

An Interview with Peter Stanfield. The Who and the “White Heat” Generation: Politics, Influences and Modernity in the 1960s¹

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Abstract. The 1960s is a decade that has frequently been re-assessed due to the vast number of socio-political changes which occurred in these years—many of them still affecting current society. In the UK these improvements were promoted under Harold Wilson’s administration (1964-1970), whose political agenda aimed to create an era of modernisation that soon permeated the British arts at all levels. In the case of the British band The Who, their songs deliver a particular testimony on issues such as modernity and commodity culture—in some cases, even anticipating a punk attitude, as Peter Stanfield, Emeritus Professor at the University of Kent, notes in one of his most recent books *A Band with Built-In Hate: The Who from Pop Art to Punk* (2021). The rising interest in this decade, the particularities of this band, and the recent release of material such as the present book have been the reasons to conduct this interview with Peter Stanfield. Moreover, the main aim of this dialogue is to shed light on the views on politics, modernity and society of a band who, due to its particular features—discussed in this interview—has a paramount role to be considered in British Cultural Studies.

Keywords: British culture; the 1960s; The Who; Cultural Studies; politics

[es] Entrevista a Peter Stanfield. The Who y la generación “White Heat”: política, influencias y modernidad en los años 60

Resumen. La década de 1960 es una época que ha sido frecuentemente revisitada debido a la gran cantidad de cambios sociopolíticos que se produjeron durante estos años, muchos de los cuales siguen teniendo gran repercusión en la sociedad actual. En Reino Unido, estas mejoras fueron promovidas por el gobierno de Harold Wilson (1964-1970), cuya agenda política tenía como objetivo crear una era de modernización que pronto impregnaría las artes británicas a todos los niveles. En el caso de la banda británica The Who, sus canciones ofrecen un testimonio particular sobre temáticas como la modernidad y la cultura mercantil; llegando incluso a anticipar en algunos casos una actitud punk, como señala Peter Stanfield, profesor emérito de la Universidad de Kent, en uno de sus libros más recientes titulado *A Band with Built-In Hate: The Who from Pop Art to Punk* (2021). El creciente interés en esta década, las particularidades de esta banda y la reciente publicación de material como este libro han sido las razones por las cuales se ha llevado a cabo la presente entrevista con Peter Stanfield. Además, el principal objetivo de este diálogo será el de arrojar luz sobre las visiones acerca de la política, la modernidad y la sociedad de una banda que, por sus características particulares, tuvo un rol primordial a considerar en los Estudios Culturales Británicos.

Palabras clave: Cultura británica, década 1960; The Who; estudios culturales; política

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1. Introducing the Swinging Sixties, The Who and Peter Stanfield

Among Peter Stanfield’s several publications, there are books and articles on Western, pop culture, music and pulp cinema. His last books are the aforementioned *A Band with Built-in Hate* published in 2021 and *Pin-Ups 1972: Third*

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Generation Rock 'n' Roll released in 2022, both published by Reaktion Books. The current interview³ will draw special attention to the former volume devoted to The Who, which has been described in the *Irish Times* as a book that “locates the Who (and crucially their peak years, during which they were, he writes ‘not copyists but innovators’) at a boundary-breaking intersection of pop and art-rock” (Clayton-Lea 2021). *A Band with Built-In Hate: The Who from Pop Art to Punk* explores The Who’s transformation from the mid-sixties to the late seventies, tracing their journey through the lens of pop art and the dynamic fusion of high and low culture that characterized this period.

Apart from the general interest in this well-known band, there are several reasons to approach The Who at this particular moment. Among them, the approaching of their 60th anniversary, the subsequent new releases and deluxe editions of their albums from the 1960s and the fact that in less than five years, new biographies of all the members of the band have been published. This has also been accompanied by new documentaries, like *The Who: Sell Out* (2021), which explore the role of this band beyond music, dealing with their impact on society and the state of the art during the 1960s. But above all, a significant reason to re-examine the legacy of this band is the fact that now there is a tendency to re-approach certain aspects of this decade. In the last years, there has been a rising interest in deconstructing the canonical image of the ‘Swinging Sixties’ and the subsequent counterculture of the end of the decade. This is observed not just in recent studies⁴ but also in contemporary artistic manifestations. Among these, there are remediations of stories and films that re-explore issues such as gender, race and class during the decade both in the UK and in the US, for instance, books such as David Mitchell’s *Utopia Avenue* (2020) or films like *Last Night in Soho* (2021), *The Trial of the Chicago 7* (2020), *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019) and *Made in Dagenham* (2010) to name some of them.

What most of these artistic productions have in common is not just their implicit aim of depicting the radical social changes which took place in this decade but also the fact that, to a greater or lesser degree, they question the real extent of these changes in people’s lives. In the case of the UK, these changes were fostered by the government of Harold Wilson, whose political mantra was to create a New Britain out of the “white heat” of the “scientific revolution”⁵ (1963: 1-5). In a society still marked by the also significant changes of the post-war Welfare State, this led to a period of modernisation and new social legislations such as the legalisation of homosexuality, the end of censorship, reforms on divorce, laws against racial discrimination, equal payment, and the legalisation of abortion. Nevertheless, in these years the country also witnessed other—not so positive—changes such as the 1967 Devaluation of the Sterling, something unprecedented in 18 years, which introduced a period of economic instability in the UK. This melting pot of changes permeated British society, especially teenagers, who according to scholars such as Arthur Marwick arose as a new dominant group resultant of the post-war baby boom, and created “new modes of self-presentation, involving emancipation from the old canons” (1998: 99).

In view of this, it is worth dealing with a band like The Who, as its four members stand not just as perfect archetypes of teenagers in the sixties—all having very diverse backgrounds and economic situations—but also as the main exponents of the mod subculture during the decade. Thus, to re-approach the role of this band in the social upheaval of the British Swinging Sixties is paramount to British Cultural Studies, as they gave voice to a generation who witnessed all these changes towards modernity and the new politics of Harold Wilson’s government.

2. Interview with Peter Stanfield

Interviewer: In your book you suggest that The Who, as other mods, had a complex relationship with modernity as they were part of it but also against it. You mention that their album *My Generation* (1965) is paradoxically a “critique of commodity culture” produced by pop stars (Stanfield 2022, 83). Could you expand on this idea, please?

Peter Stanfield: It is really about how you talk about mods as a group. When you collapse vast numbers of individuals into one group, you take the agency away from the individual. So, it is very hard to know whether or not they had any opinion about modernity whatsoever, because it is a kind of groupthink really. But also, you must be very careful because who the mods were shifted quite dramatically in that period from the very late 1950s to when The Who came on board. If you read a book like *Absolute Beginners* (1959) by Colin McInnes or *Baron’s Court, All Change* (1961) by Terry Taylor, there both versions seem to pre-exist. That it is about jazz, and it is very much a kind of individual’s response to the world. In this kind of book, you can find answers to that or versions of that complex relationship that I talked about.

³ The present interview was conducted in September 2022, just a few months after the release of the book’s second edition. The conversation was recorded and subsequently transcribed.

⁴ In *British Fictions of the Sixties: The Making of the Swinging Decade* (2016), Sebastian Groes exposes the need to “demythologize” the 1960s, he also notes these myths on the decade are “making us blind to their actual complexity and fictionality; they often lead to a reductive over-romanticization and misrepresentation” (Groes 2016: 8).

⁵ These words were the motto of Harold Wilson’s speech delivered at the Labour party conference in Scarborough on 1st October 1963. This plan of modernisation would later lead him to be elected Prime Minister in 1964.

My point is that the mods were part of that commodity culture and, one of the things that made a difference was their kind of celebration of it. But what makes The Who different from the mods—from the pack of mods—is that they had the critique. They wrote a critique of it. They were able to see themselves outside of that commodity culture, even as they were being spawned as part of that commodity culture. Therefore, an album like *The Who Sell Out* (1967) is part of that kind of complex view of how they were positioned within that space and then also how they could come out of it, at least at that point in time, which is to kind of reengage with rock and roll as a primal form that gave them back that kind of authenticity that they were getting lost in with psychedelia.

Interviewer: When you present the idea that pop is stocked up on plastic, it reminds me of the song “Substitute”. I think that you also mentioned it in the book.

PS: That is a perfect example, the song itself. You can work with that; it is Townsend describing the contradictions that he finds himself in or someone equivalent to him finds himself in. You know: “I look all white, but my dad was black. I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth” (The Who 1966a). That is working class, not aristocracy. You could use that as a kind of formative text really to kind of pick apart this whole issue concerning how they sit within commodity culture and comment upon it.

Interviewer: Authors such as Michael Bracewell (2011) note a rising tendency in the art produced during the 1960s to homage British icons of the past, e. g. Neo-Victorian fashion, a revival of figures such as William Blake, Oscar Wilde, P. B. Shelley, etc. In The Who, this is noticeable in the use of elements such as the logo of the band alluding to the Royal Air Force or the Union Jack pattern in Pete Townshend’s clothes. Later, other bands like The Kinks would also explore British tradition and its provincial side in their album *The Village Green Preservation Society* (1969). This comeback to the imagery of the empire, the war and even a more natural Britain is very different to the technological Britain fostered by Harold Wilson’s government. What are your views on this?

PS: The debates around the modern predate Harold Wilson. There is a famous book called *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) by Paul Fussell, which looks at the shifts that happened after the war and that led to kind of an explosion of modernist activity. Artists engaging with the modern world, trying to articulate what it is to be inside modernity, and what the experience of modernity is. Therefore, concerning *The Kinks’ Village Green Preservation Society* and their kind of reaction to the modern—to the ‘white heat of technology’—, actually, you can see it within the arts and craft movement of the 19th century with William Morris, who moved back to traditional forms of British identity. But I think The Kinks are not saying that we should still be riding around on steam engines, but they are saying that things get lost in the rush towards the future, and some things are worth preserving. So again, there is always an inherent tension in this. None of these pop musicians is really one thing or the other. Besides, the fact that they stay for the most part away from any kind of commentary on Harold Wilson and his government is significant.

Consequently, I think you might want to read George Melly’s *Revolt Into Style* (1970) as a way of getting to grips with that. So, what were they revolting about? What were they pushing back against? The idea is that you can have a kind of revolt because of the jacket you wear as it can be really quite a powerful symbol if it is made of a flag. Britain may be in the declining days of the Empire, but it is still very patriotic. This is what the whole Brexit project is, it is about trying to regain something that was lost a long time ago and is unregainable. So, they took something that people revered, venerated and considered to be the embodiment of the kind of ideas and values that they hold to be true and to which their identity belongs. Therefore, when Townshend turns it into a jacket, that is a provocation and that is probably more effective than somebody going on strike and holding up a placard saying, “More money, please”, “Protect the traditional cobbler” or, you know, “the leatherworker order”, “Morris dancer” or something. But he is also doing something which is being gifted to him by other Modernists, other artists that have taken the symbols and recontextualized them, he is reworking them. Then, when he wears medals, he can make no claim to what those medals symbolize. He did not fight in the trenches. He did not stand off the Germans on the beaches of France. He simply wears them as decoration and, therefore, again, it is a provocation because they represent that which is considered to be the best of British society. But he is using it as a way of saying “I don’t care for those values”.

One of the things that he constantly battles against is convention. For example, the convention of young people getting married and then just simply repeating what their parents have done. It is very against that, and this is what the whole thing around “I hope I die before I get old” is about. It clearly wasn’t a kind of manifesto that he was going to follow, that the day before his 30th birthday he was going to jump off a building in front of a train. But it was about this thought that old ideas are something that pins you down, holds you down, and locks you in place and he wants to get away from that.

But where does he want to go? That is something you might want to think about and it is towards the ‘white heat’ of Harold Wilson’s rhetoric. So, do you see where I am placing this? It is not directly political, but it is highly political.

Interviewer: Yes, this kind of, not explicit, but implicit meanings in their actions, is what I wanted to highlight. Because it is very difficult to find some explicit criticism, even in literature.

PS: Yes, and I think if you look back and see the way that I use George Melly in *A Band with Built-In Hate*, and if you also read his *Revolt Into Style* (1970), you will see that he talks about it. The danger of the Rolling Stones was that they were sex. Well, why is sex dangerous? Well, because if it is about sex, then it is not about preserving the traditions of marriage and monogamy. They are scared of them in that sense, that they suggest there are other ways of living and pleasures unbound.

Interviewer: Considering the previous question, would you say that this approach [elements from the past in fashion and art] —contrary to the famous ‘white heat of technology’ of the government— was triggered by the rising criticism towards Wilson’s politics (taking into consideration that the devaluation of the sterling also coincided with these dates)? I am afraid this is highly related to your previous answers. Therefore, do you have anything else to add?

PS: In *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) by Thomas Frank, which is essentially about male fashion, you might find it fascinating as he talks about the 1950s, at least in America, as the space in which nonconformity became the means by which you sold products. So, for instance, to drink this whiskey, which is —as much as all whiskey— mass-produced, suggests that you are a non-conformist, that is what the advertising does, or to drive this particular car, suggests you are a non-conformist. Because we do not want to be seen as part of the crowd. We want to be seen as individuals, and this is what the men on the TV programs did, and his book is about how men move from conformity of dress —like the black suit and tie white shirt and matching shoes— to that kind of psychedelic face. Where did men’s hats go? Was that because of Elvis Presley or John F. Kennedy? They did not wear them. Or maybe the beatniks, who did not wear them either. But then, the idea of becoming nonconformist becomes really important and that is why you get in the 1960s these kinds of films and a lot of The Kinks’ songs like “Mr. Pleasant” and “Dead End Street”, where they talk about that idea of conformity as a form of death, and therefore, you want to break away. Nevertheless, they also laugh at that because you end up as “The Dedicated Follower of Fashion”, becoming conformist again.

The Kinks are indeed very good for this play by critiquing the class structures and the way the world works, but also critiquing the way that people try and break with those. They see the kind of hypocrisy and the contradictions in it.

Interviewer: So, back to the members of The Who, their origins and formation were very diverse: Roger Daltrey was a sheet-metal worker, John Entwistle a clerk, Pete Townshend an art student and Keith Moon was the only one having attended a secondary school. How did this condition the way they approached their criticism of certain aspects of society? What about the Americanisation of culture and their working-class condition?

PS: It is post-war and obviously, there is a boom in young people —the initial baby boomers— and grammar schools really do take on a very important role. It has already had, as the means by which you create opportunity and that kind of moving from one class to another, class mobility. But, actually, it is a very ineffective means as they were to discover. In fact, by the time I was at school in the seventies, they got rid of most grammar schools, except not in some places like Kent, where they still have them. Because the middle class is very good at gaming this situation and making sure that their child, regardless of their merits or abilities, gets to go to grammar schools because they give them extra classes or what they need to pass the exams. The whole thing is fixed, so actually, it does the opposite of what the people thought it was going to do, which was to allow a kind of class mobility. Contrarily, it locks people into the existing status quo.

Richard Hoggart is very good on that whole background of how grammar schools work. He is thinking about this at a point in time, in particular, with American culture, rock and roll... whether he does not much talk about that, it is comic books and pulp novels that he worries about. Certain films as well if I remember right. All of these are seen as the enemy at the gates that have to be kept out. Therefore, what do we learn at school? What things should we be teaching our kids? Should they be reading D.H. Lawrence or, should they be reading Mickey Spillane? That is part of the debate that was going on. What do kids read? Well, the kids do not much care to follow a standard path to conformity: to earn enough money to pay, get a mortgage on your house, buy a house, and have a family... And one of the routes out that they had was not just the new universities, like Kent, but more importantly, the art schools. They were everywhere and they had a very open and liberal approach. They basically let them do what they wanted for a year or two and it was there that they had spaces to practice on their guitars and to meet other like-minded people. So, Simon Frith’s book on art schools is excellent, *Art into Pop* (1987). I definitely recommend that.

Interviewer: And taking into consideration that, as you mentioned in your book, Keith Moon is the only one who did not attend a grammar school. Do you think that this affected —as I mentioned before, not his political vindication because we are not dealing with explicit ones, but maybe in an implicit manner— the way in which they broke with tradition and in which they vindicate the use of different styles?

PS: Yes, the distinct spaces that they go into before becoming successful pop stars are pretty much a good picture of the kind of social makeup of a certain part of Britain at that time. I left school at 16, I had an apprenticeship in a factory. These were respectable jobs that paid a reasonable wage for a young man that was still living at home. But

a lot of my friends were like John Entwistle, who went on to become a clerk, a white collar. They worked in a tax office or something, and then other friends were like Pete Townsend and went to art school. And then some were like Keith Moon, that I do not know what he did after he left school. He probably hardly attended and went just straight into a band. I cannot imagine him actually earning any money, but he would just be picking it up where he could until the band took off. But I do not think that is surprising, I think that is very representative of what young people did when they left school at 15 or 16 without too many qualifications, except those like John Entwistle, who obviously had enough to be a clerk.

Interviewer: Therefore, if you would have to choose, in The Who, who was the most politically committed or if not, at least transgressive in his art?

PS: Oh, by long sure Pete Townsend. I mean, I think they all have great talents. Entwistle already was a great musician and super bassman, Keith played the drums like nobody else, and Roger Daltrey learned to sing, becoming one of the best singers in the 1960s. He does not sound like Robert Plant or John Lennon, but it is almost like he works the song rather than have the song work him. So, I do not doubt that one or two of them would have been a musician and had hit records, but they would not have been The Who without Pete Townshend and his ability to listen and absorb the ideas of others who had a bit more life experience than he had. For example, Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp and his tutors at art school and those who just were just a little bit older than him. It is Townshend's ability to absorb those kinds of ideas and then rework them to fit his particular needs and the band's needs. I think this is extraordinary, but not unique because I think Ray Davies is not that different neither Keith Richards and Mick Jagger... A lot of them were art students and that is really because art schools gave them the ability to think independently after having been in the conformist context of school and home.

Actually, I do not think they are politically committed. You would need to read the biographies and I find them unbelievably boring. I am not sure they are always true either. You know, Roger Daltrey is a Brexit supporter. So, I do not know what his politics are, but he probably voted Tories all his life. Townshend, I think comes and goes depending on his religious beliefs at any moment. He was committed to the ideas of modern art, because for him it was important, but not to a political line, you know? "I can go anywhere... anyhow, anyway" [lyrics from The Who's "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" released as the band's second single in 1965.] What is important to him is about not following the lines that have been laid before. He does not share an overt political opinion about the politicians in charge of the country, it was simply about not being back in that conformist sphere... He is not a 'pub politician', who has a few beers and tells you what's wrong with the world.

Interviewer: You mention that Pete Townshend was highly influenced by his teachers of art Gustav Metzger and Roy Ascott. They introduced him to 'autodestructive art'. Has it a role in the band when critiquing commodity culture?

PS: Well, that is in the book [*A Band with Built-In Hate: The Who from Pop Art to Punk*], it is the way that he refuses to consider a mass-produced guitar to be somehow important. He can hold it in contempt if he likes, because, if he has got money, he can buy another one tomorrow: you can buy a Strat tomorrow, if you bust that. So, it is not about simply busting things up, but about showing you that the commodity culture is an ephemeral culture. It does not last very long. Moreover, as a bad boy, he takes great pleasure in busting things, and smashing things, and we take great pleasure in watching that. But it is never wanted. He has a greater meaning —yes, he has picked up from Gustav Metzger and Roy Ascott, his art tutors— but he does not follow their line. He is quite clear and he has a critique of them. The problem is that, if you watch on YouTube Gustav Metzger doing his auto-destruction on a work of art with acid on sheets of polyethylene, the idea is great, but the actuality is not. You can laugh at it, that is what Townsend says, but you cannot laugh when they are smashing things up. It is just too loud. It is too explosive. It is a cataclysm and you cannot walk away from it. The walls are coming down, you just have to embrace that.

Therefore, he does something else. That is why Townshend is extraordinary. He is not simply repeating in a very kind of bland way the archetypes of pop art that you can see with other bands at the time, like The Creation. They might be great and they made some great records, but they are not nearly as interesting as The Who and that is because of Townshend. He is an artist, and his art is audio. It is sonic and noisy. You must think about what noise is. Noise is irritant, it is a kind of a pollutant, it is something that spoils beauty, but you can actually make noise work for you and that is what Townshend does. He is the first really to make noise part of his art rather than something that needs to be excluded. For example, if you think about the way that Bob Dylan went from being a folkie to being a rock and roller, and if you listen to the live recordings, they are so loud. He is attacking his audience as much as he is entertaining them. It is a provocation. Townshend is already there, same with the Velvet Underground and the "Exploding Plastic Inevitable", they are all versions of it. But Townshend is certainly at the forefront of all of that, definitely. I agree there is a huge difference between the records and the live performance. I mean, if we see the live performance, we could say that they were doing punk, because of the attitude, the sound, the distortion of the guitars and everything.

If you go to my blog [Peter Stanfield.com], about three posts down, there is a publication about The Who and Pop Art, and a link to a YouTube video that I had not seen before made for Canadian tv. What they do in this performance

it is just phenomenal, but also what is extraordinary is that, if you look at the audience, they are all young women, and there are absolutely in seventh heaven with what he is doing. They are not running away from it. So, there is that sense that they are part of that kind of Pop female culture that can be bought and sold in teen magazines, but also they are doing something that is just extraordinary.

Interviewer: And also, when we were discussing destructive art and violence, this idea reminds me of the garage music made at that time. I have always considered that style to be very close to the working classes due to the condition of the recordings. How would you place The Who within that?

PS: With the garage bands you may think of it as a kind of do-it-yourself as there is no kind of middle person. The big record companies had such a monopoly. EMI had the Beatles, Decca had Rolling Stones... One of the things that The Who's managers recognised was that if they were going to make money, they needed to have their own label. Andrew Loog Oldham had broken away from The Stones and set up his label with the Small Faces, Immediate Records. So, The Who was not the first either, but they did it with a kind of gusto and a sense of purpose, which I think was very telling. So, they were striving for a kind of independence, but the true do-it-yourself thing attitude did not really happen until post Sex Pistols. Anyway, you were putting your own records out as a kind of manifesto of your own disgruntlement with the world, from your dad's garage into the hands of the audience. And if you have got an audience, without anybody interfering, I think that is quite powerful. There is a shift.

Interviewer: The band as well as their managers, especially Chris Stamp and Kit Lambert, were notably influenced by different artistic disciplines from Europe and the US, e.g., in terms of cinema, the image and attitude of the French New Wave and in terms of music the American Rhythm and Blues, but when it comes to other disciplines, like literature (notably more critical with society and politics), which were their views? As far as you are concerned, did any member of the band mention being influenced by any particular writer or having a connection with them as they had with other kinds of artists (filmmakers, visual artists, etc.)?

PS: They certainly created relationships with other artists. Nik Cohn was a novelist as well as a critic. The people who did their album sleeves were well-known commercial artists, they worked with the Beatles, and they worked with other happening stars of the day like Jimi Hendrix. So, they collaborated with those artists where it was necessary and also in live shows, they would use other kinds of artists. All those connections that I have discovered, or I consider interesting are in the book. I think they were also in the vanguard of something that was far more exciting than writing a novel, far more exciting than making a film and far more exciting than creating a painting and that was pop music. It was a new art done in new ways and that does not happen very often.

About cinema, you know, the French New Wave was hugely important to their generation because it said that you could take pleasure in American commercial products and make art with it, Pop Art really. Cinema's Pop Art does not get much spoken about like that. But if you watch early Jean-Luc Godard movies, like *Le Mépris* (1963) or *Made in U.S.A* (1966), they are pop art movies, full of pop art images, even the film stars are pop art images, like Elvis or Marilyn Monroe. I think they took great sustenance from that. How you draw that line is always more difficult than just saying it.

Interviewer: You mentioned Kit Lambert [The Who's manager who was openly homosexual in the 1960s] and I cannot avoid thinking of Pete Townshend and his statement in which he suggests his homosexuality. Taking into consideration that we are dealing with the decade in which it was legalized, do you think that it was also, let's not say political, but a very transgressive act that he admitted that?

PS: Yes, in all cases, but especially with Kit Lambert. I think that Pop allows them to play out the role of killing your father. You cannot come from a more cultivated background than Kit Lambert comes from. So, his dabbling with Pop is really a way of, saying "fuck you" to his parents or to his parents' generation or class. He was a provocateur, like Townsend. They loved to stir things up. Malcolm McLaren is an end result of all of this really. He was like an acolyte that sat at their feet, watched them do all of these things with Pop, and then he decided that he could do it even more spectacularly, and of course he did. Therefore, I do think there is a kind of constant play between high and low culture and then The Who make that shift where it is not just a provocation against high culture, but they actually move towards a high culture with the idea that they are making an opera, a rock opera, which is a contradiction in terms if you ask me. If you ask a lot of people at the time, they would have said the same thing, but that is too a provocation. Their success at doing it is another matter. And of course, a lot of people said that they have not written an opera, they wrote a set of a story set to a number of songs, which is not like an opera.

But that whole idea that rock could be serious changes everything. It stops being frivolous and ephemeral and it starts being serious and permanent. At that moment, you could say, like Nik Cohn did, that rock and roll died.

Interviewer: Let's talk about the government of Harold Wilson (1964-1970). I would like to highlight three albums among the production of The Who released in these years: *My Generation* (1965), *The Who Sell Out* (1967) and *Tommy* (1969). What are the different strategies followed in these three albums as regards criticism of society?

PS: Well, I think there is a definite evolution from *My Generation* through *A Quick One* (1966) into *The Who Sell Out*. They just became much more drained, forensic, if you like, in their critique. They became better at recognizing the situation they were involved in, which is this contradiction of commenting on being a pop star while being a pop star. You can see it beginning to be literally generated in *My Generation* album, and then with the cartoon cover and some of the songs on *A Quick One* (1966) and *The Who Sell Out*, “Happy Jack” and “I’m a Boy”. Especially those where they begin to play around with gender, another convention that can be squashed and distorted and remade. So, in *The Who Sell Out* there is a set of comments on commodity culture and I think *Tommy* is part of that, but is also a kind of a shift into a different space, which is to understand low and high as post all that they have done, and all that the Beatles and the Rolling Stones have done, somehow coming together. It can be part of their strategy, but I think it is a dead end.

Interviewer: So, for instance, in *Tommy*, the fact that the boy plays pinball is also very like very American, very consumeristic, and then also the forced cult created around this. Would you say that it is also a critique? Are they highlighting the falseness of this world in some way?

PS: Yes, I think of religions and of what it is to be a pop star, when you have got hundreds of thousands of people turning up to your concerts, who see you as some kind of God or some kind of deity. A worshipping crowd that was very much in Townshend’s mind. You can read the kind of anecdotes he tells about watching The Doors and Jim Morrison on stage and him hurting a young female who wanted to go up on stage. He writes that into *Tommy*. And it is part of what all of these bands are looking for, some greater meaning in what they do, finding Indian gurus or having you to help them make sense of things. But that too is a kind of return to traditionalism. God is killed every day in modernism. It does not exist. It cannot exist because science and rationalism tell you that you would be foolish to believe in it. But that does not mean that people have stopped believing, in fact, as things become more and more complex for them, they very often return to that which seems to offer solutions to the state of the world. Simple ideas like love. And Townshend is not immune to that.

Interviewer: Paul Rees, John Entwistle’s biographer, mentioned that pirate radios “were instrumental in shaping the sound of British pop in the sixties” (2021: 122). What are your views on this?

PS: The first thing to consider is the concept of being pirates. Pirates are outlaws, they are autonomous. They do not recognize the rules and the laws that others follow. So by calling them pirates, you have to work with that term: what that meant and what that now means. It is the rebel factor, the outlaw factor that rock and roll carries with it taken into the radio. That kind of anarchic way of responding to the kind of the restrictions of those who controlled the media in Britain at that time, the government and the BBC, and they might say it is for your good, always for our good. It is for “entertainment, education, and enlightenment”. But they do not do very good pop and that is what the kids want, so someone is going to give it to them. That is how commerce works. If there is a demand, someone will attempt to supply it, and it ran for a while, but then the British establishment saw that it was a threat to what they did. It was not controlled. So, they gave a kind of watered-down diluted version of it and now we have BBC Radio One. They hired all of the pop pirate DJs. It is a brilliant bit of capitalist appropriation, and you see it again and again and again. You know, that idea that anything radical —when it first looks like a threat to the status quo, and this is where he comes back to *The Conquest of Cool* by Thomas Frank— can be appropriated, it can be bought out and exploited.

So, pirate radios, and that part of that whole process are a radical intervention into culture: a critique. And then after its appropriation, its dilution and its reselling, you get another radical intervention to come after it. Punk would be one of the versions. I can walk down the high street where I live, and I can go and buy Ramones’ T-shirts. Well, the idea that you can buy Ramones’ or Sex Pistols’ T-shirts in Primark is just like... What?

It just boggles the mind that something that was once as radical as that is just now part of fast fashion. It absolutely diminishes it, it ruins it.

Interviewer: One of the most famous statements in Roger Daltrey’s autobiography is the following: “Before the sixties, you were a child and then you were a man. You went to school and then you went to work. That changed. Our generation changed it” (Daltrey 2018: 46). Is he referring to the important role teenagers had during this decade, something noted by scholars such as Arthur Marwick in *The Sixties* (1998)?

PS: Yes, I think that is right. If you were to read a kind of a social history of the period and looked at the demographic shifts that were going on —but you know, not just here, across the whole of Europe and into the United States and, and North America, Canada, Australia— you would see that the sheer numbers of teenagers and the kind of accumulation of wealth post-war that these economies were involved with just shifts everything. In other words, it is the engine. It explains virtually everything that we have been talking about. It comes back to the Labour Party and wanting to harness that power to affect change for the better. But of course, what is a good change for someone is usually a bad change for someone else. You cannot ignore the demographic, these huge demographic changes that take place

when young people absolutely dominate the population. In fact, if you look now, my generation, which is the baby boom generation, dominates this population.

Interviewer: That is very connected with the last question, I would like to continue with the post-war period and this baby boom generation. All the members of the band were raised in the Welfare State. How would you say this affected their education and later opportunities?

PS: I think that it was the great experiment in Britain of the 20th century: to break away from an empire mindset and the new towns that were built outside of London, in the satellites of London and elsewhere. They were extraordinary places because they were built for people from London, working-class people who came out of real squalor in many cases, whole neighbourhoods bombed into oblivion by the Germans. They came out of that into this kind of little paradise, its very green fields, new schools, new hospitals, new churches, new community centres, youth clubs, national health service, rising wages and if you lost your job, there was good support for you until you got another job. The state's willingness to provide a safety net for all of its citizens was quite marvellous. And they obviously made huge errors with things like tower blocks and not properly giving everybody the kind of space that they needed—if they were going to live well and happily in those places—but they were not problems, considering the problems that we are living with today. Therefore, I think those experiments, the 'New Towns' and the Welfare State were extraordinary. I think they were life-changing.

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