

Talking about his generation

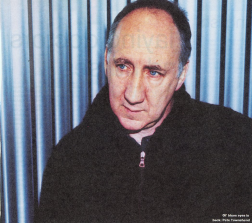
Pete Townshend wrote a rock opera about the not-30 years ago. Only now is it getting its premiere. On Radio 3. By MARK EDWARDS

Nearly 30 years ago, at a press conference to announce *Lifehouse*, the Who's follow-up to the highly successful rock opera *Tommy*, Pete Townshend seemed things weren't going well. "It was terrible," he recalls. "I suddenly realised that all these great journalists thought I was completely mad. I was terrified that the press from the band weren't there. They were very supportive about *Lifehouse*, but they didn't quite understand what I was going on about and what it was a bit of a shock."

Lifehouse was written in the future — the future we're currently living in — in the last days of the millennium. Townshend had written about a world in which people would stand up in their houses to protest themselves from pollution and experienced the world through a vast

communication network that he called *The Grid*. At the end of the piece, Townshend envisaged a scenario in which a band played music that was somehow "programmed" to affect the people in the audience so each individual's music was layered off all the others, the sound would evolve until it finally became "one note" — a note that would connect spiritually with everyone.

Let's not over-estimate pollution, a company network that connects everybody and music that is programmed rather than composed in the traditional way. Townshend appears to have got it all about right, if we allow him a certain exaggeration for dramatic effect. But in 1971, the press and the public felt otherwise. Nobody believed in the premise of the plot, and an attempt to stage a version of the "one-note" concert at the Young Vic proved disastrous.



WR: Mike van der Meer/PAU Photography

"I had a lot of meeting around writing it was so simple, why didn't they understand," says Townsend now. "You sit like some young man with a computer record company looking like David Byrne, with make-up and all cerebral hair and saying, 'This is the future'—and then you say, 'Well, when we go to the future, would you mind coming back?'"

Townsend was barely disappointed. Littlemore represented a chance to pull together the two disparate strands of his creative life: the influence-carrying power of his rock band with the cerebral space often yearned at an college. "The bit I've always really liked about Littlemore is the concert at the end, which appears to be Philip Glass pretensions, an experimental composer pretensions, which have always been there throughout times at the back of Bob's O'Riley or the funny years behind *Man O'War* and *Bandaged Again*. Even the Who sounds, but I always wanted to be a little bit arty, cerebral, creative in a way."

Both Bob O'Riley and Howard Gooden again were originally written for Littlemore as part of the project's

script transferred on the band's next album, *Man's Hand*. But they've never been heard in their original context... until now. Because Littlemore is back. With a program. On Sunday, December 3, Bob's 7 will broadcast the premiere. The next day, Townsend's first live production releases two hours later. The *Littlemore* Christmas is a live CD set, accompanying of the play plus four CDs of music; the *Littlemore* Method is an art album that includes a new CD, a documentary on the making of—

Beyond that, Townsend will want to actually stage the "one-man" concept. "It's almost as if I was involved on all of the pop music, all the rock, all the music there is, what you would usually hear is almost," he suggests. "It's almost nice in writing his. I don't know whether the sounds are such, but I understand what I'm saying. If this concert could happen in reality, what you'd have is something like the sea, something quite soft, gentle, fluid and natural."

Maybe the technology has caught

up natural forces in Littlemore could also be useful. "I think the internet is an incredibly valuable and the enabling people all over the world," he says. But this would be to compile some basic facts on these people, who would then become the actors for the concert and have "their" music played back to them.

"Remember, it is an experiment. It might fail. I've been prepared to fail, but the Who was always a band that had a strong will. I speak in English and he still thinks of the Who as a band that didn't really fail... we got a few things wrong, but I'd say, but if we picked everything up from where we were before, we could go on and everything would be good. But, you've got to go out and work hard and write some more songs."

Townsend, however, was the last years of the Who as a band. "For me, what's interesting about the latter stages of the Who was not just that our band, it was that we failed and I was really trying hard." Townsend was already beginning to have problems with his role in the Who back when he was

writing *Lifehouse*. As the band grew bigger, and the concert grew bigger, he was already missing the sense of "companionship," as he puts it, that he felt in the early gigs. He was sure the audience at the big concerts were still feeling part of the event, but he wasn't. He remembers the concert of the band's two concerts at Charlton football ground as "horrible."

"I wanted a lot and Keith [Johns] brought Elizabeth Taylor. She came in and said, 'Elizabeth's in the other room, she wants to meet you,' and I said to myself is that off? The whole she was a nightmare. I got tonic and my wife and kids were asleep, and I thought, what is this about? But people who were in the audience will be the dream was made."

This sense of isolation inadvertently influenced the plot of *Lifehouse*. The need to reconnect with people, a theme of the play, was also very much on Townsend's mind. "In the early days of my writing, I was very conscious of a process which was like a communion," he says, "writing for the audience, which was predominantly male, and talking about male health. The irony was that the vehicle I chose was an incredibly female, with culture, and you sit all of the Who's material was almost male, hard, direction, energy, but you sit in the face of someone female and you're all alone."

This feeling that the audience was his "communion altar" is one Townsend wants to have again. He believes Littlemore may get it back for him. The play involves around a kid from the previous days — "Theobald's day," says Townsend. "It's about a boy whether he believes or not in his family and father — shows the feelings he has for a kid. 'Oh but I grew up with you this whole time' was what we were saying, where, light, a bright new future," he says. "But there was no feeling of evidence of it was all in my head. I then got to be 12, 13, 14, and thought — oh, I got this, I have to pass it myself."

"Littlemore is a bloody reality. It's not to say the music isn't important, but I think, if a group of people listen to the play, and the feedback I get is that I am when they are, then I think what I'll get is a really good communion for my concert. Because I haven't really had a close communion since I wrote *Don't Explain*."

Littlemore is published by Pocket Books at £19.99. Order from the Fantasy News Bookshop on 01753 693303

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collaborator. The failure to make — through the play — also on December 3, BBC Worldwide is releasing the play live on radio. Home, and Simon and Schuster Pocket Books is publishing the script. You can see yourself pretty good idea, home of activity by watching *Who's Classic Albums* on November 3, which will feature *Man's Hand*.

up with Townsend enough to make it feasible. Certainly there are already composers, Simon has among them, who have worked with "progressive" music collectives — programs that which you create a mixture amount of data, and which this "composer" music based on that data.

Further technological development