

From The Who to editing for Fabers



Pete Townshend 1985

'A large publishing house is not dissimilar from running a band'



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It's twenty years ago this March since a band called The Who penetrated Establishment consciousness when, caught in the transition from mod to pop art, their image shattered suburban Sunday expectations on the cover of an *Observer* colour supplement. "Things they do look awful cold/ I hope I die before I get old/ . . . Talking 'bout by generation . . .", they sang six months later, their place in the history of rock 'n' roll assured.

Like most bands, they forged a corporate identity but each member remained distinctly individual, and that individuality has lately become strikingly apparent: Roger Daltrey, their egocentric lead singer, now spends much time advertising American Express. Pete Townshend, the band's creative dynamo, is an associate editor at Faber and Faber. What would T.S. Eliot, tight-lipped and repressed as he was, make of that?

Townshend has, in fact, been beavering away within those hallowed walls for the last 18 months, though his experience in publishing dates back to 1976. For a couple of hours last week, he spoke thoughtfully and perceptively to *PN* about books in general and his role in particular. It was hard to reconcile this quiet-spoken man with the youth whose demoniacal stage performances culminated in the destruction of many a beautiful guitar. So what brought him to Fabers?

"I met Robert (McCrum) initially because I tried to get Faber to take over the Eel Pie list. I'd heard they were interested in trying to move into popular arts and popular culture. . . . They looked at it and decided it was a bit too broad. Some of the titles were very good but a bit specialized

Stimulate sales

. . . I think Matthew Evans in particular was at a point where he was hoping to stimulate Fabers' overall sales. Certainly, he was revitalizing the back catalogue, and fiction list and everything else. He was in a very punchy mood. He wanted to do something new, so I think the idea of just taking over a load of titles didn't really appeal to him. He wanted to see something growing.

"They turned down my list and about a month later came back and offered me an imprint deal. I was absolutely staggered. I explained to them that, although I'd run a bookshop for four years (Magic Bus, later bought by Penguin), and I ran Eel Pie for eight years (bought by Plexus in 1983), in neither case did I have any management experience other than a deep enthusiasm for books. They said 'it's not really your experience we need; it's your ideas and enthusiasm. . . . Just jump in and we'll support you.' And that's been the case."

Townshend jumped – but not without a certain feeling of paranoia. "I was flattered and, to some extent, slightly suspicious. . . . I know what the exploitation of 'a name' is about. . . . But later on, I felt that people seemed to enjoy having me around. . . . And I enjoy the slightly corporate quality of a large publishing house. It's not dissimilar from running a band."

Townshend's sensibilities led Eel Pie Publishing to assemble a respectable catalogue that went a good deal beyond ex-

pected rock norms, in terms of both subject matter and quality. But it was a rock title that ultimately caused their undoing: *David Bowie: an illustrated record* by Roy Carr and Charles Shaar Murray was put into production as Bowie was moving into a new career stage. 50,000 copies were printed, about half of those for the States, when someone from Bowie's past slapped a writ on the company. Townshend was cautious, not wanting to hurt a fellow artist, and consulting with lawyers. The book eventually appeared, but too late. "It broke the back of the company. There was a £750,000 overdraft for three months at a time when interest rates in this country were at 22%. I was paying £2,235 a week interest," he says, with businesslike precision.

So Faber's invitation meant a chance to pursue a passion without the burdens of financial management. For logistical reasons, the Faber & Townshend imprint fell by the wayside and a role as a commissioning editor has replaced what Townshend calls "a prima donna situation".

"I work on the editorial committee. . . . We have regular meetings and talk about the general direction of the company. . . . That's where my ideas go now and I'm much happier with that. . . . If I have an idea for a biography or whatever, I present it to the other editors and they either back it or dismantle it. I have a chance to have a crack at them too, so if they come up with something that I think is an indulgence or an academic wank-off I just say so. I've lost the *carte blanche* that was implicit in the imprint deal but I'm glad because, in return, I've more of a feeling of interchange and exchange of ideas, a feeling of being part of the company. . . . No, I didn't put any money in."

Last month, Townshend made his editorial debut with *West and other plays* by Steven Berkoff, "the top boy in contemporary British theatre" (*Time*). The editor is clearly delighted: "It's just a perfect opener for me. I don't think it's what anybody expected, but neither is it an attempt to shake up the literary tradition of Fabers. I think Berkoff is a literary writer – an exciting manipulator of language. But I do think he belongs more to my genre than to that of the Establishment. He's a rhythmic, colloquial writer concerned with using anger where appropriate. . . . I don't think he's anti-British establishment, or anti-British eccentricity, but he certainly has a good solid crack at it. It's wonderful that Fabers agreed to publish his work because in fact he's against everything they appear

to stand for. He's really pleased to be with Fabers and they seem pleased to have him. So it was nice to be in the middle – it's a nutty combination."

Townshend's brief is popular culture, and some 20 titles are commissioned so far. Some came from proposals, others from ideas of Townshend's own creation. He explained his philosophy. "I see 'rock 'n' roll' as something that might appear in a history of ideas course at a polytechnic. . . . something that embraces a whole area. So I'm interested in books about success, achievement, youth and the psychology of youth. . . . what it is about our society that produces the kind of art and ideas and sense of futility we seem to be suffering from. Rock 'n' roll is a focus. . . . Book publishing can address itself directly to issues. . . . rather than just the emotional responses to the issues."

"On the books I commission, I'm directly involved in the shaping and editing. . . . On the Eric Burden autobiography, I just got buried. . . . With *Bikers*. . . . I was able to help with improving the way Maz's ideas appeared on the page and the way they flowed. . . . The practical slashing and working with the author to get everything in shape for presentation – yes, I do all that. In the odd bits of journalism I've done, I've always leaned very hard on editors. The major *Rolling Stone* piece I did in '73, Dave Marsh edited it for me and he transformed it. *NME* printed it unedited, and I could see the difference. I made a close study of what Dave had done and I've been edited a lot since and I find it quite natural. . . . I've realized that words aren't lost because you cross them out or put them to one side. The *idea* is not lost. . . . That's what has to be communicated."

Good writers

Would he have signed Boy George for £100,000? "No, but not because I don't think he's worth £100,000. . . . It's just that I think there are enough good writers around in the music business and music press that you don't have to construct phoney biographies. Still I've heard that Boy George is a good writer. . . . But, he's said a lot already. . . . At least the Sidgwick deal is honest exploitation. I think what they're saying is 'we're going to use your name, use your authorization, and help you construct a biography in some shape or form. We'll have access to your private thoughts, your private photo books



Liz Thomson introduces *PN's* look at the biography business with a first interview with someone relatively new to it and to publishing in general – Pete Townshend, late of The Who

and perhaps access to your parents'. . . . I think that paying £100,000 is entirely appropriate. What *isn't* appropriate is to do that, or to pretend that one is doing that, and not pay the artist anything. . . . Eel Pie demonstrated that you could do a book about a current pop phenomenon and sell a lot of copies. Sidgwick in particular jumped – they were distributing us and I think they just watched."

Townshend feels that the publishing industry should take steps to restrain the instant book phenomenon, a rampant trend so far as rock books are concerned.

"The press can write what the hell they like and that's a sad situation sometimes. It has to be that the press are free but I don't think it has to be that any *publisher* is free. I don't think they should be free to take the name of a band like Culture Club or Duran Duran, put shitty pictures together and write a shitty story and smash it out and make some money. Shallow exploitation is *unworthy* of the book trade."

Showbiz biography in general and rock biography in particular is a difficult genre. If it's not a 48-page instant biography, it tends either to the Albert Goldman character assassination approach (*Elvis*, published here by Allen Lane, besmirching the venerable imprint with its scurrilousness) or the Ray Coleman artist-as-saint approach (S & J's *Lennon* tome, weighty in all but content). Townshend, too, is searching for a solution. "The rock business is the runt of the entertainment industry. . . . It's very difficult to apply the traditional, conventional ethics of biographical publishing." Controversy is one thing, unnecessary abrasiveness another. Care and honesty of approach, says Townshend, are paramount.

April-May will bring a Faber fiction extravaganza – a nationwide tour in which Townshend will have both an off-stage and on-stage role. For as well as figuring out the logistics, he'll also be reading from his work of autobiographical fiction, *Horse's Neck*. "I had literally a hundred pieces of prose, some of which resembled short stories. . . . some of which were like diary entries and some of which were just expansions of song lyrics. . . . I assembled the bits that I felt were most cohesive and Robert McCrum began to edit them. We did the selection together. Where he was *really* good was in helping me to recognize where there was something that was special."

It's refreshing to find that someone who, in many ways, has had it all can still have ambitions – and not just for himself. He'd like to try a novel but is reticent about doing so because the only experience he has to draw from is the rock business. But, "I suppose my *burning* ambition is to walk in with a wonderful new writer, a novelist or a poet. That's the longest shot. I look all the time. I read manuscripts in piles of twenty. . . . I've stopped looking to really young people – I think they're frozen. . . . We have to awaken these poor sleeping creatures that society has created. . . . Or perhaps less philanthropically, less evangelically, the point is to be ready so that if effervescence and ideas and enthusiasm are needed by the young, or from the young, the machinery should still be there."

"Publishing," concluded Pete Townshend, "is all about enthusiasm for ideas."