

It's Hard but the Who fight on

Only two songs into *It's Hard* Roger Daltrey comes right out and says it: "I was a face in a magazine when you were still playing with your plasticine." Let's see now — 'My Generation' came out in 1964 and I'd have been three years old at the time — yeah, well, I guess he has a point there. Indeed, after 18 years and almost as many albums, the Who are one band that realise their age.

After the appalling *Face Dances*, the Who also realise that they've got a lot to answer for. Even though Townshend's erstwhile solo albums have been much more than adequate, the Who as a foursome just haven't clicked in what seems like ages. Hence, for the cover of *It's Hard* we find Peter, Roger, John and Kenney looking pretty serious. If the figures on the cover could talk, you know for sure what they'd say: "We still matter! We are not dinosaurs! We are up to date!" There's even a video game on the cover for crying out loud.

In any case, now that they've got something to prove, the Who have bounced back with their strongest album since 1973's *Quadrophenia*. OK, *It's Hard* is not *Who's Next* of the 80's (did anybody seriously think it would be?). There are a couple songs here ('Athena,' 'It's hard') that are a little clunky in the chorus (the Who never were a singles band). And, sure, the Who don't sound as vital as they did on *Who's Next* — if you're looking for an album chock full of Daltrey's almighty scream and Townshend's power chords and distortion, sorry, this is not it. The thing to remember though is that these guys are pushing forty and, heck, you can't smash and bash forever!

This isn't to say, however, that the Who have forgotten how. Indeed, *It's Hard* finds the Who caught between the pull of the past and beckoning of the future. About half of this album is in the style of the Who of old; the other half points to something new and different. The three songs penned by bassist John Entwistle are practically definitions of what the Who are supposed to sound like. For sheer ferocity, the best of Entwistle's lot is 'It's Your Turn' on which the Who's rhythm section sounds downright awesome.

Kenney Jones' rat-a-tat-tat drumming almost makes you forget that Keith Moon is no longer with us while John Entwistle's trumped-up bass part makes you wonder if there's a better bassist anywhere.

Another song that longtime Who fans ought to love is Townshend's latest anthem 'I've Known No War' which features Roger Daltrey's fearsome growl and appears to be patterned after 'Won't Get Fooled Again.' 'I've Known No War' is also one anti-war activist's bad dream of nuclear holocaust:



The video game is an ominous symbol of things to come...

War — I've known no war
I'll never know war
And if I ever know it
The glimpse will be short
Fireball in the sky
No front line battle cries
Can be heard as the button is pushed by a
soul that's been bought
And the armies remaining will judge
without people or courts
And there's no use pretending that
knowing will help us abort
I'll know no war

But what is most encouraging about this album is that the Who finally seem to be moving on to new things. Indeed, even beyond Townshend's alcoholism and depressiveness, an

important reason for the Who's mid-seventies decline was their apparent refusal to break out of the limits they set on *Who's Next*. While everyone else was changing with the times, the Who stayed the same. And pretty soon — lo and behold — people were likening them to the dinosaurs.

Anyhow, the good news is that the Who have a few surprises in store this time around. 'Eminence Front' puts Pete Townshend on lead vocals (first time since 1975) and adds in bobbing synthesizers and ultra-crisp guitar that are unlike anything the Who have done. Then there's 'One Life's Enough,' a weepy ballad about a first love that Roger Daltrey sings over a striking piano arrangement. Another eye-opener are the lyrics, which feature some of Townshend's sharpest social commentary yet.

At times, yes, Pete Townshend's lecturing, er writing, does get a little pretentious. But the guy's intentions are so good that it's difficult to come down on him too harshly.

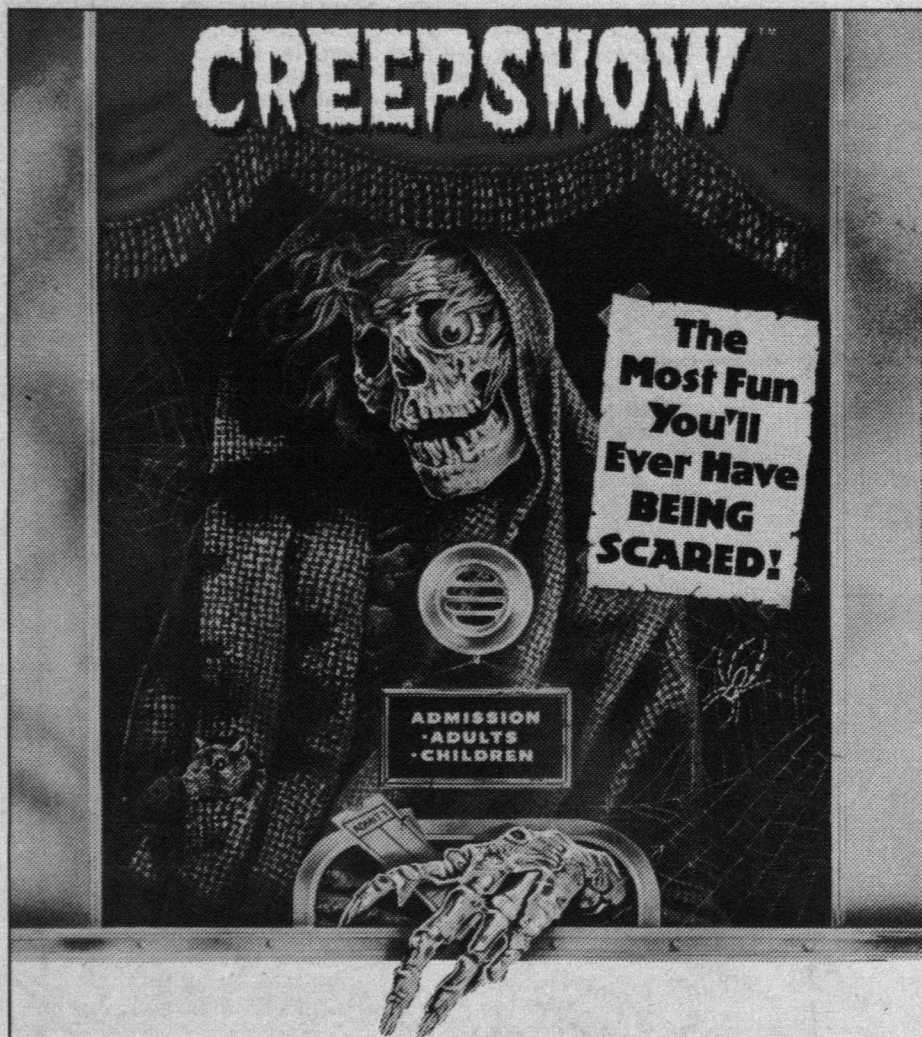
One of Townshend's noble intentions is to try to increase awareness. 'Cooks County,' for example, uses repetition to try to force us to think about some facts that most of us would rather not think about: "People are suffering ... People are hungry ... People are lonely." 'I've Known No War,' on the other hand, suggests that although everyone knows what war means in the intellectual sense, few of us are aware of what it means in the emotional sense. And in 'Eminence Front' Townshend attacks phonies not so much because they're hiding behind a put-on as because they're not even aware it is a put-on.

It's Hard is also very much an album about survival. Never the band to be subtle, the Who address (in 'It's Your Turn') the struggles of youth and middle age in very blunt terms:

I know you young and dumb
I know where you're comin' from
Don't know where you're goin to
But I been there same as you
You're running out of ideas
And new hats to try on
I know you middle age
Same song, different page
I know what you're goin' through
Made the same mistakes as you
All you want is some hope
And a shoulder to cry on.

This album isn't called *It's Hard* for nothing! 'It's Your Turn,' however, is taken one step farther by the astonishing 'Cry If You Want,' which looks back on youth from the perspective of middle age. A soothing chorus ("Let your tears flow/ Let your past go") is alternated with raging verses that remember the turbulent voyage through lost innocence, identity crisis and naive blunders. The album is then brought to a close with a final onslaught of distorted-feedback guitar breaking — the aural equivalent of the Who smashing their equipment at the end of a gig.

Not only is 'Cry If You Want' a fitting conclusion for one of the year's best albums, but it also must be counted as one of the most moving songs ever written about the hard lessons of youth. I'd be surprised if anyone could get through this song without finding a part of himself, or herself, at some point or other. Indeed, if you're wondering why Who fans think of Pete Townshend as a God, you need look no further than 'Cry If You Want.' As we hear in 'It's Hard,' "everyone complains, few can state!" Pete Townshend is obviously one of the few.



Starring HAL HOLBROOK · ADRIENNE BARBEAU · FRITZ WEAVER · LESLIE NIELSEN
CARRIE NYE · E. G. MARSHALL, and VIVECA LINDFORS as Aunt Bedelia

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