

Review: "Who I Am": The Pete Townshend autobiography

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In his 538-page autobiography, "Who I Am", Pete Townshend details a fascinating life in a book that took more than a decade to write. He covers his childhood, which led him to become a poet, a rock and roll pioneer with The Who, then a successful theater and Hollywood movie producer, all the while being a raging alcoholic. The book is cathartic for him. Writing about his life is a therapeutic exercise he learned from psychotherapy sessions.

Like Pete's complex rock operas and plays, this book is very hard to follow. His own life involved so many trips across the Atlantic that the reader is asked to follow a story in one paragraph that takes place in London, then the next paragraph is taking place in the "halcyon days" of Manhattan.

Pete Townshend is one of the most successful rock and roll musicians ever, creating the genre as he went along. Yet he seems to have little insight into what has made him so popular. Many of his personality traits that he regrets the most in his book, and that have nearly killed him many times, paradoxically have made him genuinely loved by millions of fans. Anyone growing up to the music of The Who and his solo work knows that Pete is a genuine "fuckup", as he puts it. He is the real deal and not one of the scores of phonies created by record companies.

Like all of the rock and roll pioneers, Pete was born right as World War II was ending. The strange combination of adults knowing what the edge of extinction is like, and the booming post-war economy, allowed kids to roam the streets of London as unsupervised brats who could afford to buy guitars and enjoy idle time free of German bombing raids. WW2, in many ways, created rock and roll, and created Pete Townshend.

Pete grew up in a household of professional musicians. His father played brass and clarinet in successful bands of the day, and his mother was a fairly famous singer. But his parents drank and enjoyed the nightlife, leaving Pete often to be babysat with his grandmother, whom he describes as a true evil witch.

Pete was also sexually abused as a young boy. This would become a powerful influence on the rest of his artistic life. He is a truly tormented man to this day.

Pete has written down a mea culpa for his decades of drinking and drug use. He avoided heavy binge drinking and cocaine throughout the beginning of The Who, while Keith Moon and John Entwistle were indulging dangerously. He gave up marijuana around 1967 or so, when he realized it was making him lazy. He first touched cocaine in 1980, while in Los Angeles, and he fell in love with the devil. Many years later, he was found unconscious in a Chelsea nightclub bathroom overdosed on cocaine (Or perhaps heroin. He is not sure), and had to be revived by a six-inch needle of epinephrine into his heart, just like the scene in Pulp Fiction.

But it was alcohol that was and still is Pete's real nemesis. He believes that he is among the 10% of the population who have the genetic switch that makes them experience a greater euphoria from alcohol. He describes many episodes of abstinence for periods of many years, then instantly relapsing into black-out boozing. Throughout his boozing, he would flirt with death and suffer serious injuries, breaking his precious guitar-playing hands many times, wrecking cars, and getting arrested.

It was not until 1982, while on tour, drinking two bottles of liquor a day, that he finally took sobriety seriously and entered into rehab. Roger Daltrey had intervened and begged him, remembering the death of Keith Moon with guilt. Of course, Pete relapsed. In 1992, he describes how he even welcomed back the booze at one point because he missed his old raucous rock and roll self. He was in the middle of a manic year, with three major productions all being juggled (theatrical version of Tommy, Psychoderelict, and Iron Man). Overstimulation often leads to relapses.

Pete makes numerous references to his marriage with Karen all throughout the book, and their three kids who seem to have turned out pretty well. He also details several other loves of his life with beautiful young women that ranged from superficial sexual lusts to serious relationships. Pete is not a handsome man (although he disagrees), but he consistently overachieved with the ladies, even by rock and roll standards, often astonishing fellow rockers. He eventually become divorced, costing him half his fortune.

Pete writes with deep regret the pain that he has caused to his wife and bandmates from his moodiness and infidelity. He views much of his life as being one of a derelict "fuckup". But what he seems to lack insight into is that those embarrassing regretful decision he made also created the flaws in his personality that are precisely what endears his legions of fans. When fans are in a rock and roll mood, they are exorcising their own demons through The Who. Pete is the "Indian Guru of all Fuckups", like Meher Baba, and his fans are his worshipers.

The fans own Pete, in their minds. It's a contract they made with him in the 1960's, so just "Shut up and break your guitar", he feels they are thinking at times. The fans want more and more rock and roll antics from him, regardless of whether it harms his health.

Even if you are not a fan of The Who, Pete's autobiography is a fascinating history of rock and roll from its inception through to the 1980's when the genre "jumped the shark", so to speak. The four members of The Who formed a band in 1964, having known one another since they were 11 years old.

Pete rather nonchalantly spits out paragraph-long tales of rubbing elbows with virtually all of the icons of rock, such as Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Ronny Wood, Ray Davies, Jimmy Paige, Robert Plant, Eric Clapton, Paul McCartney, and many others. It was a small club back then, literally and metaphorically, with The Beatles leading the way, and The Rolling Stones a few years later.

The Who did not hit it big until they played at an unimportant disaster of a festival called Woodstock, on August 16th, 1969. After all, the biggest bands of the day had declined invitations. Bob Dylan, The Beatles, The Doors, and Led Zeppelin all passed on Woodstock. This was just a cheap copycat version of the 1967 Monetary Film Festival. No one knew that one man, a low-budget film-maker from Akron, Ohio named Michael Wadleigh, would be filming it all and make the festival a legendary event.

Before they played Woodstock, Pete recalls that in the span of just a few minutes after checking into their hotel, somehow John Entwistle and Keith Moon scored some drugs and were giggling high on the way to the concert. Decades later, both men would be dead from drug overdoses.

On an August Friday in 1969, the small country road to the Woodstock, New York amphitheater was clogged by stranded cars and hippies walking. Pete recalls being backstage in a tent, helping himself to some coffee, then realizing it was mildly spiked with LSD. He walked outside and saw a young man climb up a tower by the stage, then fall down and die after he touched a live electrical wire wet from the thunderstorms.

After many hours of delay caused by dangerous thunderstorms that turned the farm pasture into mud, The Who took the stage at 5:00 AM, Saturday. They played their brand new album "Tommy" to thousands of campers asleep. They slowly awoke and cheered the band on.

Michael Wadleigh, the man who made the film about Woodstock, which is the one and only reason that the festival became the important event in history that it is today, was a second-year medical student at Columbia. He employed Martin Scorsese as a gofer, among others, and took some cameras to film Woodstock. That movie became a Hollywood blockbuster and propelled otherwise obscure bands, like The Who, into superstardom. Pete kicked Mr. Wadleigh from the edge of the stage with his boot, not knowing who he was.

Pete never describes it this way, perhaps due to modesty, but the best rock and roll artists of the day clearly respected him as a genius for creating the first rock opera, Tommy. David Bowie, after babysitting Pete's younger brother Simon as The Who performed Tommy, told Pete afterward that he too would create rock and roll characters. He later formed the persona of Ziggy Stardust in 1972.

Mick Jagger also respected Pete. They both toyed with the idea of having a rock and roll circus that literally toured the country by train, but logistics got in the way. Instead, they filmed a TV special called the "The Rolling Stones Rock and Roll Circus" in December of 1968 (before Woodstock took place the following summer, which would later propel The Who to the Rolling Stones' level of stardom).

Eric Clapton and George Harrison were/are also personal friends of Pete. Pete describes how he was asked by Eric to do him a favor, and accompany him on a visit to George's house. Pete served as a decoy, allying Eric to have quiet one-on-one time with George's

wife. It worked. Eric married Pattie Boyd, and the song "Layla" is based on the whole affair. George eventually forgave Eric for stealing his wife.

For the periods of The Who after the 1960's, Pete devotes entire chapters to his life and events that shaped his writings of The Who albums and solo albums. Interestingly, he still to this day seems to have a disconnect between what he views as being his best work, and what the rest of the world thinks are his greatest works. "Tommy" and "Who's Next" are clearly the two sources of the biggest hits that The Who plays at every concert, yet Pete only holds Tommy in high regard. Who's Next is just a salvage album that collected the songs from his failed attempt at another complex opera called "Lifehouse", in Pete's mind. He seems to hold a grudge against Who's Next, the same way a father might ostracize a bastard child.

In reality, Lifehouse was just one of many overly ambitious follow-on concept albums and stage theater productions that Pete started, trying to top Tommy, that were never properly finished. Pete recognizes now that he has a manic depressive personality. He would dream up fantastic plots for albums, that even his own producers and bandmates could not understand, then be unable to see them through to completion. In the large pile of Pete's not-quite-finished projects are Rough Mix, Iron Man (album and theatrical production), White City (album and theatrical production), and Psychoderelict (album and theatrical production).

Even the double-album Quadrophenia, released in 1973, was not properly completed, according to Pete. It was supposed to be released in four-channel stereo, but the record company rushed them to meet the Christmas season, so it was released in normal stereo.

For the devoted fans of Pete, they are not alone in being confused about the origin and completion of many of his works. As one reads Pete's autobiography, it is clear that he views none of his works since Tommy as being properly completed. "Iron Man" the 45-minute album, for example, was released in 1989 after being pushed aside for tours by The Who. It was panned by the critics and fans. Nevertheless, Pete persevered on the theatrical stage production, which was well received by the critics. Finally, it became a Warner Brothers animated movie in 1999, also well reviewed by critics.

After leaving The Who one time (he did this often, only to return), Pete made some artistic solo albums, such as Iron Man, and actually became a full-time book editor for Faber & Faber in London. He created several companies to produce more movies like Tommy, and sell online merchandise. Out of all of this, he became a very successful Broadway play producer, and finally rich. Pete explains that throughout the heyday of The Who, the band members were living in debt and were actually broke.

After the Psychoderelict album in 1993, Pete laid low for almost a decade. After the attacks on September 11th, 2001, Sir Paul McCartney put together the Madison Square Garden tribute concert. The Who's performance (now just Pete, Roger, and John, since Keith died in 1978) stole the show according to many music fans. Elton John approached

them after their performance and encouraged them to get the band back together, which they did.

While touring, Pete began to record on the road with a mobile recording studio a new album that he decided to put out under The Who brand rather than as a solo album. In 2006, "Endless Wire" was released to good critical review. It was their first studio album since 1982.

After more touring that resulted in the cocaine overdose death of John Entwistle, perhaps the best bassist to ever live, in 2006 in a Las Vegas hotel with a hooker, Roger Daltrey also had to drop out due to vocal cord problems. The Who broke up again. Pete got a divorce and moved in with a new spouse.

In 2012, after Hurricane Sandy devastated the East Coast of America, the 12:12:12 charity concert at Madison Square Garden featured the biggest bands that ever came out of the rock and roll era. The Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney, Bruce Springsteen, Roger Waters, Eric Clapton, and The Who all took the stage. This was bigger than Woodstock in terms of talent. Once again, it was The Who that performed among the very best of the evening.

The Who celebrated its 50th birthday in 2014. It has survived heroin addicted managers who stole from the band, two drug overdose deaths of vital members of the band, near-death experiences of the other Pete and Roger, hearing loss, the cocaine era of the 70's and 80's, the ravages of alcohol and heroin addiction, Pete being outed as bisexual before Hollywood made it cool and acceptable, and other major international scandals.

Now, what about that 800-pound gorilla in the room: Pete's arrest and conviction for viewing Internet child pornography? Did he do it?

There is little doubt about what happened, since Pete confessed and the police reports back up his version. In 1999, when the faster bandwidth allowed graphic images to propagate on the web, Pete became curious about how the establishment, such as banks, would allow for the commerce component of kiddie porn to happen. He made a one-time "click" on a porn website and paid with his credit card to access the images. But Pete's infamous bad decision in the blink of an eye was recorded by the FBI in a global sting. A British tabloid got the story and reporters flocked to his house. Years later, he pleaded in British court to the equivalent of a misdemeanor in the States.

Pete explains that he was only researching the child pornography issue for various projects he was working on, and his alibis are rock solid. First of all, he made child abuse a central theme in the 1969 and 1973 Tommy productions. Then, at the time of his Internet crime, he was actively sponsoring multiple charities involved in helping abused children, and counseling adults who were victims of sexual abuse. Most importantly, no victims came out of the woodwork claiming that Pete was any sort of creepy molester. In fact, the most respected people in music and film supported Pete.

Pete seems to have been just another victim of childhood sexual abuse, dealing with his demons for the rest of his life. His illegal Internet browsing and philanthropic activities were psychiatric therapy for him. Child abuse victims often revert to the past.

When viewed in totality, Pete Townshend deserves credit for pioneering the Marshall "stack" amplifier, popularizing auto destruction through smashing of his guitar on stage (slightly before Jimi Hendrix did it), the windmill arm motion of playing the guitar (inspired by Keith Richards' warm up exercise), incorporating synthesizers (along with Pink Floyd), writing the first rock opera with fictional allegorical characters, describing the concept of global social networking in his "Lifehouse" project before the Internet and Facebook were even dreamed of, bringing rock and roll to Broadway theaters, and most importantly, for putting on the best live rock and roll stadium shows ever.

Through the first 460-pages of "Who I Am", Pete seems to be a nihilistic dullard of a man, not fully grasping his place in history. He does not brag about his accomplishments or acknowledge his weaknesses and strengths. He pretends that he is not a globally popular man, until the chapter "Letter to my eight-year-old-self". Then, he opens the curtains and lets the reader know that he has indeed achieved enlightenment. He admits that he realizes his body of work has been important to millions of people, and shaped our culture. Legions of fans do more than revel in euphoria during his rock concerts, they genuinely love him for the big British fuckup that he is.