Pete Townshend has always courted controversy and so now the original angry young man is rock’s curmudgeonly old geezer. Gibson Keddie dodges the flying Zimmer frame.

Throughout their career The Who have always been particularly adept at producing tangibly relevant and occasionally definitive music from the mass of seemingly confused energies, both internal and external, which legendarilly pervaded the band. One of the advantages, therefore, of the newly-released and hugely enjoyable four CD box set retrospective of The Who, ‘50 Years Of Maximum R&B’, is that it allows the listener just that: some retrospective on a band which made the rules while simultaneously breaking them.

Thirty years is, however, an impressive timespan, for a band for whom it frequently looked like the next 30 seconds might be terminal.

“Well, we didn’t really make 30 years did we? In reality it was more like 18%, so that’s mainly record company license,” explains Pete Townshend somewhat disarmingly, whilst ensconced in the aircon comfort of Twickenham’s Eel Pie Studios, on what is, outside, a blindingly hot, sticky humid late-June day.

Box Set Go

“Actually, there was a personal sense of discomfort with the box set which receded after I saw the package. I didn’t have much to do with putting it together, but once I saw it I was conscious of two sensations. One was that, at last, here’s a collection which is not so much definitive but a good collection which possesses a “warts and all” feel of the band’s strengths and weaknesses. The prevailing feeling is that the band was fun, and that’s really great. By contrast, The Who...
have been attributed with so much of rock’s nihilism and decadence over the years, mainly because we were a spearhead which went into places before anyone else. Then the things that we started went wrong: stadium rock, rock opera and laser shows, things that we were always piddling around with. Even ‘hope I die before I get old’ became a symbol of certain aspects of rock culture that were necessarily bad, so I feel good about some perspective being offered on that.

“The other reason I feel good is that the box set has put a full stop on The Who’s career; it’s finally been laid to rest, so there’s a personal sense of relief.”

Doesn’t the thought of trawling the memoirs of more than 30 years in order to explain the retrospective become wearing?

“It might do more than for the fact that it’s so good. It’s strange, but it comes hard on the heels of me spending a year plugging ‘Tommy’ in America for Broadway where I’ve been talking constantly about the show’s genesis and where exactly it fits in rock’n’roll. I thought I’d find that very, very difficult, but there’s a couple of things happening at the moment which make it refreshing, not least a whole new clutch of fresh and interesting British groups which owe some allegiance to early Who.

“The other thing that dignifies the past period for me is that they’ve managed to find good videos to include in the video collection, although the sound is a bit crappy. After we did ‘The Kids Are Alright’ film I thought that we’d found everything, so it was great to find another batch of good performance stuff.”

Despite the ups and downs The Who always appeared unafraid of stepping outside the circle.

“Oh, we were afraid,” adds Pete quietly, “but we did it anyway.”

Hope I Die Before I Get Old

“The interesting thing about getting perspective on statements like that is you tend to freeze them, not so much in terms of being held to account, but rather for where they actually came from. As you get older you remember the early years of your life with much greater clarity than recent years,

“The smash-ups started off as us pretending to do certain things on stage, but they then became real releases when we were frustrated about the sound, or the audience not paying us enough attention”

which by contrast fade very quickly. Last year has already started to fade with me. It’s not important somehow, whereas the year I was in my little flat writing My Generation is, as are the feelings that I had at the time. ‘Hope I die before I get old’ has always been banished about as a kind of nihilist rock’n’roll pre-echo which leads directly or indirectly to the death of someone like Kurt Cobain. The fact of the matter is that it wasn’t nihilistic at all, but exactly the opposite; it was life affirming: I will be forever young. I hope I die before I get old, I hope I live in this place that I’m in now forever – I never ever want to be like you older people who’ve forgotten what it’s like to feel like this, to feel as marginalised, as frustrated, as excited about being alive as I am today. Tremendous anger in there, and also determination. My Generation has become a symbol of a great wall that came down.”

Smash The Mirror

The Mod cult was primarily one of a heady combination of existentialism and hedonism, where youth was celebrated in an orgy of smart clothes (What about parkas? – Fashion Ed)
and mass pill-fuelled bank holiday weekend gross-outs. The Who (whilst still The High Numbers) caught the mood with their first single *I'm The Face* written by ace Mod (and later ‘Quadrophenia' subject material) Pete Meaden: “All the others are third class tickets by me baby, is that clear? I'm the Face.”

“It was a completely different value system which attributed the celebrity with a different function,” explains Townsend. “I inherited a Mod philosophy from Pete Meaden where the function of the rock group was as a mirror to the audience; what they did, what they felt. We kept that up until 'Tommy' where I suddenly realised in conversation years later that the mirror gets smashed in the song.

“I don't know whether it was us that abandoned the Mods or vice versa, or whether the movement just fell apart. Certainly, around the time of 'Tommy' that was all at an end; we went off to America and, in a sense, I don't think we ever really came back.”

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**March Of The Mods**

“In a way The Yardbirds were the only band that had a following like The Who. We had a residency at the Goldhawk in Shepherd's Bush and they had one at the Athletic Club just over the river with a similar scene going, which was pre-Rolling Stones hysteria; at the time they played various clubs all over the place. The Yardbirds were also reflecting their audience, but when Eric left the band they stopped, after they brought Jeff Beck in from The Tridents. Eric was always the one people went to look at, he was a face. I used to see him in the street before I knew he was in a band; he'd visit the Ealing Club as a member of the audience, wearing a Seersucker jacket and short hair, looking like King Mod. The first time I met him to talk to we were both in Ainsty which sold American clothing in Shaftesbury Avenue. I said, You're Eric from The Yardbirds, aren't you? and he replied, Yeah, but I'm leaving. I'm going to work with John Mayall. I just thought, John f***ing Mayall? Talk about the antithesis of style – a great hairy man who sang the blues on a Hammond organ. So The Yardbirds briefly mirrored the audience. But there aren't many other examples. Perhaps The Beatles had it briefly at the Cavern, I don't know.”

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**Marshall Law**

“Before John, Keith and I got into personal volume competitions, one of the first reasons I went to Jim Marshall to say ‘build me a big Marshall amp’ was because I wanted to shut the ****ing audience up. I was sick of standing playing in the Oldfield Hotel only to get Reggie Kray types in suits coming up during numbers to say (adopts Hale & Pace ‘The Management' voice), It's my girlfriend's birthday – play the Tennessee Waltz. I'd try to put them off, We don't actually know it... then he'd say, Play the f***ing Tennessee Waltz otherwise it's the starting handle for you. So we'd be going 'I was waltzing/With my darling/To the Tennessee Waltz', looking at one another thinking, F*** this, as Reggie Kray or whoever waltzes round with his girl, sticks his thumb up to us, Well done, fellas. We had to do something. Johnny McLaughlin [yes, that one] had sold me my first Fender amp - a Pro - when he worked at Selmers, and it was a really great buy. I eventually took the Fender Pro and a Bassman head to Jim Marshall and said, I want this sound but I want it 10 times louder. When he asked why, I said, Because I don't want to hear any heckling, I don't want to hear any requests. All we want to hear when we're in a hall is The Who - that's all. We're there so that they can hear themselves. We're not there to hear them. Jim Marshall was amazingly inspired; I realise now that Jim was an angry young man too, though a few years older than me. But he was like the crooks' weapon builder, like Uzi or Kalashnikov, and the enemy was the previous generation. He built a big, powerful amp, but I kept going back and saying, Bigger, bigger, and Jim would turn to his backroom bloke and say, Bigger; Pete wants it bigger, and so the amps would come back with yet another couple of big valves in the back.

“I know this sounds a bit like Margaret Thatcher, but it actually felt that I'd been elected to do that job up on stage. After I wrote I Can't Explain a deputation of people came to tell me that I had to do more work like that. I had the ‘O”

*Guitarist August 1994*
"The Who was very much a pop band, Hendrix was the psychedelic guitar artist, and Cream were Cream."
levels, they reasoned, so it fell to me to articulate their feelings; well, okay, but f***ing leave me to get on with it. Stop coming up and asking for requests. If you want somebody else up here then put somebody else up here, but I’m up here now and I’m going to do it my way; and it worked very well.

Marshalls Invade America

“We took the whole equipment thing to America, lock stock and barrel. Coincidentally, Cream arrived with exactly the same amp rigs, as did Jimi Hendrix. Jimi and his manager Chas Chandler had previously come to see me to ask about buying amps. I said that I’d just stopped using Marshall amps at that time and was using a new rig called Sound City, which became HiWatt, and I said I thought Sound City were better. Chas, being a canny Georgie, turns to Jimi and says, One of each, I think.

We did a show with Jimi later at the Saville Theatre where he had Marshall and Sound City stacks together. So we all arrived in the States within a couple of months of each other with this formidable weaponry, used in different ways. The Who was very much a pop band, Hendrix was the psychedelic guitar artist, and Cream were Cream. I think we all helped one another, and it was like a tidal wave. The Americans couldn’t believe it. They’d had The Beatles, the Stones and The Animals, what could possibly follow that? Then we three showed up...

Following major acts with more major acts...

“Even louder acts.”

Get Working

“Our first American tour was supporting Herman’s Hermits; 30 minutes a show, two shows every night, and 300 cities in 30 weeks. Talk about disciplined – we would always be doing these long tours, disciplined to doing concert after concert, trying to get out of it but never having the time. Never having the time to make friends or get distracted by relationships, love affairs, anything like that. Just gig after gig after gig, but we sounded good by the end of a tour. A good example was the first Isle of Wight festival, when we returned after a long US tour. We arrived in a helicopter which actually crash landed, and as we fell out, Keith broke both his ankles. How can you play a double kit with both ankles broken? He reckoned he’d still play because the doctor was going to give him morphine. Halfway through the set, he had to have another morphine injection, and he’s playing merrily away. A f***ing great gig. We’d just arrived from space and played like a f***ing engine.”

Future Shock

Is the idea of cultural pockets following certain bands still applicable?

“I think it hasn’t been applicable for some time but it’s returning; the audience are what’s happening, and a band’s role is therefore not purely a musical one. A lot of that got lost in drugs and dance music, techno and acid jazz, but the group scene has been revitalised now with Blur, Smash and others. I know about them, because they owe some allegiance to The Who. The problem at the moment is that bands seem to come and go very quickly with no build up of experience which comes over a long period of time like five years. If you’re only a hit band for 18 months, what you’ve learnt is lost when you break up. You can’t put it to use in any other walk of life and it’s sad to see bands like The Las, who were a spectacular band, make one album. What happened to that incredible vision and understanding? They were like historians coming along and saying this is what comes out of what was, and they did it so well. The Who are 30 years on, so I have all of this accumulative experience of what rock’n’roll is about, and all I can really do is talk about it. I can’t do it anymore, and it irks me to see bands come and go so quickly. I think it would be better to have fewer bands but lasting longer, but it doesn’t seem to be the way at the moment. It doesn’t seem to be the way that the world is going, either with proliferation of media; more specialised magazines selling less numbers, more cable channels reaching less viewers and that’s the way it’s going to go. In the end we’ll all be buying our music directly from the artist. Possibly even in relationships which are as acute as 500 to 1,000 people keeping one artist alive.”

Thirty Years Hard Labour

Thirty years of maximum aggro; couldn’t you have made each other’s lives slightly easier? After all, surely you were all in the same place musically that you wanted to be?

“But don’t think we were. There were problems. The Who’s second single was Anyway, Anyhow, Anyplace co-written with Roger, and subverted in the process. Roger didn’t want to do another song written by Pete Townsend. He didn’t want me taking control of the group. So we co-wrote a song that I had called Anyway, Anyhow, Anyplace, about the freedom of the spirit.”
conceived whilst listening to Charlie Parker. The first verse was: 'I can go anywhere, I can do anything anyway I choose' – the soul being liberated through music. Roger’s contributions were ‘I can break through locked doors’ [laughs] – you know, that kind of thing. But it was useful because it allowed him to sing the song. But we had different musical agendas: John Entwistle wanted to be Duane Eddy, Keith wanted to be in Jan and Dean or The Beach Boys. Roger and I were both R&B fans, but I was a total R&B addict. I didn’t really like rock’n’roll, to be honest. We were very narrow with a lot of in-fighting. It was difficult to make records with the band, even to keep them in the studio.

“We did have great managers, and were very lucky in that respect. We went to Sweden in 1965 to do our first and last tour there. Keith and I were taking pills, borrowing equipment to do the gigs, we didn’t even take guitars with us. We were smashing up other bands’ equipment, really a tour on the cheap. Roger ended up getting upset with Keith and me, and started having a go at us. Keith lashed out at Roger, who then floored Keith. John held him off, but we decided that we couldn’t be in a band with somebody like Roger and sacked him. I felt that, well, that’s got rid of him then, I’m in charge now. We did a number of shows as a three piece, then Keith stopped appearing, and John and I were playing with the drummer from The Pretty Things. Keith was apparently forming a new group with Jimmy Page called Led Zeppelin which our managers got wind of, and got us all back together again to tell us we were under contract to work as The Who. Various points were made, which we all agreed to, so The Who went on, and Roger never used his fists again.”

Reappraisal

“The smash-ups started off as us pretending to do certain things on stage, or to illustrate certain things, but they then became real releases when we were frustrated about the sound, or we were angry about the audience not paying us enough attention. We eventually realised that the band had swapped roles, and our formula was very special as a result. Effectively, I was the drummer, John was the lead guitarist and Keith was the 100 piece symphony orchestra – then we were okay! I became the metronome of the group. Even when I played solos what you heard was me pumping solos rhythmically. It was very rare to hear me just hold a note because if I did that for more than four bars the whole rhythm fell apart. Keith could play rhythm well, but he just didn’t have to most of the time, so he abandoned it. He would always be doing decorative stuff. If you slow down certain Who recordings and listen to what he’s doing it’s incredibly decorative, complex, lyrical and ambitious, and doesn’t always come off. He was decorating, creating colour and expression. It just felt very powerful, a bit like riding a horse; not always under control but going very fast.”

Age Concern

“Now that The Who’s career is laid to rest, I’m trying to continue the personal diversification that started in 1982, after we stopped recording. I’m experimenting with a number of musical ideas which involve songwriting and interesting use of words, and less and less obsession with my lost role as a performer in The Who. I look at performers like Leonard Cohen, Lou Reed or Paul Simon with mixed feelings, because I think, I could do that. I toured with ‘Psychoderelic’ last year, and that show was over three-and-a-half hours long. I enjoyed it, and I played f***ing well. So in a sense, that’s there for me if I want it, but... I was tremendously impressed by watching both Eric Clapton and Neil Young performing last year. Eric did his blues night, no Layla or Badge or anything like that; just faithfully copied blues songs all night, and he was stating who he was and what his terms were. Neil Young did ‘Unplugged’, sat on a chair and gave a masterful rock music performance without moving a f***ing muscle, so older...
performers can advance the craft with tremendous dignity. Unfortunately, when I get on stage I start dancing about like those mums and dads from hell that teenagers hate. They wiggle their butts and think they look groovy but no they f***ing aren’t – I’m one of those, I’m afraid. But music makes me want to dance, it always did, and so I’ve got to learn to sit on a chair and stay there.

“I’ve cancelled my record deal and have no plans at the moment to make another record, though if I’m going to be some kind of backroom boy I’ve got to become a better writer, because I’m no Tom Stoppard. I don’t even know that I could write songs anymore.

“I always kind of get a feeling that I’d quite like to write for Roger, but I don’t know that I could do it. But I like to watch what he’s doing very closely. He’s going out with his ‘Roger Daltrey Sings The Music Of Pete Townshend’ concert with a symphony orchestra (with a band including Geoff Whitehorn – see page 172), and I’m crossing my fingers for him. I spoke to him yesterday about it and he’s very committed to it. He’s not certain it’ll work and he’s already had tremendous critical problems in New York, but he’s still going on with it.

“But ‘Tommy’ is getting great reviews on Broadway, and will be touring internationally next year, so I’m involved in the planning for that. Animated film music is another area which is proving to be fun, as is music theatre for the radio.”

Will the legendary ‘Lifehouse’ project ever get finished? [The abandoned ‘Lifehouse’ concept album produced arguably some of The Who’s best songs which instead became ‘Who’s Next’.]

“I don’t think so. I looked at it last year as a possible final Who project. There may well be a Lifehouse Hotel chain one
day; I didn’t realise when I was writing it that it’s not actually about the lost chord – it’s about a better class of room service, really…”

Pete Townshend; relevant as ever.

**Impact**

We’ve all lived with The Who’s material for some quarter of a century plus, becoming blasé about the power of the songs and the band who performed them. Witnessing the early Who blitzkrieging some tiny club must have been a truly apocalyptic experience at a time when there were generally only polite professional performances. The toppish Mod look of the band contrasted totally with shows which verged on the psychotic; a young Pete Townshend windmilling out power chords, then standing in a signature ‘birdman’ pose – arms stretched out in crucifix stance, guitar left hanging loose around his neck, screaming through Marshall stacks in a sonic frenzy of harmonic feedback.

There only ever was one Who.  

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A Who Riffology by Adrian Clark

No interview with Pete Townshend would be complete without a guitaristic compendium of crunch and so warm up those Hiwatt stacks, strap on a Les Paul and practise those windmills.

1. To start with, here’s an example of Townshend-style simplicity in the shape of the main chord motif from Won’t Get Fooled Again, one minute and 40 seconds into the track. The only chords used are open A, G and D, yet the riff has an unmistakable punch, due to the tightness and force of Townshend’s strumming.

2. This example follows immediately on from the previous one. Here, the underlying chord progression is even simpler — just A and G — but Townshend spices it up with sparse partial chords, giving them a funky feel by accenting some of the upbeat (an upbeat being the second 8th note of each beat).
3. Pete Townshend’s use of chordal embellishments is often demonstrated with the verse part of Pinball Wizard, containing those famous sus 4/major resolutions. However, the intro of the same song is an even richer source. Over an 8th note F# pedal tone, he superimposes a sophisticated sounding chord progression, making good use of ‘voice leading’; in other words, moving from one chord to the next with a minimum of movement between the individual notes (or ‘voices’).

4. Staying with Pinball Wizard, this riff – 47 seconds into the track – returns to the raw simplicity of Ex 1. Use just a little distortion (or Hiwatt amps if you’re fortunate enough to have any!) and really whack those strings. (Remember, Pete once hit a chord on a Stratocaster so hard that it drove the tremolo arm through his hand!)

5. The intro/chorus riff from I’m Free is pared down a stage further – all the chords here are root 5th diads. Use downstrokes throughout, and remember that this comes from a time before such riffs had become a heavy metal cliché.

6. Another intro/chorus riff, this time from Substitute, illustrates another side of Townshend’s minimalist approach. Over an open D string pedal tone, he plays two note voicings of D, A and G chords, making for a catchy, melodic hook which also outlines the chord progression.
It's every working guitarist's dream to be asked to do a world tour with one of the biggest rock bands ever. It can happen, too: it happened to Steve Bolton

The Who Loves Ya, Baby

Steve Bolton

The likes of Paul Young, Steven Bishop, Marianne Faithfull and Wendy James have all enjoyed the guitaristic attentions of Steve 'Boltz' Bolton. He has wielded his distinctive yellow Strat with the best of 'em, but possibly his finest hour started when he was immersed in a personal slough of despond.

"I was having a weird sort of year where I had a few personal troubles and was even thinking of giving it all up, but in the middle of all this chaos the phone rang and it was Pete Townshend and he said, 'Boltz, I've got one question to ask you: Will you play lead guitar for The Who on their 25th Anniversary tour? So I covered up the mouthpiece, did three somersaults round the room and then said, Well, isn't this a bit silly? Aren't you the lead guitar player for The Who? And then he explained about his hearing problem and said he just wanted to play acoustic. I was very flattered because I'd only met him once, but apparently he'd watched me on various videos and seen me play live a few times and he said, There are only three guys I could envisage doing this gig: one's Joe Walsh. I said, We can't have him, he's not English! You can't have Americans in The Who, it wouldn't be cricket! So that was it, really. Pete said, Look. As far as I'm concerned I want you to do the job. I suppose we could get together and have a bit of a blow together - a sort of audition - but as far as I'm concerned you've got it.

"He asked me over to the studio, telling me to bring an acoustic, so I went over to Eel Pie and met him. Pete asked one of his engineers to get his Gibson J1200 and when he opened the case the guitar just snapped the bridge flew off! I was quite relieved really, I mean, I didn't want to sit there with an acoustic guitar. I wanted to plug into an amp and make some noise! But anyway, I said, See that Pete; you just look at a guitar and it just smashes itself up! This must tell you something! So it was great: we rehearsed for weeks on end without the actual band being there, while John, Roger and Pete went off around America, doing pre-tour promo.

"Now this was supposed to be a quiet tour; I>
was told I had to use a really, really small amp – 25 watts, something ridiculous – and then Entwistle turns up with this bass rig the size of a house! So I ended up using five Mesa/Boogie stacks and I still couldn’t hear what I was playing! It was unbelievable. With The Ox, it’s like, heads down, let’s go! I remember Simon Phillips looking at me in sheer panic, going, What do I do now? I said, F*** it, let’s just play! And it was great fun."

And if Boltz was ever unfortunate enough to be marooned...

“My desert island guitar is my ’61 Strat; I’ve had it ages. I bought it for £210 and it was this horrible hand-painted yellow colour, but I thought I’d just buy it and change the colour. I had it set up by the guy who does Jeff Beck’s guitars and I never got the colour changed so in the end it became synonymous with me if you like, sort of like a recognisable thing. Anyway, it’s a good colour because if you’re on stage, a certain combination of lights can make it look salmon pink. So just by flicking the switch I can add two-and-a-half thousand pounds more value on to it! But yeah, that’s my thing, that yellow Strat; it’s bog standard – although I’ve had a five-way switch and a brass bridge put on. After I’d had the guitar about six months I put a DiMarzio Fat Strat in the bridge which didn’t make any difference whatsoever! The only difference is that it’s been dipped in wax and so it doesn’t squeal. But it stays in tune; you can throw it around the stage and pick it up by the tremolo arm and it just won’t go out of tune! It’s an amazing thing.”

What about amplification?

“I ended up using Mesa/Boogie when I was with Paul Young but I didn’t really want to; I’m not really a big fan because they’re all so different. But this one I’ve got is a Simulclass model with a JBL speaker in it. If I use it with a Marshall 4x12 cabinet it’s really an amazing sound. There’s actually something wrong with this Mesa/Boogie, and it’s been like it for about five years; I think the lead channel is not giving me as much sustain as it should do; it’s giving me some, but if you turn the volume down you don’t get enough; so now I’m using a Marshall Guv’nor pedal with it. You know what guitar players are like; they won’t change their sound and so I’ve just left it like that and it sounds brilliant.”

Having enjoyed the considerable limelight of a high-profile tour, Boltz’s new project involves his own band.

“After The Who I met these two brothers, Jim and Bob Kimberley, who play bass and drums. We played together and I thought, Well, this is it; this is my band – I want a three piece band. We did some tracks for a couple of independent labels but about a year ago I was getting quite busy, so I sort of demolished the whole thing and said, I’ll see you later. But now I’ve re-formed the band again with another bass player and I think we’re going to release an EP. This is the stuff that I’m most pleased with; it’s my own stuff I’m really concentrating on at the moment.”