

RECORDS

FLASHING



Who's Ongoing Saga of Stardom & Failure



The Who by Numbers
MCA 2161

by Dave Marsh

By now, a nonopera by the Who is its own kind of concept album. While *The Who by Numbers* pretends to be a series of ten unconnected songs, it's really only a pose; there's not a story line here, but there are more important unities—lyrical

themes, musical and production style, a sense of time and place.

Quadrophenia and *Tommy* helped Peter Townshend sharpen a writing style that was already one of the most personal and interesting in rock. Because the Who is itself so stylized—alone among their early-Sixties peers, they sound like no one else, neither Chicago bluesmen nor Memphis rockabillys—Townshend always had to seek themes and characters, as well as musical ideas, that were pure rock & roll. The tension between Keith Moon's wild drumming, Roger Daltrey's barely on-key vocals, Townshend's own limitations as a guitarist and the composer's skill and introspection made him one of the toughest, most compact writers in rock. Like John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, John

Fogerty and very, very few others, Townshend has a very specific idea of what rock & roll is about and what it's for. Everything he does—which is nearly everything the Who does—is informed by it.

The rock operas were Townshend's ultimate means of expressing his idea of rock and its place in the world, but the very notion was anathema to fans of "Substitute" and "My Generation." Even if those works garnered the Who a legion of new fans (many of whom, Townshend once wrote me, "think the name of the group's Tommy and that the opera's the Who"), the hardcore of old admirers fired so many charges of pretension and evisceration at *Tommy* that Townshend felt the need to retrench. The result was *Who's Next*, a blistering anticconcept

work and a masterpiece. After *Quadrophenia*, a much more flawed work than *Tommy*, though in many ways a braver one, he has felt the need again.

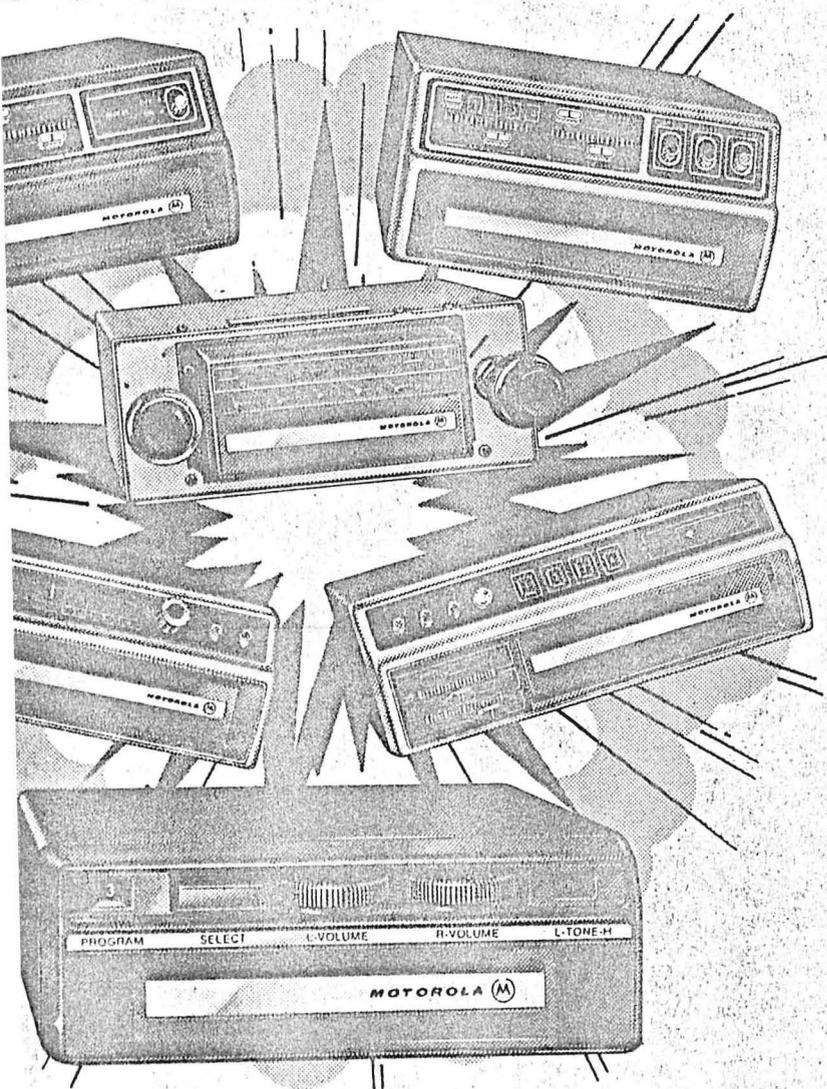
But *The Who by Numbers* isn't what it seems. Without broadcasting it, in fact while denying it, Townshend has written a series of songs which hang together as well as separately. The time is somewhere in the middle of the night, the setting a disheveled room with a TV set that seems to show only rock programs. The protagonist is an aging, still successful rock star, staring drunkenly at the tube with a bottle of gin perched on his head, contemplating his career, his love for the music and his fear that it's all slipping away. Every song here, even the one non-Townshend composition, John Entwistle's "Success

Story," fits in. Always a sort of musical practical joker, Townshend has now pulled the fastest one of all, disguising his best concept album as a mere ten-track throwaway.

The disguise is effective partly because it is mostly musical. Along with the story line, Townshend has thrown out the Arp synthesizer—which is supposed to be his instrument—after his success with it on *Who's Next* and the *Tommy* soundtrack. It's a great diversion; he keeps us busy noticing its absence so that the story sinks in subtly, rather than bating us over the head with it, as he did with his operas.

To replace the synthesizer, he fleshes out the standard electric guitar riffs with acoustic ones, and on one song each, banjo and ukulele. Townshend plays

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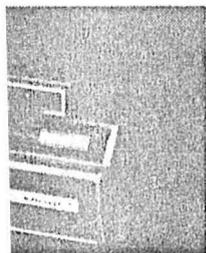
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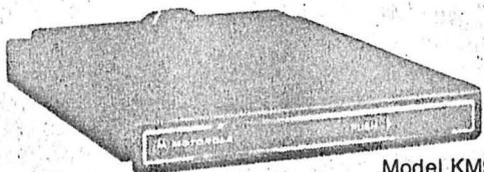
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acoustic guitar more like a rock & roller than anyone else in rock; listen to "The Magic Bus." But here, even the smashing electric guitar chords that are his musical signature have been tamed, played and mixed more like conventional rock guitar than on any previous Who record. *By Numbers*'s mix of acoustic and electric six strings is, in fact, occasionally reminiscent of Neil Young's, particularly on "How Many Friends" and in the concluding segment of "Slip Kid," which is as frustrated and distorted as *Time Fades Away*.

Much has been made of the Who's internal dissension over the past few months. Daltrey, Moon and Entwistle have devoted themselves to glaringly inferior solo projects, while Townshend, save for whatever additional music he wrote for Ken Russell's *Tommy*, seems to have been almost completely inactive since *Quadrophenia*. Not surprisingly, this album seems more Townshend oriented than even the operas, although—since Nicky Hopkins has been brought in for some brilliant keyboard work—Townshend may appear less often than on any of the group's other recent records.

Part of his presence is in the vocals. As a singer, Townshend originally patterned himself after Daltrey, though lately he has developed a guttural range which Daltrey doesn't have. But they are still so close to one another that it is often difficult to tell who's singing what. Clearly, though, Townshend sings more here than he has before and he sings better as well. While Daltrey has always been too frequently flat, emotionally and musically, Townshend brings great fire and passion to songs like "Blue Red and Grey" and "They Are All in Love." He is in the great tradition of rock's classic nonvoices, like Young and Dylan. Daltrey has his moments, certainly, particularly on "How Many Friends," but it is now clear that if Daltrey decided he'd rather make bad movies, the Who could function acceptably as a trio.

There is no song on *By Numbers* with the impact of "Won't Get Fooled Again" or "Pinball Wizard," although there are moments reminiscent of all the classic songs in almost every track. That's unfortunate, because the Who has always seemed at its best as a singles group. Both "Success Story" and "In a Hand or a Face" come close to the old crashing, barely controlled Who, but this record is much more disciplined, in general, and much more restrained.

The best songs are closer to "Behind Blue Eyes," slower

numbers which aren't quite ballads. Almost every track is filled with enormous anguish, bitterness or fear, conveyed most perfectly in "They Are All in Love," "How Many Friends," even the faintly sanctimonious "Imagine a Man."

Townshend apparently oversteps only once, on "Blue Red and Grey," which is ostensibly simplistic enough to have been written by John Denver. It is kicked along by his ukulele and the repeated declaration, "I like every minute of the day." Like a lot of Townshend songs, though, there's a catch at the end: "And so you see that I'm completely crazy/I even shun the South of France."

Not that the record is witless; no Who album has ever been. "Squeeze Box," for instance, is the Who's ultimate sex joke, even better than "Pictures of Lily" in its way. Its sound, complete with a banjo break that sounds as if the Who is ready to refight the Civil War with the Band, is a real departure, close to jolly rockabilly. Entwistle's "Success Story" is full of his usual sardonic epigrams: "He deserted rock & roll to save his soul"; "I'm your fairy manager/ You shall play Carnegie Hall"; "Six for the taxman, four for the band"; "Take 276... You know, this used to be fun." "In a Hand or a Face," prototypical Townshend, begins with a verse pillorying pop mysticism, the sort Stevie Wonder sells: "Ain't it funny how they're all Cleopatra/When you gaze into their past/When you find out about their birth sign/You realize there was no need to have asked."

But there is an ominous quality even in the midst of the jokes. Townshend has always been the rock & roller most concerned with how he fits into the world. In a way, *The Who by Numbers* is only an interim report in the continuing saga of stardom and failure, of the weird characters who strive for fame and wind up with disaster even when they make it. *Sell Out* remains the definitive statement on the rock artist, placing him in context next to the baked bean commercials and half-hideous, half-beautiful station identification jingles. But Tommy is as much star as prophet—and he fails at both—while *Quadrophenia*'s Jimmy was clearly shooting for center stage when he wound up on that rock. Even *Who's Next*, which seems so anticonceptual, is obsessed with these things, fore and aft; it begins with "Baba O'Riley" 's "teenage wasteland," ends with "Won't Get Fooled Again" 's half threat, half promise to do something about it.

"The real truth as I see it is that rock music as it was is not really

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contemporary to these times," Townshend recently told an interviewer. "It's really the music of yesteryear. The only things that continue to keep abreast of the times are those songs that stand out due to their simplicity." There is no better summary of what *The Who by Numbers* is about: Townshend has always been his own best critic.

As angry as it is desperate, the album moves from song to song on pure bitterness, disillusionment and hopelessness. Not only the aging rock star of "Success Story," "They Are All in Love," "Dreaming from the Waist" and "However Much I Booze" is frustrated. Even "Slip Kid," the latest in the line of Townshend's quintessential teenagers, finds that the only answer is: "There's no easy way to be free." Which wasn't even the question.

For the rock & roll star protagonist, "The truth lies in my frustration." In song after song, he's confused, "dreaming of the day I can control myself," unable to figure out what it's all worth, much less what it means.

In "How Many Friends," he despairs of anyone telling him the truth—maybe he really is over the hill—but, in "However Much I Booze," he realizes that even those who try don't have a chance. "Dish me out another tailor-made compliment/Tell me about some detriment I can't forget." The shreds of utopian optimism in *Tommy*, the exhilarating moments of discovery in *Quadrophenia* are gone now: "Take 276. You know, this used to be fun." Always before, the Who have been able to ride out of these situations on power and bravado—now, they wonder if they still have enough of either.

"Where do you fit in a magazine/Where the past is a hero and the present a queen?/Just tell me right now, where do you fit in/With mud in your eye and a passion for gin?" I don't know what magazine Townshend might have had in mind when he wrote those words—he makes a cute little raspberry where the title ought to go—but they might give pause to every reader and writer in the rock & roll part of this one, not to mention to every subject of it. As ex-Beatles solo albums rush forward in feeble proliferation, as the Rolling Stones stagger into their second decade with songs drawn almost exclusively from their first, as the Who stumble onward, another of Townshend's thoughts in that interview quoted above sounds truer than ever: "It's like that line in 'The Punk Meets the Godfather' . . . 'you paid me to do the dancing.' The kids pay us for a good time, yet nowadays people don't really want to get involved. Audi-

ences are very much like the kids in Tommy's Holiday Camp, they want something without working for it."

What they want is what the Who, as the ultimate manifestation of a certain part of the heart of rock, has always promised: a way out of their obligation to the ultimate piper, Time. From "My Generation" to *The Who by Numbers*, time and aging have been Townshend's obsession, as if he were trying to live down the statement that made him famous: "Hope I die before I get old." If this is his most mature work, that's because he has finally admitted that there is no way out, which is a darker and deeper part of the same thing. Typically, the Who face the fact without flinching. Indeed, they may have made their greatest album in the face of it. But only time will tell.



Al Green is Love
Hi SHL 32092

by Jim Miller

Al Green's latest LP would almost qualify as a concept album were it not for the fact that Green has been mining the rhetoric of romance ever since his first hits. If *Al Green Is Love* contains any surprises, they come in the treatment of his material, all of it original for a change. The kind of love portrayed in "Rhymes" is no simple Moon June affair, and "Love Ritual" summons eros as a frenzy of orgiastic salvation. Languid, serpentine phrases issue in unsettling shrieks, garbled fragments: "I wanna sanctify with you baby." There is a troubled urgency to Green's singing here that defies the epithet sweet.

It also dispels any notion of Green as a hostage of candied formulas. True, he is willing and able to dissect fluff; predictably, *Al Green Is Love* contains its fair share of soporific pleasantries. But Green, with the help of the Memphis Hi Rhythm Band, often manages to transfigure the most benign sentiments and endow them with an undercurrent of tension, as if the clichés concealed a hidden cargo.

It's a tricky game to play. As "Take Me to the River," his most recent blues/gospel effort