

# 50 years since the Who's *Quadrophenia*

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*I'm coming down,  
got home on the very first train from town,  
my dad just left for work,  
he wasn't talking.  
It's all a game,  
and inside I'm just the same.  
My fried egg makes me sick  
first thing in the morning.*

Britain experienced considerable intellectual and cultural ferment in the postwar period. As the WSWS has noted, “British imperialism emerged from World War II economically bankrupt. The Empire was falling apart. The working class was on the move—and its disgust with the decrepit aristocracy, and the ruling establishment in general, found artistic expression.” Moreover, the purposelessness “of bourgeois life and the hypocrisy of British institutions became targets of relentless cultural criticism—angry, sarcastic, iconoclastic and rebellious.”

The “Angry Young Men” phase of the mid-1950s was followed by the “New Wave” of the early 1960s, which developed a good many of these themes in film and television, generally in a more distinctly left-wing form. Popular music too, although it came more immediately under the sway of commercial pressures, was also influenced and shaped by the complex, but generally radicalizing trends of the time. Like British cinema and theater, it tended to look “into the life of the working class in a manner that was, at its best, realistic and unsentimental. At any rate, these qualities were far more present in Britain than in the US.”

The late 1960s and early 1970s in Britain witnessed an eruption of strikes, industrial battles, mass pickets, factory sit-ins—building workers, dockers, miners, engineering workers—which culminated in the 1974 national miners’ strike (after national action in 1972) that brought down the Heath Tory government.

In the midst of all this, in 1972, English musician Pete Townshend (born 1945) approached his bandmates in the Who with demo tapes for a new album, a “concept” album such as the band had made with 1969’s “rock opera” *Tommy*. Townshend called his new project *Quadrophenia*.

Judgments may vary, but in this reviewer’s opinion, to the extent that popular music constitutes an art form, *Quadrophenia* qualifies as high art, a richly layered album of compelling themes and variations, with raw yet crafted lyrics that plumb the depths of rock itself in the story of an adolescent whose overpowering emotions find no satisfying outlet and whose society—1960s Britain—offers him no fulfilling direction.

A certain breed of feeling attends adolescence, often called “angst,” which rages against the illusions of childhood as they fall

but also against the hypocrisies of bourgeois adulthood as they make themselves known. By and large, those hypocrisies represent the lies of capitalist “freedom” and “democracy” and the compromises people must make to survive under capitalism. Released in October of 1973 as a double album, *Quadrophenia*, like the best rock, expresses this angst. It also exposes an impressive range of hypocrisies, all while keeping alive a search for beauty and truth. Treated in this way, “teenage angst” is redeemed as the deadly serious business it really is.

*Quadrophenia*, the Who’s sixth album, tells the story of Jimmy, loosely in its songs and explicitly in an extensive liner note. Jimmy is a London kid, lower-middle class with a menial job, whose parents, like Townshend’s own in his youth, are alcoholics. Jimmy himself abuses amphetamines (“leapers”) and alcohol and has self-consciously ambivalent feelings about his parents. Most importantly, from Jimmy’s perspective, is that he runs with a group of Mods, the style-conscious British teens who spent their money on expensive clothes and motor scooters and listened to modern jazz, ska, rhythm and blues, and rock groups like the Who, the Yardbirds and the Kinks.

Jimmy opens his monologue in the liner notes with a reference to the psychiatrist he “had to see.” The psychiatrist of the notes “never really knew what was wrong with me. He said I wasn’t mad or anything. He said there is no such thing as madness.” In the song “The Real Me,” the “shrink” listens to Jimmy *tell him about my weekend / but he never betrays what he thinks*. In neither case does the psychiatrist acknowledge the objective limitations on the lives of young people in postwar Britain.

This blindness to material and social reality as they affect the individual is foregrounded by Townshend in *Quadrophenia*, which explores the various intersecting areas of a British youth’s life and the expectations each raises only to prove a disappointment. The psychiatrist is no help. Jimmy also believes his parents do not understand him and cannot help, a given of 60s youth culture that is looked at more closely in *Quadrophenia* than in perhaps any other rock or pop music album: *The kids at school have parents that / Seem so cool, / And though I don’t want to hurt ‘em / Mine want me their way*, Townshend sings in “Cut My Hair.”

Romantic love, the promised land of almost all pop music, turns out to be an illusory source of self-knowledge and self-esteem. The notes tell us that Jimmy has seen “this bird that I really liked,” a young woman with whom he has had sex on the beach at Brighton, now walking with his best friend.

His ultimate hope for self-worth and purpose comes with being a Mod. But even this identity proves tainted when he is revolted by the violence of the Mods’ beach fight in Brighton with a group of

leather-clad, motorcycle-riding Rockers: *Dressed right for a beach fight / But I just can't explain / Why this uncertain feeling / Is still here in my brain*, the Who's Roger Daltrey sings in "Cut My Hair."

Finally, Jimmy sees his hero and the leader of the Mods, "the Ace Face," who once kicked in a door of a Brighton hotel looking "like Fred Astaire reborn," now "working at the same hotel. But he wasn't the manager." This part of the story is told on the album in the song "Bell Boy," growled in exaggerated Cockney by Who drummer Keith Moon:

*Bell boy!  
I gotta get going now.  
Bell boy!  
Keep the lip buttoned down.*

After his disillusionment with the Mod scene, a disillusionment he calls blasphemous "in an old fashioned sense," Jimmy steals a boat and motors toward a rock off the shore. Allowing the boat to drift away, he sits on the rock in the rain and watches his life "crawling" by: "Now it's just the bare bones of what I am." Townshend has allowed Jimmy insight into himself but offers him no clear or easy way forward. Yet the listener is to take seriously, in this opera, the placement of "Love Reign O'er Me" as the finale.

As powerful as this song is, the album does close on a decidedly conventional note, with Daltrey screaming "Love!" and the social awareness of songs like "Bell Boy," "The Dirty Jobs" and "Helpless Dancer" taking a back seat to the personal feelings of the hero.

The music of *Quadrophenia* is inspired, telling the album's story through memorable themes and deft variations that weave and recur, mutate from major to minor and conjure the inner states of a young person who can only understand himself as having a split personality ("Schizophrenic? I'm Bleeding Quadrophenic").

Using an ARP 2500 synthesizer, Townshend created the effect of a soaring string section and used this effect as the foundation of the album's major themes, such as in his poignant, melodic interpretation of the rolling peaks and valleys of the sea in the "Love Reign O'er Me" theme. Townshend deepened the strings sound with a cello he learned to play in two weeks for the recording. The synthesized strings are complemented by a horn "section," created by overdubbing Who bassist John Entwistle playing a number of brass instruments. Entwistle's horn work is especially pronounced on the tracks "5:15" and "Doctor Jimmy."

But *Quadrophenia* is rock and roll first and last. The Who had proven with 1970's *Live at Leeds* performance that they could outplay any band, rock harder and with more feeling, and probe the raw emotional depths of the genre. With *Quadrophenia*, the energy and inventiveness of that performance are hitched to Townshend's symphonic creation and lyrics to elevate rock to a sustained artistic level.

Throughout the album, Townshend's crashing rhythm guitar and tasteful single-note work draw the listener in completely. Entwistle's unparalleled bass work (listen to "The Real Me") is given free rein on this album and at once percussively drives the music and serves as a counterpoint to the melodies. Moon, whose drumming was an animalistic force of nature, is nowhere more

creative or effective than on *Quadrophenia*. And Daltrey, an underrated interpreter of songs, puts in the performance of his life on this album, summoning an emotional range equal to the challenge of the story.

What was it that brought out such fine performances? In brief, we can say that Townshend and the Who took their subject seriously, and like the best popular music and the best art, *Quadrophenia* confronts the real social conditions that shape individual lives.

Townshend was not satisfied simply with providing a visceral experience for young people. Rather, with *Quadrophenia* he attempted to explore the terms of the experience of rock music itself, its emotional sources, social contexts and psychological receptors. That is, he and the Who took their audience, their younger selves and 1960s England as their subject. For the most part, Townshend found that society, despite the brief and relative prosperity postwar Britain enjoyed in the 60s, to have been a material and spiritual trap for youth and adults alike. These lines from "The Punk Meets the Godfather," in which Daltrey takes on the persona of capitalist society itself, capture the nemesis Jimmy and his friends and parents are up against:

*You declared you would be three inches taller,  
You only became what we made you.  
Thought you were chasing a destiny calling,  
You only earned what we gave you.*

Certainly in 1972 Townshend would have been conscious that the UK was in the grip of a recession, with inflation in the double digits. The class struggle had sharpened, and December 1973 would see the resumption of the previous year's coal miners' strike that would cause blackouts across the country in 1974 and eventually chase Conservative prime minister Edward Heath from office.

Also in 1973, while rock and roll was not a spent force, it was well into its decadent period. Little that was truly new or compelling, let alone socially relevant, was being produced in the 70s, though much good music was made. With the end of the US draft in January 1973, rock on both sides of the Atlantic (now dominated by established artists in their 30s) began to detach itself from political life. With few exceptions, rock and pop music in the 70s aimed at being pleasant and fun, occasionally maudlin.

In reaction to this ocean of innocuousness, punk would strip away the heavy production and banal bombast, turn up the distortion on the guitars and strum fast in an unfiltered, sometimes untalented, expense of youthful energy. From this perspective, 1973's *Quadrophenia* represents a high water mark, and the beginning of the end, of rock as a vital art form. Townshend was attuned to, and resisted, this state of things when he penned in 1972, *Long live rock! / Be it dead or alive.*



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