Townshend still thrives on contradictions: he is the original Brit Rebel—doesn't believe in revolution, the angry young artist excoriating the establishment—then hangs out with aristocracy and claims the only way to change things is by joining the infrastructure. He is the loyal band member for whom "The Who Came First"—yet who admits his solo albums are his best work...and has recommitted himself completely to his band...but plans to dismantle it by this time next year. Confusion? Not exactly. It's just that Pete Townshend is one of those cursed/blessed souls condemned to always recognize the merits of the other guy's point of view, and who can see equal truth and urgency in seemingly irreconcilable opposites. That kind of insight would paralyze most humans, but Townshend seems to draw strength, as well as confusion, from the ensuing dynamic tension. His Taurian bullheadedness and fiery temper induce him to gleefully play chicken with conceptual vehicles—with himself at the wheel of both machines. Little wonder his favorite group is called the Clash.

Townshend's professed passion of the moment is for politics—specifically, his voice is raised in anger and bitterness as he speaks of his responsibility as a public figure to speak out against the nuclear arms race. As much as one agrees with him and his stance, there is something oddly disconcerting about the vehemence and breast-beating that frame his declamation. Is all this sturm und drang really necessary? Or are the heated affirmations and denunciations to some extent motivated by something else? Guilt over his extended lost weekend, perhaps? A need to re-establish his political credentials? It's not that one doubts Townshend's sincerity when he speaks of politics. It's the sense that he feels that his political stance is what he will or should be judged on, rather than his art, that disturbs me. Because Peter Townshend is an artist of extraordinary courage, a courage not born of rhetoric, but of the willingness to play out the great moral, social, and even political questions of our time in the crucible of his own soul; to make art out of his passions, doubts, contradictions and epiphanies. (And here we're not talking of
art as a purely subjective melange of impressions, but of an act, that, in the words of mythologist Joseph Campbell, can “bring the ineffable into time and space.”) In all rock ‘n’ roll, only Bruce Springsteen can match his capacity for reaching the universal through plumbing the depths of the personal. Townsend is the first to admit that the Who have been a relatively ineffective medium over the last few years. Instead, it’s been through his solo work on Empty Glass and Ali The Best Cowboys Have Chinese Eyes that he’s found his voice recently. The former, a near perfect blend of power, passion and grace, utilizes references to the alchemical transformation of water and wine to depict an inner ascension, a glimpse of the goal; while the latter, with its tangled imagery of mud, streams and rivers documents the painful but necessary struggle to separate the fine from the coarse—and forms a therapeutic chronicle of Townsend’s recent dark night. 

It’s interesting to note the change in P.T.’s voice and appearance as he speaks of these albums. He is visibly more relaxed, more secure, his voice resonant with confidence—as if he’s speaking from a different part of himself. Is this the real Peter Townsend?

Perhaps a clue can be found in the lyrics of Empty Glass’s “I Am...An Animal,” easily Townsend’s most dramatic personal statement to date. Amid the typically Townshendian turmoil and clamor, a voice emerges in the repeating chorus, a voice that speaks with the calm authority and grace of his higher creative nature. The voice points the way to a place in Townshend beyond the dualities of anger and self-doubt, a place where the paradoxes are resolved. It’s the source of his artistic inspiration and integrity, that which transforms, for example, “I Can See For Miles” from merely a song about a jealous rage into an anthem of hope and possibility.

“I was always here in the silence
But I was never under your eye
Gather up your love in some wisdom
And you will see me.”

**MUSICIAN:** It seems as if rock values are centered around youth, vitality, innocence... What kind of life do you have to walk to grow old in rock and still be creative and contemporary, as you’ve managed to be?

**TOWNSEND:** I think as a society, we’re mistrustful of the establishment; we don’t want anything to do with it. It’s rendered us impotent. We have nothing to do with control of the world and our desires are completely ignored. But people who are interested in changing the world don’t understand that it’s not possible overnight. They don’t understand how difficult it is and they reject anybody who appears to be part of the establishment. 

But it’s only by becoming part of the establishment that you can actually do anything. That’s why you find a lot of older musicians moving into the establishment infrastructure. From my point of view, I like to be like a reed. You get blown backwards and forwards by the ebbs and flows of what is happening in the world. But you don’t break—and I have never broken and I will never break. I will be just as angry and embittered and frustrated and desperate to do something about this planet as I ever was, but the methods I use, outwardly, are gonna look like they change.

There’s a certain number of things I can’t just give away, because I’ve become like a politician. The only way that I can actually prove that the things I said as a young man were not just blabbermouthing and hypocrisy, is to do what I set out to do. And that’s what I’m in the process of doing. This is not to say that the music becomes secondary; far from it. Rock ‘n’ roll remains the central, maintaining lifeline for me. It’s still the thing which I turn to, which raises me up when I feel down.

But behind that, I’m trying to deal with my life and trying to face up to my responsibilities as a human being. That’s boring to seventeen- and eighteen-year-old kids. They don’t want to know how miserable their lives are going to be, how much hard work they’re gonna have to do when they’re thirty or forty years old. They just want to believe that they can stand onstage with a guitar and change the world. Great. But it’s not possible.
overnight. You just don’t say you shouldn’t try.

MUSICIAN: Your solo albums jump right into the middle of all those contradictions. Empty Glass seemed to be about hope, and the new album, All The Best Cowboys Have Chinese Eyes, seems to be about struggle. Do you think that’s true?

TOWNSEND: Yeah, but it’s also about the determination to survive.

MUSICIAN: Well, that’s what I meant by struggle.

TOWNSEND: Yeah, when I started Empty Glass, I mean, that’s exactly what I was doing—I was hoping. I was hoping that I was going to pursue two careers at once, not realizing that they’re irrevocably knotted together. I hadn’t quite realized how much what I did as an individual would affect the Who, and vice versa. The new album was a big difference, in the approach to it and with the ruthlessness with which I had to deal with the Who with everything around me. In order to get it made, it was a real commitment and a recognition of that essence of commitment, a commitment to a set of principles which I’ve debated over the last ten years: the importance of a family, the importance of my role with my peers and the band, the importance of my freedom of self-expression, and lastly but not at all least, the importance of becoming actively immersed again, for only the second time in my life (and the last time was when I was seventeen) in politics. I really do feel that I can’t sit and watch any longer. I don’t want to turn into Jane Fonda, but there’s a kind of selfishness in people who sit back and watch when they do have a unique position to get respect and attention. I just think it’s too good an opportunity to say something I feel is in everybody’s bones.

MUSICIAN: Listening to Empty Glass—especially in comparison to the last few Who albums—I thought to myself that if this man can produce a work of this magnitude, he doesn’t really need the Who in any way I can see. And yet he may want to continue the band for other reasons.

TOWNSEND: Yeah, well, I... It’s difficult for me to agree or disagree, because if I disagree with the fact that that album is the best work I’ve done in a long time, I would be fooling you. But the Who provide me with a platform and a set of restrictions, constraints and limitations that are important. The things I’ve done on my own have been fun and interesting, but incredibly un-effective. And so I don’t get that very real, celebratory affirmative feedback you get when you go onstage with a band. As part of the Whol I can enjoy the experience, and as a writer I can also stand back and see what lines in the song turn people on or make them throw their hands in the air with joy. See it! Not have to wait for a letter to come through the mail and wade through sixteen pages of adolescent rambling to find out whether somebody actually understands what I write.

The album that the Who are working on now is probably the most self-conscious and probably the most dangerous record we’ve ever set out on, and I think one of the reasons it’s like that is because of the effectiveness and the purity of the communication contained in the solo albums. Perhaps the new one will open up a new door. It’s really just illustrating what’s possible. I can’t always convince the band that they’re capable of some of the things I believe they’re capable of—and they often can’t convince me that I am capable of some of the things that they believe I am capable of.

Working in a band is a strange kind of democracy, a democracy of total negativity. Whether it’s actually been what has enabled the Who to sustain, I don’t know, but our average meeting goes something like this: I’ll say, “Right, I think for the next tour what we should do is small stadiums; what do you think?” And the other three guys in the band all go “NO!” (laughs) So I say, “Well, my other idea is that we should all go onstage wearing dark suits and bow ties.” “NO!” say the other three. So in frustration you say, “Okay, what are your bloody ideas then?” So somebody says, “Well, I’ve been sitting at home ruminating, and what I’ve decided we should do is all go onstage wearing floppy crepe socks.” (laughs) “NO!” go the rest of the band. So the only way I can get anything done is if I say, “LISTEN YOU BASTARDS, THIS IS THE WAY IT’S GOING TO BE DONE—THANK YOU AND GOODNIGHT!”—and then walk out of the room.

Now, I do that all the time, and Roger (Daltrey) does it all the time: and John (Entwistle), in his quiet way, gets his way as well. It means that, in a sense, you’re getting three solo careers contained within a framework. There’s no watering down of individual responses. On the other hand, mutual respect for one another’s ideas can mean that you’ll accept compromise when you shouldn’t. And I think within the Who, it’s very easy to be compromised, because we do love each other so much. You know, you don’t go around hitting people in the head to get what you want anymore.

MUSICIAN: Isn’t there something useful in the kind of tensions you’re talking about, tensions within a band?

TOWNSEND: I think it’s an absolutely vital thing—and it’s something that I’m going to have to face up to at the moment because the Who is not going to go on forever. For the first time in our career, we’re actually talking about rounding off our current state of live appearances, the way that we work at the moment, and to force ourselves into a position where we have to rethink things. It’s too easy for the people around us, too easy for the record company, the manager. It’s too easy for the Bill Graham’s of this world. Now Bill Graham is a great, great friend of mine and a fundamental in the Who’s success story. I’m not criticizing him as a man, but if he thinks he did anything creative on the Stones tour, he’s completely wrong! It was totally exploited. It’s like saying the Stones are one of the only bands who can go out and earn $60 million on the road—let’s do it! The Who have that problem, too. You get a phone call from a guy in Toronto and he says, “Listen, you know the Who sold a million seats in Toronto last time, let’s go for two million! And we can do it, we can do it!” Who is this “we”? The “we” are the two million people who work all day and shell out ten bucks for the ticket! The Stones could fold tomorrow, and it would not change rock ‘n’ roll.

I think that rock ’n’ roll would help the Who greatly. The Who have stopped and regrouped several times in their career, at one point for two whole years. And those times were vitally important for the band. So what we’re talking about at the moment is a year of exploitation, but under our own control, of live performances of the album which we’re about to do. And then we’re gonna stop. What happens then is an open book.

MUSICIAN: A fellow critic said to me recently that he felt “Townsend is being direct in his solo work, but the recent work with the Who seemed condensing.” Do you feel when you’re addressing a mass market via the Who that you have to use bigger, broader images and simpler forms?

TOWNSEND: I think there’s an element of that, yeah, and there’s no way a critic is going to be able to relate to that. I mean, the New York critics voted Sandinista! the best album of last year, but it didn’t sell. It doesn’t matter what critics think. I’m sorry! What really matters is what critics are able to communicate to people who read newspapers and magazines, and as a rule it’s NOT VERY GOOD DAMN MUCH! The frustration a lot of critics feel, and which so often manifests as vindictiveness and bitterness—a frustration with bands they know have tremendous potential and whom they see going the wrong way: with the insipidness of manufactured music and production values, with the misuse of power in the record companies; with the obeis and fowes of the world economic crises affecting music, which it shouldn’t do; and everything else—is a frustration felt alike by the audience out on the street and by the musicians themselves. It’s not unique to critics.

The difference is that out there somewhere, is somebody with a baton, with nobody to hand it to. And that’s the position that the Who are in.

In Britain we live in this incredibly volatile, fascinating, explosive... It’s the closest thing to art college I’ve ever come across, the way the music business is in this country. Bands come and go overnight; no sooner do they become established than they break up and go off into splinter groups. There must be about twenty different outfits who I wait upon eagerly for their next productions: the Jam, The Clash, and from there on down through UB 40, Echo & the Bunny-

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men, Teardrop Explodes, Bow Wow Wow, Fun Boy Three... I even get into Pigbag. When are those records played in America, apart from the occasional Clash record played in New York? Instead, you get "Start Me Up" played every fifteen minutes. People out there aren't hearing everything, so who's going to be condescending first, the critic or the artist?

What I'm saying is that you have to condescend to an audience that hasn't been educated. I was gonna say that I think the Who are in a unique position in that we're capable of exactly the same kind of tense and desperate expression the Clash make, but with a far, far larger audience. I'm saying that we have a responsibility to the fans who've grown up with us, and don't want us to change too fast, because they're worried about literally losing their grasp on what's going on; the responsibility to not change suddenly in mid-stream, to evolve slowly.

MUSICIAN: Do you sometimes feel that there's a whole generation of kids growing up since the early 70s that have no idea what rock 'n' roll is all about?

MUSICIAN: ...What, all about?

TOWNSEND: Absolutely.

MUSICIAN: How did this come to pass?

TOWNSEND: I think the Who are probably as responsible as anyone else. Basically, it came about because of the opportunities to make large amounts of money and the Western obsession with achievement as measured by quantity rather than by... quality is not the right word, because the Foreigner albums are incredibly high quality; the musicianship is superb, the production is superb, the actual motives behind the musicians... if you sit down and talk to those guys, they're not assholes, they're good people. I suppose what's lacking is the... the....

MUSICIAN: ...depth?

TOWNSEND: The depth, that's it. And the commitment to the depth you put in. You know, if you put in too much, people become almost embarrassed! I don't know how it is over in the States, but over here if you try to get in a conversation about arms buildup or nuclear weapons, people turn away and order another pint of Guinness, and they want to talk about bloody...
Arsenal (English soccer team) They’re gonna be dead tomorrow if they don’t start thinking about it... but they’re embarrassed; “It’s annoying—oh, don’t talk about that! We’re impotent, we’re neuter.” Now that’s what’s happened to rock ‘n’ roll. People have actually started to say, “What’s the point of trying to make a really great record, when we know that just a well-constructed, well-produced piece of crap is gonna sell six million copies, and everybody’s gonna think we’re great.” And to be brutal for a second, I think one of the dangers of middle age in rock ‘n’ roll is that it’s very easy to take the easy way out. You have to be very angry, in a sense, to stay honest.

But I don’t think the Who have ever condescended, to the extent where we’ve said, “Ah well, we’ll just chuck something out.” I mean Face Dances, for example, which is a very ineffective album—I don’t think anybody that worked on it will argue with that. It didn’t work. But for us... we know what we put into it.

The positive part of the compromises that are part of the Who, the big positive to me, anyway, is that the wall that you have to smash through is that much bigger and thicker. Do you know the Dylan Thomas line—“Rage, rage against the dying of the light”? That’s really the epitome. Our manager is really well-read, and last year, when I was getting a bit frustrated and just generally down about the slowness with which the record was going together, he wrote to me and closed his letter with it: “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” That was quite interesting, because it’s really what you have to do. Just as years ago, when I used to smash guitars because I just couldn’t play them the way I wanted to... now I smash words. Because I can’t... I don’t actually use what I’m best at.

MUSICIAN: It’s like you’re punching through walls in each one of the songs on Chinese Eyes.

TOWNSHEND: Yeah, well, that’s... on the song “Communication,” for example, I deliberately take the word communication and break it up into bits. I mean I literally hurt the letters of the word at the listener. And then I show a literal example of how not to communicate, which is with flowery, meaningless prose. You know, “briollete tears drip from frozen masks, the back of the whale cracks through the ice floe,” blah blah blah—what else?

MUSICIAN: What you said about well-constructed crap reminds me of the Asia concept I saw the other night. It was so contrived...

TOWNSHEND: Well, this will maintain as long as we buckie to the needs and desires of the industry. They are musicians who have evolved, each one of them, in a particularly sterile area of the biz. None of them have come from rock ‘n’ roll bands. They’re not rock ‘n’ roll musicians. Uh, that might be a bit sweeping... I’m thinking of Carl Palmer... Steve Howe... they’re not a rock ‘n’ roll band. They’re musicians. They’re striving for something else. And I don’t think any of them would object to my saying that. I don’t know... maybe they would.

MUSICIAN: The distinction you draw between musicians and rock ‘n’ roll recalls the 60s. Was there a social energy then that is no longer as universal? Did rock lose its powers of communication and become just entertainment?

TOWNSHEND: I don’t think entertainment is... is that bad. I still think it’s one of the greatest services a person can perform for another man—to entertain him, to make him happy. Even if it’s only temporarily. Let’s face it, you turn to the greatest teachers to try to make you bloody happy for the rest of your life, and none of them can do it. Not even the greatest, not even Jesus Christ can make people happy for their whole lives. He doesn’t even claim to. Jesus was an entertainer in some respects. I think that it’s important to realize the dark side of life, that the suffering and the indecision are a fundamental, valuable part. Without them there’d be nothing to write about. “Entertainment” is, in a sense, a diminutive for a much larger phenomenon, it needs a much bigger word. And that word to me is “rock,” which embraces and encompasses entertainment but also does other things as well.

MUSICIAN: But rock once had the power to literally change your consciousness, and I don’t mean just change your mind and opinions. Where is music that is doing that now?

You can’t say, at seventeen, “I want to be a star” and then say, “Old it a minute. I want to be alone.”
TOWNSEND: I don’t think it’s doing it on the scale that it’s done it in the past, but rock has never done what people are still waiting for it to do! It’s not… no, I’m sorry, I don’t accept the position that it used to do something which it doesn’t do now. It started a job which it hasn’t finished. That’s the way I look at it.

MUSICIAN: But how do you go about finishing that job?

TOWNSEND: I’m more worried about Paul Weller, in the of a large mass of people is the easy part. Let’s face it—Hitler managed to rally the biggest European country, within about eighteen months. You know—he just—he just spouted. Talk is cheap. It’s easy to stand up and say, ‘We’re gonna do this! We’re gonna do that!’ Let’s get together! Let’s march!” And suddenly everybody is all massed together, as we were in the 60s, going “Yeah! Woodstock! Yeah! Let’s take on the world!” Right, what do we do now? Who are the leaders? And—of course, the thing about rock ’n’ roll is, that there are no beedin’ leaders. We haven’t got any—we’re an observation platform, in a sense.

MUSICIAN: But given the lack of so-called leaders, do you fear for a guy like Joe Strummer of the Clash?

TOWNSEND: I’m more worried about Paul Weber, in the Jam, than I am about Joe Strummer. I think Joe Strummer has got a lot of problems, I mean it’s obvious how they’ve affected him at the moment, when he should actually be strutting around London like a peacock on the back of what is the most superb rock album to come out in two years, the new album (Combat Rock). He’s actually in hiding somewhere—rumour is God-knows-what. I’ve got no worries about him. But I am worried about people like Paul Weller—who has fantastic drive and potential—accepting the establishment’s status quo as being too large a wall to crack. The way that he looks at America… it’s as if it’s not even worth trying to communicate, because they’re so caught up in their own garbage. That’s why I’m worried—because it’s shortsighted. And one of the things that you find out about America, if you go there, is that people passionately care about the quality of life and the things that are wrong with society, and are actually trying to change it from within the infrastructure that has been laid down, the American Constitution.

I get worried about people who, right now more than ever, believe they are impotent, that they are powerless, that the circumstances of hierarchical control, of apparent control of our planet, are irrevocably destined to fail. I think that is a mistake, because if the individual feels he can’t change anything, then what is the point of being alive?

MUSICIAN: A continuing theme in your music is that the individual has to make changes within, must struggle, fight in his or her own life, not just outside. So now you’re raising the banner, but how are people who are still unsure, people like yourself, going to change the world?

TOWNSEND: I understand your question, but how long do you sit there saying, “I’m immature, I’m not ready yet. I need to go through a bit more experience. I need to study a few more years with my guru, another fifty lifetimes, a million lifetimes.” Of course. You can be a RAT—that’s what my new album is about—you can be a rat and still change the world. That’s where you come down to the principles that you’re talking about, which is that the individual is the pillar, you know.

MUSICIAN: I’m agreeing with you, but if someone’s being hasn’t grown, what’s the point of getting that person on the barricades? That seemed to be the point of “We Won’t Get Fooled Again,” jumping prematurely, wasn’t it?

TOWNSEND: No, “We Won’t Get Fooled Again” was a refutation of the value of revolution. I don’t believe in revolution and war. Revolution is the ultimate betrayal… every revolution even the necessary revolutions, or the Russian or Chinese revolutions; they are betrayals because they equalize, without recognizing other people’s aspirations.

MUSICIAN: That’s kind of what I mean; if we jump in and immediately change everything without changing ourselves, we’ll wind up with the same thing in the end. If you build a house out of bricks that are ‘half-baked’, no matter what shape it is, they’re only half-baked bricks.

TOWNSEND: But who’s talking about heaven? I’m not trying to turn this planet into heaven, into a perfect world. We all know there’s only one way to that—and that’s through God, through Jesus Christ, through the one and only. For me, it’s through Meher Baba. That is the only way to heaven. I’m trying to get this planet to become the functional, you know… Battlestar Galactica that it’s capable of being. One of the fundamental mistakes I feel is being made is that America doesn’t realize that it embodies our planet’s ambitions to colonize space. Everyone’s pissed off to see millions and billions of dollars coming out of the space program to go back into making beedin’ cruise missiles.

Nuclear weapons are sterilizing the whole world into inactivity. People don’t talk about it. People are even bored with ecology now: “Oh, ecology, that’s old hat.” What’s old hat about it? You go to India and there’s people that can’t even keep their sixteen kids they’ve already got alive, having children at the rate of one a year.

All I’m talking about is attempting to use the communal consciousness that we all have, which we know has come about through music and through affirmation and celebration of the higher qualities in life, and deal with some of the darker sides, deal with frustrated, despair, and despair has also been embodied in rock ’n’ roll. In other words, to say, “We did it in rock, at least we all recognized one another, realized we all think and feel roughly the same way, but that we recognize we’ve got our same cross-section of assholes, matrosi, good people, gurus, bad people, lazy people, hard-working people as any other part of society has, but at least we share something.” What we’re looking for is the common denominator in
That's why I took a degree of exception to the idea that communicating with a lower common denominator of the rock audience was condescending. I'm probably just swinging back into the mainstream again and getting excited about an aspect of the potential of rock. I'm just gonna push it again, whether it'll do it or not, I don't know. I just feel at the moment—and you obviously have gotten the message by now—that whether or not it's gonna change your behavior, I do think it's good to be conscious—whether or not you can do anything about it doesn't matter. I don't think it's hypocritical to stand up and say things aren't right and then sit down again.

**MUSICIAN:** I'm still troubled by that contradiction between an individual and the society.

**TOWNSHEND:** I am too. I see a society, or a race which I feel lucky to be a part of, and lucky to be a little bit unique, and in my own arena of activity, obviously, especially unique, and I really enjoy that. But at the same time, I don't want to face up to the inevitable fact that life is as I see it, as I'd like it to be, then I am no better than anybody else (laughs). And that occasionally throws me into a bit of a turmoil, and that's where I'm at odds to a great extent. I don't quite know how to deal with it all the time. Sometimes I've got it in control, and then sometimes it gets out of control.

**MUSICIAN:** Given that uncertainty, how were you able to write such a masterpiece as "We Won't Get Fooled Again"? Did you know exactly what you wanted to say?

**TOWNSHEND:** No, it's grace, I'm afraid. It's almost like you have to almost not be there for it to work, so when it does work, it takes you by surprise. Like that song, for example, which was so powerful a statement and such an obvious affirmation of what so many people were feeling at the time about the pressure that was being put on them by political spearheads, the Chicago Seven or Eleven or Twelve, or whatever they were, trying to make us feel guilty because we weren't doing this or that. It sort of happens out of the sky, because when I was working on that song, I didn't actually realize that it was gonna be... a universally accepted warning signal as it turned out to be. And I think you have to be fairly unconscious, you have to be naive, to some extent.

I think Cincinnati needed to happen, as an example to all of us within rock 'n' roll that it's not perfect, that we've got lessons to learn. We shouldn't be complacent.
MUSICIAN: Can you think of any other songs you've written that came about that way, that turned out to be different and greater than your original idea?

TOWNSHEND: I think "I Can See For Miles," because it was written about jealousy and actually turned out to be about... the immense power of aspiration. In other words, you often see what it is you want to reach, and you know that you can't get at it, but you can see it and say, "I'm gonna try." And those words start to move you in a direction—as long as you say, "I can see what I want, but there's no way that I can get it."

MUSICIAN: Are there any more songs like that that come to mind?

TOWNSHEND: "Behind Blue Eyes." I wrote that for a film script, The Lifehouse; it was written about somebody else. It was written about a man who actually was a villain, and he seemed to be a villain; he's accused of being a liar and a cheat, when in fact his motives are absolutely pure.

So I tried to capture this character that I'd written and then realized it was me afterwards, and about a part of me that I hadn't considered: the inability to be taken literally because of the way people take you to be. You can never define, you can never control how people react to you, however much of a star you think you are. You can never hide what you really are.

MUSICIAN: Does that ever happen in the music itself, are there times when the music, as opposed to the words, can come together in a way that makes you feel the music is a perfect expression of what the song is about?

TOWNSHEND: No. I feel really inadequate on that level. I don't know. I'll stumble on things musically, but they're often borrowed or in some ways derivative.

MUSICIAN: When I interviewed Paul McCartney, he said, "We used to steal from everybody." He even said that he was inspired by reading an interview with you in which you said that the Who had just done "the loudest, raunchiest thing they ever done." He got so intimidated by that that he sat down and wrote "Helter Skelter."

TOWNSHEND: Well, as you probably know. I've dedicated my life to making Paul McCartney as uncomfortable as possible, creating as much tension in him as I possibly can... No, I really like him. And I like his family. I'm a good friend of his wife.
I'm probably the only person in the world who would much prefer to hear a Linda McCartney album than a Paul McCartney one... no... I think McCartney is a very valuable part of the industry because he is somebody that is in pursuit of balance on a very diplomatic, polite, or courteous, or whatever level—it's part of his pursuit of balance. But he works damn hard.

**MUSICIAN:** It seems as if John Lennon's death has done a little of what you want to do to Paul—it challenged him, the song "Here Today" on the new album for example. Did Lennon's death have some value that way, did the old network that used to connect us through rock, but which had become atrophied suddenly come alive again?

**TOWNSHEND:** Well, I must admit... I do think Lennon's death had some value, and I don't think that however poetic and languorously indulgent Yoko gets on the subject, that she can actually express it too deeply. Lennon had actually been through that period of review, he'd actually defied all the machinery of rock, and everything else, and defied all of us, in a sense, in just not wanting to keep churning out records, until we said to stop. He stopped, reviewed, built up a relationship with his children; probably he watched his son—his elder son, Julian—wondering about London's nightlife like a lost soul. You know, John could obviously look at him and say, "I'm not gonna let that happen again." And dealt with his new family in the way that he wanted to deal with it. Then when he was ready, when he thought the time was right, he came back out. Of course, you had the incredible dichotomy, a built-in anarchism of stardom, that you can't do things the way Greta Garbo did. You can't say, as a seventeen-year-old, "I wanna be a star, I want everybody to love me," and then say, "'Old ita minute—I want to be alone." You can't do that.

In a sense, Lennon's tragic death was most tragic of all because we felt it as deeply as a family member. And it wasn't Lennon of the Beatles we were mourning or that we felt bad about what had happened, because he'd already gone, he'd already left this place. It was that man that we were just starting to get to know. He had sat down and decided, "The next time I appear, they're gonna get to know the real me." And he was just poised to do that and was just starting to reveal things about himself in that album, and I'm sitting here thinking, you know, Lennon's next five or six records and interviews are gonna be fascinating. Because he was starting to talk, in a way that you knew you weren't, ever gonna get close to Dylan, however much you want to. He always wants to be this mystifying and enigmatic figure and wants to go down in history as James Joyce or Proust.

**MUSICIAN:** What in rock today gives you hope? Who is going to supply the same magic we lost in Lennon?

**TOWNSHEND:** It's interesting you say magic, because I felt a very indefinable magic at the first Bruce Springsteen show I ever saw, which was in Brighton. The sound wasn't particularly marvelous and the show wasn't particularly sensational, but there was that definite magic in the air. I went backstage and there was an amazing atmosphere of sterility, complete, total sterility. Bruce would always come to Who concerts, but I went to meet him for the first time on his ground. And it was like meeting one of the lighting men. And I realized then all of the disciplines that were erected—and a lot of them were imposed against insuperable odds by Springsteen: no drugs, no booze, only beer, no spirits, no girls backstage, none of that stuff. Security people under a very tight rein and things like that. All those things really focus a hell of a lot of the energy which is dissipated in normal circumstances backstage for a very exclusive elite. Bruce focuses that energy outward and up onto the stage. I think that's where rock 'n' roll needs a lot of discipline.

**MUSICIAN:** It may be hard to convince a young musician of that. We seem to want to learn by experience rather than by handed-down wisdom.

**TOWNSHEND:** Of course. If I say that to a young musician, he's gonna say right back, "Well, it's okay for you! You've had your good times, you've screwed all your groups, snorted all your coke, tried your free-basing and heroin, you've done your spiritual master, you've got your family, you've crashed your cars, and now you say, 'That's not the way to do it!' I want to go through it. I want to have the fun of doing all that, go through all the experience."

Listen, I've had more opportunities than you have for extremes in experience, and I can assure you that none of them are futile. They're all worth doing! They're all valuable, I'm not saying, "Stick to the chosen path, wait until I tell you." That's not the way of the West. I really believe in the value of demonstrated experience—as long as you react to it, you know.

The West, as it's structured, is just starting to understand the value of wisdom handed on. We're more interested in accelerating the experience to get the gist of it ourselves. I think ultimately, in desperation, we all turn into the same face. But I think rock is about that. It's not aspiring to be the new Sufi path with the new gurus, Bruce Springsteen or Peter Townshend, or whomever. It's aspiring to be what it has served so well as for such a long time, a reflective surface in which you melt down your own experiences, subjective, objective experiences, things that you've seen other people go through, lifestyles of one type of rock musician against another, from the groupies right on through to the other fanatics, and everybody that's been touched by it. It gives you a microscope, a barometer, a viewing screen through which you can see life. And I think that it always comes back to the fact that what has happened for centuries in the East is passing. Those ancient wisdoms and things, they're going, they're gone practically. This way the West operates is now really the norm I mean, you could even regard Russia as being a Western nation in that respect.

**MUSICIAN:** One experience I would imagine you would hesitate to tell worthwhile was the tragedy in Cincinnati. I was at Altamont and I was also at Monterey, and at Monterey there was a feeling of expansion and sharing, while at Altamont, literally as soon as you went in, there was a feeling that there was something wrong in the atmosphere, a selfishness. Was it everybody out for themselves. Could you feel that at Cincinnati?

**TOWNSHEND:** I think what's really ironic about Cincinnati was the fact that it was such a beautiful concert and such a beautiful crowd, such a wonderful atmosphere inside. And I think the shock that not only the band experienced, but that the audience shared, was finding out what tragedy had happened outside, which a lot of people didn't realize.

I think Cincinnati needed to happen. And I'm not saying this just to comfort the relatives of the people that were lost and try to give it a meaning where it hasn't. It did need to happen, in the same way that John Lennon's death has a purpose. It has started us thinking. And I think it could only have happened to the Who. I think only the Who could have survived it, and have survived the investigation and the self-examination that obviously went on afterwards.

And you know, in the past, I have said that there were elements of responsibility that we adopted. I think, that responsibility back into my face, and tried to turn the least possible device that merits me working for the rest of my life to pay for some relative's grief. That's the lousy part of it, to be quite honest. I think it's a really weird American attribute, the fact that human life is valued in money. Sick, really sick.

If you take those two incidents, Altamont and Cincinnati, and measure them up against Woodstock or Monterey. I'm afraid we would come up with the same answer both times. At Monterey, somebody stole the money, and we let them get away with it. At Woodstock, the fences were broken down and LSD was put in the water supply. It was put in the coffee. I saw a man fall off a telephone pole and break his back before my very eyes. That was the first big incident that I saw at Woodstock. And he's been in a wheelchair ever since. I followed that story, because he fell off a telephone pole holding a Meher Baba image.

And the Cincinnati tragedy is still an obvious example, although, as you suggested, the responsibility is spread. It's
still an obvious example. I think the thing about it is that we take a superficial stance on all of them. I don't think that anything truly investigative has really been done in rock 'n' roll. I think it's very interesting, for example, to look at Rolling Stone magazine—now I'm treading on dangerous ground, maybe, because Jann Wenner is a good friend of mine, and so are a lot of the writers. But I think they do incredible investigations of some political things. They'll go in and get the real smut, interview people who used to work for so and so and all that. Yet when it comes to rock 'n' roll, they stop short. It's like opinions and reactions are spouted off ad hoc, but very few facts are ever revealed. And I think it's those facts behind the rock business that are the most fascinating.

For example, in the Cincinnati hearings, what I found most fascinating about the line of questioning by the appointed attorney was that the guy was questioning me as though I was a rock star like the rock stars he had read about. Whether or not he was assuming that role, or whether he was intelligent enough to know that what you read in the papers ain't true, I don't really know.

But I thought that was quite remarkable. I thought, here we are, justice is being seen to be done. And the guy is treating me like I was a combination of Keith Moon, Ozzie Osborne, Ted Nugent, Mick Jagger and you know, every other sort of apparent degenerate in the music business. And I just found it kind of weird. And I thought, well, you know, what does this guy really want to know about me? Does he really want to know how I feel? Does he really want to know how I live my life? Does he want to know that I've got two little girls? Does he know what kind of schools they go to; that I run them to school every day, that I do half the cooking? Does he want to know how much I give to charity?

MUSICIAN: Yeah, but whose fault is all that? Whose fault is it that's why he's got that image? It's the fault of a lot of people you're talking about.

TOWNSEND: If you're talking about the individuals concerned that are guilty of hypocrisy, then I won't argue with that. But I do think that anybody that lumps people together, it's going to... I think what rock has attempted to realize is the shared experience of struggle and the determination to overcome the unimportance of the individual, the transitory quality of heroes, their disposability, and yet their absolute vitality. And in all these things, what I'm saying is that nobody looks deeper than the surface. That's a pretty good indication that if that really is what rock 'n' roll is about, then we've got a fairly good working model of society.

The problem is, in a sense, that you don't often see people in rock acknowledging that. People in rock see bad things happen, see people indulge themselves, see people being opportunists, see people doing bad things when they should be doing good things, or see people misusing power or position, see them being subject to the machinations of materialist monopolies and things like this. They lose sight of what is apparent on the outside, what should be apparent on the outside.

And that's something that I've never done. I've always seen rock from both the inside and from the outside. And I think that when you make any serious investigation of what rock 'n' roll is all about, or the significance of events like Cincinnati, you have to look at it from the inside and from the outside. In other words, you have to have a global response to rock 'n' roll, to be able to say it was important that those eleven kids died.

And somebody is going to say, "Why should eleven kids die for something as dumb and stupid and transitory as rock 'n' roll? So you can screw fourteen-year-olds? So you can snort coke when you fancy it? So you can go through with some machination?" Of course not. It's not for me, or for my freedom or my indulgence, or for my bank balance that eleven kids died, but as an example to all of us within the rock 'n' roll framework that it's not perfect, that we're not perfect, that we've got lessons to learn, that we shouldn't sit on our laurels. We shouldn't be complacent.

THE RAT, THE RIVER AND THE HOTLINE TO GOD

Today is Peter Townshend's thirty-seventh birthday. Peter is not keen on birthdays. (Then again, you wouldn't be either if you'd staked half your career on a line like "hope I die before I get old"). In any case, here we are celebrating over dinner at a posh but not ostentatious London restaurant. Peter looks positively natty in a smart blue blazer and slacks, his wife Karen a vision of warmth and elegance beside him. "God," mumbles a discomforted Townshend, "thirty-seven sounds so... old." "Come on," says I, "compared to somebody like Bill Wyman you're a spring chicken." On second thought, chicken is not the right word. No, *Time Out* had it right: with that prominent schnozz and sourful visage he's more like a turkey contemplating Thanksgiving. Meanwhile, the bush-league aristocrats and upper class types (twits?) around us take no notice of the cultural icon in their

INTERVIEW/PETE TOWNSHEND • PART 2/BY VIC GARBARINI
Ah, sanctuary. Not a Who fan in sight. A place to relax and avoid the madening crowd. In fact, we're talking Robert Goulet types here...maybe Donny and Marie when they really want to get down. No autograph hunters. But wait, here comes a svelte young thing, pen and pad in hand, seeking an audience. Peter listens to her whispered requests, nodding indulgently. Ignoring the pen and the paper he reaches under the table, emerging moments later with...his shoe.

His shoe?

He peers inside, and announces the size, width, manufacturer's name, and place of purchase. This is all duly noted by the s.y.t., who clucks her thanks and leaves. Townshend turns to his baffled guests, and with a goofy smile and shrugs offers this succinct explanation: "Fashion magazine."

Oh.

Being the rock establishment's premier elder statesman and spokesman offers both opportunities and pitfalls. "Let's face it," muses Townshend, "I'm in a unique position. I'm one of the few people in England who can have tea with Prince Charles in the afternoon, and then go out and talk to some street kids who've just picked up the guitar." Actually, Peter Townshend is so empathetic to both roles that he'd be perfect to play the twin lead in The Prince and the Pauper. Except for one minor problem: by the final scene he'd have confused the role so thoroughly that neither he nor the audience could distinguish rabble from royalty. Sometimes this evenhandedness, coupled with his twin demons of anger and self-doubt can be as much a curse as a blessing, but behind what can appear to be a baffling and contradictory exterior is a reservoir of strength and compassion, courage and honesty. Ironically, Townshend seems reluctant to completely acknowledge his real gift and powers either to himself or others. In part 2 of our interview he reveals himself to be a major artist and poet who's half convinced he should be a journalist; a ground-breaking innovator on guitar who's insecure about his lack of technique; a conduit of creative visions who is embarrassed to be a channel for the ineffable—and who is often intimidated by lesser talents: a firm believer in rock 'n' roll as a life-affirming force who occasionally thinks it would be glamorous to destroy himself; the conscience of rock—who can't forgive himself his own weaknesses.

In short, a lovable putz.

As we began part 2 of our interview we agreed to quickly clear up a few misconceptions about his political commitments before delving into the music itself, and his relationship with the Who. By this point I'd begun to find the guy so eminently appealing and admirable that I decided, with true Townshendian logic, to come up with an opening salvo that would catch him off balance.

MUSICIAN: Considering your reborn political conscience, and the responsibility you feel to speak out on certain crucial issues; what would you do if Abbie Hoffman walked onstage today while you were playing and started to give a speech? Would you whack him with your guitar and knock him off the stage like you did Woodstock?

TOWNSEND: I think I'd probably do the same thing again, because I feel that the stage is a sacred platform. If you're taking responsibility for it you have to be sure it's used for the right purpose. The Who don't provide a stage for any old asshole to come up and start spouting. We're responsible for what happens on that stage; and after Cincinnati it's becoming clear that a lot of people hold us responsible for what goes on offstage as well. In any case, I never agreed with the motives of the revolutionaries of that particular time. I thought they were all potential "superstars" who were trying to find another way of becoming big wheels. It was something I saw as fairly shallow. Perhaps I was wrong....

MUSICIAN: Nah, you were right. The cause was noble, but as usual most of the leaders were jerks. You've always exhibited some degree of spiritual and political commitment throughout your years with the Who. How is your commitment today different from what you stood for ten years ago?

TOWNSEND: What I'm now saying is that instead of being quite prepared to destroy myself for my art, I am now quite prepared to be destroyed...for the planet. All right? That is the
difference. And I don’t think that either alternative is particularly noble, because both have been done a million times before, by better and lesser men. But I think that recently, one thing that I hadn’t seen rock doing enough of—particularly its spearhead establishment figures—is not so much just going and playing at a No Nukes concert, but saying, “Why the hell are they doing it?” What are they prepared to stand for, and stand by? That’s why I say that anybody’s gonna come up with instant answers or anything, but just... it’s a unifying, rallying stance. This is something that I tried very, very hard to get across on Chinese Eyes: not to point a finger and say they’re the evil ones. It’s us. We’re the ones who are guilty—as a group, and as a race, for allowing things to get out of hand.

MUSICIAN: So how can we start to set things right?

TOWNSHEND: I do believe that everybody on the planet, whether they like it or not, is a spiritual aspirant, and that the most valuable demonstration of how he deals with his or her problems can be seen in how he handles the commitments he makes to the most important human being in his life, whether it’s his wife, his offspring, his workmates or whatever. And that includes how the individual deals with his own contradictions and problems... his conscience. That’s the place to start. But I also believe that if you get to the point where our generation is at, where we’ve never had to哭... I’ve never seen a bomb go off. I’ve never been trained to stick a bayonet into a dummy, let alone into another human being. And yet I know that in order to rid the planet of nuclear weapons that are sterilizing the world into inactivity, we have to fight—to physically fight, or physically effect some kind of change.

MUSICIAN: It sounds like you’re talking about going to war.

TOWNSHEND: No, I’m not talking about going to war, not in a literal sense. But in a allegorical sense, rock ‘n’ roll has been at war all through its history.

MUSICIAN: As a musician, what are your weapons?

TOWNSHEND: My work. It’s all I’m capable of doing, I suppose. I have to do what I do in my area, and that’s where you come down to what are the principles you’re talking about, which is that the individual is the key.

MUSICIAN: But obviously your work goes beyond mere propaganda.

TOWNSHEND: Sure, like on “Won’t Get Fooled Again” I never set out to make any statement at all, and yet something came through: the pieces fell into place and I think that’s obviously where things are most effective.

MUSICIAN: Will the new Who album reflect this sense of commitment?

TOWNSHEND: The album we’re finishing now is probably the most dangerous one the Who have ever made. We’ve actually sat down and found the common denominator, and I have to say, the lowest common denominator of feelings that we all share, and said, “Right! That’s what this record is gonna be about—something we can all identify with. And it’s changed our attitude a bit, because now we have something we want to take out and work one hundred percent—we want to shove it down people’s throats, in a sense. And we know that we can’t sustain that kind of level for very long. So as I said before, after a year we’ll wind up things, and then it’s open and I don’t bother to write more hidden-page letters thank-you-very-much, telling me we’re still valuable, or we’re better than Talking Heads, or we’re not too old, blah-blah-blah-blah. People always assume, kids in particular, that you’re stopping because you think you’re too bloody old.

MUSICIAN: Well, you’re the guy who wrote “Hope I die before I get old.” Do you worry about it?

TOWNSHEND: Yeah, a little bit; usually at the wrong times. I suppose it’s because rock doesn’t have an established, dignified way to absorb its heroes into old age. But if you look back at blues and jazz, they provided it eventually. I think the Who and the Stones are the only remaining bands of that particular era who have reached this point. Ray Davies and the Kinks are also coming along... it seems to be taking them a hell of a long time, possibly because Ray has the gift of irony, and irony is tricky to respond to. It’s difficult to know who the real Ray

“However big or small, you’re always a channel and a servant of God. Even if you’re a rat, you’ve got the hotline to God.”

Davies is. Is he the man who’s trying to be funny, or is he the man who really cares about the old traditions and qualities of life being lost? Or is he just using them as interesting subject matter to write songs about?

MUSICIAN: The very tension of wondering makes you wake up and actually examine the issues he’s talking about.

TOWNSHEND: I agree, it does me, anyway. Ray’s always been a big influence on me, I’ve never been able to write in the same way, though I’ve often tried. In fact, I’m terrible at it. I think “Keep On Working,” from Empty Glass, tries to be a Kinks song but just doesn’t work. I mean, “Lola” or “Low Budget” is so much better.

MUSICIAN: On the other hand, Chinese Eyes seems to be heavily influenced by Springsteen’s work, particularly The River. The music and lyrical themes are very similar, even the names of some of the tunes.

TOWNSHEND: Actually, there are two songs, “The Sea Refuses No River,” which obviously caught your ear, and “Silk Skirts,” where I’ve actually taken Bruce’s writing form and demonstrated another facet of it. And on “Silk Skirts” I attempted—it wasn’t a hundred percent successful—but I attempted to actually break that form down, to smash it at. One thing I really enjoy about solo albums is that I can afford to be as academic as I like.

MUSICIAN: When you’re working on a solo project, do you see yourself addressing a slightly different audience, or emphasizing different aspects of your work than you would with the Who?

TOWNSHEND: I look at it like this: there’s a widening gulf now between the two poles of rock. One is very intimate and very private and very much like reading a book. You sit at home with your earphones on, completely private, listening to a record, listening to statements and feelings and moods. Then there’s the concert, which is the shared, celebratory experience—the affirmation of rock, where you all get together.

It’s a bit like a literary luncheon. Everybody sits at home and they brush up on their latest Edmund O’Brien, or whatever it is that’s gonna be discussed, and then they go to the literary luncheon and they all kinda quaff wine together and toast everything and start throwing out lines from Proust and Joyce and everything else. But ecstatic! They’ve done their homework, folks. And rock ‘n’ roll is like that. You can really work on both levels, the public and the private, because the world is such a media-devastated place, we really treasure those moments of privacy, the act of putting earphones on and listening to something in quiet, the kind of meditative peace which people used to be able to enjoy when there were less people on the planet. But we still need the football game, the other side of it. So as those poles get wider apart, the use of both the extremes is what fascinates me. And that’s why on both the solo records I try to use both of those extremes. In other words, have moments in the lyrics which can only really be effective when I’m talking directly to somebody and they’re all alone, but also when there’s a load of kids sitting around at a party, smoking pot and having a good time drinking beer, so that they will also get something from it. And also a couple of songs which would be great on a stadium stage in front of 20,000 people.

MUSICIAN: Anything you’ve done recently that’s touched both those aspects, or where something more came through than you’d originally planned?

TOWNSHEND: I do that all the time. One of the best examples is what the Who did over the last six weeks with a song of mine, which is the key song on the next album. Basically, we
just started with the word “war” and went from there. It’s possibly one of the best Who tracks we’ve ever done, I believe. It’s very archetypal, very 60s issue, but it’s also bloody great. I started it off with just a clock ticking, and we went from there, just dumb, dum, dum dum—a kind of throbbing noise. You do it to remind yourself that that’s the starting point of a lot of music these days: the half-beat, the ticking clock, the throb, the pulse—the rhythm.

MUSICIAN: Speaking of throbs and pulses, you helped introduce synthesizers to rock on Who’s Next over a decade ago. What do you think of the current crop of synth bands like Human League and Throbbing Gristle? Is there something in the human spirit or feeling that gets filtered out, that can’t be put through an instrument like that? Is there an inherent limitation?

TOWNSEND: I prefer to take a different stance: I think the Human League are interesting because they’re a summation of a lot of different loose ends, which they’ve managed to gather up with the help of a very brilliant producer, Martin Rushent. They create a backdrop, and the sterility of the sound and its continuity, its pulse, is similar to the sterility of the backdrop in disco music. It’s a deliberate backdrop against which you then make your very clear statement, whatever that happens to be. And it just so happens that the Human League write very poignantly pointed songs. On the other hand, if you use that backdrop the way Kraftwerk does, and make a fruity and creative synthesizer sound, and then on top of it you put, “I... AM... A... ROBOT.” then you can take that, and bury it as deep as you possibly can, however skilled they are. There’s just no point in it. Everything has a value, and everything can be used. It really depends on how you do it and what your motives are, and what you’re trying to say.

MUSICIAN: As you say, with the Human League something comes through that’s well, human.

TOWNSEND: Yeah, and I could also point to someone like Thomas Dolby, who plays synthesizer on lots of people’s records, and actually manages to humanize and speak through the instrument. The problem that surrounds a lot of synthesizer or computer-based music at the moment is the lack of true control. Computer technologists will tell you again and again that there’s nothing dangerous, nothing inhuman about a computer. Like a pencil, it’s what you write with it that counts. Or like the Gutenberg Galaxy. Somebody discovers that you can print words, and the first thing they printed was the Bible, right? Great thing to print. I don’t know what was first committed to a computer, but I very much doubt it was as interesting and vital as the Bible. It was probably a ledger list of overdue accounts for Exxon Oil.

MUSICIAN: But considering what you were saying about the value of struggle and friction—the struggle to master your instrument—is there a danger that the computer or synthesizer makes things too easy?

TOWNSEND: I don’t think you need... remember the guitar and piano are inherently frustrating and limiting mediums to a lot of people. They’re not natural to everybody, though some people will strive hard to overcome it. But the great thing about computer and synthesizer technology is that it brings music into the hands of people that are amusical, and I think that’s healthy. I mean, a lot of my early stuff came about because I was lucky enough to be given a home recording studio when I was nineteen years old; that really helped me as a writer. I think the fact that you can go out and buy a home recording studio for $400 today is great. Obviously, the more people who use the medium, the better.

MUSICIAN: How did you come up with the initial sequencing on “Baba O’Reilly”?

TOWNSEND: Oh, incredibly difficult! I went out, bought a Larry Berks organ, pushed the marimba button, and played. And people kept saying, “That’s incredible synthesizer work on that,” and I’d say, “Okay, sure, you’re telling me, right?”

MUSICIAN: Wasn’t there something about programming your vital statistics into the machine?

TOWNSEND: Oh, that was totally misconstrued. What I was actually doing was collating all kinds of detail about six subjects for the Lighthouse film. One was Arthur Brown, the other was Meher Baba, and the rest were four members of the band. I took astrological details and I was going to take heart rates, pulse rates—everything that I could find out about people—to use as controlling parameters for synthesizer music. Now this was back in ’72, and the synthesizer, even then, was still pretty much of an unexplored instrument. I realized I was pushing the technology a bit hard, so I backed off. What I did do in the end was create the musical equivalent of a found poem—like taking a few lines out of a newspaper and calling it a poem.

MUSICIAN: Is there a special possibility or potential that exists in the period before you’ve totally mastered an instrument or technique?

TOWNSEND: Yeah, I mean, people use open tunings on guitar, don’t they? Somebody who’s stuck in a rut on a song will detune a couple of strings on the guitar and suddenly they discover new chords for the first time. Then, later on, when they tune the guitar back again, they realize that the chord that took an hour to find in that other tuning is actually A major—but it’s like hearing A again for the first time.

MUSICIAN: Along the same lines, your first major single, “Can’t Explain,” seemed to be a classic Kinks chord sequence slightly rearranged.

TOWNSEND: Yeah, that was, because we were using the same producer as the Kinks at the time and we were trying to get him more interested in us. So I sat down and wrote something that I thought was similar to a Kinks song, hoping he’d think, “Well, this is going to be easy to produce, so I’ll take them on.”

MUSICIAN: It’s funny, but to me, “Clash City Rockers” sounds like “I Can’t Explain Chapter 23.” Same chords and timing.

TOWNSEND: It’s very difficult not to borrow or be influenced: the limitations within the framework of rock are bounded by simplicity. That’s what makes it so great: the severity of the limitations. I think the reason jazz didn’t last as long as it should have—didn’t evolve to its logical conclusion—was because everybody was so determined to break the framework of the limitations that had been set down by vamping around the song. Now that was great while you could still recognize what the player was doing within the framework of the song. But when you lost the song, what was happening? The guy just sounded like he was goofing off. To me, Parker is still the epitome of bebop exploration, because he would take a song, a standard, and fly all about it like a butterfly.

MUSICIAN: Along the same lines, do you ever suspect that if you were a truly great lead guitarist, knocking off scabies and whatnot, that it might have actually inhibited your ability to come up with some of the ideas and innovations you created?

TOWNSEND: I think the epitome of somebody who used the instrument in the way I’ve always wanted was Hendrix; he was a great virtuoso, but only within a certain framework. He was no Larry Carlton or Pat Metheny, both of whom I happen to like, but then I don’t think either of them would aspire to what Hendrix achieved, because it cost them too much. But going back to your earlier question, I think Hendrix was someone who actually communicated something through the music. He was a channel, and there was tremendous purity, and he did it with just the guitar. His voice got in the way; the band got in the way; the songs got in the way; his lust got in the way—he got in the way. Everything got in the way, but once you put a guitar in his hands, he communicated, and in a most magical way. I saw his first twenty or thirty concerts in this country, and they were absolutely... magical. You actually did feel a tremendous sense of uplift, and that’s. I suppose, what I always wanted to do. I wanted it to be easy. I wanted to pick up the guitar and create that, and it annoys me that I’ve never been able to do that. It still bothers me today when I sit down and try to play a guitar solo, even though nowadays I can play very well.