

THE WHO

Fromm Institute

Week Three

Essential Listening:

1. *Tommy* (Universal, 1969). The Who's most famous album, and one of the most famous albums of all time. It's often described as the first rock opera, and if that's accurate, it's certainly the most famous of those. While it's doubtful that many if any of you are unfamiliar with this record, basically it follows the story of a boy, Tommy, made deaf, mute, and blind after witnessing the murder of his father by his mother's lover. Tommy becomes a messianic hero by becoming a pinball champion; his senses are restored shortly afterward; and he leads a messianic cult, whose followers reject their leader in the album's finale.

For all its complexity, it generated a big hit single, "Pinball Wizard," and several other songs that became popular even when heard out of the album's context, like "I'm Free" and "We're Not Gonna Take It/See Me, Feel Me." For all its radical departure from the usual rock album format, it developed ideas Pete Townshend (who wrote most of the album's songs) had been working on for years, both in terms of operatic/conceptual structure (foreshadowed by mini-operas like "A Quick One," "Rael," and even "I'm a Boy") and lyrical themes (dysfunctional family/childhood, the search for identity).

And for all its ambition, it contained many of the Who's trademarks in the power chords, harmonies, and catchy melodies. Those were crucial into making it accessible, which it did with phenomenal success, becoming a huge worldwide hit (and their first big hit album in the US); making the Who into one of the world's biggest concert attractions when the bulk of the opera was presented onstage; and, by generating large amounts of money for the group for the first time, enabling them to continue into the 1970s at a time when they were genuinely worried their debts and financial problems might cause them to break up.

Like about half a dozen Who albums, *Tommy* has been issued in confusingly multiple expanded editions. A two-CD "deluxe edition" in 2003 added 17 outtakes and demos, though it's doubtful a couple of these ("Young Man Blues" and the instrumental "Dogs Part 2") were ever seriously intended for *Tommy*, and these are just different mixes of the official studio recordings of those two songs, not demos. A 2013 "super-deluxe" four-disc box set expanded upon this expanded edition by presenting 25 "demos and extras" (most but not all of which overlap with the ones on the mere two-CD edition); one disc offering the album in 5.1 SurroundSound; and a live disc mostly comprised of 1969 Canadian concert recordings of *Tommy* tunes, though it also had some live 1976 Swansea versions of *Tommy* songs. It had a lengthy book of liner notes by Pete Townshend too, and it costs almost as much as the fee for this entire course.

Recommended additional recordings by the Who, 1968-1969:

1. The Who didn't put out much besides *Tommy* in 1969, but the non-LP B-side to "Pinball Wizard," "Dogs Part 2" (on at least a couple compilations, including *Two's Missing*), is a fun throwaway instrumental with some great guitar, drums, and dog barking. They also put out a studio version of "Young Man Blues" on the obscure compilation LP *The House That Track Built*; you can find it on the expanded CD edition of *Odds and Sods*. And some of the songs from their famous performance at Woodstock are on the various editions of *Woodstock* soundtrack albums.
2. From a whole bunch of other places: the truly weird UK-only 1968 single "Dogs," and the more conventional driving rocker "Call Me Lightning," a minor US hit; Outtakes of the interesting Pete Townshend song "Melancholia" and the New Orleans soul standard "Fortune Teller" showed up on the expensive box set *30 Years of Maximum R&B*.
3. From *Odds and Sods* (Universal, 1998). A few 1967-68 outtakes are here, including the anti-smoking commercial "Little Billy"; "Faith in Something Bigger," one of the first songs to reflect Pete Townshend's religious concerns; and a cover of Eddie Cochran's "My Way."
4. *Live at the Fillmore East 1968* (Universal, 2018). This two-CD set of material from shows on April 5 and April 6 of 1968 is the only good-sounding live document of the Who prior to 1969. It features both popular crowd-pleasers ("Boris the Spider," "Happy Jack," "I Can't Explain," "My Generation") and more off-the-wall selections ("Little Billy," Eddie Cochran's "My Way," "Fortune Teller"), as well as the mini-opera "A Quick One While He's Away." A 33-minute "My Generation"—you read that right, 33 minutes, not three minutes—takes up all of side two, and is arguably *too* long.

Notable unreleased Who material, 1968-69:

1. There are numerous fairly good-sounding recordings of Who concerts from mid-to-late 1969, dating from around the time they made material from *Tommy* the centerpiece of their sets. They sound similar enough that it's hard to recommend any above others, but some of their October 22, 1969 Fillmore East concert is available on the Wolfgang's Vault website.

Recommended books:

The Story of Tommy, by Richard Barnes & Pete Townshend (Eel Pie Publishing, 1977). Slim, long out-of-print book about *Tommy* is puffed up by some not-so-great illustrations of scenes from the songs. Tragically, there's more text about the movie version of *Tommy* than the writing and recording of the original album, leaving the impression this book (issued by Townshend's own publishing company) was devised at least in part to promote the film. The pluses are that this does have a lot of first-hand memories and perspectives of *Tommy*'s creation from its principal creator, Pete Townshend, as well as

reproductions of original handwritten documents, including lyric sheets, with notes about *Tommy* as it was being composed and conceptualized.

The Who and the Making of Tommy, by Nigel Cawthorne (Unanimous, 2005). The basics on the album, though it's not distinguished by much first-hand research, and padded out to book length by coverage of the Who's pre-*Tommy* career and the album's subsequent iterations as a movie and musical.

Recommended DVD/videos:

Sensation: The Story of Tommy (Eagle Vision, 2013). Good documentary benefits from interviews with Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey, as well as (via archive footage) John Entwistle and associates like *Tommy* LP cover designer Mike McInnerney and engineer Bob Pridden. A notable bonus on the DVD presents a 1969 episode of the German *Beat Club* television show where the Who mime to some songs from the album, and Pete Townshend discusses the songs and album with an interviewer from the program.

Notable people:

Meher Baba: Indian spiritual master – some would say guru – of whom Pete Townshend became a disciple in the late 1960s. The Meher Baba faith/religion would become a prominent influence on his songwriting, though more so in the early 1970s than on *Tommy*.

Mike McInnerney: Designer of *Tommy*'s distinctive fold-out cover. Also the friend most responsible for introducing Meher Baba to Pete Townshend.

Damon Lyon-Shaw: Engineer for the *Tommy* album.

Jann Wenner: Editor/publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine. Townshend has credited a lengthy interview with Wenner that appeared in *Rolling Stone*'s September 28, 1968 issue as the conversation that sparked him to first fully expound upon the concept/theme/idea that developed into *Tommy*.

Nik Cohn: British rock critic and friend of Townshend. Conversation with Cohn motivated Townshend to write "Pinball Wizard," in part because he knew that Cohn, a pinball fanatic, might write more favorably about *Tommy* if it had a song about pinball. Cohn would travel with the group on tour in 1971 with a mind to writing a script that might be turned into a movie featuring the Who, which like numerous ambitious Who projects from that time didn't get off the ground.

Abbie Hoffman: Famous American late-1960s radical. Was physically booted off the stage at Woodstock by Townshend when Hoffman interrupted the Who's set without being invited and started to make a speech about John Sinclair's prison sentence.

Thunderclap Newman: Unusual three-man British rock band comprised of pianist Andy “Thunderclap” Newman, teenage guitarist Jimmy McCulloch, and singer-songwriter/drummer/guitarist Speedy Keen. They formed at the instigation of Pete Townshend and Kit Lambert. Townshend had known Newman since the early 1960s, and Keen had written “Armenia City in the Sky” on *The Who Sell Out*. Townshend produced their only album, which included the 1969 British #1 hit “Something in the Air” (which was a smaller hit in the US).

The Doors: Didn’t have any audible influence on the Who’s music, with this notable exception: Pete Townshend based part of *Tommy*’s “Sally Simpson” on watching the Doors at an August 2, 1968 concert at Singer Bowl in Flushing Meadows, New York (with the Who on the same bill), at which the audience created pandemonium to the indifference of lead singer Jim Morrison.

John Lennon: Keith Moon jammed with Lennon’s Plastic Ono Band at a cacophonous December 15, 1969 performance at London’s Lyceum that was issued as part of John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s 1972 LP *Some Time in New York City*.

Unknown Australian Girl: Pete Townshend wrote “Sensation” for a girl he met in Australia during the Who’s tour there in early 1968, though it was modified when it took its place in “Tommy.”

Notable Landmarks:

IBC Studio: London studio where *Tommy* was recorded.

Ronnie Scott’s: Famed London club (mostly though not exclusively for jazz) at which the Who premiered *Tommy* for the media on May 1, 1969.

Albums by Artists Who Were Influential on and/or influenced by the Who in 1968-69:

Mose Allison, *Greatest Hits* (Original Jazz Classics, 1991). While it might seem that this singer-pianist who combined jazz, blues, and hipster lyrics would have little in common with the Who, they did his song “Young Man Blues” in the concert as early as 1964, recording it in the studio in 1969. They also put his adaptation of bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson’s “Eyesight to the Blind” on *Tommy*. Both songs are on this compilation, but tragically it does not include “I’m Not Talking,” which was covered by the Yardbirds with Jeff Beck on guitar in 1965.

The Jeff Beck Group, *Truth* (Epic, 1968). In truth this blues-rock turning into hard rock was not the best work of either Beck or singer Rod Stewart, due in part to a shortage of good original material. It was extremely popular, however, especially in the US, and has been seen by some as providing part of the model for Led Zeppelin. Certainly its hard guitar rock was influenced by the Who, as were some other groups of the time who generated massive volume with one guitar, one bass, and one set of drums, like Cream

and Blue Cheer. The only other Beck album with Stewart as singer, 1969's *Beck-Ola*, is less impressive.

The Bonzo Dog Band, *The History of the Bonzos* (Beat Goes On, 1999). Two-CD compilation of the British comedy rock band whose history intersected with both the Beatles (appearing in *Magical Mystery Tour*; having their lone British hit, "I'm the Urban Spaceman," produced by Paul McCartney) and Monty Python (appearing as regular guests on *Do Not Adjust Your Set*, the late-'60s UK TV show whose cast featured three future Python members). Pete Townshend wanted Track Records to sign them, but was too late, getting Arthur Brown instead. And in the late 1960s, the Bonzo Dog Band came out with their own concept-album-following-a-vague-story, *Keynsham*, though it wasn't one of their better efforts. There's yet more of the Bonzos on the three-CD *Coronology* (sic).

Arthur Brown, *The Crazy World of Arthur Brown* (Universal, 1968). Reissued on too many different labels to keep count, in whatever form you find it, this is British psychedelia at its most deranged, though not without its share of catchy jazz-blues-pop. The wild-eyed hit "Fire" is the only famous track. But Brown's theatrical-operatic vocals are consistently entertaining and chilling, and this has some of the best and most demented psychedelic organ work you'll hear anywhere. Why is it listed here? Because Pete Townshend was responsible for getting Brown a deal with Track Records after seeing him at London's UFO club; because the Who's co-manager/producer, Kim Lambert, also produced this album; and because the Who and Brown sometimes shared concert bills around this time.

The Kinks, *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society* (Universal, 1968). While much of the world around them was upping the volume or jumping on new trends, the Kinks sang modest songs celebrating and satirizing the quiet joys and sorrows of British life. It won them more critical acclaim than sales, though their career would rejuvenate the following year when they were able to resume touring in the US. Though unlike *Tommy* (or the Kinks' own next album, 1969's *Arthur*) it doesn't follow a story, its focus on British vignettes gave it a slight thematic feel, as though it was a collection of stories about people and incidents in a British town. This is available in expanded editions, of course, one of them running three CDs.

The Kinks, *Arthur* (Universal, 1969). Apparently independently of the Who and Pete Townshend, the Kinks and *their* main songwriter, Ray Davies, came up with a thematic album based on the story of "Arthur," the trials and tribulations of an Englishman who emigrated to Australia (based on a relative of Davies). Intended for use as the soundtrack of a TV special, the television program was never produced. *Arthur*, a single standard-length album, is not as good as *Tommy*, or even the best '60s Kinks album. Since it did follow a story of sorts, however, it generated inevitable *Tommy* comparisons, and did include some good music, though none of the Kinks' top classics.

The Pretty Things, *S.F. Sorrow* (Snapper, 1968). Recorded at Abbey Road not long after the Beatles' psychedelic heyday, using (as did early Pink Floyd) producer Norman

Smith, who'd engineered most of the Beatles' work through *Rubber Soul*. Little known at the time of its release (though it's since garnered a large cult following), this early concept album was a likely influence on *Tommy*, and itself shows quite a few debts to the Beatles and the Abbey Road production staff in its vocal harmonies and carefully multi-layered arrangements. This expanded CD is recommended for including two key pre-album psychedelic singles from 1967 and 1968 as bonus tracks.

The Small Faces, *Ogdens Nut Gone Flake* (Sanctuary, 1968). A pseudo-concept/storybook album that was a smash in the UK but hardly known in the US, with a story that was hard to follow, even barely present. Nonetheless this does conclude the group's psychedelic era. And as usual expanded/deluxe editions are preferable if they include their final big British hit single, "Lazy Sunday."

Tomorrow, *Tomorrow* (EMI, 1968). Though perhaps the most obscure and least experimental of the underground British psychedelic bands to rise to prominence through clubs like UFO (such as Pink Floyd, the Soft Machine, and the Crazy World of Arthur Brown), Tomorrow made some good recordings in both the guitar-oriented freaky vein and the bouncy English storybook style. They also had a guitarist, Steve Howe, who went on to superstardom with Yes. This also has the quasi-rock opera by lead singer Keith West, "Excerpt from a Teenage Opera," that was a huge UK hit in 1967, and another likely influence on Townshend.

Sonny Boy Williamson, *Eyesight to the Blind* (Acrobat, 2011). Unlike some other big British rock groups we could name, the Who went to the trouble of crediting an African-American bluesman of a song they adapted with a much different rock arrangement, as they did for Sonny Boy Williamson's "Eyesight to the Blind" on *Tommy*. His original version, available on this compilation of his 1951-54 recordings, is almost unrecognizably different from the Who's version, especially as the Who's rendition was based on the one by jazz singer-pianist Mose Allison. But a lot of the lyrics are certainly the same.