

It's a bright autumn morning, and in the conservatory of The Wick, a grand Georgian house at the top of Richmond Hill in southwest London, the guitarist and songwriter of the world's greatest rock band is making coffee. Pete Townshend, a fit and healthy 67-year-old who has been sober for almost two decades, bought The Wick from Ronnie Wood of the Rolling Stones in 1996. That was the year Townshend began work on *Who I Am*, the definitive inside story of The Who, in the room in which we are sitting. Now, after countless curtailments, edits and rewrites, it is finished.

"It's a wonderful room to work in," Townshend says as he brings over two cups of coffee and sits by the desk in the middle of the conservatory. An enamel print of Peter Blake's *Babe Rainbow* is in on the wall and a Vespa scooter is by the window, reminders of The Who as both Sixties Pop Art phenomenon and the epitome of mod culture. "All the history, the collateral, the press and other people's biographies were here for me, so I never felt I was facing a blank page. But it wasn't an easy ride."

Who I Am details myriad aspects of Townshend's life and work, from his bizarre childhood, to the incredible journey of The Who, to his arrest in 2003 as part of the Operation Ore child pornography investigation, the circumstances of which he finally explains. As much as a personal portrait, it's the story of how the music and image of The Who helped to define and give voice to a generation.

Formed in Ealing, West London, in 1964 from the ashes of Roger Daltrey's R&B band the Detours, The Who brought to pop a complexity and eccentricity it hadn't previously explored. Townshend captured teen angst and sexual frustration in singles such as *Pictures of Lily*, *I'm a Boy* and *My Generation*, then brought new levels of scale and ambition to rock with *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia*. The Who became one of the world's first stadium bands after storming the Woodstock Festival in 1969, and have sold more than 100 million records. Alongside the Beatles and the Rolling Stones they are part of the holy trinity of British pop.

Unsurprisingly, none of this came from a satisfied mind. *Who I Am* documents the life of a conflicted, complex man, whose darkest moment came in January 2003 when his name appeared on a list compiled for Operation Ore, a computer crime investigation focusing on child pornography. Those closest to Townshend, including his girlfriend Rachel Fuller, his three children and, most publicly, The Who's singer Roger Daltrey, stuck by him: Daltrey knew that the man he had known for four decades wasn't a paedophile. But when the story went public Townshend reacted in what retrospectively looks like a big mistake: he went silent.

FRONT PAGE AND BELOW: ROBERT J WILSON COMMISSIONED BY THE TIMES



The Real Me

Only one man could have written the true story of perhaps the greatest, loudest band in rock — and now he has. As *The Times* prepares to print a series of excerpts from his extraordinary memoirs *Who I Am*, Pete Townshend tells **Will Hodgkinson** about his life in The Who

How hard was it to write about the arrest now, almost a decade later? "I knew that all I had to write was the truth," Townshend says. "But what I did was insane."

The story's roots go back to 1976. Townshend and The Who's drummer Keith Moon, of all people, visited a home in Chiswick, West London, for battered wives run by the care activist Erin Pizzey. "Joanna Lumley called and said The Who had to help this amazing woman. Keith said, 'I'll go!', mainly because he wanted to shag Joanna. He got there and Erin Pizzey had him cleaning the toilets. He came back with tears streaming down his face, saying: 'We've got to do something.' And that's how Double-O started."

Double-O is the charity set up by The Who for victims of sexual and domestic abuse. Having heard first-hand

accounts from victims, Townshend wanted to demonstrate that child abuse and the pornography that goes with it involved a financial chain that ran all the way from Russian orphanages to British banks. So in 1999 he paid a \$7 charge on a site that carried a button labelled "click here for child porn". Then he cancelled it. When police tracked Townshend's name and confiscated his computers and files they found nothing incriminating. His main concern was that his diaries, with their standard rock star woes about which car or boat he should buy next, would make him look like "a self-obsessed prat". As it turned out, that was the least of his worries.

"It's white knight syndrome," Townshend says of the pattern of events. "You want to be the one that's seen to be helping. Roger has it with Teenage Cancer Trust. I had experienced something creepy when I was a child, so you imagine: what if I was a girl of 9 or 10 and my uncle had raped me every week? What would I be like then? I felt I had an understanding, and that I could help."

Townshend could have gone to court and explained his innocence. It could have all been cleared up years ago. I put this to him. After a very long pause, rubbing his head as if protecting it from a black cloud of despair, he says: "You know... I think I was exhausted. The police at Kingston station gave me *half an hour* to make a decision about whether to go to court or not. My lawyers were as surprised as I was, because everyone thought I would be let off. And I thought that if I went to court they would f***ing rip me apart. They'll just rip me apart."

The story went public anyway, which was worse. "If I'd had a gun I would have shot myself, just to escape the lynching," he writes in *Who I Am*. Was he really suicidal? "Only for a moment. It was fine until I looked out of the window and saw four satellite vans outside. A journalist came to the door and I told him: 'I'm f***ed.' He said: 'Nah, you'll be all right.' 'How?' It was the subject of the day and it really did feel like a lynching, because there was no sense of 'the truth will out'. I've had the misfortune to read online comments where I'm judged as a paedophile because I've got a big nose."

Why has it taken Townshend so long to properly clear his name? "I wanted to say: I will explain. I just didn't think it would take this long. It's not why I wrote the book, but it is why I brought it into the present day."

"But look at another scenario. Imagine three or four girls coming along and saying: 'I had sex with Pete in the Sixties, when he was 25 and I was 12'. I know it didn't happen, but when you're a pop star people say all kinds of things. I get lots of pictures of children with big noses who claim I'm their dad. One guy sent me a letter to say he had always known I was his dad, he loved me and he had been waiting to have the courage to connect with me. He told me the circumstances and I was convinced he was right. So I said it would help if he sent me a birth certificate. It turns out he was conceived a year before I lost my virginity."

That's another revelation about *Who I Am*: Townshend, at least in the early days of The Who, was hardly a rock'n'roll animal. Despite The Who's image as the wildest, most aggressive band of them all, much of the memoir describes Townshend trying to be a good husband and father to his children



Ladies and gentlemen, The Who: from left, Pete Townshend, Keith Moon, John Entwistle and Roger Daltrey

and resisting the temptations of life on the road to stay focused and productive. There are a few incidents in the cocaine-ravaged Eighties, such as an awkward moment when his daughter Emma asks him who the pretty woman he is paying so much attention to is (it was the actress Theresa Russell), and an evening in 1982 when he did technically die from a cocaine overdose in the toilets of a club in Baker Street before being brought back to life by a massive shot of adrenalin. But as Moon and The Who's bassist John Entwistle fornicated their way across America for much of the Sixties and Seventies, Townshend was remarkably chaste.

"It's an absolute fact," he says. "I was the backroom boy and I carried this duty to serve the band as well as the audience. John and Keith were dedicated to filling up the time until they got on stage however they could, but for me the whole process filled my time. I came from art school, where the lecturers chucked out crazy ideas in the hope that something would happen, and the guys in the band were not that kind of people."

"When we started John was working in a tax office. Keith was working for British Gypsum, selling cement. Roger was in a tin plate factory. They were released from those jobs when they went out on to the road and they left their lives behind. I took mine with me."

Who I Am details the way so many of The Who's biggest songs, and much of the inspiration for *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia*, came from Townshend's troubled, disconnected childhood. The son of glamorous musician parents, he was 6 and having quite a nice normal time in the family home in West London when, for reasons that presumably made sense to them at the time, his parents sent him off to live with his insane grandmother Denny.

So began a period that was bizarre verging on disturbing. Denny lived in a flat above a stationer's shop in Westgate, north Kent. It was opposite a bus station and she would cross the road to deliver cups of tea to the drivers — in her negligée. Townshend's memories are hazy, but it seems that

she was offering a selection of hot and cold snacks, light refreshments and sexual favours. Townshend remembers visiting American Air Force officers benefiting from the arrangement too.

"She wouldn't let me have a lock on my door, which was terrifying," he says. "She had one guy that looked like Adolf Hitler, with a little moustache, his hair brushed to the side and a withered arm. He would sit me on his lap and I had to call him Uncle. I don't want to say I was sexually abused just because it's convenient to explain why I'm so... complicated, but I also don't want to deny that what feels to me happened did happen. Not that I was brutally raped, but something very creepy was going on."

Townshend writes illuminatingly about the early to mid-Sixties South and West London phenomenon in which a generation of callow, mostly middle-class youths fell in love with American blues and R&B. It gave birth to the mod movement, for which The Who became the signature band.

"We were in the right place at the right time. I had first heard blues and R&B at art school, and to discover a mirrored record collection with the Stones — Jimmy Reed, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry — was amazing. And we had a ready-made audience with the mods. Pete Meaden, our first manager, always said that you could be a mod and still have a job behind the till at the bank. You would continue to take part in society without changing a single thing about your outfit. It wasn't about rebellion. It was about subtlety and a sense of self-enchantment and I realised that we were narrating their story, creating a theatre in which they could place themselves. We were serving the mod boys in the audience."

Townshend's goal was to treat pop music with a level of artistic seriousness it hadn't previously had, in the same way that Andy Warhol realised a manufactured product such as a Campbell's Soup tin was worthy of attention. "People still don't want to treat pop with any level of seriousness, which in a way is correct," he says. "It's a bit like painting a crazy picture and then saying: 'This is a crazy picture and all serious art is a load of wank.' Then someone comes along and says: 'But why did you feel the need to paint the crazy picture?'"

"You had people like Jann Wenner of *Rolling Stone*, smart, well-educated people who wanted to talk about the artistic drive behind pop music, and before you know it you get seduced. For me that was always a great danger, which is why I frequently disappeared up my own arse. What the rest of the band wanted was a little less high-flown."

The rest of The Who don't come out of the memoir too badly. Moon, whose 20th birthday celebrations included driving a Lincoln Continental into the swimming pool of a Holiday Inn, hurling a lamp at a fan, and knocking out his own teeth (The Who have been banned from Holiday Inns ever since), is clearly more intelligent than his Moon the Loon image suggests.

"Keith was fabulous. But he was incredibly hard work, very selfish, and it's only lately emerged about how vulnerable he was. Roger has letters Keith wrote to his ex-wife, and it seems he was in love with her until the day he died. I certainly didn't want to celebrate him as a cartoon. When I was working on *Tommy* I was trying to present it to the guys in the band and the only one that got it, that understood it was ▶

“I was the backroom boy and I carried this duty to serve the band as well as the audience”