Who are you?

Not everyone could turn their childhood miseries into a gold mine; but Pete Townshend has, Ginny Dougary discovers. Photograph by Paul Massey

Pete Townshend has been enjoying a long month of celebrations. First there was his 48th birthday and 25th wedding anniversary: a family knees-up at home on the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall. And a more glittery knees-up in America when Tommy, the Who's Sixties rock opera which is enjoying a revival on Broadway, scored five Tony nominations. These are all good reasons for Townshend to toast his health and wealth, with some vigour.

When you are a world-famous rock star, an interview with The Times can be cause enough to crack open a bottle or two of champagne. And, of course, no one's complaining. Townshend is not entirely unconscious about this habit. One of his new projects is a concept album called Psychedelic. (The generic title alone is enough to fill one with dread, a feeling which is magnified on reading Townshend's self-penned publicity notes.)

The female character is Ruth Streeting, a vituperative journalist loosely modelled on Julie Burchill, whose mission in life is to lambaste a 50-year-old rock star by the name of Ray Highsmith (who is modelled on guess who). "I heard about you, Mr Stinking Rich Hasn't Been Drinking Vintage Krug as though it was two bob a bottle," she hisses on her radio show. "I'll be watching you out for you."

At the beginning of the interview, a representative from Townshend's new record company is watching out for his client. "Nice trousers, Pete," says Tony, the amiable young minder, and for the next half-hour we talk about shopping.

Townshend is wearing a blue denim shirt, black trousers, high-waisted with a ridge down each leg ("Joseph, but they look like Thierry Mugler") and a pair of mid-calf regulation Doc Martens. His dark hair recedes dramatically and his eyes, which often look strikingly blue in photographs, are a faded aquamarine. His huge, magnificent nose is slightly pink around the edges. It is an extraordinary face, like a descendant of the tribal masks that inspired Picasso and Matisse to go "primitive". It should be downright ugly, but it is oddly beautiful.

Townshend's brothers were commandeered into cooking for his birthday: bonefish en croûte preceded by a slippery oyster concoction bound with a lemony sauce. Townshend thinks it was a Raymond Blanc invention, but it sounds more like Marco Pierre White. We compare cooking methods like a pair of seasoned foodies, and he plumps for the latter. "The male members of the family are very aggressive cooks," he says. "We swap recipes and argue about the best way to cook a roux. This must qualify as a quote of the week." Good food is what makes life tick along. "If you've got the money..."

At times like these, he sounds like the sort of man you'd almost imagine had had in mind when he wrote the soaring lyric of his teenage anthem My Generation — "Why don't you all... fade away?" There have been periods in his life when it looked as though that was precisely his intention.

The giant stage in the sky is pilled high with the corpses of beautiful and not so beautiful young men and women who seemed to self-destruct, not gently fade away: Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Brian Jones, Keith Moon (the Who's own casualty), and, waiting in the wings, the salutary near-misses: Keith Richards, Marianne Faithfull, George Clapton and, perhaps, even Townshend.

He seems to believe that the trouper — the aging glamour boy of rock 'n' roll — are the living dead, and he is delighted that he is not among them. "When I became a solo artist after the break-up of the Who in 1982, I could write songs, I could record them and I could, briefly, perform them. But when I was asked to tour, and be the performer, be the rock star, my problem was that I would look at myself and say: 'This is not what you are.'"

"David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Roger Daltrey, Rod Stewart..."
fun, lively, brilliant, smart, gorgeous. He was just fantastic, and I owe an enormous amount to him."

Townshend had problems with drink and drugs long before his post-Lambert heroin addiction. The letters page of the Sunday Telegraph, as far back as 1970, includes one from Pete Townshend, Leader of a Who hq group. The pop star praises a Dr Allan Cohen. "Doctor Cohen and his aides in the States are directly responsible for my own drug-free condition at present," Townshend wrote. "The use of drugs had led me, some would say inevitably, to an interest in religion once again . . . I turned to Indian mysticism. On coming into contact with Meher Baba's followers (Baba remains Townshend's guru), I came to realize that drug use could no longer fit into my life as a sincere, soul-seeking person."

The doctor who sort out in 1962 was Meg Patterson, with her little black box. Her technique is known as electric therapy. Townshend first met her in the mid-Seventies, when Patterson was treating Eric Clapton's society girlfriend for depression. Didn't Clapton practise from some remote Scottish island? "No, no, it was Jack Bruce [who played in Cream with Clapton] who went to the Scottish island," Townshend says, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Eric and I went to Harley Street."

The mid-Seventies was one of Townshend's least-draggy periods. He was suspicious, he says, even of marijuana. (This he parries with a great verbal flourish — marriage-hooeh-ah-nah! — like some old dad trying to keep up with the latest trend.) His explanation for his slide into heroin, a decade later, is so pot that I wonder where this imagination has been stimulated by a stronger artificial substance.

A doctor had prescribed a drug to help Townshend, and within six weeks, he had switched additions from addiction to his new medication. "I rang up Meg and said: "Listen, Meg, remember me? I'm ironic but I think I've discovered something. I don't know if it's a drug."

"She advised me to stop taking it and use heroin. By this time it was in California, and she couldn't see me immediately. So I had to get over there in November to January of the following year. And then I went to her, and four weeks later I was straightened out."

I ask him whether he thinks his addictive tendencies spring out of some need to fill a hollow. Does he fear that at the root of his personality lies a fundamental psychic or emotional weakness? Quite the opposite, he says. "What I really distrust is psychic strength. When I shoot for something, I seem to get it. When I decide that something is going to happen, it happens. When I dream a dream, it comes true."

"What I'm saying means that I must feel a level of omnipotence. You're like a dangerous dictator, a Hitler or a Stalin. So what you start to do is to undermine. That you say: 'Let's see what you're really made of. Let's see what happens when you cut it and see if it holds. Let's see how effective you are when you've got no brain.'"

He is scared, now that he is on an upward curve once again, that the pattern will repeat itself. "Will he feel the need to sabotage his success? It's a question that I ask myself about every year."

"I'm not saying that I am making it. I think I'll be OK. In the early Eighties, I stopped worrying about me. I was in that same space as the Kt Lambers and the Keith Moons. I thought it might be better to follow my nose to wherever it led me, even if that was death. I felt I wasn't achieving anything. I wasn't making anybody happy. In love affairs, I was only making women cry. I was neglecting my children and friendships. I thought I was producing interesting and creative work, but critics reviewed them as indulging in self-indulgent sloppiness."

I asked the people who knew him then how Townshend was able to stumble and fall but not go under. Mike Hirst, a screenwriter who worked with the director Nic Roeg on Bad Timing, became acquainted with Townshend when they collaborated on the Life House film project. (I never got off the ground, but some of the material has found its way into Psychoedelict.)

For much of the time, Hirst recalls, Townshend was deeply serious. "But occasionally his eyes would flicker mischievously, and you could sense the mad Pete Townshend act was coming on. He'd suddenly start shouting or sing a song or play the piano loudly. It was a total show."

"It was the people around him, like Keith, who weren't able to cut themselves off from their act and who had no private, intellectual side to retreat to, who tended to die."

Townshend has his own theory on why he has survived. "When you have kids, you are constantly reminded of your duty to live."

"He has two grown-up daughters — Emma, who is doing her PhD at Cambridge, and Aminta, who is reading modern languages at Exeter. He has taken the past three years off to concentrate on his little boy, Joseph, who is three and a half."

"That's the first sign. And then you think, well, I also have a duty to my spouse, and to my mum and to my brothers and my friends — and that's why I'm going to stay alive. And you suddenly realize that the people who let themselves die were without any sense of their own meaning or responsibility. Maybe they felt that they would have more meaning when they were dead."

Tony the Minder comes in to check on our progress. My subject's eye's light up. He is about to have one of his "mad Pete Townshend" bursts. Throughout the interview, he has been as jumpy as he has been loquacious. Now he hesitates. And it is entirely for the benefit of the man from the record company. "I'm in Times Square: it's one in the morning. There's this black guy slouched in the doorway, who must be about 57. He looks like he's nodding off and his head jerks.
Last Museum by Brion Gysin, William Burroughs’s secretary, commissioned books (a study of bikers by Max Harris) and was an energetic participant in conferences held at the un-rockstar-hour of 9.30am. Townsend no longer goes into the office, but is retained as a consultant.

I saw him five years ago as a rock star, but now during his transition from pop star to publisher. They all mention his enthusiasm, his expansive imagination and endearing eftiness to learn. Scholzaloff is overestimating it when she says Townsend is "a man of goodness", but no one has a bad word to say about him.

"Coming to Faber was Peter’s equivalent of going to university," says one of the higher-priced editors at the publishing company. "He was always asking: ‘What shall I buy?’, and we had no home weight on down at least ten books. It was terrific blood. He was always very open about it. He wouldn’t say: ‘This is embarrassing, but I’ve never read any Shelley.’ He’d say: ‘Tell me about Shelley.’"

He has an office with Craig Raine, who was poetry editor at Faber for ten years. Raine does not share the educating Peter view of Townsend. "He was terrifically well-read when he arrived. Very early on, he made a reference to Tradition and the Individual Talent — an essay by Eliot — and it was absolutely perfect.

This autumn, the Young Vic is staging another Townsend musical, his adaptation of The Iron Man, Ted Hughes’s book for children. Hughes meets Townsend at the Faber office in the mid-Eighties. They have subsequently become friends, and Hughes has even been invited to the poet Laureate’s home in Devon. "He’s an enormously imaginative fellow," Hughes says. "He has an unpredictable fantasy life, which ranges across a whole set of barriers and limitations that restrict other people. It is a very free imagination."

I catch a glimpse of Townsend’s "free imagination" when we start to talk about sex. (Although the context is not necessarily what Hughes had in mind.) In 1990, one of The Sun’s screaming headlines was ‘My Gay Secret By Rock Star Peter’. Townsend had apparently revealed his bisexuality in love with a handsome New York music writer, Tim White, who had interviewed him for a book. "I know how it feels to be a woman because I am a woman," was one of Townsend’s more startling revelations. In the month of the story, as it so often is beyond the magazine, The Sun was rather different.

Townsend had been asked to write a song for Beti Midler, and wanted to know what it felt like for a woman to be made love to (he phrased the question more bluntly to Midler). To authenticate the female voice, he had to imagine that he was a woman. The line that emerged from their discussion was: "He laid me back like an empty dress. The song is called And I Moved."

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"What is interesting," Townsend says, looking almost stern, "is that I won’t trivialise my sexuality in that way. If only I was just a transvestite. But I think I’m much more interesting than that. And much more complicated. And more honourable. I would never, ever betray any relationship that I’d had of any kind of degree of sexuality or perversion. I would never ever comment on its value to me by inferring that I have had or have not had a homosexual or heterosexual or a whipping thing or an external thing . . ."

Barney, I am so taken aback that I keep track of what he is saying. Perhaps I am rambling, but the "whipping thing" had not even featured on my list of questions. Let alone the "emotional thing."

WE MOVE ON TO the comparatively straightforward terrain of schoolgirls. Like most famous rock stars, Townsend has had his share of schoolgirls. The most notable, he says, was one he met in the late Seventies, and he began to attract a "superior class of groupie" and his "desire to be faithful was constantly challenged". He says that any man will try to attract the attention of a schoolgirl if he can, because "it’s not just about the firm upmanship; there’s the whole idea that you can penetrate not only the body, but also the mind. It’s a form of vampirism."

On the subject of his marriage (he met Karen in 1963 when he was 18 and she 14), he says: "In those days, it was a case of the boy who is struck dead, dumb and blind when he is drawn into the web of deceit by his parents; who is further abused by his Uncle Ermie ‘fiddling’ about; and who finds redemption in a grinding fiddle put around him."

‘I’m just trying to realise that there is an absolute link between the things that happened to me when I was a child, and my writing. Those early years account for everything that I am today. The reason why I have always tried to be more than I am, I think, is because I want to deny the face that I am so obsessive and self-absorbed, which is what it is. It’s when I was three or four years old? What happened to me?"

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Psychodocile is released on July 12. London Productions of The Iron Man and Tommy are planned for the autumn and next year respectively.

Pinball wizard: Pete Townsend goes wild on stage during a Tommy performance (top); Townsend (far right) with Kit Lambert and Keith Moon

aroused, largely autobiographical short stories, dreams and observations, which are as surprising as the title.

The editorial appointment came about when Eel Pie. Townsend’s own small publishing company ran into financial difficulties and he was obliged to look for a buyer. He met Lambert and Midler, who he had admired for a long time, and they decided to take over the company. The firm turned down the firm but was so impressed with his founder that he offered him a job. Why? "Pete gave us access to new writers and new ideas," Evans says. "He introduced people to us who might otherwise have thought that Faber was just an up-market prize publisher."

Townsend’s editorial role was no Mickey Mouse job, despite the incredulous response from commentators at the time. For four years, Townsend came into the office two days a week, read manuscripts, edited them (among others, The Times Magazine) and detailed his own publications. The organisation was overturned. Townsend no longer went into the office, but was retained as a consultant.

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