

Pop Talk: New music lifts Townshend's burden

by *George_Varga*

For fans of The Who, last year's "Endless Wire" represented the English rock band's first album of new songs since "It's Hard" in 1982. But for Pete Townshend, The Who's guitarist, sometime singer, principal songwriter and all-around creative visionary, "Endless Wire" represented nothing less than life or death for the London band he has led for more than 40 years.

"I could not have done any more, and made it very clear that I would do no more big tours without new music," said Townshend.

More shows, yes. A major tour, no.

THE WHO - The Who's new album, 'Endless Wire,' shows off Pete Townshend's renewed sense of musical purpose, and has bolstered his friendship with singer Roger Daltrey, the band's only other remaining original member. CNS Photo Illustration by Jacie Landeros. Townshend, who in the 1960s helped lay the foundation for punk rock, power pop, hard rock and rock opera, didn't want to repeat himself any longer. The

composer of The Who's timeless 1965 anthem of teen angst, "My Generation," with its snarling declaration of defiance - Hope I die before I get old - needed fresh inspiration to move forward as he grew older. And without a new Who album to get his creative juices flowing, soul-sapping stasis appeared dangerously imminent for this bearded British rock icon, whose fans range from Eddie Vedder and Bono to the members of such younger bands as Jet and Wolfmother.

"I would have done some shows for various reasons, possibly to make a bit of money, or for charity, but touring today is politically incorrect, bad for the ecology, selfish and entirely Western," Townshend said in an e-mail interview from New York.

"But if you throw some new art into the mix, it feels justified to me; this new music might suggest a way to change, might inspire a new and poetic way to evolve. Of course, it might not, but in the past my music has been attributed with special powers to help people through difficult times.

"We'll see what happens with the new stuff. It's helping me."

Townshend seems very much like a man reborn, artistically speaking, as he demonstrated at the first of The Who's two sold-out concerts last November at the Hollywood Bowl. Ditto on "Endless Wire," which features a 10-song mini-opera.

"I don't feel right unless I spend a few moments of each show two feet in the air," said the still-spry guitarist. "How absurd is that for a man of 61? How can it possibly mean anything, except to someone else who is 61 and needs a vicarious validation?"

But Townshend's biggest validation comes from his renewed sense of musical purpose with The Who. This in turn has bolstered his friendship with singer Roger Daltrey, 62, the band's only other remaining original member.

"There is still a real feeling of celebration for Roger and I but it is coming from the right place - the audience, and for the right reason - we have survived," Townshend said.

"Our music is a real mixture of acoustic, light rock and heavy rock. That reflects better what I have always done in my own life and solo work. So at last Roger and I feel we both can view The Who as a vehicle for every shade of my songwriting, not just the bravura and bombast. Some fans may feel slighted, or cheated in some way, but the old music is there always, and it is a joy to play it live because of the way it triggers an audience to an unexpected level."

Nearly five years in the making, "Endless Wire" was delayed - and almost derailed - by two dramatic events.

The first was the drug-fueled death of bassist John Entwistle in June 2002. His demise came 24 years after the drug-and-alcohol-related death of original band drummer Keith Moon in 1978 - and only a day before a Who concert tour that largely went on as scheduled.

The second was Townshend's arrest in January 2003. It came after he admitted having accessed images of child pornography from the Internet while researching a memoir about his own abuse as a child (which also inspired his autobiographical storyline for The Who's classic 1969 rock opera, "Tommy"). He was cleared four months later, following a lengthy police investigation by Scotland Yard, although his name will remain on a national Sex Offenders Register in England until next year.

"Child porn enraged me," said Townshend, who has rarely addressed the issue in interviews since his arrest.

"The only good thing about my arrest was that I had to put a cap on that rage. If I had gone on with my rage-driven campaigning I would probably have been shot by some branch of the Balkan Mafia or agents of some burgeoning dot-com empire that was building Wall Street flotation stats based on porn delivery dollars counted in billions. Sometimes a broken nose and a badly cut eye means you have to stop the fight. Somebody saved me."

So, a decade earlier, did the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego.

Townshend still sings the praises of outgoing Playhouse artistic director Des McAnuff, who in the early 1990s helped him transform "Tommy" into a multiple Tony Award-winning smash.

"I had worked in theater before I worked with Des, but my experience with him was special," Townshend said. "Commercially the success of 'Tommy' changed my life, and not entirely for the better. It took me some time to get used to making so much money without having to stand on a stage myself; I went a bit crazy.

"... I have to admit that back in 1993, with 'Tommy' on Broadway, I had absolutely no intention of working with The Who again. I was very unhappy that 'Tommy' on Broadway was called 'The Who's "Tommy."' ' From an authorial point of view 'Tommy' is my story, no one else's."

And now The Who is the once again vital musical story of two boyhood pals, Townshend and Daltrey. Both are now in their 60s, and each is thriving.

"I don't want making music ever to feel boring. But lately I have been finding 'The Zone' while on stage with The Who," Townshend said. "This is something to look forward to, because in this state time doesn't exist, only sound, rhythm becomes the ticking of a clock that has no power to age. Musicians that find 'The Zone' feel as if they will never die, and even if they die it is OK."

"It is the most perfect form of meditation there is - because it involves action, art, expression, feedback, reflection and poetry. A rock musician in 'The Zone' is as much a High Artist as a jazz musician, or a filmmaker or writer. Ego may bring us to the stage, but when we find a way to lose ourselves there, the ego has done its job perfectly."

Copley News Service Who's best? Who wants to know? Pete Townshend shines on record, with and without The Who. Here are some of pop music critic George Varga's personal favorites:

Â§ "The Who Sings My Generation" (1965): Still one of the most ferocious debut albums by any band. Highlights: "My Generation," "The Kids Are Alright."

Â§ "Tommy" (1969): The Pretty Things beat The Who by a year with the first rock opera, but "Tommy" is the more daring and satisfying. Highlights: "Pinball Wizard," "I'm Free."

Â§ "Live at Leeds" (1970): One of the most combustible live albums ever. Get the CD reissue, which adds a whopping 27 songs to the original, six-song LP. Highlights: "Magic Bus," "Summertime Blues."

Â§ "Who's Next" (1971): Originally planned as an expansive concept project, "Who's Next" was pared down to a single album by co-producer Glyn Johns, but what an album it is! Musically and emotionally, this set a standard for rock, and beyond. Highlights: "Won't Get Fooled Again," "Behind Blue Eyes."

Â§ "Quadrophenia" (1973): Wildly ambitious and, at times, unwieldy, this double-album achieved a heady degree of grandeur without sacrificing its hard-rocking grit and fire. Highlights: "5:15," "Love, Reign O'er Me."

Â§ "Rough Mix" (1977): A duo project with Ronnie Lane, this aptly titled collaboration finds Townshend at his most earthy and unpretentious. Highlights: "Heart to Hang on to," "Till the Rivers All Run Dry."

Â§ "Empty Glass" (1980): The lyrics to some of these songs are so intensely personal that Who singer Roger Daltrey felt uncomfortable trying to perform them when Townshend first presented them to the band. The result is perhaps Townshend's most moving solo outing, with added urgency coming from his then-rapidly deteriorating personal life. Highlights: "Let My Love Open the Door," "Rough Boys."

Â§ "The Lifehouse Chronicles" (2000): Townshend released this six-CD set himself in an effort to document his greatest artistic failure: A 1970 concept album intended as his sequel to "Tommy." Highlights: "Teenage Wasteland," "Baba O'Riley."

Â§ "Pete Townshend: Live La Jolla Playhouse" (2001): Recorded at a pair of mid-2001 solo shows in California, this two-CD set captures The Who's leader at his most direct and intimate. Highlights: "The Sea Refuses No River," "St. James Infirmary."

Join together with the brand At least for The Who, yesterday's parody is today's reality.

When "The Who Sell Out" was released in 1967, the album included several songs that were mock advertisements, including "Heinz Baked Beans," "Odorono" and, prophetically, the luxury automobile-championing "Jaguar." Today, classic songs by The Who are prominently featured on TV commercials - and as the theme songs for all three "CSI" TV series.

Some fans regard this as a real-life sellout by The Who. But Pete Townshend, the veteran band's leader, pays them no mind, especially in an era when radio playlists grow ever narrower and young and veteran bands alike fight for exposure.

"I'm for sale," he said. "I'd sell flakes of my skin if anyone would pay for them. What I wouldn't do is try to sell flakes of your skin. 'CSI' has been vital to The Who ... it has extended our reach internationally."

What about musical purity?

"Purity? Forget the art, the purity of Pete is being cheapened," Townshend said.

"But hey, that's show business, and at least I'm not working down a (coal) mine."

Here's a look at some of The Who's songs used on TV shows:

Â§ "Baba O'Riley" - "CSI: New York" (2004);

Â§ "Won't Get Fooled Again" - "CSI: Miami" (2002);

Â§ "Who Are You?" - "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" (2000).

On TV commercials:

Â§ "Magic Bus" - Nissan Quest minivans (2006);

Â§ "Baba O'Riley" - Cisco Systems networking equipment (2006);

Â§ "The Real Me" - NBA draft (2006);

Â§ "I'm Free" - Saab automobiles (2005);

Â§ "Baba O'Riley" - Hewlett-Packard computers (2004);

Â§ "Happy Jack" - Hummer jeeps (2003);

Â§ "I Can See for Miles" - Sylvania SilverStar high-performance car headlights (2004);

Â§ "Baba O'Riley" - Nissan automobiles (2000);

Â§ "Won't Get Fooled Again" - Nissan automobiles (1999).

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