I'm particularly cynical about the flower-power era, because I thought it was daft at the time.

This has been a year in which the curse for rock's past—the Summer of Love, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band—has eclipsed interest in its present. How do you feel about this sudden yearning for the good old days?

If anything exemplifies Sixties pop, particularly '67 through '69, it was its strong connection with the roots of spiritual theosophy and the language that ran with it—the idea that pop music was about spiritual uplift, human potential, solidarity, unification. And that is very difficult to recreate. When you look back at the flower-power era, it all looks daft. I feel particularly cynical, because I thought it was daft at the time. I didn't like Haight-Ashbury. I didn't like Abbie Hoffman. I didn't like Timothy Leary, and I didn't like Woodstock. I've been fighting all my life to make people realize that the superficial qualities of rock and pop are not the parameters through which you should judge the product of that generation. The music was less important than the musicians. The musicians were less important than the audience. The audience was less important than the infrastructure that was created around a generation. And ultimately, the activists were less important than the overall underlying mood of reaction that music became a symbol for.

The music wasn't responsible for it. What's wrong with looking at something like Sgt. Pepper as a symbol for such a time is that it avoids confronting the real truth—that Sgt. Pepper was possible as a product at the time only because people were so inordinately open-minded, so conscious of being in pursuit of innocence that they were willing to take a chance with anybody. They wouldn't have been had they been more conscious of the fact that naivety and innocence had a purpose.

Compared with the upheavals in popular music between the rise of Elvis Presley in the mid-Fifties and the breakup of the Beatles in 1970, rock seems to be changing and evolving at a much slower pace now. How does that bode for the music's future?

I don't expect change necessarily. I recently listened to a new record by a band that I hold in high regard—I won't say who they are—and I found myself thinking, "Hey, I don't think this sounds any different from what they've done in the past or from what the Liverpool bands were doing in 1980." Then I checked myself: "Hold on a minute, you shouldn't be expecting Beatlesque innovation from everybody," that game everybody's playing at the moment. Prince has just made his White Album. What comes next? Abbey Road and then obscurity?

If you go back to the early days, to that period between Presley and Sgt. Pepper, where songwriting and recording techniques, integrating political ideas into pop, all came together, what you're looking at is something that wasn't necessarily new. The course had already been struck in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties. What was important about pop then was that it established that change in itself leads you to a new starting point. It might have been incredibly fast, but I think it was incredibly slow. It took from Elvis to Sgt. Pepper—a good ten years— to convince not just bloody Wilfrid Mellers [a British musicologist] that pop music was worthy of consideration, but the public. This music grows at an organic rate, a rate that is governed by the way broadcasting is structured, the way the marketing is structured, but most of all, it grows at the rate the public wants it to grow. And if they want Who
clones and Led Zeppelin clones, then they’ll get them.

In recent years, you’ve been very outspoken about how much the Who accomplished in terms of changing the world and also how much being in the band drained you physically and spiritually. How do you feel about the reverence with which you and the Who are still treated?

I’ve been looking at the Who’s career and realizing that while the Who were the most important thing in my life for twenty-odd years, they were not the most important thing in the world. They were not the most important thing in rock & roll. And they were not the most important band in any of the critical cycles. There was always someone working on a par with the Who.

If I was to choose, completely objectively, who was a better writer, Pete Townshend or Ray Davies, I would pick Ray. I know that now. I’ve always seen him as a comrade and a contemporary. But I also know that he was — and still is — a better writer. And what Ray and I both have to live with is that the Beatles and the Stones were fifty times bigger than the Kinks or the Who would ever be. And to be happy with that.

Part of the realism that’s required is a dismantling of the way rock sad adotected the Hollywood star system and everything that was bad about it. We were convinced we wouldn’t do that. And we have, even to the extent that, today, Springsteen, who must be the last person on earth who wanted to be a superstar, has become one. And the more he tries not to be, the more Garboesque he’s going to become. I’m glad I got out of that system. The realism I’m coming to grips with now is that I’m a nobody, like anybody else. I’m only as good as my next trick.

Throughout your career, you’ve been one of rock’s most prominent theoreticians, analyzing its cultural importance and emotional impact in your songs, interviews and essays. Did you feel a responsibility to articulate your feelings and views to your audience?

To some extent, it used to be hurt when Keith Richards said, “Pete, you think too much. Get down and play your guitar.” But I always did want to be like a social worker. I wanted my popularity to be real popularity. I wanted the real me to be appreciated, not the performing me. I didn’t particularly want to be loved for the way I played the guitar. The way I played guitar was part of my funny side, my rebellious side. What my audience loved me most for was something that was only a small part of me.

One of the great ironies of ‘Tommy’ was that because of the Woodstock movie, the ‘See me, feel me’ chorus in the finale became a real anthem for the hippie dream, a theme for the gathering of the tribes. Yet the whole point of ‘Tommy’ was that Utopia was not just the corner that this explosion of positive youth energy was already co-opted and corrupted — in this case by a deaf, dumb and blind ‘gun’.

I was thinking about this last night [laughs]. Why is it that rock songwriters are not allowed to be ironic? Why is it this satire can only be comedic? Why can’t rock satire be real satire, real irony? I know that a lot of people heard Tommy, listened to certain tracks and completely misread them. What people went for in Tommy was the celebration, not the denouement. The sad thing is I continue to live with the finale, not the bit in the middle.

What was important at the time, and continues to be important, is that the human individual accepts the fact that he or she is capable of being spiritually swayed. And in order to make the best of that, they really have to listen to what’s being said. It’s no point being carried away by the uplift.

I suppose the mistake I made in Tommy was instead of having the guts to take what Meher Baba said — which was “Don’t worry, be happy, leave the results to God” — and repeating that to people, I decided the people weren’t capable of hearing that directly. They’ve got to have it served in this entertainment package. And I gave them Tommy instead, in which some of Meher Baba’s wonderfully explicit truths were presented to them half-baked in lyric form and diluted as a result. In fact, if there was any warning in Tommy, it was “Don’t make any more records like that.”

Possibly the most astonishing and thematically relevant song you’ve ever written was “My Generation.” How do you look back on that song now?

“My Generation” was very much about trying to find a place in society. I was very, very lost. The band was young then. It was believed that its career would be incredibly brief. The privilege that I had at the time was being plucked out of bed-sitter land and put in a flat in the middle of Belgravia with two tape machines. It was private, and I could look out at these people who seemed to me to be from another planet.

I remember one of the things I bought when the Who first became successful was a 1963 Lincoln Continental. I was driving with the top down through London, and a woman was in a car going in the other direction and looked at me. She was wearing a string of pearls, blond hair, very beautiful, about thirty-five. She kind of looked at me as if admiring me in my car. Then her lip curled, and she said, “Driving Mummy’s car, are we?” That one incident, among a series of other key incidents, made me hate those people.

I really started to respond to that. “All right, you motherfuckers, I am going to have you. I am going to be bigger and richer, and I am going to move into your neighborhood. I am going to buy that house next to you, Lord So-and-So.” And I’ve done it. And I’m afraid I’ve done it out of a great sickness. I talk to people. I really do respect from that way of life now, and I say to them, “Do you realize why it is I’m so driven to operate within the Establishment? It’s vengeance.”

“Hope I die before I get old” is something I still have to live with, but not for the reason many people think. I have to be very, very vigilant not to become one of those people I despised.

Was “Won’t Get Fooled Again” a song of rebellious individuality or a song of disillusionment?

It’s the dumbest song I’ve ever written.

How dumb was it?

It was dumb to deny the political role of the individual, the political responsibility of the individual. Burning your draft card is a political act. Throwing your vote away is an apolitical act. And “Won’t Get Fooled Again” was an apolitical song. Luckily, most people didn’t listen to the verses. “There’s nothing in the street/Looks any different to me/And the slogans are all replaced, by the by...” They just listened to the catch.

It was an irresponsible song. It was quite clear during that period that rock musicians had the ear of the people. And people were saying to me then, “Pete, you’ve got to use the Who. You’ve got to get this message across.” It was like Abbie Hoffman said on the stage of Woodstock that John Sinclair was in jail for one lousy joint, and I kicked him off the stage. I deeply regret that. If I was given the opportunity again, I would stop the show. Because I don’t think rock & roll is that important. Then I did. The show had to go on.

What made me stop thinking the show had to go on was obviously Cincinnati. It was a terrible lesson to have to learn. For a long time, I couldn’t live with that. It was directly responsible for me literarily, emotionally falling apart.

But it was a valuable lesson for me today, looking back on the political relevance — or irrelevance — of a song like “Won’t Get Fooled Again.” I greatly regret that it’s one of the most powerful songs that I’ve ever written. The Labour party asked me if they could use it in their election campaign. And I said, “Yeah, but please let me rewrite the verses.”

The mid-Seventies are considered to be the height of flamboyant pretension and self-indulgence in rock. How do you feel the Who handled itself during that period?

We were in pretty good shape. We indulged ourselves technically slightly. We used synthesizers for the first time, we tried to make decently recorded albums, and we started to use my undeniable talent of working conceptually.

And I’m proud of those years. Who’s Next is a great record. I still like it because it started from a very big idea and ended up as a really nice rock & roll record. Who’s Next is very much like the songs from a musical of which the story was never staged. People keep asking me, “Why hasn’t a film of House ever been made?” It was a silly story. It gets sillier by the day. I’m no Ray Bradbury. It was my attempt at science fiction. The important thing was that it produced the songs.

But that rather camp and glossy show-business side of rock was something that the audience wanted. And it was something that was necessary for a technical reason, which a lot of people overlook. The halls were getting bigger. So the staging had to be grander. You couldn’t rely on facial expression and sheer volume and body movement. And that did lead to theatrical pomposity. It was out of scale. It had to be larger than life because the audience was larger than life.

The fact was that there were people interested in hearing our music, and we wanted to reach them. People were doomed to listen to music in basketball arenas and, later, football stadiums. Ultimately, you had to provide people with the theatrical things.

You had to improve on the setting.

You had to. It’s easy to look back and complain about Queen and the Who with their laser beams. We
never saw the bloody laser beams. It was something to give to the audience. The first time you see a latticework laser – they’re common as muck now – it is a wonderful experience. But it was very much to do with the fact that the auditoriums were getting bigger.

As the man who wrote, “Hope I die before I get old,” how did you feel being dismissed by British punks in the late Seventies as a boring old fart?

What’s terrible is when people like Billy Idol and the Sex Pistols say they were only acting at the time. I find it incomprehensible. “Oh, well, we didn’t really mean it when we spit all over you down the Roxy. We didn’t hate you. We were just doing it; you know what Teenagers are like.” No, I don’t know what Teenagers are like, because when I smashed guitars, I fucking well meant it.

Did punk energize you as a writer, as a rocker?

“Energize” is the wrong word. It freed me. It allowed me to be myself. It dignified me, in a way, to be cast to one side.

I felt very uneasy with the way the Who were inevitably on the road to mega-stardom. I believed that the punk movement would free me from that. It did. It freed me from it, that it was all crap and that the bottom line was we were all flesh and blood. But the Who as a band didn’t believe it.

I ultimately had to stop using the band as a vehicle for my songwriting. In a way, I’ve got the punk explosion to thank for making that decision. Commerically, leaving the Who was the dumbest thing I’ve ever done in my life. But artistically, it was undeniably the most logical thing for me to do. It was the most important thing I’ve ever done for me – to allow me to have a new beginning, to actually grow.

How do you feel about the way U2 has been held up, especially in America, as inheritors of the Who tradition of spiritually and socially committed rock & roll?

I feel afraid for them, just the way I felt afraid for Springsteen. I wanted to tell him, “Bruce, be careful. They’ll destroy you. They’re not really listening to you.” And that’s the thing I worry most about U2. I want them to be enormous. I want people to have them. As far as musical evolution, they have the future before them. The Edge is a giant. Rooted and remaining as they do in Ireland, it will produce their most apocalyptic vision. They can bring a unique view to the world.

But they’d better watch out. I have told Bono a couple of times. You can’t think you can control the way people respond to you. People are falling in love with U2. And you can’t control love. Love doesn’t listen to Bono’s intelligence or to what Bono has discovered in John Lee Hooker or in reading the French impressionist poets. They look at the band, and they love the fact that they’re a great band.

How has the business of rock & roll music changed in the past twenty years? It seems like pin-striped lawyers and accountants have all but replaced flamboyant entreprenuers like Phil Spector, Andrew Loog Oldham and the Who’s manager Kit Lambert.

There is a quick condemnation you can make. You can just say it’s all crap. The important thing is that every now and then a unique musical event happens. But most of it is utter garbage. The machinery behind it is financially, spiritually and morally corrupt. And I don’t think there is any point in standing on a soapbox trying to get the music industry to honor the music itself. In the end, it becomes futile.

The importance of people like Kit Lambert is what he said to me from day one. He went even further. He said all great art was crap. And I’ve now found that out. We read that Mozart was doing commissions on motifs, numbered motifs, and selling his copyrights.

“Oh, the bloody prince of Denmark wants another piece of music, and I’m so busy. Give him fifteen of number twenty-two, six of number four, nine of number fifty-eight…” It was very much like computer music. And, of course, Bach was a mathematician. And these have all been elevated to some kind of artistic gods.

Kit used to be extraordinarily funny on the subject. He said, "You've got to be pretentious, you've got to go for gold, you've got to be over the top." So as a kind of agitator in the music business, he was wonderful, because instead of devaluing the whole thing, he was actually making it more real.

The problem now is when you go to a meeting and someone in bated breath, with reverent tones, says what a great artist Madonna is, and you suddenly think, "Hold on a minute, don't you realize what Madonna really is?" Madonna is a very clever woman.

There’s no question that she’s talented and has got charisma, that she took the pop industry as she found it.

Those people – Kit, Andrew, Spector – were very important. Not to enable us to rise above the crap, but they told us whether we were or not. A few entrepreneurial individuals with a true show-business sense would not be out of place right now – a George Balanchine, a Diaghilev, a Kit Lambert. They’re all so decent, these characters today. Even Nile Rodgers is safe. Nile Rodgers works with a band in the studio, but he doesn’t do what Kit Lambert did with the Who. He doesn’t make them his family for the rest of his life, and make the audience part of the family.

In the first Rolling Stone interview you ever did, you signed off with a quote: "Rock & roll is one of the many keys to a very complex life. Don't get freaked out with all the many keys. Groove to rock & roll, and you'll find one of the keys of all." Do you still believe that is true?

I do think it's true, but only in terms of what I then meant rock & roll was. At the time, rock & roll to me was another word for "life." What I was saying was it doesn't matter what you do or how you do it. But the way we do it in this thing called rock & roll is we do it with great determination and enthusiasm. What I was experiencing in rock then was a great introduction to what might have been a cloistered and isolated, protected view of life, but one that I wouldn't have swapped for all the world. If I went back to that age, knowing what I would go through in the next twenty years, I'd probably say the same thing again.

Elvis, Chuck Berry, Charlie Parker – they were the people at the head of my class. I knew they all had made terrible mistakes. But the sum of the whole thing seemed that they had set off on the right road and that literally what rock was like at the time was being given a key. You went in, you turned the key and you found yourself in a place where nothing was decided, nothing was arrived at.

I still feel I hold that key. I am one of those characters who, like a teenager, sits at home with a guitar in front of a full-length mirror, and I do it. And I can do it now just as well as I did it then. And it gives me just as much pleasure as it did then. I'd come forward a few years and maybe chuck the key away – once you're in, you're in – but I'd never chuck the mirror away.