SPokesMAN SEeks GENERATION

"I'm not in tune with the times – I'm in tune with my generation. It might be I've lost touch with them as well." Pete Townshend meets a recent recruit to the Twickenham rock fraternity, Cass Browne of The Senseless Things. By Sally Margaret Joy

TWICKENHAM, RICHMOND, EALING, CHISWICK, KEW, MOST of Surrey; you'll find more "rock n roll" per leafy square metre here than anywhere else outside California. As West London teenagers, my gang were smugly conscious of, and yet brimming with scorn for, our rock legacy. We were terrified by the thought of hanging out at the (now demolished) Castle in Richmond, where The Rolling Stones had once played. We made jokes about steering wheels being poltergeist-ed out of control whenever we drove past Marc Bolan's tree in Barnes. Cruelly, we'd perform "micro" air guitar solos (blurring your left hand to your diaphragm and wriggling your fingers while looking as though you were about to sneeze) whenever we passed by poor Peter Green on the towpath at Kew.

But we were never ever rude about Pete Townsend. He and his songs were so sussed and angry and devoid of sexual matters (or "creepiness" as we called it), that even in the early '80s he was the perfect hero for righteous teenagers. In the school holidays, groups of us would congregate on the river at a park opposite Eel Pie Island. Perched precariously on the railings, we had a good vantage point of the tall, brown, rectangular building that Pete lived in.

"Do you reckon he's in? SHHHHHHH! His wife's coming out!" And we'd all stare at the woman with long, straight dark hair, as she strode off with the Townsend daughters. She looked purposeful, unself-conscious and beautiful, and we were merely horrible, unfinished creatures of yet indeterminate sex, loitering near an ice cream van.

Our other sacred Pete mecca was his studio by Richmond lock – the studio which, over a decade later, I am standing in today. It's dreamy. Idyllic. Outside is a parched yellow afternoon with the Thames flowing coolly and greenly through it. Zephyrs lift the branches of the big trees, and the rustling sound makes you feel sleepy.

Cass Browne, drummer of The Senseless Things, arrives, yawnning uncontrollably. He's a Twickenham lad who, the local scene being what it is, I've known of since he was 11 – even then he was notorious as a rascal who could drink you out of your parents' house and home. Cass is here because Pete fancied the idea of bringing two generations of Twickenham rocker together. I'd heard that Pete was good friends with Cass. As it turns out, Cass is mates with Pete's daughter Emma, and occasionally sleeps on the Townsend sofa, but the only verbal exchange between them to date has been, Cass: "I sleep." Pete: "Oh."

We're nervous about meeting Pete. I'd heard he can be a bitter, railing git. So it's a delightful shock to meet a calm, sagacious, open-minded and occasionally vulnerable man. Oh, still sussed (he's au fait with the Internet) and angry (he's au fait with what Rupert Murdoch gets up to). But bitter and railing? Where did they get that from? A man whose itinerary for July goes something like: LA, New York, Cornwall, London, Scotland, London, Cornwall, sail for the Scillys can't exactly rail with any conviction now, can he?

I doubt that our last meeting is exactly feared across his memory. It was 13 years ago outside the Peking Inn in Twickenham where I blocked his mission to get a takeaway for his family. I was in agony, hotly aware that I wanted to spark off a meaningful interchange, but was unlikely to be fruitful because I was a smirky kid, a blank slate, and he was a mature rock star, sullen, tired and, in retrospect, drunk. I was grateful that he was only mildly irritated by me and, weirdly, felt exactly the same after our meeting today.

Cass and I settle into the leather furniture and begin.

CASS: Do you think interviews are a valid medium? I think that a lot of what you've done has been an attempt to communicate with people but, to quote a man you something you said in the '60s, "Ninety-nine per cent of the audience is going to be pretty thick", which I do actually agree with, and in that case, why try to appeal to them?

PETE: Your band is unusual because you built a fanbase before you even put a record out. Most bands don't, so they need the media to convince people that their record is valid.

CASS: Possibly. But all of the stuff I've been listening to recently like Beastie Boys, Royal Trux, Ween and Beck, tend to make great, low-fi, underproduced four-track recordings which sell by word of mouth. That's why I don't believe that censorship of books, music or film exists as much as people think. There isn't anything released anywhere that you can't get hold of if you try. All the
PETE: [Deep sigh] Well, maybe. But I do believe in the conspiracy theory. I believe in censorship. I believe in its power, that at a certain point you need good reviews or to be prepared to live in a garret and starve to death. And if they don’t like the fucking colour of you, they’ll bury you.

SMJ: Do you take in a lot of media? I thought maybe you wouldn’t be able to tolerate all the wittering.

PETE: I read the newspapers, the music papers, media magazines, political ones like The Spectator and Private Eye, The Economist, Time...

CASS: But if there was a conspiracy, then by rights all the information in them is already vetted, thereby making them almost redundant.

PETE: I’m conscious of that. But I still believe interviews are good because you do make contact with living human beings, your audience. Newspapers and radio have their functions and people have a requirement of those functions. And there you find your function as an artist is responding to what the audience is requiring.

CASS: Do you think you have to play to that requirement?

PETE: I try to. Because that’s how things were when I started. I’m not in tune with the times. I’m in tune with my generation and am working to their brief, or I like to think I am. It might be I’ve lost touch with them as well.

I wonder what the function of music today, hearing you say that you don’t want to use the music papers or media or record companies or feel any obligation to the audience.

SMJ: The writer Jeanette Winterson also...

PETE: Why are [the critics] slaughtering her?

SMJ: Because she’s a lesbian and a feminist.

PETE: She’s a fucking good writer.

SMJ: Anyway, she said recently that she does feel a responsibility to her audience, and that she feels that, as an artist who at a young age had to tear herself away from everything she knew, she feels a moral imperative to show people courage in their lives.

CASS: I know some people do feel a responsibility to sum up people’s feelings and communicate and others don’t. They’re both as valid. I don’t feel any obligation to make anything for anyone other than myself. And I think that really, when you were writing for a whole generation, Pete, you were just writing about how you felt inside yourself.

PETE: That’s partly true. I could only write from experience. But in the ’60s youth was a new power that demanded we represent it. I got it from kids down the Goldhawk Club saying, “You will speak for us!” Mind you, as soon as I could get out of that gig, I did. But I’m still very conscious of a group of blokes and maybe two or three women, who are between 40 and 50 years old and who are thinking, “Let’s hear if Townshend’s still in tune with us.”

The indictment of the British mind between 40 and 50 is that they think that Mark Knopfler, Phil Collins and Eric Clapton are reflecting their needs.

SMJ: Which have you preferred, being followed—having legions of fans following your progress—or, like when you followed Meher Baba?

PETE: Neither, really. I needed to follow Meher Baba because I was out of step with what was happening in London, where everyone thought God was LSD. I never liked it. I liked what I saw sometimes, but God knows why we didn’t do it because we used to have to take three days off a day because we couldn’t eat, move or shit. Right now, I feel I can best do what I need, and best do what other people want me to do. If I do what I want to do. And I don’t mean it in an egoistic way.

CASS: That’s always the best way. If someone says, “Fuck it! I don’t give a damn about everyone else. I’m gonna do my own stuff,” everyone goes, “Yeah! That’s what I wanted to hear!” Because that’s the emotion that everyone feels.

PETE: But Cass, do you make the important distinction, which is that we’re only talking about artistic thought?

CASS: Yeah.

PETE: What emerged from the acid revolution was the sense that what was good specked you up and what was bad slopped you down. Those values suggest that you are the arbiter of your own morality and that no one can ever tell you something that can help you. And yet, look at Alcoholics Anonymous where people really can help others if they are sincere and if the people who want the help are able to listen. The problem of the people of my generation is that we still have difficulty in trusting any authority figure at all. And I don’t mean police and teachers and politicians, but our own peers. If someone offers you a piece of advice you back off.

CASS: But is that a generation thing? Doesn’t everyone feel like that?

PETE: I find that stuff very difficult. Take someone like Roger Daltrey who’s been alongside me all my life, fights and friendships all the way. We’ve done everything that’s possible for two men to do, and if he turns around to me and says, “Can I give you a bit of advice?” my instinctive thing is [sweat back and pulls face of mock horror] NO! But I should listen to him. Because, in certain respects, he knows me better than I know myself. And I’d like to think that the same is true for him. I wish in a way I could tell him certain things that I know he would listen to. Because I know I could help him. But then he’s got to do what he’s got to do and so have I.

Working in a band, some people defer to others but they’re still there. And if they’re quiet, they’re subversive. John Entwistle never said anything for 20 years but he was always ready to get in there and undermine. He got louder and louder and in the end you go anorgastic. It doesn’t matter whether it’s tortured, good or bad— all you can hear is the bass.

How do you feel about working with that sort of stuff in a group? How do you feel your artistic integrity prevails?

CASS: We just argue and sometimes we argue for the sake of it. But we’re tolerant towards each other. I’ve never felt uncomfortable, and if I ever did I’d say so.

PETE: What I’m needing at is, you’re very passionate about the idea that artistically you should be able to be true to yourself and that suggests there is an

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individual, a self. I mean, OK, you play the drums and, if you don’t mind me saying, the way you play the drums is quite extraordinary and different to other drummers I hear, and it is very much your way of doing it, but the band must have an artistic idea. Do you find someone offering you advice leads to compromise?

CASS: Well, if you compromise you’re satisfied because you know it’s easier that way.

PETE: Whether the result is effective or not?

CASS: If something’s unworkable, then the idea’s kicked out. I’ve honestly never thought about this before.

PETE: I’ve found that it’s the thing that’s finally undermined my ability to work in a group. I can’t be in a group with Daltrey, because although I respect what he has to say and I’m willing to compromise, part of me says, “No, now is the time to be really true to the artistic ideal.” To some extent that comes from a place of frustration out of years of compromise.

CASS: Don’t you ever bounce off people then?

SMJ: It seems to me that there are two basic kinds of band personalities. One like The Who, all wound up and perhaps growing with bad feeling, and the other much more laid-back and harmonious, like Senseless Things. Usually it’s got something to do with how the royalties are shared out.

CASS: Ours are pretty much split.

SMJ: If one person’s taking the majority of the money, the frustration will break the bond in the end. How else have U2 managed to stay together for so long?

PETE: If you get all the money, you get all the control. God! The politics of running a group. Anyway, I don’t want to go on with a band. Yesterday, I spent some time with Roger who’s off to LA and Japan with a band — which I have no problems with. I just feel that what I want to do now is indecisive and I feel that’s quite exciting. I’ve been in this position for quite a long time now, since the band stopped in 1982. I did some concerts for my last album last year and I liked the concerts but I didn’t like the response to the record. I felt I’d wasted a lot of energy, so I’ve just cancelled my record deal. It’s great to be in that position but I don’t want you to know it’s the right response. But I can almost make mistakes and get away with it; and I’m free to do whatever I feel is going to give me the most pleasure.

One interesting thing that’s prevailed through my life is that people have got attached to the idea that the work I’ve done has been driven by desperation, violence, frustration and angst, and misery and self-loathing. Yet I did enjoy it all throughout the years. I don’t know whether it was an act or whatever, I was just happiest being miserable.

CASS: Listening to the box set, I was aware that there was so much humour there, in all the jingles and in all the comedy in something like Pictures Of Lily, but The Who were always taken very seriously. Nowadays there’s no room for bands to get away with that level of humour without being immediately written off.

SMJ: I was thinking how weird it was that when I was about 12 or 13, kids would giggle chirpily along to Keith singing Fiddle About from Tommy, but listening to it now, well, we’re talking child abuse here, aren’t we?

CASS: No one took a song like that seriously or would assume that it would cause an outbreak of paedophilia. Nowadays, every song is held up to close scrutiny and, well, that’s why when you hear Gs And Hustles by Snoop Doggy Dogg, you just think, ‘This is funny.’ When I hear someone bumping him off between tracks, that makes me laugh. Everyone knows it isn’t real. Hearing a song like Fiddle About makes me laugh.

PETE: Well, when Uncle Ernie’s song was written it was fucking outrageous to talk about that stuff. I commissioned John Entwistle to write it. He said, “Why don’t you write it? Why do I have to write all the pervert’s songs?” I said, “Cos it actually happened to me and I don’t want it to be a serious song.”

In the Broadway show, it starts off, “I’m your wicked uncle Ernie,” and there’s always a tapping of gaggles from the audience — ha ha, here’s the comedy song, we know what to do, we laugh! Then they realise they can’t laugh any more because of Oprah and others who’ve tried to laugh it and made it a big open debate.

SMJ: I find the character of Tommy really unsympathetic and scary: deaf, dumb and blind, and a right hard-facc’d bastard to boot. Yet there must be a trace of autobiography in such a big work. Is that character part of you?

PETE: Yes. At the time I had the sensation that I was trying to get in touch with my spirituality when all I could be in touch with was what I liked musically, what was good to wear, how often I got laid, how much money I had, and how popular I was. When I started to write the piece I thought, What can I use as a metaphor for this feeling of being completely disabled as a spiritual person and, Why am I disabled? Was it because, you know, I used to sing in the choir and the rector was a pervert, or something?

I couldn’t get with love and peace and the LSD thing. I felt deaf, dumb and blind to those values. When I got into Meher Baba I realised that I’d been using my mind and my ego to tell myself there wasn’t such a thing as spirituality because I’d been afraid of where I might go. After six months I wanted to write about what I’d learnt and I did Tommy.

SMJ: Most bands have songs with ‘I love my special lady’ as their whole raison d’être. Your songs don’t. Your women characters tend to be either a put-upon mum who’s lovely but distant, and too busy coping with the demands of a relationship, or the Acid Queen, the witch who’ll do nasty things to you. What do you say to that?

PETE: It seems like analysis.

PETE: I met my wife when I was 18. I started going out with her when I was 19, and I’m still married to her now. So I’ve hit this very strong, beautiful, smart woman in my life the whole time. It gave me a very positive relationship and left the Freudian stuff untouched.

But I’ve got a real grievance with my mother who ran off for two years when I was four and kinda dumped me with my grandmother. My mum was a post-war mum. She’d driven trucks, got married too young to a handsome musician and was worried that it wouldn’t work. She met an all man and she was going to go off to Aden. I wouldn’t have minded being dumped with my gran except my gran was mad. So I ended up with a real deep streak of familial misogyny.

Now, I really do love women. At every level. What I can’t come to grips with is that when I write, I write a lot about that gran and about that mother. And the gran is the evil old witch, maybe even sometimes the mother too, and the woman I write about is that beautiful, beautiful woman who left me, who’s come to visit every weekend and dress up for it! In heels and stockings and beautiful clothes and lipstick with her hair done and I’d go, “My mum is so fucking gorgeous I wanna go with her.” Not because she was a great mother, but because she was beautiful. So I’ve ended up with a distorted idea about what makes a woman the right woman in my life at any particular time.

I chose my wife because she was beautiful, not because she was a good person. I was lucky she turned out to be a good person. I could have done a lot of men in my position have done and gone through 20 or 30 identical women, constantly in search of that kindred spirit.

When my parents finally got back together they brought my fucking grandmother with them. So I always had this confused idea of who was in charge. Gran got all the dirty work and my mum got all the glam work. I spent from age seven onwards getting used to quite a normal, loving family, but in a way it was too late. I’m not saying it was damage. It was just complicated. The way that I talk to my mother about it now is I say, “Listen mum, don’t worry about it. It’s been very useful.” It’s given me an acute view of relationships. I don’t really write about relationships so I don’t often have to deal with it, but when I have to create a woman in a play or a story, she might as well be made out of papier mâché. It’s terrible. I just can’t do it.

CASS: So, what’s your reacion to playing on again?

PETE: I don’t know. You know who I envy right now? Someone like Neil Young who can get up onstage with a guitar, sit on a stool and just play without moving. You see a look of his hair move and it’s enough. He can really work that MTV thing.

SMJ: But why can’t you just get up there with a guitar?

PETE: My problem is that whenever I stand up with a guitar, I can’t help moving and I feel like Trendy Dad, the character in the Mary Whitehouse Experience [He puts on a fishlike expression, shows out his behind and waggles it]. And I can’t go to gigs anymore because I think, Uh-oh, it’s mutton time.

CASS: You can do what you want, can’t you?

PETE: Ah, I know I can do what I want, but I don’t want to do that.
1965, Pete Townshend makes an early attempt at an out-of-body experience. “When I got into Meher Baba I realised that I’d been using my ego to tell myself there wasn’t such a thing as spirituality.”