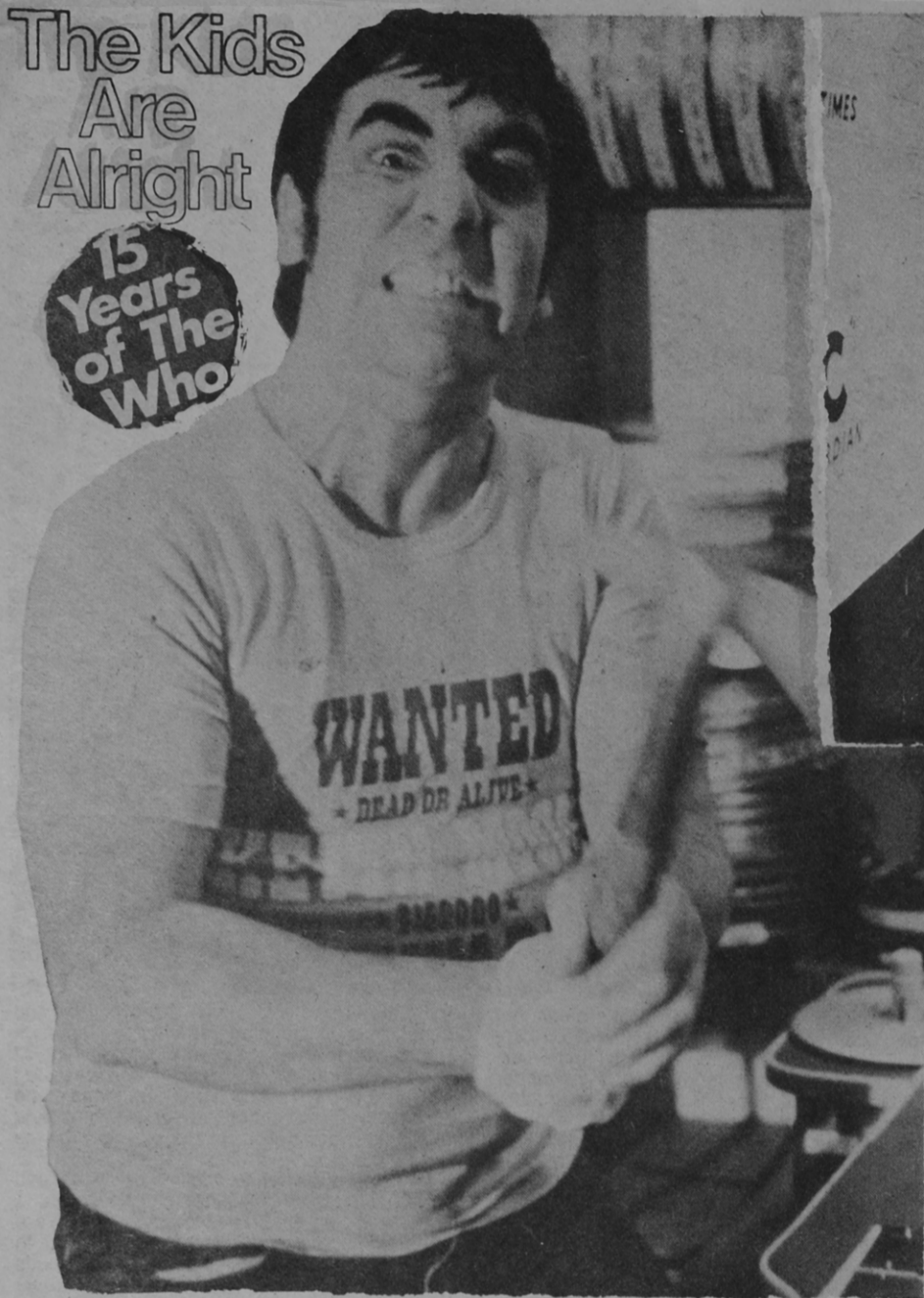


The Kids Are Alright

15 Years of The Who



The Who biopic *The Kids Are Alright* opens on a wonderful note of mayhem. It's all the more amusing when one considers that this pop anarchy was perpetrated before millions of unsuspecting Americans on traditionally bland network television.

The sequence is from a September 1967 airing of *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. Tommy and Dickie Smothers were a kind of comedy Kingston Trio — button down collars, Ivy League.

Tommy Smothers wanders among the assembled members of The Who, introducing each in turn ("My friends call me Keith," says Moon. "You can call me John"), before announcing the song. America wasn't ready for a "My Generation" like this one. Neither was anyone except Moon.

Ever the loon, Keith had worked up a surprise ending for the number, the climax of which was always orchestrated chaos ("auto-destruction" was the word Who management coined for it). Moon had had his bass drum rigged with gunpowder. But in the time between rehearsal and the show he had been plying the stagehand charged with loading the explosives with booze and money. The result was that the bass drum held 10 times the amount of explosive it should have.

"My Generation" comes to its close with Pete Townshend pummeling his guitar into his speakers and trashing mikes. And then Moon's drums explode. On screen, the effect is shattering. There's smoke everywhere and the image seems to ring with the concussion.

"ME EARS, ME EARS"

Townshend is too close to the blast. He staggers around, holding his ringing ears (years later he is to attribute the serious deterioration of his hearing to this moment). A shocked Tommy Smothers enters from the wings, an acoustic guitar strapped around his neck. A manic expression on his face, Townshend snatches the hapless axe and reduces it to matchwood.

This is the Who, rated by many the best rock band in the world and certainly among the topweights. *The Kids Are Alright* traces the Who's 15-year career from silent footage at London's Scene Club in 1965 to the final concert with Moon at Shepperton Film Studios last year. In between there was the big rock festivals, Monterey (more guitar trashing) and Woodstock ("I hated it," says Townshend, who said later he was tripping), the projects — *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia* (now made into a film) — and personalities. Unlike other rock bands of their time the Who made no secret of the fact that off-stage they didn't get on. Often their shaky personal relationship would crash in acrimony and fistcuffs. Music from *Quadrophenia* was withdrawn from their repertoire after an introductory tour because of serious disagreement between Townshend and Roger Daltrey. Daltrey, the only member of the Who to try to develop a career outside music, is described by Townshend in an early British television interview as "a Shepherd's Bush geezer who wants everything to be a laugh and who gets upset when it isn't." To the young Townshend, bassist John Entwistle who acted as the film's musical director doesn't seem to be interested in anything very much. Apart from his rock steady playing, the only glimpse we get of Entwistle the person is a fantasy sequence showing him emerging from his palatial country home with a clutch of Who gold records and proceeding to use the discs as clay pigeons as he skeet shoots them with a Tommy gun.



wound split Daltrey in two.

Outrageous behaviour on the tour by both the Who and the Faces put an abrupt end to rock tours of New Zealand. It seems incredible but there was a dry spell that lasted more than two years before another major rock act visited this country.

There are rumours (always the rumours) of the Who touring here early next year with new members Kenny Jones and Rabbit Bundrick. Reviews of the new Who have been en-

thusiastic. As Townshend says of the band, "We're still learning." The Who's continuing development and refusal to settle into a rut spared them the contemptuous wrath the punks directed at other old lags.

"Whatever we did we did for real," says Daltrey. "We weren't pretending. No matter what, we kept our credibility and that's the most important thing for any band."

Ken Williams

TEN MILLION PEOPLE HAVE BEEN WAITING

FLEETWOOD

MAC

TUSK



KNICKERS

Moon is unlike anyone Townshend has ever known before. Or since. If there is a star of the film it is Moon. Daltrey says Moon showed the others how to live. Keith offers some of the funniest footage — the funniest footage of a rock star, whether he is disrobing to his red briefs for a television interviewer struggling to retain control or cutting up with his drinking buddy Ringo Starr. Only towards the end, overweight and struggling a bit to keep up, does Moon's spark seem to fade.

Townshend himself is the personification of working class genius. A lanky, sometimes brooding figure, Townshend mumbles in an early interview about the importance of disregarding 'quality' as a concept. This is the key to Pop. Its qualities have little or nothing to do with 'quality' and this gormless-looking kid understood it better than any of them (asked if he doesn't think the Beatles' music has 'quality' Townshend says he has been listening to a stereo recording of the Beatles where the voices are in one channel and the backing track is in the other "and their backing tracks sound lousy.")

FROM THE VAULTS

The Who are unique in having access to a backlog of film stock dating back to their days as the Mod High Numbers. Director Jeff Stein has assembled the mass of footage into a superb documentary/entertainment. Those who haven't followed the Who closely may find themselves a little at sea because Stein hasn't signposted the way. The film jumps back and forth in time and place, apparently haphazardly. Stein has been criticised for being "wilfully uninformative". He says his aim was to make a film as self-referential and potentially alienating as rock is at its best. That's as may be, but I think those who let the rhythm of the piece carry them will have no trouble charting the passage of the Who.

For Stein, the film is a labour of love. Now 25, he has been a Who fan since 1965. He believes *The Kids Are Alright* "proves that the Who are the greatest rock and roll band in the world."

It wasn't an easy project to set up. The story goes that when Stein first approached Townshend and the Who's manager, Bill Burbushley, and asked whether he could make the movie he sat and cried for two hours when the proposal was rejected.

"I said to Bill," Townshend recalls, "anyone who cries for two hours can never make a film about the Who. But Bill said, think about it the other way..."

IMAGE BLAST

The film abounds in pop imagery — Moon's exploding drums, the Union Jack jackets and POW! T-shirts of the Mod days, Daltrey's bulging biceps and Townshend's windmilling guitar chording.

My never-to-be-forgotten image of the Who is the concert they gave at the Auckland Town Hall in early 1968. They topped the bill over the Small Faces and Paul Jones. It was the days before the big sound systems and all the vocals were done through the Town Hall's P.A. Needless to say, it was totally inadequate for the task. The Who played very, very loud and, apart from some rather silly stuff with some bombs, were very good. The memory that stays is of Townshend hurling his Strat high above his head and catching it as the others created the customary "My Generation" cacophony. I was awestruck, and genuinely fearful that should Townshend muf his catch the falling Fender