



THE PUNK AS GODFATHER II

If The Glove Fits... Wear It!

PETE TOWNSHEND

by Roy Carr



Michael Zappala

Pete Townshend may well have some cause to feel sorry for himself; when the final reckoning comes he's got a lot to answer for—in particular, the Curse Of The Concept Album.

Though concept albums are by no means new to popular music—Gordon Jenkins and Mel Tormé were churning 'em out almost a quarter of a century ago—it was *Tommy* (as opposed to *Sgt. Pepper*) which unleashed a deluge of albums built around one specific theme. These ranged from the Fudge's horrendous *The Beat Goes On* through to J. Tull's obscure *Passion Play* up to and including Rick Wakeman's Disneyesque *King Arthur*.

"None of which," says Townshend, as he bursts into laughter, "work."

"For instance, when the Big Feedback Controversy was going on in the mid-sixties, Dave Davies and I used to have hilarious arguments about who was the first to invent feedback. I used to pull Dave's leg by saying 'we both supported the Beatles in Blackpool and you weren't doing it then... I bet you nicked it off me when you saw me doing it'. And Dave would scream that he was doing it long before that. Then one day I read this incredible story about Jeff Beck in which he said—at this juncture, he adopts a retarded Pythonesque android accent—"Yeah, Townshend came down t'see d'Tridents rehearsing and he saw me using the feedback...pause...and copied it." Returning to his natural voice,

“ When 'I Can See For Miles' bombed in Britain, the pressures were really on me to come up with something quick, and that's how Tommy emerged... ”

Yet as we all know, Townshend himself has had no less than three stabs at the same subject. So how does he view the trilogy in retrospect?

"I don't. And if you're going to ask me which one I prefer, I don't really like any of them very much. I suppose I still like bits of the Who's original version, but the definitive *Tommy* album is still in my head."

Perhaps it would be wise to quit this line of questioning and leave *Tommy* where he is. But Townshend wants the last word.

"I think that everyone in rock shares the same basic urges, and therefore, that it would be very unfair for me to say it's alright for the 'Oo 'cause we invented it. I have great doubts about that.

Townshend scowls. "I never ever saw the Tridents and the man is pathetic.

"Obviously, Beck may feel deeply enough that he invented feedback—but for Chrissakes who gives a shit? Why even comment on it? It doesn't really matter, it's just a funny noise made by a guitar."

Townshend goes on to explain that the innovatory part of rock is not necessarily the part that he's proud of, even though he's regarded as the Who's ideas man. "I was trained in graphic design...to be an ideas man...to think up something new and different...like, let's give a lemon away with the next album!"

Thank you.

"In the early days of the Who we were tagged with gimmicks and sub-

sequently it made me very gimmick-conscious.

"Now if I might return to *Tommy* for a moment...

But only for a moment.

"...What I think is good about *Tommy* is not that it's a rock opera or that it's the first or the last...that's of course, if you assume that there's gonna be any more!"

Don't worry, there will be. Have a copy of Camel's *Snow Goose*.

"What I feel is very important about *Tommy* is that as a band it was our first conscious departure out of the adolescent area. It was our first attempt at something that wasn't the same old pilled-up adolescent brand of music. We'd finished with that and we didn't know which way to go. That's when we went through that very funny period of 'Happy Jack' and 'Dogs'.

"It was also a very terrifying period for me as the Who's only ideas man. For instance, though 'I Can See For Miles' was just released after 'Happy Jack', I'd written it in 1966 but had kept it in the can for ages because it was going to be the Who's ace-in-the-hole.

"If you want the truth..."

And nothin' but...

"I really got lost after 'Happy Jack' and then when 'I Can See For Miles' bombed-out in Britain, I thought 'What the hell am I gonna do now?' The pressures were really on me and I had to come up with something very quick and that's how *Tommy* emerged from



Neal Preston

a few rough ideas I'd been messing about with."

And whereas the Beatles had cried that it was impossible to perform *Pepper* in public, the fact that the Who demonstrated that *Tommy* was an ideal stage presentation quickly motivated other bands to mobilize their might for the New Aquarian Age.

With more sophisticated electronic weaponry than they knew how to utilize, the likes of Floyd, Yes, and ELP adopted a more "profound" stance as, in a blaze of strobes, they began to bombard audiences with techno-flash wizardry, pseudo-mystical jargon and interchangeable concepts.

Townshend may have had a helping hand in starting the whole schmear rolling (it sure didn't rock), but he is adamant in his belief that many alleged "profound" music machines are working a clever con-trick on the public.

"All that they're really doing is getting together and working out the most complex ideas they can handle, packaging it with pretentious marketing appeal and unloading it on their fans. But"—and here comes the get-out clause—"does everything *have* to hold water? Obviously, it must mean something to the integrity of the band that's putting it together, but it's results that count."

Well the result, as Townshend puts it, has turned many a rock theatre into a dormitory.

"It might be difficult to fall asleep at a Who gig, but I can understand why some bands send their audiences into a coma. I don't like Yes at all. I used to like them when Peter Banks was in the line-up, because, apart from being extremely visual, he also played excellent

“ It doesn't matter who invented feedback, and Jeff Beck is pathetic. ”

guitar. With so many changes in the line-up, Yes is Jon Anderson's band and he might be guilty of much of that wishy-washy stuff they churn out—because Jon really is a tremendous romantic. Maybe he believes in the old mystical work, and maybe poetry moves him along—but I'm not concerned either way."

Just wait until the letters come pouring in.

"It's like that line in 'Punk and The Godfather'... 'you paid me to do the dancing.' The kids pay us for a good time, yet nowadays people don't really want to get involved. Audiences are very much like the kids in *Tommy's* Holiday Camp, they want something without working for it.

"That wasn't the way it used to be. The enthusiasm that evolved around the Beatles was *enthusiasm* as opposed to energy generated by the Beatles. You talk to them now about it and they don't know what happened! It was the kids' enthusiasm for *them*. Now when you see it happening again you can see how utterly strange it must have seemed the first time around.

"For instance, take the amount of energy and enthusiasm that's currently expended on, say, Gary Glitter...and Gary's just as confused as everyone else. All he knows is which curler to

put on which side of his head—Gary readily admits this, and is all the better for it.

"Get in the middle of a crowd of screamin' kids—it doesn't matter who they're screamin' at—and there's a certain amount of charisma transferred to these people. But then, that's what fan-mania is really all about.

"When the real charismatic figures like Mick Jagger came along, then I think that rock started to change and then the kids began to create their own trends in fashion. The Mods not only used to design their own clothes but sometimes actually to make them; and the fact that they did hum-drum jobs to get money to buy clothes, scooters, records and go to clubs built up this elite. Therefore it wasn't too long before the artists let that rub off onto them and in that sense, I think the Who were as guilty as anybody else. And I'll tell you why. Because in the end we wanted the audiences to turn up to see only us as opposed to the audience being the show and struttin' about like peacocks. We had to be the only reason for them turning up at a Who gig."

With rock and its peripheral interests having been systematically turned into a multi-million dollar consumer industry, Townshend has observed that the customer no longer dictates youth fashion. "That's all down to some designer employed by a multiple chain store. Everything nowadays is pre-meditated. Within days the whole country is flooded with what someone thinks the kids want."

Even as far back as 1968, the Who were somewhat trapped by their own image, when Townshend stated that the thing that had impressed him most was the Mod movement. He had been fired by the excitement of witnessing and subsequently taking an active part in what he felt was the first time in history that youth had made a concerted move towards unity of thought and drive and motive. "It was almost surreal" was how he was quoted at the time.

Somewhere at the turn of the sixties, the youth movement was derailed. Talk of a promised land and the eventual greening of America became suffocated as the consumer industry once again took command, and the Business in show business grabbed the spoils.

When Townshend looks back in time, he can't help but laugh. "I don't think they were promises, I think it was just young people promising themselves something...having ambitions to do something...and, if you like, certain rock people were acting as spokesmen. So they are the convenient people to

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blame. That's if you want to lay the blame at anyone's feet.

"Basically, everyone had this mood that something was happening...something was changing. In essence it did, but unfortunately a lot of its impetus was carried off by the drug obsession. Everybody credited everything innovative and exciting to drugs...yeah man, it's pot and lepers and LSD, that's what makes the world great."

"Then when things turned out to be meaningless and people had missed the bus, they quickly realized that they'd gambled everything on something that had run away. The same thing happened to rock. Rock got very excited and flew off ahead leaving most of its audience behind. The Who went on to do what I feel to be some very brave and courageous things, but in the end the audience was a bit apathetic.

"It was back to what I wrote in 'Punk And The Godfather'—you paid me to do the dancing. That's why when I'm on stage I sometimes feel that I'm too old to be doing what I'm doing."

Then, by way of contrast...

"Track by track, the new album that the Who are making is going to be the best thing we've ever done. But if people expect another grandiose epic then they ain't gonna get it. 'Cause