As the leader of the Who, guitarist/composer Pete Townshend explored a vast terrain of music that was both earth-shattering in its power and intellectually stimulating. He covered the gamut from pure pop rockers (“My Generation,” “I Can’t Explain,” “Substitute”) to ambitious concept pieces (the rock operas Tommy and Quadrophenia). Though Pete often joked, “We would never allow our music to get in the way of our stage show,” the Who catalog has surely stood the test of time. In this career retrospective, we’ll take a close look at Pete’s guitar playing in his 30-year stint with the legendary Who, and how it changed rock music permanently.

In January, 1965, the Who released their first single, “I Can’t Explain,” a catchy song, both lyrically and musically, that is driven by power chords played on a Rickenbacker electric 12-string. Figure 1a is similar to the intro rhythm part. This pattern is repeated, with a slight variation in bar 4, for the verse (see Fig. 1b). What are today commonly referred to as “power chords” may very well have originated with Pete Townshend, though Pete himself points to the influence of classical composer Henry Purcell, who favored the use of two-note chords without thirds. The chords shown here are comprised of root notes and fifths above, with an octave root note on top; because of their compact, punchy sound, these root/fifth end root/fifth/root chords are known as “power chords.” As the Who grew in popularity, power chords became synonymous with the name Pete Townshend.

Pete’s first solo, like Figure 1c, is based primarily on the E minor-pentatonic scale (E, G, A, B, D). Notice how single-note lines are combined with two-, three-, and four-note chords. Bridging the gap between rhythm and lead playing in this fashion is another Pete Townshend signature.

The Who became regulars on a popular English music show of the mid-Sixties, Ready Steady Go!, and their second single, “Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere,” became the show’s theme song. “Anyway, Anyhow,
Anywhere" is notable as the first song for which Pete recorded multitudes of guitar effects, such as feedback, rapid-fire toggle switching and pick slides. The band's next single, released in November of '65, went on to become their anthem and one of the most influential rock songs of all time: "My Generation" captured the raw energy, frustration and attitude of the youth scene and quickly rose to #2 in the UK, the highest charting single in the band's history.

Figure 2a is a riff similar to the song's four-bar intro rhythm figure; notice the switch from G5 power chords (bars 1 and 3) to an F single-note figure, with the subtle addition of the open D string. The open D, present throughout the riff, provides a suspended tonality that holds it all together, subtle though it may be. The verse riff, like Figure 2b, begins with a single-note figure for two bars and returns to the primary figure in bars 3 and 4. For the chorus rhythm part, Pete moves between G, Gsus4, G5 and G7 chords, employing the open D and G strings throughout, as in Figure 2c. (With the release of Tommy, and "Pinball Wizard" in particular, the use of suspended chords would become yet another Townshend trademark.) Following Entwistle's ferocious bass breaks, the verse riff, similar to Figure 2d, modulates up a whole step to A. Notice that Townshend subtly includes the E note (the fifth of A) in the G single-note figure.

At the end of '65, the Who released their first album, The Who Sings My Generation, featuring eight originals and four cover tunes (including James Brown's "Please, Please, Please"). The album also includes the instrumental "The Ox," which is a showcase for Pete's mastery of feedback (he actually demolished a guitar in the studio during the recording). The band's next single, "Substitute," was the first song the Who produced themselves and it quickly became another Who favorite. The opening guitar riff, like Figure 3a, is based on moving triads over an open D pedal and grabs you immediately. (Pete would later expand on this moving triads/pedal concept on "Pinball Wizard" and "Sparks" from Tommy.) Figure 3b brings to mind the pre-chorus single-note riff, which is based on the E minor-pentatonic scale. Playing a heavy single-note riff in this fashion, doubled an octave lower by the bass, was considered innovative in early 1966, and would soon become a staple of heavy
metal. Be sure to check out the great live version of this song on Live At Leeds.

The band's next single was the eminently catchy "I'm A Boy," originally intended as
the centerpiece of what would have been Pete's first rock opera, to be enti-
tled Quads. He instead penned the nine-minute "A Quick One (While He's Away)" for the
band's upcoming A Quick One LP. Released in December of '66, the album featured
the song "Happy Jack," which by March had become the Who's first U.S. hit.

A humorous nursery-rhyme of a tune, "Hap-
ny Jack" opens with a palm-muted single
note figure in D major not unlike Figure 4a.
In the pre-chorus, similar to Figure 4b, Pete
demonstrates his well-balanced approach to
arranging complementary rhythm guitar parts,
abutting sustained chords with furious 16th-
note-triplet strumming. This flamenco-like
strumming is yet another Townshend tech-
nique which he would expand upon in the
future (check out the magnificent solo acous-
tic version of "Won't Get Fooled Again," from
The Secret Policeman's Ball).

The band's next single, released in April
of '67, was the controversial "Pictures Of
Lily," a song about a boy's "fascination"
with a young woman's photograph. The
verse riff, similar to Figure 5a, combines
sustained chords with a descending bass
figure, creating harmonic and rhythmic
counterpoint within a single rhythm guitar
part. The chorus riff again features high
chord voicings with a descending bass fig-
ure similar to Figure 5b, creating yet anoth-
er melodic and equally rhythmic part.
Notice the muted 16th-note-triplet strum-
mimg in the last bar.

In October of 1967 The Who released
the powerful "I Can See For Miles," a suc-
cess in the U.S., but not the chart-topper
Townshend hoped it would be in the U.K.
The concept of playing high chord voicings
over a bass pedal tone is again in evi-
dence, during both the verse and chorus
sections, as in Figures 5a and 6b. Notice
in Figure 6b the constant open high-E ring-
ing through the ascending triads.

Following The Who Sell Out (November
'67), which featured "I Can See For Miles"
plus the classics "Mary Ann With The
Shaky Hand," "Tattoo" and "Rael" (a song
cycle which included what was to become
the theme of "Sparks" and "Underture"
from Tommy), Pete began work on what
some consider his greatest achievement,
the rock opera Tommy. In the interim, the
Who released the Bo Diddley-esque single
"Magic Bus," which is played mostly on
acoustic guitar, capoed at the 3rd fret.

Tommy's first single, released in March of
'69, was the timeless classic "Pinball Wiz-

[Music notation and diagrams]
"Wizard" begins on page 123. Performed on an acoustic guitar, the song begins with a series of chord voicings played against a repeated F# pedal tone and culminates with the heavily-strummed Bsus4-B chord figure. Notice in particular the use of accents within the strum pattern, which create a "threes on fours" type of syncopation. The verse rhythm figure moves down in successive whole steps—B to A, then A to G—and ends with a half-step descent from G to F#. This is then followed by a classic power chord sequence; illustrated in the transcription is the electric part, which is essentially doubled by the acoustic. Just prior to the final verse, the song modulates up a minor third from the key of B to D, with the riff starting at the 10th fret. One of Pete's most potent compositions is the previously mentioned "Sparks," rear-
ranged as a part of "Underture;" both pieces appear on Tommy. The Who recorded two powerful live versions of "Sparks": one from Woodstock, included on The Kids Are Alright soundtrack, and one on The Who: Live At Leeds, included as a part of what is listed as a 14-minute version of "My Generation." On Tommy, "Sparks" and "Underture" are played on a guitar tuned down a minor third (low to high: C# F#, B, E, G#, C#). On The Kids Are Alright and Live At Leeds, the song is played in standard tuning. Figure 7 brings to mind the first theme of "Sparks" as it was performed at Woodstock (The Kids Are Alright). On the recording Pete plays a series of triads on the top three strings against the open D string.

Another guitar masterpiece from Tommy is the solo acoustic section of "Overture," played in "dropped D" tuning (low to high: D, A, D, G, B, E), where Pete touches on country, blues and rock and roll, all wrapped up and delivered in his own inimitable style.

When Pete's Lifehouse project (1971) failed to materialize [see accompanying story], a handful of the songs intended for the work were put together for Who's Next.
Recorded with a mobile unit at Stargroves, Mick Jagger's country home, every song on this watershed album is a masterpiece. The remaining Lifehouse material appeared subsequently on Odds And Sods and as singles.

From this group of songs comes what is surely one of Pete's most outstanding compositions, "Behind Blue Eyes." The intro and verse rhythm part, similar to Figure 8, is based on a series of arpeggiated open chords played with a flatpick.

"Won't Get Fooled Again" and "Baba O'Reilly," both from Who's Next, feature synthesizer loops and are fueled by crushing power chord verse and chorus figures. Figure 9 illustrates a rhythm figure similar to the "Won't Get Fooled Again" verse. Another power chord-driven song from Who's Next is "Bargain," similar to Figure 10. Also from Who's Next is "Going Mobile," which features a cool guitar solo played through an ARP 2500 synthesizer set to an envelope filter effect.

In the future, we'll examine Quadrophenia and other highlights of the Who's later years, and also take a look into Pete Townshend's incredible solo career. In the meantime, check out the upcoming Who box set, 30 Years of Maximum R&B (MCA).