



THE WHO

PETE TOWNSHEND CAN'T STOP

An explosive conversation about sex, his love-hate relationship with the Who, and why he decided to get the band back on the road

BY CHRIS HEATH

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A WEEK BEFORE JOHN ENTWISTLE DIES, PETE TOWNSHEND SITS IN A BUILDING overlooking the Thames in southwest London. He bought this property in 1976 and for years ran it as a spiritual center for the guru whose teachings he embraced in 1967, the late Indian mystic Meher Baba. (Townshend still prays and meditates every day, and he sometimes believes he feels Baba's presence, which he characterizes as both "pink" and "incredibly humorous.") In the novel Townshend has just written, *The Boy Who Heard Music*, this building appears as a lunatic asylum, but these days, in the real world, it is a recording studio where, a few days ago, the Who were rehearsing for their forthcoming American tour. (After Entwistle's death, the Who decided to carry on with the tour, but Townshend declined to speak further with *ROLLING STONE*.) The Who stopped making records in 1982 and have toured only occasionally since then, but there have been recent signs that their career is reawakening – not only with this tour but with the suggestion that later this year they would begin recording an album. ¶ Townshend has been most resistant to working as the Who during the past two decades. He has been busy writing books,

WHO'S BACK
Townshend in 2002. "We can rely on some kind of weird cosmic energy," he said.





musicals and his own music. (Recently, he began compiling a database of his unpublished music and has already documented 1,500 pieces.) It's clear his feelings about the Who are complex and conflicted, but he discusses them openly and thoughtfully, and he is often mischievously keen not to show himself in the best light. When he occasionally gets angry and raises his voice, it lasts for a minute or two and then – on the surface, at least – he resumes his regular soft manner, spiky in attitude but gentle in tone. Throughout our conversation, his cellphone is propped up against the window next to us, and at just after five in the afternoon it rings. Each day at this time, he is sent a weather report from Cornwall in southwest England, where his boat *Zephyr* is based. These days, sailing is his other grand passion.

"I had one mission this year, to write a book – which I thought was going to take me until June, and I finished it in May," he says. "So I've got the rest of the year to go sailing or do whatever I want." Instead, for a couple of months, he has decided to tour with the Who. "This," he says evenly, "is something that I'm really quite inclined to do at the moment."



The Who are at their most active in 20 years. Why is that?

Well, it's really just an unfolding of events. We did [the Concert for New York City], and a lot of that was quite cosmic. There was a lot of talk about "Should we play the heavy stuff or not?" and I just said, "We should just do what we do, we shouldn't rationalize this too much." I went into Eric [Clapton]'s dressing room and into Billy Joel's dressing room, watching the monitors. James Taylor was on, singing "Fire and Rain," and everybody was crying, and then these pictures were

THE AXMEN

Entwistle and Townshend tuning up in 1966. "The band kind of blew up a few times in the early days," Townshend said.

coming on and it was like, "Oh, my God, this is like being in a Lebanese fucking village, the weeping and the wailing and the gnashing of teeth." And I thought, "Well, either this is going to work for us or it isn't." I think if we had known what the atmosphere was going to be like in advance, we would have played a different kind of show. When I came off, I thought, "I went out there with a fucking

sneer on my face and I machine-gunned the audience!" But it was OK. Afterward, I realized that we'd started something that wasn't finished.

And that's the first time you'd really felt like that?

Yeah. I agreed with Roger that, in order to keep him amused this year, we should go back to New York and play a couple of shows. Our manager said, "This is arrogance, to think that you can go back to America now and just play a couple of shows." I said, "OK, just book what you need to book."

You always make it sound as if you're doing Roger a favor.

[Snappily] Well, I am.

How is that?

How is it not? You know, I don't think there's anything wrong in doing somebody that you care about a favor. It is something I am doing for Roger and John and for other people in the Who's camp. It's not just a favor; it's also, in a sense, a thank-you, an acknowledgment of solidarity and friendship.

Does he get annoyed when you make it clear that you consider it a favor?

[Pause] It sounds patronizing to say that he's grateful, but I think, in a way, I'm grateful, too, for pushing 60 and being in a band where you can get together with a couple of old mates and rely on some kind of weird cosmic energy to inhabit you and inhabit the audience. And it's pretty bloody reliable. And you can use it for all kinds of things. You can use

it for charity events, you can use it to buy yourself a boat if you want to, you can use it to simply go out and enjoy playing music. What you can't use it for is creative work, unfortunately. So the next bit of the Who's jigsaw puzzle has been the bit where Roger has been fighting hardest, which is to get the Who back into the studio and doing new, fresh creative work. What's been an uphill struggle has been for me to get Roger to accept that it's going to be incredibly fucking hard, and it'll probably be terrible. And he's willing to spend a couple of years producing something which is absolutely terrible. I can't afford to do that.

You have been rehearsing a couple of new songs, one by Roger and one by you?

Yeah.

So are they new Who songs?

This is interesting, because after we ran through Roger's song, "Certified Rose," one of our inner circle said, "I love it, but it's not a Who song," and I wanted to strangle him. I nearly did strangle him, actually. I love it.

I believe the first real kind of détente between you and Roger was triggered by the conversation you had, in about 1998, when he came to you and said that he felt impotent and powerless. How was that?

It was pretty scary. He came to my house. Going back a couple of years earlier, we did *Quadrophenia*. We came to the States with it, we did a few shows in Europe, and then, as always with me, I lost all interest. So I quit. It was the following year that Roger came. He felt I had fucked him over. He also went on to say a whole load of other things, which were to do with unspoken contracts from childhood: that we were a band, we were lads from the street, he was going to go into the gutter. We looked at each other in the eyes, we swore to be together for the rest of our lives... It was real marriage stuff.

Halfway through the conversation, this stuff that he was saying was making me cry – it was so brutal, so nasty and so aggressive. And elements of it were true, but lots of it wasn't.

Do you cry easily?

No [laughs]. So in the end, I stopped him. I said, "Roger, listen, this is hurting too much, you're just going to have to stop. And all I can tell you is to go away, and I swear to you I will think about it." And so he left, and then he called me back about two hours later and said, "I've been thinking about this, and I went too far – and I'm really sorry." He said, "I just want you to know, I don't care what you do, I don't care if we ever go out again. I'm your friend, I love you, and all I care about is that you're going to be OK." And I said, "What I feel proud of is that at our age you feel you can come and do it. It's nice that you can be fucking honest." Because years ago, I would have had to read this in a newspaper.

There are a few interesting uses of Who songs at the moment. I thought it was strange you let them use "Bargain" in the Nissan car ad, given that the song is so very much not about that.

Yeah, but not many people know that [laughs].

Well, correct me if I'm interpreting it wrong, but the song is saying that you are prepared to give yourself up for enlightenment or spiritual satisfaction and that this bargain is the best you've ever had.

That's right. Yeah.

Which is about as anti-materialistic a message as one could think of.

[Mock snarling] So, what's your point?

My point is it's now being used to sell shiny new motorcars.

I still don't get your point – you haven't completed the argument.

FLASHBACK

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Who Hit the Studio

After 24 years without a new album, Daltrey and Townshend finally made one



SOMETIMES YOU JUST HAVE TO WAIT FOR all the elements to fall into place, including the possibility that what you do best will come back into style," says Pete Townshend, reflecting on how – 24 years after the Who's last studio album, *It's Hard* – he and Roger Daltrey reignited their creative spark with *Endless Wire*. The guitarist describes the new songs as a mixture of "sonic experiments with complex techniques behind them" and "basic home-studio recordings – a few that are just acoustic guitar and vocals." Theatrically, tracks such as "Fragments" and "God Speaks" connect with the Who's recent *Wire and Glass* "mini-opera" and were likewise inspired by Townshend's online novella, *The Boy Who Heard Music*. Elsewhere on *Endless Wire*, the guitarist metaphorically addresses the 2003 accusation that he viewed child pornography on the Internet: "A Man in a Purple Dress" questions the right of any man to judge another when he is dressed like a drag queen," Townshend says. Ultimately, though, he promises *Endless Wire* is mostly about the topics that have always fascinated him. "I am stuck with a single vision. I'm afraid to address childhood rage and disenfranchisement through music, as the Who's early work did." **JENNY ELISCU**



Well, I'll complete it, then. The suggestion of the ad is that one might buy a super new Nissan car that is the best one for the finest price, and that that's the bargain.

Well, that's their suggestion, isn't it? If that's what they think is their campaign, and that's what you think is their campaign, then that's their campaign. I haven't seen the ads. "Going Mobile" is not about mobile phones.... For about 10 years, I resisted any kind of licensing because Roger had got so upset when somebody used "Pinball Wizard" for a bank thing. And they hadn't used the Who master - what he was angry about was, he said that I was exploiting the Who's heritage but denying him the right to earn. Who fans often think, "This is my song, it belongs to me, it reminds me of the first time that I kissed Susie, and you can't sell it." The fact is I can and I will and I have. I don't give a fuck about the first time you kissed Susie.

But surely you care about some of the deep, personal meanings in the songs?

If they've arrived, if they've landed, if they've been received, then the message is there, if there's a message to be received. I think the other thing is, though - and I'm not trying to side-swipe this, this is not the reason why I license these songs, it's not the reason why I licensed "Bargain" to Nissan - it was an obviously shallow misreading of the song. It was so obvious that I felt anybody who loved the song would dismiss it out of hand. And the only argument that they could have had about the whole thing was with me, and as long as I'm not ready to enter the argument, we don't argue. Well, I'm not ready to argue about it. It's my song. I do what the fuck I like with it.

Do you have any envy over Mick Jagger's recent knighthood?

No. I'm absolutely amazed that he got one, though [laughs]. I'm kind of pleased for him, really. I think he actually seems quite pleased, doesn't he?

Why are you amazed?

I suppose, like everybody else, I thought, "He'll never get one. If they give him one, they'll have to give Keith Richards one."

Which is the last Who album you're unequivocally proud of? Quadrophenia.

That's a long time ago.

1973. But I've done lots of other things since then that I'm pleased with. You have to remember, I do think that the Who's halcyon years were short. And most bands' were.... [Last week] I said to [touring keyboard player] Rabbit [Bundrick], "Wouldn't it be great if we could produce a Who album that was like *Who's Next?*" A few wild, edgy little bits; we could absorb a few visits from a few passing celebrities that weren't Lenny Kravitz. Bless him. I love him. But it's him and me on everything currently this year. We're on everything.

These days, you're a keen sailor. I think people who don't know may think it's a strange thing for you to have taken up.

It is a bit strange, I suppose, but I think it comes straight from the river, and an affinity with the river and an affinity with water. I love boats. It's the only area of my life where I've actually felt competitive - when I'm racing. And the only sport I win at.... I'm not a natural sailor. I was around on boats when I was about 10 or 12, and my father and I bought a boat together when I was about 20, but I don't regard myself as a sort of a natural, born-on-boats sort of sailor. But I do sail with people like that. I know if you want to win races what you do is you get a few of those guys around and you put one on the helm. But I understand the wind, I understand hydro-nautics, I understand a lot about what kind of boats are likely to win and what aren't, I know about teamwork, I know about putting together a team. I just won my very first race in Antibes this year with a new boat. We put it in the water, we raced it, and we won.



You've always been guarded when discussing how fluid or otherwise your sexuality has been. I was interested and somewhat surprised to recently read ["In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press"] Danny Fields [Doors publicist and Ramones manager] referring rather casually to the two of you as on-and-off boyfriends in the late Sixties.

You know, I don't know what that's about. We were friends, you know? We were friends in a circle with Linda McCartney, but I just don't know what he's talking about. He can say what he likes, I just don't know what he is fucking talking about. I have no idea.

So that's definitely not the case?

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. [Pauses] What is definitely not the case? I haven't read what he said.

That presumably the two of you were physically intimate.

Oh, no. Physical intimacy, quite possibly, yeah. I can't remember.

Sexual intimacy?

So what? Yeah. Physical, sexual intimacy, yeah, quite possibly. There's whole chunks of my life I can't remember. But "boyfriend"? [Shakes his head] Once. But twice? It's not possible. It's just not actually possible that I wouldn't remember it twice. I can accept I might not remember it once, but I can't really deal with the fact that I couldn't remember it twice. Or three times or four times. I don't get it. You know, he was a fucking good friend of mine. It's very difficult for me. I haven't spoken to him since this has come out. I'll just look him in the eye and say, "What the fuck are you talking about? Please tell me."

Have you had many physical encounters with men over the years?

No. [Laughs] No, I haven't.

But it's not something that you're completely closed to?

No. I'm from the Sixties. You know, we tried everything. But...

Did or do you consider yourself fundamentally bisexual?

No, I don't. I know that I've got - and this has got nothing to do with anything I've actually done, or not done - a very, very feminine side. I think my creative side is very feminine. And I went so far as to say in that interview [with Timothy White in 1989, when Townshend was misunderstood as referring to his bisexuality] that I often feel like a woman; I can see what a woman feels - the whole act of submission, sexually. But, in a sense, what I was talking about was the act of submission sexually in a male-female relationship, that you can swap roles. But that's very common and corny now, in a sense, to even bring it up. And I suppose what I'm doing is taking all of the feminine attributes and regarding them as being passive, gentle, submissive or whatever. But in the sense that my creative side is archly feminine, it is "I want the baby and I

AIRBORNE

Onstage in 1973. "I do think the Who's halcyon years were short," Townshend said.



want it now!" It's biological. It's absolute. It's the feminine side that says to you [raises voice], "If I need to take heroin, I'll fucking take heroin – who are you to even raise an eyebrow? If I need to give birth, I shall do it!" But it's got nothing to do with my sexuality.

So, when you had sexual encounters with men, did that have anything at all to do with expressing that feminine side?

No. I think what it had to do with – and to be honest [laughs], I can't remember much about any of it – was to do with the fact that I was actually completely smashed out of my head. I'm 57, I've got a young girlfriend, I'm not gay. I'm not interested in men. I don't think I ever really have been. I've had a high sex drive all my life, which has actually been difficult sometimes to reconcile with some of my spiritual aspirations, which are just like, you know, a monk, I suppose. But, no, I think it would have been because I was completely off my face with something. If you want to talk about this, and Danny's the one that's gone into print... [loudly] if Danny fucked me, Danny drugged me first. So if you want to fucking print that, then print it. Because that's the truth. It fucking hurts, that he so fucking carelessly said this in the papers. He should have fucking told me what he did to me first.

Aside from the newspaper side of it, do you feel like if that's the case, that he mistreated you on a personal level?

No, I don't give a damn! But to actually say that we were boyfriend and girlfriend! Boyfriend and boyfriend. I don't

LIVE FROM NEW YORK

Daltrey and Townshend onstage at the Concert for New York City, October 20th, 2001

know what he's fucking talking about. [Louder] And this is it. This is the fucking thing that stinks about this whole fucking thing of doing a fucking interview with fucking ROLLING STONE magazine in the first place when I don't need to!... The tour is sold-out. I don't want to talk about my work, I don't want to talk about the Who, I don't

want to talk about any of this shit. But you go and you talk about it, because it seems the polite thing to do. [Shouts] Live in the real fucking world! Live in the real fucking world!... I don't know what Danny is talking about. I know I spent a night in his house. I don't remember much else about it. I did not go out with him. He is not my type.

[After our conversation, Townshend contacts Fields through an intermediary and, after receiving an e-mail from Fields, leaves me a message in which he clarifies: "I think, just for the record, there's only two cases where I've experimented, consciously, and I think Danny's situation might be one where it might be said I experimented unconsciously, which he'd admitted to me for the first time in this e-mail. It's a bit of a shock for me, but there it is." For his part, Fields says he doesn't remember saying that they were on-and-off boyfriends for the book, nor does he understand why he would have said it, as it was never true. As for whatever fleeting sexual contact occurred between them – "I never fucked him," Fields chooses to clarify – he rejects any suggestion, no matter what drugs were around at the time, that he drugged and took advantage of Townshend. "I adore him," says Fields. "I wish I had ever a

boyfriend or girlfriend in my life as magnificent as him, or as gorgeous as he was and is."]

You wrote a couple of years ago that it's all been downhill since the first concert with Keith Moon.

I think that's right, yeah.

That's an extraordinary thing to say.

Yeah. I think just because creatively it was a mistake. I think I made a mistake.

Being in the Who?

Yeah. Yeah. I think it wasn't really what I was destined to do [laughs]. Difficult to argue with reality, isn't it? And for whatever reason, I didn't go back to finish studies [at art school]. I had a number of opportunities to leave the band in the early days and didn't – I don't quite know why I didn't. Roger left the band a couple of times, was kicked out a few times, Keith and John nearly formed Led Zeppelin with Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck. I never left.

How much of what the Who have been, both good and bad, has been a function of you not getting on with one another?

It's been an interference, really, rather than a help. We did grind to a halt, didn't we, ultimately?

Do you think you like one another yet?

[Quietly] Yeah. Yeah. I really like Roger and John a lot.

You've written on your website recently about your habit of pretending to be drunk and off your head onstage....

Yeah, I've decided to stop doing that. I actually had to meet with a girl who I hurt. I fell on her with my guitar [at London's Royal Albert Hall in 2002], and she could have sued me or sued the band or the hall or something, but she didn't – because she's right in the front row, she's obviously a hard-nosed fan. My guitar fell on her neck and damaged her collarbone. And I didn't hear about it until quite recently, and she wrote a letter saying, "I can't believe that you haven't sent a letter saying sorry." And I was – I didn't fucking know about it. And she came and we talked about it. And I was, "What was I doing? Oh, that's right, I was pretending to be drunk" [laughs].

What's the thought process when you decide to do that?

I need to end the show. I enjoy the fact that if I pretend to be drunk for 15 minutes, the crowd will go wild. And, you know, I'm a recovering alcoholic and it's a good laugh to pretend to be drunk. But to be celebrated for it, there's a kind of weird irony of it where, in actual fact, one of the only reasons I can be up there at the moment is because I'm healthy.

Most performers don't need to find that kind of closure.

I don't know. The Who's show this year will be different, I hope, because we can end with some music. But, you know, who knows, I'll probably get to the end of it and want to do something... I suppose it's like the musical equivalent of smashing a guitar. I feel like I want to do something that's a transcendent final act, and that everybody's waiting for that.

These days, are you more likely to smash a guitar when you don't really want to, or to not smash when you do feel like it?

The first. It feels childish, it feels petulant. It doesn't come from the same place. You know, when I used to smash guitars, I was an artist. I'd never smash guitars in a rage – it demeaned the whole thing. But now I'll have a quick fit and go, "Oh, fuck everything," smash the guitar and think, "Oh, dear, look at that."

Will you smash any this summer?

No. If it happens, I certainly won't be surprised, but it's not something that I plan on doing. I think it would be quite a good thing if I could avoid it.

[The first guitar-smashing of the new Who tour occurred during "Won't Get Fooled Again" at the end of the fourth show, on July 6th, at the Gorge in Washington state.]

FLASHBACK

JUNE 30TH, 2014

The Road Goes On

In 2014, the Who announced plans for a new album and one last major tour

THE WHO HAVE ANNOUNCED DATES FOR the first leg of their 50th-anniversary tour, "The Who Hits 50!" that will find the band visiting arenas across the U.K. in November and December before a planned North America tour in 2015. Speaking at a press conference in London, Roger Daltrey explained that the tour was "the beginning of a long goodbye."

"It will have a finality to it," he said. "We'll stop touring, I'm sure, before we stop playing as a band, but just like Eric Clapton just said, it's the grind of the road, it's incredibly tough on the body..." At this, Pete Townshend interjected, quipping: "The prostitutes, the heroin, the cocaine..."

According to a press release, "The band will play all the classic anthems as well as tackle deeper cuts from their catalogue... [They will] take their audience on an 'Amazing Journey' through their entire career from the days of the High Numbers to classic albums such as *Who's Next*, *Tommy*, *Quadrophenia*, *My Generation*, *Live At Leeds*, up to the present day."

"We are what we are, and extremely good at it," Townshend said in a statement. "But we're lucky to be alive and still touring. If I had enough hairs to split, I would say that for 13 years since 1964, the Who didn't really exist, so we are really only 37." Townshend joked about certain lesser-known songs making the set list. "We could play 'Dogs (Part 2),' 'Dogs (Part 1),' 'Now I'm a Farmer.' We're hoping there will be a few nice surprises for people that have seen us many times over the years."

The band also revealed plans to enter the studio this summer to record a new album before the tour. Townshend said at the press conference that he had given Daltrey three new songs. "I gave Roger three demos of three rough songs and happily he likes them," said Townshend. "I really liked the pub-rock sound of the album [Daltrey] did with Wilko [Johnson – 2014's *Going Back Home*], and we may try to make the record in a slightly more basic way than we normally work, although a lot of my writing these days is pretty complicated. It's more prog-rock than pub-rock!" The tour isn't being explicitly billed as a "farewell tour," but the band has indicated it will likely be their final major outing. "We intend to go on doing music until we drop, but we have to be realistic about our age," Daltrey said last year. "We have to draw a line in the sand somewhere. This will be the last old-fashioned, big tour."

ANDY GREENE AND MARK SUTHERLAND