“My Generation”—The Who (1965)

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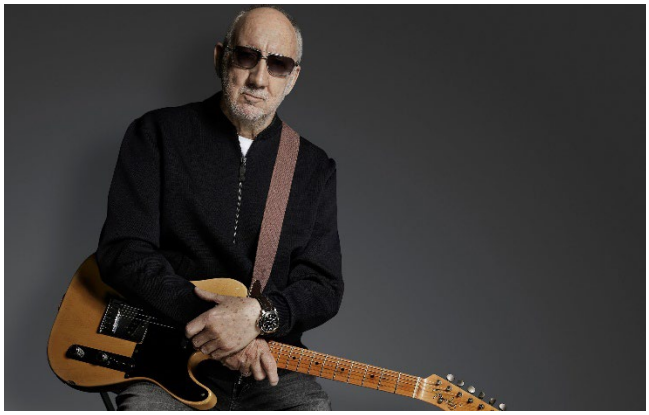
Essay by Charlie Harding (guest post)



Pete Townshend

In 1965, Pete Townshend was in his apartment workshopping a new song for his band The Who after a group of fans asked him to write lyrics that spoke to their generation’s frustration with how they were being treated. Townshend’s initial approach was a chug-a-lug acoustic number about kids his age being “put down just because we get around” and wanting “to die before I grow old.” The Who’s manager loved what he heard but told the guitarist to give it a bit more oomph. A bass solo, thudding drums, and a few “f-f-fade away” stutters later, the band landed on “My Generation.” Celebrated and banned (briefly) by the BBC, it became a lodestar for millions of disaffected youths tired of the patronizing stance of their elders. It also helped turn the Who into stars, giving them their first top-five hit in England.

Few songs since have spoken to an entire generation while sitting at the intersection of multiple musical histories--in this case, rock, punk, blues, and folk. With the forthcoming release of a new box set of his solo work, Townshend reflected on the massive cultural shift “My Generation” served for him, his band, and his audience--along with the burden it became only a few years after its release.

Interview with Pete Townshend adapted from “New York Magazine” / Vulture’s podcast “Switched On Pop”:

It began with a degree of societal disaffection. I was sharing an apartment with my best friend, Barney, in West London. I had a little studio there, where I wrote the first demos for the Who. Kit Lambert, our manager, and his partner, Chris Stamp, came to see me and were very upset about the conditions in which we lived. So they brought me to Belgravia, which was very posh. I had a top-floor apartment on a street called Chesham Place, right on the border of all the big embassies.

I spent about three or four months in that apartment, and it was kind of blissful. I'd written "Can't Explain" and "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere," which became hits. Meanwhile, our stage act was getting more violent. It had all sprung from my guitar-smashing routine. Keith Moon then started to smash his drums up. Roger was using his microphone on the cymbals. This became a big trademark of what we were doing in public.

Once "Can't Explain" was released, we were playing in an Irish club in Shepherd's Bush. After the show, a group of boys and one girl came up and asked if they could speak to me. They took me aside and said, "Listen, Pete, we want you to do more songs like 'Can't Explain.' We think it's important."

"In what way is it important?" I asked. "This is a song about some kid who doesn't have the courage to say that he's in love with this girl."

And they said, "Well, that's not the way we hear it. We hear it as a song about the fact that none of us can really explain how we feel about anything."

I remember thinking, Wow, I've got a brief here. I've also got an audience.

One day I took a train to Swindon, way out of London. I had bought myself an old hearse with a 12-cylinder engine. I was going to chop it and turn it into a hot rod, though I don't know how the hell I thought I was going to do that. Anyway, I parked it outside my house. But it wouldn't start the next day, so I left for a gig, and when I came back, it was gone. I called the police. They said, "It hasn't been stolen. It's been towed away." I said, "On what basis? I'm allowed to park my car outside my house!" It turned out that the Queen Mother had complained because she drove past it every day from Clarence House to a friend's place. It was distressing for her because it reminded her of the hearse in which the late king had been taken to his burial place. She obviously just said to her driver, "Oh my God, that awful thing, have it removed."

I had this sense that I was the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. I shouldn't be living in Belgravia. I should be back in my West London place surrounded by friends and by the people who had elected me to be their champion. So I sat down and looked through my lyrics and found a song that was an attempt to emulate two of my heroes at the time: Mose Allison, the jazz singer, and Bob Dylan, who was then an almost-unknown folk singer. I started to riff on this being my generation, that people were trying to put us down just because we get around. The words just tumbled out.

The song didn't come from a very good place in me. It came from a place of resentment and a feeling of class consciousness, which was something that was very out of tune with the way I'd been brought up. My parents were musicians and they had friends who were poor, but they also had very wealthy friends: some journalists and radio people, music agents, people who were quite aristocratic. I felt at ease about that, but I still wanted to speak for that little gang of kids in my music. That line "I hope I die before I get old" was a shout against the Establishment, the way that it assumed that anybody without money and status should be ignored. And I never wanted to live that way. There was a sense, too, that I was a young kid. I was only 20 coming up to 21 and thought, Fuck it. I don't want to be old. I would prefer to be dead than to be like these people.

The next day, Kit Lambert listened to it and said, "Pete, this is very nice, but, you know, maybe you could rock it up a little bit?" So … I rocked it up a little bit. Then the second version, I

pretended I was taking amphetamines. I started to burble: "P-p-p-people try to put us down." I was a big fan of John Lee Hooker, who actually had a stutter. But it wasn't meant to be a piss take about stuttering. I grew up in this group of boys who took so many pills that they stuttered.

Then I did another version with some key changes. It grew in an interesting way because it had so many different demos. I mean, it was the most I've ever done for a song. I did it over and over again because I knew that I needed to get it right. I didn't change any of the words. I just added more stutters and key changes.

We went into the studio to record it. The idea of the bass solo, it was quite clear that John Entwistle was a far better shredder than me. Plus, we were a three-piece band with a singer. One didn't play guitar solos if you're playing rhythm or driving the band. So it felt natural to do what John did with it. We were all shocked at how well it worked. I think we did it all in one take. I just knew this thing was a big hit.

Quite a few punk journalists have said, like, "Oh, poor Pete, the Queen Mother complains about his car, so he writes 'My Generation.'" Well, I'm afraid that's the story. I was and still am very sensitive. So I felt that criticism very deeply, but I knew once I'd written the song, that the whole exercise was worth it, as it often is.

"My Generation" was misunderstood because of the behavior of the status quo--of the politicians, the schoolteachers, the doctors, the police, one's grandparents. The people who were older than we were, they had fought for their country and we hadn't. We were expected to be very grateful that we didn't have to do that. We were like whining brats. But we knew what we wanted was something we really weren't entitled to: the respect and the status that the previous generations had earned. So we drew a line and started again. We rebuilt our traditions and our history. We already had jazz; we already had the fabulous classical music of Europe; we had folk; we had blues and R&B from America. So we poured it into a pot, boiled it up, took some drugs, and made it our own.

Once the song was finished, we tried to get on television and the radio. But the BBC banned it. I think the people who banned it were intelligent people. They were just being protective. I don't think it was because they felt it would create a revolution. It wasn't about politics. There were no musicians or artists speaking about politics. There was nobody suggesting who you vote for. It was considered to be passé to even have a political stance then.

Later, the song eventually became a burden for me and the band. We were still playing it as our closing song when we were in our late 20s. We didn't want to keep playing it. Roger and I just did a couple of shows for teen cancer recently at the Royal Albert Hall. We played "My Generation" and I hated it.

Still, the song is central to my development as a musician, as a band member, as somebody who has survived the rock industry and still has a sense of duty to that audience. What I would like to do for the survivors is just write a series of checks. Just say, "Go buy yourself a nice car." Unfortunately, I can only do it for a few people, and I do it for people whom I owe loyalty to.

The joy for me with "My Generation" was knowing that I set out to do something and it landed. The success of it was just doing the job that I was born to do and doing it right. But also the fact that it has lasted so long! We're talking about the Library of Congress recognizing it. It still matters. But people should be writing their own "My Generation's" today.

Charlie Harding is the co-creator and host of the podcast "Switched On Pop," published by "New York Magazine," and co-author of "Switched On Pop: How Popular Music Works and Why It Matters" (Oxford University Press). He serves as Associate Professor at Berklee College of Music and Adjunct Faculty at NYU.