LAST TIME AROUND

THE WHO SAY GOODBYE
BEFORE THEY GET
OLD, AND HELLO TO A VERY
UNCERTAIN FUTURE
BY KURT LODER

PHOTOS • NEAL PRESTON

FOR NEARLY THREE YEARS, ROGER
Daltrey watched Pete Townshend slowly killing himself with
drugs and alcohol. It was almost a parody of rock-star
decadence. Pete moved out on his wife and children and
started making the rounds of trendy London clubs, slugging
back brandy all night till he was nearly comatose, snorting
cocaine to keep up the pace, dabbling in heroin and God
knows what else. After twenty years together in a band that
ultimately attained the heights of rock celebrity as the Who,
Daltrey saw Townshend throwing away a life that apparently
had come to mean more to Who fans than it did to Town-

THE WHO ON TOUR: DALTREY (LEFT)
CHECKS OUT FIRST-NIGHT CROWD.
Pete Townshend takes off in Pittsburgh, joins Roger Daltrey on ‘Long Live Rock’; below, Buffalo.
shend himself. Finally, late last year, the tormented guitarist hit bottom. After a night of furious dissipation at London’s Club for Heroes, Townsend suddenly turned blue and collapsed, and had to be rushed to the nearest hospital.

Daltrey couldn’t take it anymore. Something drastic had to be done, and he knew, at last, what it was. One night during Townsend’s extended convalescence, the Who held a meeting at their manager’s house, and Daltrey dropped the bomb: “I don’t want to tour anymore.”

For a man who still loved the Who as passionately as he ever had in his teens—maybe more—those were the saddest words in the world. But if Townsend were to be stopped from following Who drummer Keith Moon into an early grave, Daltrey felt he had no other choice.

“See, Pete didn’t want to tour for years there before Moonie died,” he explains. “I was the instigator—I was responsible for getting him back on the road after 1978. And after three tours of America, he was a bloody junkie. I felt responsible for that. It was really hard to live with, and I just don’t want to do it anymore. I mean, I think the world of that guy. I think enough of him to stop the Who.”

Not stop it cold, of course. They could do one last world tour—as long as they called it that, and knew it was fini, they could deal with it. “I want to end the group in the right way,” says Daltrey. “On top, before we become parodies of ourselves. Then we can give Pete some freedom, because he deserves it.”

Townshend is still struck by Daltrey’s selfless and loving gesture. The two have had many a well-publicized row over the years, and yet, says Pete, “Roger was the most vociferous member of the group in saying that he would do anything, give up anything—even give up the group—if it would make me happy, you know? If it would get me happier.”

The question now, of course, is: will it?

ONE WEEK INTO THE Who’s LAST FULL SCALE tour, all is quiet. Frankly, it’s a little weird. Fifteen years ago, when Keith Moon was alive and destroying drum kits and hotel rooms with equal abandon, the Who’s celebrated road antics earned them a lifetime ban from the Holiday Inns of America. But this afternoon, up on the sixth floor of the Green Tree Marriott, near downtown Pittsburgh, a library of silence prevails—you can almost hear the twiddling of thumbs behind each closed door. Can this be the same crazed band that exploded out of London’s heady Mod scene in 1965?

No, of course not. One understands. This is the Who that survived into the Eighties, and its members, dispersed in various suites, are conserving their no-longer-boundless energy for tonight’s show at the 17,500-seat Civic Arena. There are eight tough weeks to go on this farewell tour, and looting takes a low priority.

Townshend has already caught a cold, which may explain the two sweaters he’s wearing. He’s not the faded pink-handkerchief that’s knotted around his wrist. A copy of nonniorno, the Joseph Conrad novel, lies on a table near the sofa where he’s sitting, and a stack of portable recording equipment—an adjunct to on-the-road songwriting—stands against a far wall. On a night or nearly cashing in his chips, Townsend looks a little ragged, but he’s obviously sober and straight. His only remaining vice is a penchant for miniature Indian cigarettes, which he smokes steadily.

“I do miss a drink before going onstage,” he admits, taking a hand through his dishes. “I’m not a large small brandy—a great drink, a great drink. I guess it’s the feeling of nervousness. But once I get on stage now, I’m okay. I don’t miss it,” he says, waving the had old days away. “I don’t miss any of it.”

And the days of big tours, big money, big roaming crowds—will he miss any of that? He stabs out a tiny butt and sighs. “I think there’s a certain amount of relief about the fact that it’s the last tour. There’s a tremendous amount of sadness, though, as well, because I know it’s not what everybody wants.” Bassist John Entwistle, for example, loves being on the road more than any other aspect of his involvement in the Who. Therefore, Pete says, “I think John is probably... more than sad. He’s not all that valedictory, and that makes it very difficult, because he’s actually sitting and trying to work out how he feels. He’s half the time. But I think he knows well enough to know that a lot of the people more than anybody in the world. He’s losing a vehicle for his talent and passion that he knows he’ll never be able to find anywhere else.”

It would, of course, be possible to accommodate Entwistle — keep the band in shape, maybe perform on some sort of reduced but semi-regular annual schedule. Townsend steps down at his sizable feet, which are nested in black velvet slippers with inscrutable golden crocas, and he cradles his famous nose in a clump of Kleenex. “I very much doubt that will happen,” he says with a soft honk.

THE REFORMED PETE TOWNSHEND, LIVING IT UP

The Who, in similarly shot supply in each of the other band members’ lives. Entwistle, the stoled bassist, is in the grip of a backache that won’t go away. Kenney Jones, the drummer—who is weathering a divorce and has kicked a debilitating booze habit—wades the off-stage hours compulsively guiling Perrier. Daltrey, a fitness buff, has beaten back the gut that plagued him on previous tours but is still pained by a back injury he sustained while filming Tommy eight years ago. Only Tim Gorman, the affable, conservatory-trained Californian who’s playing keyboards on this tour, seems unscarred by his calling, happily munching cheese and crackers from a vast room-service platter as he waits for showtime.

Is this how it all ends—in a whimper of cheese and Perrier? Not exactly; Who fans needn’t worry about their arms waving goodbye. Because, although it’s billed as their U.S. swan song, this latest excursion (which kicked off September 22nd near Washington D.C.) is also the longest tour the Who have mounted in twelve years; given the group’s well-known volatility, anything might happen between now and mid-December, when the tour concludes. And they do have a future, however ambiguous: The band will tour Britain and Europe in the new year, then Australia, and for the first time, Japan. And Bill Curbishley, the group’s enterprising manager, is already talking about the possibility of playing a quick cluster of dates sometime in 1984 and perhaps fulfilling the Who’s longstanding plan to play Eastern Europe—maybe even doing Tommy at Moscow’s opera house. As Kenney Jones says: “Little and often is the word—one-off concerts, or three or four days somewhere.”

So there is a master plan, of sorts: the Who will leave the road because it’s killing them—or, more precisely, because it was killing Townsend — and in the future will congregate only to record albums and perhaps perform the occasional brief burst of concerts. They’ve had it all, and now the three original members—Townshend, Daltrey and Entwistle—are crowding forty. Their generation—the pill-head Mods and flower kids of the Sixties—is just another flip in the cultural memory bank. Hanging on to trapeze stages for yet another new wave of fans, they would run an increasing risk of becoming ridiculous. Or worse, boring. As Daltrey says one evening, squinting into the setting sun outside his hotel-room window: “I can’t see the Who without its energy. If I go downhill, and if Pete gets slower... well, like it or not, the arm swingin’ and the mike twirlin’ are important to the Who. I mean, could you see us just standin’ onstage, just playin’? Daltrey’s brow bunches up over his pale blue eyes, two reflections of Townsend’s own enigmatic orbs. “Do you really want to see the Who like that?” he asks.

ROCK & ROLL GLAMOUR is in

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ON THIS TOUR, AT LEAST, NO ONE HAS SEEN

the Who like that. Buoyed by what they conceive as a sprint toward some sort of final curtain, they have been burning through their two-hour-plus sets, lashing out the songs from their new album, It’s Hand, with all the fire of their great, anthemic hits. So far, it seems like a great way to go out — on top, as Roger says. Even Mick Jagger, who turned up with his daughter, Jade, for the Who’s second concert, at John F. Kennedy Stadium in Philadelphia, was suitably impressed—and not just because his old pals had set a house ticket-sales record at the same stadium where the Rolling Stones had played one year earlier.

“Mick was up on the side of the stage,” Daltrey recalls, “and afterward, I said, ‘Are you wantin’ to go out and do it again?’ And I think, suddenly, he might have looked out at that crowd and saw what we were doin’, and thought, ‘Maybe we should have called that our last tour, too.”

The Who and the Stones’ heartbreak, however, is Pete’s still bemused by Mick’s tough business head. They spoke briefly in Philadelphia. “He was saying to me, ‘Well, we started off in Philadelphia and then went to Buffalo — it’s 400 miles, you know, a very heavy thing for the trucks.” Pete cackles appreciatively. “I don’t give a shit how far it is for the trucks. I just play.”

Rolling Stone, November 11, 1982
STILL ON TOP AT THE END OF THE ROAD...

Business smarts don’t necessarily come with the bagfuls of money that accrue to arriveate rockers, however. One day not too long ago, Townshend went to draw some funds from a group of Who-related companies clustered under the name Ed Pro—and discovered not only that the coffers were bare, but that he was in debt to the tune of some $1 million. He’s since sold off some of the companies—the Magic Bus Bookshop and a P.A. equipment rental company that kept the Who’s stage equipment profitable when the group wasn’t using it—and he doesn’t sound particularly worried.

“It’s not like it’s my money,” he says. “It’s company money, money that I invested. Personally, I have got financial security. I’ve got a home, a car—I’ve got everything that I need.”

But as the Who say their long goodbye to the big-time concert grind, there’s another foy in the ointment—a real threat to the master plan of turning the Who into essentially a studio-only band. His name is John Entwistle.

Entwistle seems to be a stoic type. Although he’s in the final stages of a divorce, and he and his longtime American girlfriend, a striking brunette named Max, are demonstratively happy, and he says he loves his life at home in England, where he collects vintage guitars, stuffed fish, antique armor and purebred chickens. But this “last tour” business with the Who, well, it really honks him off. Of all the times for Roger and Pete to discover something they can agree on.

“You know,” Entwistle says one night in his hotel room as a TV set drones soothingly in the background, “I don’t intend to get off the road. At the moment, Roger and Pete are both agreed—about this being the final tour and about the whole way they want to structure the Who’s career. But I completely disagree. I think the way it’s gonna be structured, we’re gonna be still playing, but playing extremely badly, and rustic. I mean, to do one concert, you still need to do four weeks’ rehearsal. And I don’t think it’s worth rehearsing for four weeks for one concert.”

He lights a cigarette. “There’s not much I can do about it except hope they change their minds. They frequently do, but in this case, I don’t think they will.”

So if the Who stop touring, he doesn’t want to be involved in just making records with them? “Um, no,” Entwistle says.

“I mean, from my point of view, I’m not prepared to just carry on doing albums. If the touring isn’t there, then I’d rather get my own thing together, which involves touring as well.”

Interesting.

Very interesting, actually. Especially to Townshend and Daltrey, who have heard nothing about Entwistle’s decision to bail out if the band really quits the road.

“He told you that?” says Daltrey the next day in Indianapolis. He’s a bit taken aback, but after all these years, obviously nothing that happens within the Who really surprises him anymore. But could the Who bring in another bassist and still call themselves the Who?

“I don’t know,” says Daltrey carefully. “We’ll have to cross that bridge when we come to it. I mean, I’m pretty ruthless about keeping the Who together, and if John doesn’t want to do it, then… He’s really thinking this one over now. ‘You see, he suddenly says, ‘John never says anything. We have meetings, and John actually says absolutely nothing—never. If we have a meeting, it’ll be Pete and me talkin’ and the other two just sittin’ there. I mean, you never really get to know what John feels. So, in the end, it’s just really what Pete and I want to do…’ I’m sure if Pete and I wanted to do it and still call it the Who, we could do it successfully.”

Strange news travels fast. At the concert that night in Indianapolis, the Who crank up a rather emphatic version of “Long Live Rock,” and as Townshend charged into the guitar solo, thrashing and flailing at his long-suffering Telecaster, he also started leaping across the stage to where Entwistle was standing and pumping out bass. When he reached Entwistle’s ear, he shouted the muffled shouting was unmistakable from the side of the stage—“F**k you!” But then he broke into this big, goofy grin, rolled his eyes up in his head like the village spaz and bopped his way back to his amps. Lord knows…

Backstage after the show, Townshend slumped on a dressing-room couch and considered Entwistle’s dark mutterings. Was he serious?

“I think he’s serious,” Pete said. “I don’t quite know. It’s one of those big, black, dark nights. You know, John’s a playa; the fulfillment he gets from the way that he plays, can only be experienced in a road situation—and possibly only with the Who. But I think when the band does stop workin’, each member is gonna go through a different set of withdrawals, you know? If John feels that he couldn’t even address himself to the prospect of doin’ recording, then of course we’ve got a problem.”

Townshend cracks a sly grin. “He’ll have to find about $1 million to give back to Warner Bros. He’ll have to sell one of his 490 basses or something.”

But if the leaves could be replaced? Would the resulting band still be the Who? After all, Roger thinks that as long as Daltrey and Townshend are up there, it still is the Who.

Pete shakes his head. “That is so mistaken,” he says. “I mean, it would be Townsend and Daltrey—or Daltrey and Townsend.”

“Another grin. But, oh, it would not be the Who.”

Well, what’s this with the band, then? This is the last U.S. tour because Pete Townsend is tired of the road—but then, according to the master plan, the group’s apparently going to spend most of next year on the road. Will Entwistle leave the band? Will Townsend find a way to keep this show together?

Pete has a definite one-word look in his eye. “I think the Who’s relationships are more about need than desire,” he says. “We don’t necessarily want to be dependent on one another, but we are. So it doesn’t matter whether you walk away from this relationship…” He spreads his palms, all-explaining. “It still remains.”

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