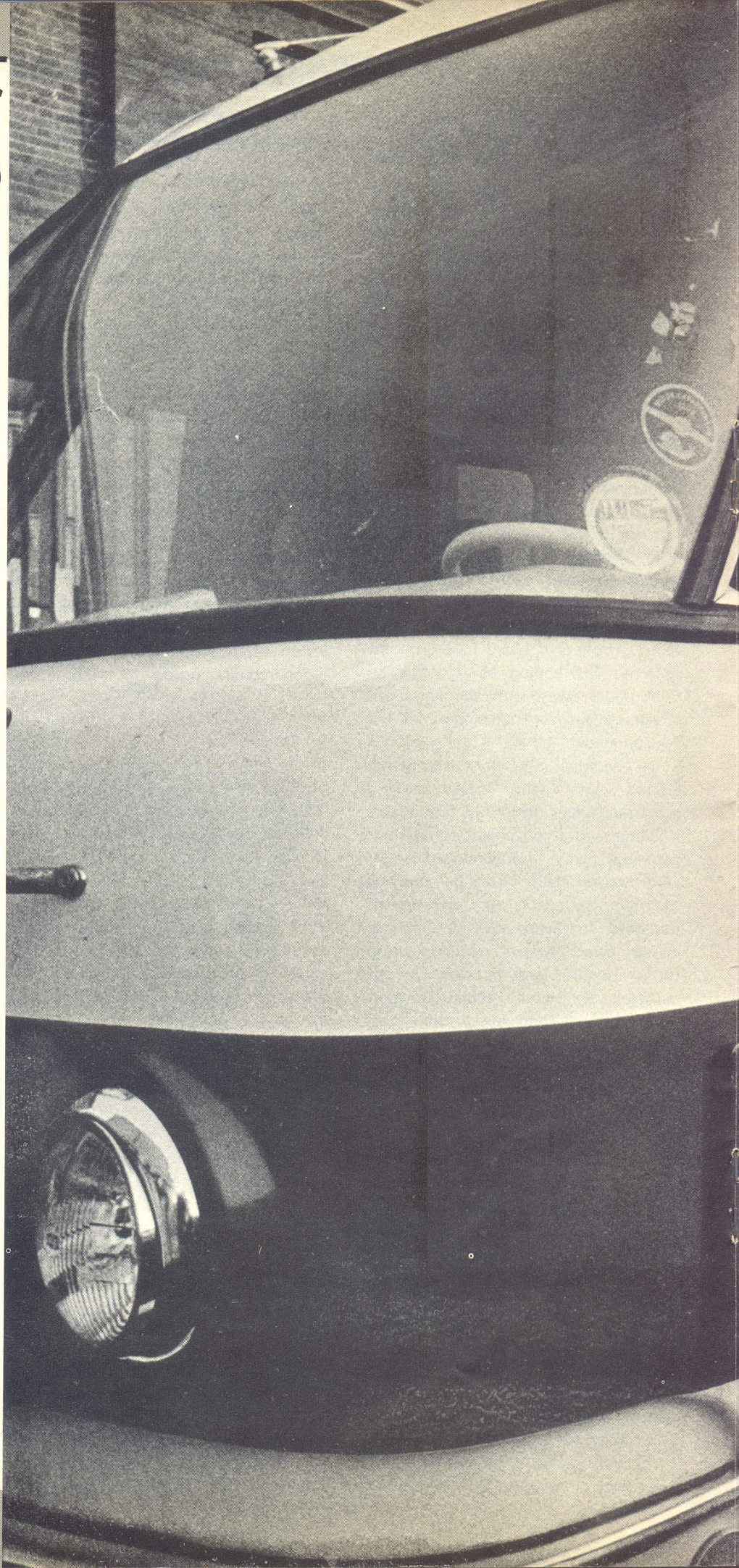


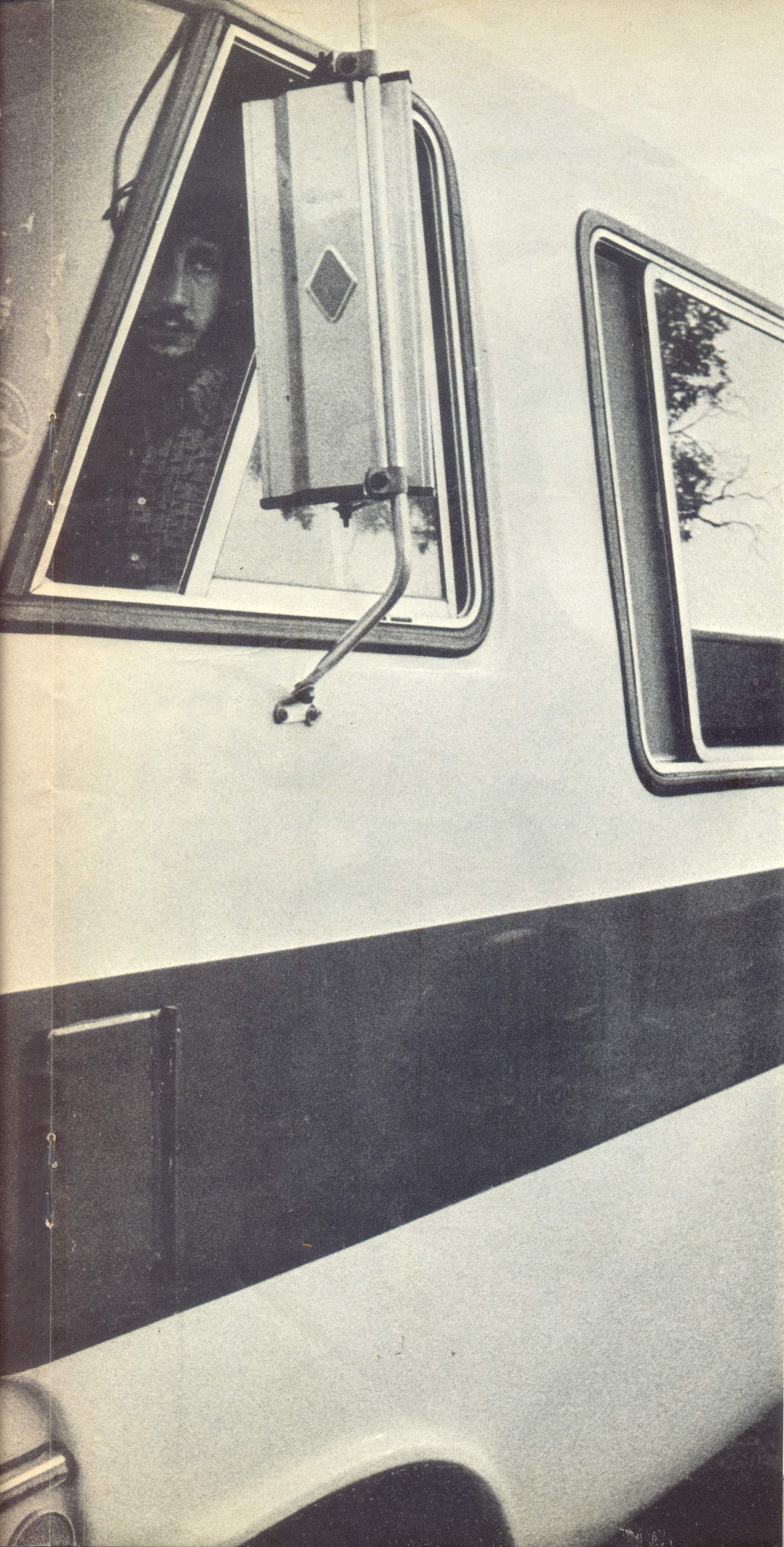
WELL, WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE AFTER TOMMY?

THE FIRST TIME I met Pete Townshend, he was sitting in a basement canteen of a firm he didn't work for, eating sausages with the rest of The Who. The staff were throwing sidelong glances and suppressing giggles as the group sat there in their bowling boots, French crew haircuts and extravagant mod gear. Moon, who had left the firm in dubious circumstances a few weeks before, beamed in triumph. No more clerking for him, he was gonna be a rock'n'roll star. I smiled good-naturedly, wished them luck and went back to work. Moon had always been a compulsive exaggerator, so no one took his claims too seriously, least of all me. I also thought that the one called Pete looked a nasty piece of work.

Seven years later in September '71, Pete was still eating sausages, but in very different surroundings. We were sitting at a table overlooking the Thames near Pete's house. I asked him if there was anything he *didn't* want to talk about. 'No, there's nothing I don't want to talk about. I always manage to twist the subject round to what I want to say anyway.' So we talked and rambled for the next two hours or so, kicking over the traces of The Who's career from the mod days to *Who's Next* but in no particular order.

'You read banal comments in the papers about skinheads. You know,





Pete Townshend likes to talk about most things and he's not the man to be caught short of a theory. Ray Tolliday discovers how Townshend learned to survive op art, pop opera and Tommy. Pictures by Bob Mazzer

like "There we was at the beach all seven hundred of us, all dressed the same with our boots and braces, it brought tears to me eyes." To most people that sounds like incredible bullshit, but I can understand it, because that's how I felt in the old mod days. It was a great show of solidarity and you felt that you belonged to something. It was the first gesture of youth. We made the establishment uptight, we made the rockers uptight, we made our parents uptight and our employers uptight because although they didn't like the way we dressed they couldn't accuse us of not being smart. We had short hair and were clean and tidy. And being aware of this uniform we gravitated to the like sort of people. You would only talk to a girl who dressed in this way because you knew she would have the same tastes as you and would automatically be in the same age group.

'This was when I first became aware of the force of rock as a reflection of what was going on in the streets. It was the only real bridge between real events and getting events into perspective. I'd see someone beating up someone else and then an hour later he'd come into the club and say what a great guitarist I was, and that really turned my head around because I knew that if I wasn't holding a guitar I'd probably be the guy he was kicking

shit out of. But we, The Who, were never in any danger of getting obsessed with the mod image because we were not so much a part of it as a mirror. When we were on stage we reflected the mood of the kids and caught their frustration and aggression.

'I don't like to think of myself as a rock chronicler, if there is such a word, but I think I was one of the first to flash onto rock and its relationships to the people on the streets. I've always been aware of this and I can't believe the banalities I hear from some people who have been in the game for as long, or longer, than I have.'

The early days of The Who were chaotic in the extreme and at times it was a wonder that they survived at all. Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp had an obsession to launch the group in real working class areas and made an abortive attempt to break them in the East End at a big draughty pub in Leytonstone. The East End, apparently, wasn't ready yet for 'maximum R'n'B' and the audiences averaged about ten. On their third appearance, Townshend threw down his guitar and stormed off. Money matters were always tight, to say the least, and one feature of the group's headquarters at Eaton Place was an accountant slowly going demented as the bills piled up and the money didn't. At one point only the money Chris Stamp was sending to England from his job as assistant director on *The Heroes Of Telemark* kept things floating. The office-cum-flat generally looked as though Oscar Madison lived there and droves of people drifted in and out, reporting parking tickets and stolen gear. Chris Stamp's East End accent grew so affected that in the end nobody could understand him and he kept threatening to go and make films in Red China for nothing. People sat through the night sticking felt pop-art cut-outs onto T-shirts with offensive smelling glue which always melted under television lights, while Lambert hung onto sanity with the help of Wagner and the occasional shock of setting his bed, and himself, on fire. Then, gradually, the success came.

'Kit and Chris were really hard working wheelers and dealers in those days, it was incredible really. "I Can't Explain" was a hit and then "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" was described as



the first op-art single, a term I could never really understand. I wouldn't like to say we were the first British rock group — that would certainly be some statement — but you could say that "My Generation" was the first British rock record, the first one that should have been sung in cockney accent. There were us and The Kinks really, although they were a bit before us. I remember first seeing them and thinking how ridiculous they looked in their silly caps, red coats and kinky boots, they were so old-fashioned. "You Really Got Me" was a great record, though. It's funny, but by the time we were really into the mod thing we thought that the Beatles dressed years behind the times. Their clothes were so crude it really offended us.'

'My Generation' was an enormous hit and a great prestige record. They followed this up with a string of hits including 'Substitute', 'Happy Jack' and 'I'm A Boy'. The Track label was launched and they had another hit, 'Pictures of Lily'. Then came 'I Can See For Miles', a record I thought was superb. When Pete talked about this there was still some trace of bitterness. 'That was the real heartbreaker for me. It was the number we'd been saving, thinking that if The Who ever got into trouble that would be the one that would pull us out. The Who did a marvellous performance on it, in my opinion Kit did an incredible production, and we got a marvellous pressing of it. It reached number seventeen in the charts and the day I saw it was about to go down without reaching any higher, I spat on the British record buyer. To me, this was the ultimate Who record and yet it didn't sell.' After that we launched a string of singles that were all total disasters and this really brought us down. It was at this point that I said The Who would never make another single. When this happens a group generally splits up. If a group goes along without accelerating its talents it is inevitable that you either split up or go into cabaret. But we said it can't be that simple. Why should we split up? The group were in a quandary. We still worshipped the two-and-a-half minute rock single, but worshipping it and playing it are two different things. Musically The Who were totally capable of making records like these but by now we were doing things that

just couldn't be captured on the pop single. We needed a bigger vehicle and this led us to *Tommy*.

'The idea of a rock-opera had always been Kit's dream. We'd had lots of conversations about the hang-ups of opera, all the bullshit about queueing for tickets, and the audiences who all stood up and cheered together and then clapped before the end because they didn't know the piece well enough. Kit hated all this. He wanted to take a rock group into Covent Garden, shit all over the stage and storm out again. He wanted to do this because he loved the opera and wanted to bring it back to its proper musical level'.

Had Kit used The Who as a tool for his own personal vendetta?

'Oh, absolutely. It had never ever occurred to us to do anything like this. But once Kit had suggested it, from then on I was in complete control. There were a lot of ego clashes about how it should be done, but Kit and I have a good working relationship and we generally just thrashed the ideas out. For instance, Kit insisted on a formal overture so I did one and it was a success for Kit and at the same time it was a success for the group. But then Kit wanted to orchestrate it and put on strings and heavenly choirs. We wouldn't have it and just used our usual line-up plus John on French horn. We used the term "opera" even though it wasn't one, it had no arias or anything although it did have restated themes, but we didn't feel we had to justify the term in any way because in rock you can say what you want and not have to justify it.

'We really thought that we were going to shock people and we were astounded at the overall acclaim it received, not only from the record papers but from serious music critics, even people like Leonard Bernstein. The only person to categorically state that he thought it was rubbish was Richard Greene (of *New Musical Express*) and he said it to my face. Although the album was intended for the home market it was a very poor seller here, but in the States it was an amazing success. It was our biggest record there and the biggest double album anyone had had.' *Tommy* has become a bit of a monster for the Who, but it was also a monster success and that isn't too hard to live with.

The Who have always been an

impressive act to look at on stage. The first time I saw them, back in 1964, I had been talked into going along to Waltham Cross by Keith Moon, but I wasn't expecting too much. I mean, Keith's previous group had been 'Clyde Burns and The Beachcombers' which hadn't exactly set the world alight. They mostly mended chip machines in the aforementioned canteen, or that's what Keith said anyway. So I went along to see The Who with some foreboding. Then when they came on and started playing I was rooted to the spot. I had never seen anything like it in my life. Pete was doing his legendary Birdman act. Roger looked like he was making love to the microphone, John seemed bored, and much to my amazement, Keith was playing the best rock and roll drums I had ever heard. I was in a state of shock for the rest of the night. I remember my friend's scooter on which I was poncing a lift, got a puncture on the North Circular at one a.m. in the pouring rain. I couldn't have cared less.

Remembering this mesmerising effect, I asked Pete if he thought that there was something missing on The Who's records because of the lack of visual excitement. 'I suppose so, to a certain extent. That's why we so desperately want to make this film that we've got in mind. We'd like to pull off the coup of the age and produce a film that really captures the live stage performance. The only way we could really do this would be to do a Zappa and produce a film quickly with someone like Tony Palmer as director, but in fact having the group in total control, because we're the only ones that still come from the streets, where the music comes from. When we do a gig we are contacting the streets and we are still in touch.

'It's amazing how rock performances have changed, particularly in America. Once you would come out on stage and the people would cheer go mad and stand on their heads, but when they couldn't see you anymore it was all over except for a few people round the back, chanting or something. But now you play away to complete silence until the end and then everyone goes mad and they leap up and down, scream, throw

to page 53

WELL, WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE AFTER TOMMY?

from page 31

standing ovation. The excitement should really be when the group are onstage. You should cheer then and take it home with you. It should keep you buzzing for the rest of the week. And that's what I am hoping to capture in the film, if we can.'

As Pete had such an understanding of the old mod thing, it seemed logical to question him about the new working class movement, the Skinheads, and their almost total rejection of progressive style music for simpler tastes such as reggae. 'What I do see in this is a warning that the kids won't have their tastes dictated to by the musicians themselves. Like in America, Grand Funk are a warning that if people want to hear a heavy band, even if it's not very good, they'll support one. And the kids at those audiences nearly all drink rose and don't take dope. This means that a lot of groups will have to realise that they can no longer get away with playing a

load of shit because the audiences may no longer be stoned!'

At this point Pete put down the mike-stand that he had been fiddling with and made a lunge out of the window and started pulling at a piece of nylon chord. After a few minutes tugging, something came loose. 'Someone's thrown a fishing rod on my roof. What an insane thing to do.'

But not really any more insane than Who history. Like the time Pete got arrested by 22 policemen after breaking in to his own flat, clambering up four flights of scaffolding blind-drunk and then being asked for his autograph. Or the time he turned up for a reception at The Dorchester eating a packet of puffed wheat. Although older and more sober now (except for Moon, that is), The Who have always had a great sense of fun and time was when the term 'looning' was synonymous with The Who and The Faces. But do not get deceived into thinking that Pete does not take things seriously. He is a worrier and though he says that since he got into the Meyer Baba thing he has felt a lot more at ease, you know that he is the type that will go to the grave worrying. He is the hardest member of the group to get to know and even though I have worked for the group

and for some time shared a flat with him, I have always been aware of a barrier that Pete throws up around himself; as if he distrusts or is afraid of any intimacies or burdens that relationships involve. He is very much a loner, a self-supporting type who creates and exists from within and has no need to draw on outside people or influences.

After he had disposed of the fishing rod, Pete turned his attention to America. 'I think the thing that most people dislike about America is the violence. Most people cannot understand violence, you know the animal savagery that exists in some people. And people are always afraid of what they can't understand. So I'm afraid of people like the Hell's Angels and become most aggressive in their presence, in the same sort of sense as I am afraid of skinhead violence, but I remember when I was involved in that sort of thing and wasn't afraid of it because I could understand it. But the thing that scares most people is the violence, they cannot understand how a nation can exist with such incredible police corruption, such incredible brutality, with such fantastic oppression of minority groups and such parental distortion of what we know as family discipline i.e. you let your kid do just what he wants and then when he's nineteen you ring up the cops and tell them he's smoking pot.

'But being over there and mixing with the kids you realise what an incredibly normal bunch they are. They are just making the best of life, they no longer have any hang-ups about sex and they no longer believe that pot is harmful, which causes a major distrust of the powers-that-be, because the powers-that-be continue to say that marijuana is a killer. They don't say that it can make you paranoid, or that it can make you sick or apathetic. They say it will turn you into a murderer and that it will undermine the growth of the nation. This causes a great mistrust of the establishment by the kids and this in turn causes a vicious circle of paranoia. The establishment, authority and the police are afraid of the kids because they can't understand them and the kids are afraid because they know basically they will get violent and

to next page



aggressive treatment if they get caught up with the establishment and this causes a great rift. Whereas both factions, if approached from within, are basically good, normal old-fashioned American people, and to my mind the Americans are still one of the great races. They are very humane and though to the outsider it looks absurd, America is still very much a democracy and there are still an incredibly lot of good people there.'

It's a long way from Shepherd's Bush to America and the path in between hasn't been an easy one for The Who, and the onus of their progression has fallen more and more on the shoulders of Pete Townshend. If a record fails, the blame would be put on his compositions. When a statement is required from the group, it is Pete who has to provide it. And at a time when a visit to the Track office produces a feeling of stagnation and despondency, it is a tribute to Pete and the rest of the group that they can still produce enthusiastic and high class product.

The Beatles have split, The Stones have pissed off and the majority of British rock groups are splitting and reforming like so many confused amoebae 'with no direction home'. Yet

The Who are still in there plugging away, growing up but never selling out. Whatever driving force made The Who think they were something special when they formed, is still there. The themes of *Who's Next* can be directly related to The Who in their early days, the proof of which is that I've never met a Who fan who has ever gone off them. They are one of the longest lived groups still actually performing in both Britain and America. And the question arises what is in the future for rock groups. Do they retire or grow old, on stage, gracefully?

'I don't think that packing it in is the answer, for the simple reasons of money you have to keep going. Once a company folds the tax men move in and they are after every single penny you have ever made and they're quite open about this. They just walk away with everything and you're left with nothing to show for all those years you've been slogging away, so it's better to keep going and have a few benefits like a place in keeping with your gig and all that.

'It's amazing how little money is actually made from record sales. To keep going you have to have incredibly huge selling records and the only place you can do that is in America. I personally don't think about retiring at

all and neither does Moon, I don't think he could exist living a quiet life. I don't think Roger or John would mind that much but they would never force it, they would go along with the group for as long as there was a need. They are quite happy about it. As far as growing old gracefully is concerned, I don't think that really comes into it. Our fans are growing old with us. It's not like the days when the kids would reach the age of 22 and lose all interest in music because they had to concentrate on the factory. Rock music doesn't necessarily reflect the young generation, it reflects the rock generation, ourselves and people like us. The people who were turned on by the Beatles or perhaps someone before them right up to the tail end of the people that are into dope, you know, the Isle of Wight breed. It encompasses all those people.

'I think that you should keep on playing rock for as long as you have an axe to grind and then if you haven't got an axe to grind you can go into cabaret. You know, like Satchmo, he had an amazing life and at the end he was still there enjoying himself. That's the marvellous thing about show business, which a lot of people forget. That is if you can't do anything else, you can always smile.'

THE TROUBLE WITH BOBBY BLAND

from page 27

Bland has rarely recorded in the pop idiom pure and simple. Even his apparently non-blues records have strong blues and gospel characteristics — in the band riffs, in Bland's voice inflections, in the mood he creates. His latest single (Duke 466) is required listening for the striking contrast between the straight blues 'I'm Sorry', and the B side 'Yum Yum Tree' (which Bobby Sherman, the Bobby Vee of the 1970s, wouldn't be unhappy to record with a title like that). In the U.S. R&B charts 'I'm Sorry' has made the top twenty but the B side is the one more likely to stick in your mind. The disastrous results of the collaboration with Andre Williams when Joe Scott left Duke Records a couple of years ago showed how much Scott's direction was missed; from that time onwards the accompanists often sounded lifeless

and even casual, and few of the sessions had the magic of the earlier Joe Scott productions. But here, on 'Yum Yum Tree,' the grooves jump to life once more, and inspired by the tight accompaniment, a dense sound of riffing saxes and trumpets, Bobby Bland is almost his old self again, dragging out those words so beautifully. No matter that they are very ordinary lyrics, and that the title is ridiculous — he has shown that he can do it again, even in adverse circumstances like these.

If Bland were to make a breakthrough here, Duke Records have a back catalogue of tracks large enough to satisfy the UK market for months without releasing any sub-standard material. When Vocalion distributed Duke/Peacock in the UK, Bland's records sold mainly to the West Indian market and few other people knew they existed. Still, Vocalion did us a great service, because at least he is not

completely unknown here — if an accurate count were possible, his popularity rating might be shown to be higher than that of many self-styled 'underground' heroes. Whoever the next licensees may be (Mojo Records are currently negotiating with Duke for UK rights), they could do worse than to issue the three most-copied songs — 'I Pity The Fool,' 'Cry Cry Cry' and 'Turn On Your Lovelight' — as a maxi-single, 'Turn On Your Lovelight' is just about the most exciting performance that Bland has ever given, with electric bass and drummer setting up a compulsive backbeat, while his powerful voice works on the lyric to maximum effect, driving, exhorting, pleading. The band takes over completely in the middle and the trumpets and saxes scream out wildly. Good stuff for veteran rockers to dance to at rock'n'roll record hops in large rooms above pubs, or for blues, soul and 'new rock' freaks alike.