

Pete Townshend: Who He Is

A rock star as yachtsman, gardener and autobiographer.

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Rock music in 2011 is not quite what it was in the mid-1960s. For one thing, it is full of challenging coincidences, such as the one reported by Pete Townshend in a recent e-mail. "I was supposed to be sailing in the St Barth's Bucket Race on March 24th," he wrote. That's right: the writer of "My Generation", "Substitute" and "Won't Get Fooled Again" now spends part of his time as a yachtsman in the Caribbean. "This was arranged last August," he added. "In a challenging coincidence Roger Daltrey will be performing 'Tommy' on that very day for Teenage Cancer [Trust] at the Royal Albert Hall."

More than most rock stars, Townshend notices what is going on in the world, and he felt he was meeting the challenge in the only decent way he could. "In these straitened and tragic times I have decided I have to do something useful rather than try to enjoy myself on a yacht while so many people are in trouble, and I am going to see Roger today at his rehearsal studio to offer my services in some way. I hope I will be able to perform with him, possibly sing 'Acid Queen' as I did when The Who played at Woodstock."

Daltrey wasn't sure. He had already announced that "Tommy" would be played by a new bunch of musicians, which meant no place for Townshend on his own rock opera about the "deaf, dumb and blind kid" who turned out to be both a mean pinball player and a misappropriated seer, a concept that has sold 20m records. "I offered to perform," Townshend wrote the next day, "but Roger and I agreed in the end that it might be best for him to do his show alone, just to properly test the new model..." Later, he expanded. "Our manager Bill [Curbishley] says that this is a safe place for this experiment. Like doing a run-through in our living room. I know Roger is nervous, but I went to his rehearsal yesterday and his musicians are superb, calm, and will provide the musical support he needs."

I wondered if I was a silent witness to the break-up of one of rock's greatest bands. But the following day, at 6.46am, this landed: "Dear Simon, Roger changed his mind. He has now agreed I can walk on and play 'Acid Queen' solo. Things change every day at the moment. He is extremely distracted, and of course very busy as usual at this time. – Pete"

Four hours later, this: “I’m definitely back on again. Doing ‘Acid Queen’ and ‘Baba O’Riley’...come if you can.”

A week or two earlier I had spent a few hours at Townshend’s home in Richmond, discussing the world of a rock star in the late afternoon of an explosive career. The conversations had ranged from his attitude towards fans (“there is something very strange about them”), his time as an editor at Faber & Faber (“I don’t think P.D. James liked me at all”) and his current reading matter, a horticultural monthly (“I subscribe to the idea that as you get older you should try to make a garden”). We also discussed his arrest in 2003 for giving his credit card details to an online company that traded in indecent photographs. But we began by talking about the memoir he has been working on for years.

He has reached the first performance of “Tommy” in 1969. “A lot of my friends who were journalists turned against me,” he says. “They said, ‘this is sick, this idea. You’ve gone too far, Pete. It’s unforgivable because you’re smart and we trusted you.’ They didn’t like the idea of a deaf, dumb and blind boy playing pinball. There was outrage.” The band tried to win them round by showcasing the album at Ronnie Scott’s in London. “We played it very very loud and also gave away lots of free booze. Needless to say, we got a standing ovation.”

Townshend’s memoir, which, at 80,000 words, is “about a third” done, is provisionally entitled “Pete Townshend: Who He?” Recently he was walking to lunch, along the Thames from his house, when another name suggested itself. A man on a park bench clutching a can of lager asked him, “Are you Pete Townshend?” He confirmed that he was. “Effing legend!” the drinker replied, and now Townshend is considering that for the book title instead. But what sort of effing legend is he?

First of all, a very British one. He was born in west London in May 1945, right at the end of the war in Europe. His parents were show people—his mother a singer, his father a saxophonist in the Squadronaires, the Royal Air Force big band. Pete’s formative years were spent at Ealing Art College, where he was inspired by Larry Rivers, a “saxophone-playing, heroin-addicted gay lunatic”, the auto-destructive artist Gustav Metzger (the inspiration behind his guitar-smashing) and the writer David Mercer, whose play “The Generations” inspired the title “My Generation”. “He was an incredibly impressive speaker. He said, ‘Once you’re on the left, you have to stay there whatever happens. I don’t care if you become a fucking billionaire—stay there!’ And I’ve always kept that in mind.”

The Who as we know them came into being in 1964, and soon became the most powerful, iconic and humorous emblem of the Mod movement.

But their scope would extend far beyond a fashionable subculture. On stage, they were all you could hope for in a rock band: brutally arresting, unnervingly unpredictable and blisteringly loud. Then as now, pop music was dependent on a character-led plot to thrive, and The Who offered much. There were Daltrey's Tarzan acrobatics with a swinging microphone, and the raw emotion in his voice, ranging from angelic yearning to a raging throttle. There was the bassist John Entwistle's prowling menace, the traditional "quiet one" turned dangerous uncle. There were Townshend's scything windmills of excitement and improbable leaps, vividly illustrating the visceral force of his songs. And then there was Keith Moon, a complex public lunatic, who lived as he drummed, with every complex flaw on brazen display. On their best nights, such as the one captured on the album "Live at Leeds" in 1970, the crowd witnessed a type of bombastic heist, an excessively glorious musical offence.

But every party brings its dawn. Moon died of an overdose in 1978, Entwistle from a drug-induced heart attack in 2002. Daltrey has struggled with throat lesions, while Townshend wears a hearing aid (can you imagine being Pete Townshend's ears? The fields of the Crimea may have put up with less). The band thrived on tension, and it is still there decades later. It is there in Townshend's songwriting, a howl of displacement and uncertain identity. Never has a band's name been more apt. His songs are often touching and tender, but there is deep anger too. A plaintive lyric is often underpinned with ferocious music. You cannot remain passive when listening to The Who. Less hedonistic than the Rolling Stones, their best songs are passionate incitements to action; they enter your life and never dim. No other stadium rock band has managed this feat so consistently or so well.

Townshend has long felt a sense of duty, partly to his audience, partly to himself. He may have analysed his role in the firmament more than any other star, and he has been criticised for it, notably by Keith Richards, who implored him to think less and play his guitar more. "I can offer comfort and momentary distraction," Townshend wrote in an e-mail earlier this year. "And yet in my fictions (from 'Tommy' onwards) the leading characters often claim to have a way forward. Dystopian or utopian, it makes very little difference in the game I play—as long as you can dance for a moment...the credibility of such work will rarely stand close scrutiny. I tend to create thin plots into which the listener can interpolate themselves, and travel with the music. This is neither my voice, nor Roger's. It is often the voice of someone who is quite mad in fact." He sees The Who now as "a kind of celebration machine".

And then there's the tension between Townshend and Daltrey. (Whose band is it really? Who dominates the stage?) "You know, it's survived. My marriage to my wife has not survived, and my marriage to Roger has survived, and it might be that only one of them could."

Daltrey once told me: "I don't care when people say we're not getting on—it's not fucking important. All that matters is what exists on stage and in our music. In that music is our relationship, is our love. He forgives all my foibles, and I forgive all his, and underneath all that I love him dearly."

These days Townshend thinks he detects an air of disappointment when they play live. "There's a sense of being in front of a bunch of fans who really want to see you fight on stage, or scowl at each other, or die. They want to be there when you die." I question this, but he remains convinced. "It's the same with Mick and Keith. If tomorrow Mick Jagger would say, 'That's it, the Stones are finished,' then people would look at him as being a completely different artist, and a different kind of human being. But why would you want to buy something by Mick? Actually what we really want is to observe him going through the agony of being on stage with Keith Richards on a bad night."

I mention the success of Richards's memoir. "The point is," Townshend says, "when we read Keith Richards's book, are we really reading who he is? James Fox [Richards's ghost] is a brilliant writer. I think it's sad that we will only remember Keith's book because of what he said about the size of Mick's [apparently modest] genitals. Which, by the way, to use an apt term, is bollocks. I've seen them, and they are not small. And it is not just the balls that are big."

Townshend's house has what must be one of the finest unspoilt private views in London. From his huge conservatory he can see the Thames snake by; the land falls away from a balcony much as it must have done in Henry VIII's time. Townshend spends most of his day in this room, not least because his variable mood is lifted by the flood of light. The house was once owned by the actor John Mills, and later by the guitarist Ron Wood; the Stones' song "It's Only Rock'n'Roll (But I Like It)" was written here. The walls are covered not with guitars or gold discs, but with Francis Bacon lithographs.

I first met Townshend in 1985, not long after he had begun working at the publishers Faber & Faber. We went for lunch at the local trattoria, and I asked him about the early days of The Who, and how badly they'd been ripped off. He told me of a humiliating showdown with the venal American accountant Allen Klein in 1977. Townshend had emerged from their encounter with about \$1m, a fraction of what he thought he

was due. What happened next formed the opening of his song “Who Are You?”, in which he was found drunk in a Soho doorway by a policeman. After the meeting with Klein he went to the Speakeasy Club, where he met two members of the Sex Pistols. “I remember thinking, ‘OK, the fucking revolution has arrived’,” Townshend said. “ ‘Maybe this money is going to be important to me, maybe this is the end. Maybe this is the last money I’m ever going to make.’ Part of me of course wanted that to be true, because the more deeply I got involved in it, the more I thought how much this business really stinks, and everything attached to it stinks, and I hate it, and I want to get out.” (Thanks to the supertax of the Sixties, Townshend only became wealthy late in his career. Or as he observes laconically, “It’s really only been since The Who have stopped making records that I’ve actually made any money.”)

His job at Faber coincided with the longest fallow period in his musical career, 1982-89, when he believed The Who were no longer relevant. He was brought in to work on “books that are about now”, mainly photography and pop culture. He had some experience: his publishing company Eel Pie produced good books on Bowie and The Clash, and for a while he had run a bookshop in Richmond. He did two or three days a week at Faber, lots of lunches, and got to know Harold Pinter, Ted Hughes and the young Kazuo Ishiguro.

We didn’t keep in touch, but I kept going to The Who’s concerts, which were reliably triumphant; you’d need a steel heart not to be stirred by both their conviction and their durability. Townshend worked on semi-autobiographical narrative solo albums too, including “White City” and “Psychoderelict”, but for some reason the band remained a vital force; they seemed better in their 50s and 60s than in their 40s. Perhaps they were more relaxed; perhaps, as younger musicians came through who were inspired by them, they felt more accepted.

I got to know Townshend again five years ago, when the band were about to release their 11th, and by current reckoning final, studio album, “Endless Wire”. This was a crashing, often angry record with a few great tracks (not least “A Man in a Purple Dress”, with which Townshend attacked the pomposity of religious paraphernalia). It sold respectably, reaching the top ten in Britain and America, but as the tour to promote it travelled from city to city, more and more new songs fell away, leaving what people had really come to hear, which was the songs written more than 30 years before. “After John Entwistle died, Roger and I felt very exposed, but in an extremely good way,” Townshend said. “We felt, ‘Oh wow, things are clearer: you sing, I write’.”

As he says this, his Yorkshire terrier Wistle appears, followed by Rachel Fuller, Townshend's partner for 14 years. They met when Fuller, 28 years his junior, was working as a string arranger for another musician in the studios where The Who were rehearsing for a tour of "Quadrophenia". "I saw her across a crowded room...she was like a beam. I left a note for her, but I think the girl who was working at reception fancied me and threw it away." Quizzed about this later, Townshend admits that it may have been wishful thinking: "I will live in fantasy...this is now so much a part of my job that I couldn't break the habit even if I wanted to."

For a time, after separating from his wife in the mid-1990s, he couldn't envisage building another long-term relationship (he has three children from his marriage, which lasted 26 years). "I saw myself doing a bit of an Eric [Clapton], playing the field. You know, 'I'll just have about 500 lovers'. I think I'd maybe had about ten girlfriends at that time. Eric was always going on about his 5,500. Even Tony Blackburn had 5,000. And I very quickly realised it wouldn't work for me."

Rachel, an accomplished singer-songwriter as well as an arranger, offers chocolate cake, which Townshend declines for weight reasons. "I've got a wonderful room at the top of this house," he says. "The room where Mary Hayley Bell wrote 'Whistle Down the Wind'. It would make a great studio, and so I set things up, thinking it would be lovely just to sit in there and play my new keyboard, but it's that extra flight of stairs, and I think 'Fuck it, I'm not going up there'."

I say that every climb might deprive him of the energy to write another song, the way Woody Allen claimed that every time Balzac had an orgasm it deprived him of a novel.

"I've tried all that," Townshend says. "No orgasm before a show, orgasm before a show..."

Any difference?

"Nah. Nothing."

Townshend's conversation ranges from the lives of the artists on his walls to the comparative merits of Scandinavian crime novelists. He was keen on the Mass Observation diaries I had edited for a series of books, proclaiming himself to be "absolutely in love" with one of the diarists, an indomitable Scottish female civil servant making ends meet at the end of the second world war. He says he was recently approached by Faber about his autobiography, but he feels they won't be able to pay the sort of advance that will reward his years of work. I wondered if the book

would contain much mention of his arrest in 2003. “I kind of dread it, but yes. The thing that’s really difficult is to do it without taking an overly defensive stance on it.”

A few years ago, Townshend had given me the first cogent, and I believe truthful, account of his ordeal. He had recognised himself in a newspaper report as the “famous rock star” the police were about to question as part of an investigation into child pornography called Operation Ore. “There were two things that went through my mind,” he said. “One was that I don’t deserve to be on the front of any tabloid newspaper. And two, this is gross hypocrisy that I’m obviously going to be sacrificed. So for a moment I thought ‘There’s just no point trying to continue.’ Luckily, Rachel was next to me when I read the paper. I turned to her and said, ‘Fuck, this is the end,’ and she said, ‘No, it isn’t. Let’s go and make a few phone calls...’ ”

Townshend’s defence has been widely assumed to be “research” for the book he was writing. The full story is more complicated than that, and more proactive. He now talks of being “psychologically triggered”, perhaps by abusive experiences when he was young. “I had the sense that there was some stuff in my childhood that was difficult and strange, but I couldn’t remember it. I’d spoken to a few therapists who said, ‘If you’d been abused you would remember it—you wouldn’t have blacked it out.’ Although one therapist did say, ‘What you could have blacked out is some abuse that you enjoyed, or that empowered you in any way’.”

The first four years of his life had been “almost paradise”. But his mother was having an affair, and Townshend was taken down to Westgate-on-Sea in Kent to spend two “dark” years with his grandmother. “She turned out to be clinically insane and very abusive,” Townshend told me—“this loon grandmother who walked around naked under her fur coat and tried to shag bus conductors.” Some of this experience formed the basis of “Tommy”, and later there would be other repercussions, not least Townshend’s almost maniacal devotion to charity work. “I needed to give back, give back, give back,” he says. “I felt guilty about my success, I felt uncomfortable about how easily I had been delivered this extraordinary life that I had.”

After seeking counselling for alcoholism in the 1990s, Townshend became convinced that he had to stop writing cheques and get more involved in campaigns. He says he was outraged at how easy it was to obtain paedophilic images online, and he wanted to do something about it. In May 1999 he spent \$7 to join an illegal site, for which he now offers

this explanation. “I believed at the time that my research was within the law, which was subsequently hardened up and made retroactive. My intention in 1999 was to show that my credit-card bank was processing money for illegal porn without question, on a clearly labelled site (that I suspected was probably a sting, and thus felt I would hurt no real victims). And that’s all it was about. And I did it once. I didn’t go into the site. I used my credit card, then immediately cancelled it, and forgot about it.”

The police investigation into his activity lasted almost five months. “I shouldn’t really have accepted a caution,” he says now. “I hadn’t done anything. They came to this house, they came to my office, my studio, my storeroom, they took away 11 computers and sat on them doing forensic examination for five months, and that whole time I was thinking, ‘I’m fucked. All they have to do is just flood one of the computers with images and nobody’s going to believe me’.”

They found nothing, but Townshend’s reputation was damaged, perhaps irreparably. Last year, when The Who were about to play for a television audience of 100m at the Super Bowl in Miami, he was targeted by family-rights groups and other protesters. “It is hanging over me,” he says. “I think there’s a divide in how people perceive me. There are some people that know me and know enough about my past to know this is the kind of thing I would do, but without salacious intent, and that I would never abuse a child. Years before, I admitted to managing to save my marriage by the occasional use of pornography on the road, particularly if I was feeling emotionally vulnerable—pornography would be a way of surviving on the oil rig of the rock’n’roll road. I received dozens of letters from people saying ‘we know who you are, and you can come and babysit our kids any time’. [He also received vociferous support from Roger Daltrey.] Then there are people on the other side of the line who just don’t know. I was just terrified of the newspapers. I thought, ‘If I don’t accept this caution, they’re going to come after me’.”

The hardest thing “was just the fucking absolute injustice of it”. But he also describes what he did as “an arrogant act. I felt inviolable. But I do think I needed to experience it, in a humbling way.” Later he adds, “I look back at my life and I don’t see any incidence [sic] where I’ve done anything wrong. I’ve never touched a child, I’ve never beaten anybody up, well I’ve had a few fist fights. A few televisions out of windows, maybe had sex with a girl or two who was a little bit too young by modern standards.”

The day after we last discussed the issue, Townshend elaborated in another e-mail. “My creative work continues, more positively than ever.

But I have to admit that at 66 years old, of all the things I have achieved in my life, I am most proud of the work I have done—mostly behind the scenes—to help establish and run innovative systems of rehabilitation and support for what society tends to see as its human failures, and help them to prevail and survive with dignity.” A little later, in yet another e-mail, he added: “It seems strange now to try to make what I did seem sensible and rational. It seems nuts looking back.”

His artistic output is still vibrant, but his ambitions are realistic. He is working on another long-form piece called “Floss”, for which he has written about 40 segments and is currently reinforcing the narrative. But will anyone hear it? In the age of iTunes, when we buy individual tracks with a click, the notion of a story-led album seems whimsically outdated. “I’m finding it very difficult to change,” Townshend says. “I’ve been through phases where I’ve wanted to get on a plane and kill Steve Jobs.”

Much of his work goes on The Who’s heritage. He has just finished organising his archive, a vast trove of instruments and recording equipment, alongside journals, books, clothes and crates of ephemera. He still has unopened fan letters from the 1960s, and every so often he opens one. “There are offers of marriage from little 14-year-old Japanese girls wearing a kimono.”

Townshend used to feel, “like David Cassidy”, he was being buried under so much fan mail that he could never process it. Most of it came from “maybe 400 people” who wrote regularly. They still do. How does he feel about them? “I don’t like fans really. But that’s because they’re my employer—I don’t like the boss. I feel much happier about the record company giving me a load of money to piss away rather than someone coming up to me in the street saying, ‘I saw you in Blah Blah Blah and you were really great —when are you going to do another tour?’ It feels to me like, you know, ‘When are you going to put in a decent sink, or whatever it is that you do?’

“Of course, without them I wouldn’t exist. But fans are fanatics, obsessives. In a Freudian sense there is something very strange about them, a degree of obsession, and neither of you really know what the transaction is about. If it’s a female who is determined to overthrow your partner and marry you, you have to send them a severe warning shot, and take some responsibility that you may have played a part at some point, either consciously or unconsciously. I’ve had death threats and all kinds of things. Because of the backdrop of John Lennon [being murdered by a fan], followed up by George Harrison getting stabbed in his own house, you keep an eye on what it is that you think that you represent to people.”

How Townshend represents himself is clearly uppermost in his mind. His frequent e-mails after our interviews—revising and expanding his thoughts and stories, sometimes to the point of contradiction—suggest a desire not only to get things right, but also to clarify in his own mind precisely what it is he is trying to say. Like the attention of his fans, this borders on the obsessive. I keep being reminded of The Who's emblematic first single, "I Can't Explain".

He tries to maintain a life without bodyguards, and to walk around freely with his partner and children. "But if you go somewhere like Disneyland, people will think that you are part of the facilities that Disneyland are laying on."

Naturally, the attention is gradually declining. In January I saw the show at Hammersmith Apollo in London at which The Who played a few songs alongside Debbie Harry and Jeff Beck to raise money for photodynamic therapy, a promising cancer treatment. One reason I was there was because I thought the appearance could be The Who's last. "Your intuition was dead on. At the beginning of the year I had decided, '66 next birthday, I think I'll just stop'. Nothing to do with my hearing, because I think I can sort that out on stage. My feeling was that I simply didn't have the enthusiasm to do reinvention."

What, then, has changed that? "I think the same thing that has made me decide to finish my book. I look around me and I think, 'Why aren't I suffering the way that other people are suffering? Is it just that I don't have to worry about paying the school fees?' I think for me it's that if you can take an artistic position and do something useful, even if it's negative, then action is the best answer.

"I always thought that The Who would be very brief, and that I would shut it down after a while and sit in my apartment in Soho making kinetic sculptures. I'd say I've been in stasis for quite a long time—and the word means either perpetual motion or perpetual stillness. I've been whirling on the spot for quite a long time."

He now wonders whether his creativity wouldn't have been better served by never being in a band at all. "The thing about The Who for me, and this is sad in a way, is the amount of control that I've had to have, keeping the creative process close to my chest, making sure the other guys in the band felt they were part of the process but they really weren't."

These days he feels burdened by another responsibility. “If I’m out on the road with Roger and he’s as miserable as sin, there is a bit of me, and I know my manager Bill Curbishley shares this, which thinks ‘Why are we doing this to him?’ He seems to be so unhappy, he seems to be so unfulfilled. Yet when you talk to him he exalts The Who to high heaven, and exalts me. He always says it’s going to be fabulous, and ‘this time I’m just going to have fun,’ and he always ends up distraught, sobbing in a corner somewhere, saying ‘That was the worst show I’ve ever done and I could do so much better and I can’t work out how I’m going to do this again’.”

Townshend finds the opposite experience. I asked him whether it was a chore playing the big hits repeatedly on stage. “It’s so fucking amazing,” he said, “but [playing live] seems to require no energy. It’s not that I’m fed up with it or blasé about it, I’m amazed by it, but at the same time I feel I have so little to do with it. For me it’s just become easier and easier, to the point where I can push a switch and this incredible U2/Bruce Springsteen crusher emerges, and we start playing and I just think, bring it on! Do a gig before or after us, toss a coin, I don’t care if we go on before you or after you, if you play on the same night as The Who, you are dead!”

At the Albert Hall at the end of March, Daltrey and his new band were a quarter of the way through “Tommy” when Townshend walked on, unannounced, with an acoustic guitar. He was wearing what he wore for the pictures on these pages—a dark suit and a checked shirt, with a large red handkerchief that leapt from his breast pocket like a ship’s flare. The show had been moving along steadily, but Townshend’s appearance, for “Acid Queen”, ignited the hall. He appeared again for the encore, this time with his red Fender for “Baba O’Riley”, and the place came alive once more.

After the show, I found him in his dressing room with Rachel Fuller, sitting upright, as if at an official tea ceremony. He appeared slightly removed from the experience; he still had his jacket on, and had barely broken sweat. Opposite him lay 24 small bottles of water and some pastries, untouched. Along the corridor, Daltrey and the band were making some noise. Townshend said he had enjoyed watching the majority of the concert from a box, and was pleased that his creation still held up. But he was clearly a rock star at the end of something, and he couldn’t be sure what was coming next.