

## PETE TOWNSHEND GETS REVENGE

“No one knows what it’s like to be the bad man,  
to be the sad man...behind blue eyes.”

**The Who “Behind Blue Eyes”**

It seems that every rock band endures feuds between its singer and lead guitarist, as if it’s part of the script. Take Steven Tyler and Joe Perry. Both have been fired from or quit Aerosmith, and blamed each other. Eddie Van Halen dumped front man David Lee Roth, and then fired Sammy Hagar. Jon Bon Jovi canned guitarist Richie Sambora. Keith Richards has butted heads with Mick for decades. In fact, in his autobiography *Life*, Keith needled Jagger relentlessly and even implied that Mick was hung like a lawn jockey. The fighting Gallagher brothers famously bashed each other before breaking up their band, Oasis. Then there are the godfathers of hostile feuds, the Kinks’ Ray and Dave Davies, who have bickered for years and broken up several times. Legend has it that Dave even spat on brother Ray during a concert.

But when it comes to love-hate relationships, Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey are the undisputed champions. For more than fifty years, the Who’s guitarist and singer have argued, taken breaks, recorded solo albums, reunited, then argued again. In the early stages of a band’s career, it’s healthy to have differing views. But over time, artists usually find common ground and set their egos aside.

Pete and Roger couldn't be more different. Townshend is tall, while Daltrey is vertically challenged. Pete's an intense workaholic who's deeply committed to new technology. Roger is more relaxed and doesn't even own a computer. Over the decades the singer and guitarist have played tug-of-war over everything from creative direction to concert set lists. Townshend wants to write and perform new songs, while Daltrey prefers singing the Who's greatest hits. But, whenever they are interviewed, Pete and Roger stick to the script and brush off their differences by saying they simply fight like all brothers do.

I got a taste of the tension between Roger Daltrey and Pete Townshend in 1982 while filming a TV interview with them in Chicago. I had an idea to film a TV interview special with Pete and Roger called WHO-TV that would air the evening before their upcoming concert. The band's record label made a formal request on my behalf. Meanwhile, I met with a TV station in Seattle in hopes of scoring a thirty-minute time slot—for free. A friend of mine worked at the station and arranged for me to meet with their general manager. As soon as I entered the GM's office, I knew I was in trouble. He stood up from behind his desk wearing a business suit and a cowboy hat. His office walls were plastered with pictures of him standing next to country music stars. Not a big Who fan. My friend introduced me, saying, "Beau is the manager of the number-one rock station in town." To which the GM snidely replied, "Son, being the number-one rock station is like being the world's tallest midget."

I let that comment pass, smiled and made my pitch: "Sir, I've read that you want to attract younger viewers. I have an idea that will help you attract thousands of 18 to 34 year olds."

Mister TV Cowboy sat back in his chair and responded, "Okay, I'm listening."

“The Who are a very popular rock band, and they’re coming to Seattle in October for a sold-out concert for 40,000 fans.” I went on to explain my plan to produce a special TV show called WHO-TV and air it on his station the night before the show. “Would you be interested in airing our WHO-TV special—at no cost to you?”

The general manager softened a bit and asked my friend for her opinion. She rushed to my defense. “The Who are a perfect fit for Channel 13. I think this is a great opportunity to attract a younger audience.” The manager trusted my friend’s opinion and reluctantly agreed to give me a free time slot from 10 to 10:30 p.m. the evening before the Who concert. Victory!

Now all I had to do was convince the Who to let me interview the band, no simple feat. I put a call into Bill Curbishley, the Who’s longtime manager. I left a message requesting permission to film brief interviews with Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey. As I was babbling, Curbishley’s assistant picked up the phone and said, “I heard your message, but Pete and Roger just aren’t doing any interviews on this tour.”

Undaunted, I countered, “I appreciate that their time is tight. But we’re producing a WHO-TV special that can help them sell copies of their new album. Our Who program will air the night before their concert. Can I get just thirty minutes with Pete and Roger? I will make this very easy and can meet them in any city along the tour. We can film the interview at their hotel.” Curbishley’s assistant relented, sighing, “I doubt they’ll do any interviews. But I’ll ask Bill, and I’ll get back to you.”

I suspected she was just prolonging the agony and would call back with a “no.” So I leaned on my friend at Warner Brothers, the Who’s record label, for some added support. “I want to produce a TV show about the Who that will help you

sell a ton of albums. It's a win-win for everyone. There's no cost to you, and I'll handle all of the details. Can you please call Bill Curbishley and help me book an interview with Pete and Roger?"

A few hand-wringing days passed. Then came the call came from the Who's management. Bill's assistant said, "Okay, you've got fifteen minutes with Pete and Roger on October 11<sup>th</sup> at 1 p.m. They will be staying at the Whitehall Hotel in Chicago. So you'll need to fly there and book a room at the Whitehall, and Pete and Roger will come to you for the interview."

I was shocked and thrilled. Before she could reconsider, I blurted out, "That's perfect, I'll get a room at the Whitehall and see them on October 11<sup>th</sup>." I wasn't sure how I'd turn fifteen minutes of interviews into a half-hour show. But I was so excited to score an exclusive interview with the Who, I'd figure out the details later. Time was running out, and I only had nine days to fly to Chicago, film the interviews, and create a TV program. No sweat.

I boarded a flight to Chicago and checked into my room at the Whitehall. I called around and found a local videographer who agreed to film the interview with Pete and Roger. I had thirty minutes to turn my hotel room into a TV set. With help from the cameraman, I pushed the bed and tables against the wall and positioned three armchairs facing each other. The video guy set up portable light panels and tripod-mounted video cameras. Meanwhile, I reviewed my questions on three-by-five cards and laid out a brand new Fender Stratocaster on my bed. It was red, just like the one Pete plays. I was hoping to get him to autograph it and offer the Strat as a contest prize inside the WHO-TV special. Guitarists can be picky about which guitars they autograph. Hopefully Townshend would be in a good mood.

The videographer and I were ready for the Who. Shortly after 1 p.m., there was a knock on my door. I rushed over and peeked through the eyehole. I saw a woman's face—and behind her stood Pete Townshend. I took a deep breath and opened the door. Jackie Curbishley extended her hand and introduced herself as Bill's wife. Today she was helping out by escorting Pete and Roger to the interview. Jackie stepped aside to let Pete pass and said, "Beau Phillips, meet Pete Townshend. Roger is on his way."

Townshend's face looked pale and gaunt. He seemed somber, didn't crack a smile and spoke softly. Pete looked weary. He had played a show the night before at the Rosemont Horizon, the first of the Who's two gigs in Chicago. I reached out to shake hands with Pete and noticed that his fingers looked red and battered, like ground beef. Pete is famous for smashing his guitars and violently slamming his hand against the guitar strings with powerful, windmill strokes. He gets so caught up in the music that his hands absorb tremendous punishment. And after decades of touring, his right hand looked battle-scarred. Pete would rather bleed than play with less passion.

Townshend settled into one armchair, and I sat across from him. He appeared sad and alone with his thoughts. A far cry from the man who'd be leaping around onstage that night before 20,000 fans.

Jackie reminded, "We only have fifteen minutes. Roger will be here soon. Maybe you should get started now with Pete."

"Okay, that's fine." I sat in the chair across from the great Pete Townshend, who was now looking a bit healthier under television lighting.

Now, Pete is wicked smart and has a reputation for being extremely sensitive. So, rather than ask him the typical interview questions ("tell me about your tour"), I went right to

the most probing questions and asked, “Pete, I know that you and Keith Moon were very close. How have you dealt with his death?” He flinched and sat back in his chair, not expecting me to go there right away. But it must have triggered something in Townshend, and he immediately opened up. He leaned in closer, and I could see him thinking about how to answer. He spoke slowly and chose his words carefully.

**Keith Moon literally drank himself to death. Ironically, he overdosed on Heminevrin (a drug used to curb alcohol abuse).**

“Moonie was my brother. It’s been three years, and I still haven’t gotten over his death. We all knew he was self-destructive. But I was shocked. I still am.”

Knowing that Townshend was also a heavy drinker, I followed with, “Was Keith Moon’s death a wake-up call for you?” Pete

raised his head and stared at the ceiling for about ten seconds. Tears started to well up in his eyes. At that moment, there was a knock on my door. We turned off the cameras, and Jackie got up to welcome our next special guest.

She opened the door and in walked Roger Daltrey, one of rock’s iconic voices. As he stood in the doorway, my knees trembled at the sight of Roger Daltrey and Pete Townshend together in *my* hotel room. I was among rock giants, two men who touched millions of fans and inspired hundreds of future rock singers, guitarists and air guitarists. This was going to be amazing! Pete and Roger *never* did interviews together. But today, I would capture them both on film. Or so I thought.

Daltrey took three steps into my room before noticing Townshend seated across the room. “What’s this?” Roger asked. “I didn’t know that he [Pete] would be here.” And with that, he made a one-eighty, turned on his heels, and walked out

of the room. Jackie dashed after Roger, but he was not coming back. At least I had Townshend and Daltrey together for thirty seconds!

After Daltrey left, Pete snickered, “He can be such a pissant. But there’s nobody else who I’d rather have sing my songs.”

Jackie came back in the room out of breath and asked, “Pete, are you doing okay? Do you want to continue?” I froze. If Townshend ended the interview now, I was screwed. We hadn’t recorded enough footage for a TV commercial, much less a half-hour show. So, I turned my eyes toward Pete, hoping that he’d continue. “No, I’m fine,” Pete answered. “This is good.” I sat back down across from him as the cameras rolled.

I picked up where we left off. Townshend talked more about losing Keith Moon. “I should have learned a lesson, but I didn’t. I still drink too much.” We were on a roll, and nobody seemed eager to stop. Jackie was on the phone, and I had plenty of questions left. So, Pete continued, “Many nights, if I couldn’t find someone to sleep with, I’d sleep with my bottle of Rémy Martin.” Then he confessed, “One night in London I drank so much that I almost died. My driver found me lying in the gutter, unconscious, and rushed me to the emergency room. Fortunately, the hospital staff heard that Pete Townshend was in the ER, and they ran to help me. One of the privileges of being famous, I guess. But if I was just an average bloke, I’d probably be dead.”

It was painfully hard to watch one of your heroes so broken down by loss and booze. Pete was getting choked up. So, I lightened the mood and asked, “You’ve played songs like ‘Baba O’Riley’ and ‘My Generation’ hundreds of times. Do you ever get bored playing them?” Pete’s answer was stunning. “Not at all. If I get tired of playing a song, I grab my guitar and find a quiet place. Then I play it over and over again

until I get back to the mental state I was in when I first wrote the song. I find that same fire again and it reconnects me.”

Pete Townshend and I talked for forty-five minutes. He was entrancing and thoughtful, choosing his words carefully as any great writer would. I felt proud that I was able to keep Pete’s interest and extract such candid comments. Of course, I wished I could have filmed Roger. But Pete was brilliant, and this footage would make a riveting television special. He stood up to leave, and I pushed my luck. “Pete, would you mind signing this Fender Strat? We’d like to give it away to a Who fan during this TV show.” He smiled for the first time, grabbed the sharpie pen and wrote in bold letters, “Do not smash or burn this guitar. Love, Pete Townshend.”

We shook hands and Pete left my room. I thanked him for his time and said it was too bad that Roger couldn’t have joined us. Townshend grinned again and teased, “Come to the show tonight and watch what I do to him. I’ll get my revenge.” I closed the hotel room door and sat down with my videographer. He rewound the interview tape and we watched it from the beginning. We had captured powerful, gut-wrenching footage of Pete Townshend baring his soul. This would be an amazing TV special.

With the interview in the can, I drove to the concert, still replaying Townshend’s final comment in my head. What revenge would Pete take? I slapped the backstage pass on my jeans and entered the Rosemont Horizon before the doors opened to the public. The venue was empty except for a few roadies rolling equipment cases into place. The Rosemont felt more like an airplane hangar than a concert hall. In fact, it may have been a hangar at one time since the Rosemont was across the street from Chicago’s O’Hare Airport.

The Who was onstage, rehearsing a new song called “Eminence Front” from their latest album, *It’s Hard*. Townshend



sang lead vocals on the tune, so Roger took a break and was sitting on a drum riser. During the sound check, the band seemed very relaxed. After playing together for decades, the Who didn't need to rehearse much. This was just to get the right sound mix for the barn-like hall. As Townshend sang the refrain, he changed the words from "eminence front" to "ignorant cunt." The sadness was gone and Pete was onstage in his comfort zone. Too bad I didn't get that on film.

The band retreated to their backstage dressing rooms as the doors were unlocked and the crowd packed into the Rosemont Horizon. For the first few songs, I was allowed to watch from the photo pit, right in front of the stage. It's that narrow gap with a barricade that separates the stage and the crowd. Townshend, dressed in a black leather jacket, looked much tougher than he did in my hotel room. I was less than fifteen feet from Pete Townshend, stand-

ing right below him. The crowd was going insane behind me as Townshend opened the show with a familiar guitar lick. But it wasn't from "Substitute," the song they routinely started with. Roger didn't notice at first that Pete was actually playing "I Can't Explain" instead. So Daltrey stepped up to the mic and started to sing the opening line of "Substitute" before he finally noticed that Pete had tripped him up. Roger looked over at Townshend and mouthed the words,

**During their 1982 American tour, the Who's opening song was an early hit called "Substitute," followed by "I Can't Explain." They played these two songs, in the same order, every night... except for this show in Chicago. After doing 40-plus shows together, using the same set list, Pete decided to mix it up—and throw off Roger in the process.**

“What the fuck?” Pete smiled as if to say, “This is payback for walking out this afternoon.” Daltrey shot him a nasty look, grabbed the mic again...and flubbed the first line of the song. Townshend laughed at Roger and winked at me, knowing that he’d gotten revenge for Daltrey’s hissy fit.

Townshend wrote (and Daltrey sang) “I hope I die before I get old” in their classic “My Generation.” Pete recently clarified his famous line in *Rolling Stone*, saying, “I hope I die while I still feel this alive, this young, this healthy, this happy, and this fulfilled. But I may get creaky, cranky, get cancer, and die in some hospice with a massive resentment against everyone I leave behind. But I am not old yet. If getting older means I continue to cherish the lessons every passing day brings, more and more, then whatever happens, I think I’ll be happy to die before I get old, or after I get old, or anytime in between. I sound like a fucking greeting card!”

In 2014, both Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey turned seventy. To no one’s surprise, the Who spit in the face of aging and plan to celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary by performing a world tour.