

QUADROPHENIA



Quadrophenia, the film, is rich in those rare moments when one recognises on the screen not a fantasy projection of me-that-might-be or someone-like-me, but ME. Not that the film is about me, Kenneth Williams, post-adolescent, one-time garage band guitarist. It is about people — in this case, mid-60s London mods — growing up, and all the turmoil that involves.

Few films have handled better that confused time of coming of age. Take a scene like that where Jim, the Mod kid played brilliantly by Phil Daniels, is drawn irresistibly from the family circle by the "5-4-3-2-1" theme music of *Ready Steady Go*, the British television pop show which was a major outlet for Mod. Lost, he gazes at the Who (of course) powering through "Anyway Anyhow Anywhere". His bemused father at first scoffs at and then abuses the foreign sounds. Jim impersonates the big-nosed guitarist, then the manic thrashing of the drummer. The volume knob winds higher. Jim is claimed by the cathode.

Later he will be thrown out of home. For the moment he is at home, but no longer of it. The scene, one of the film's best-observed moments, is almost a blueprint for the teenage years.

The creator of *Quadrophenia*, the Who's Pete Townshend, expresses satisfaction that his 1973 concept of a day-in-the-life of a Mod has made the journey from double-album to big screen.

British Tradition

"It's great to be able to cock a snook at all the Americans who say that we're finished as a nation of film-makers. Most film-makers don't have the first idea of what gets kids into the cinema, and it's not just tagging music onto something. It's making films in the British tradition, which is the only kind of film that I think we can make well, which is the kind of *Saturday Night and Sunday morning* thing. I know it's depressing, but that's our *cinema verite* if we ever had one."

In Britain the film has done well, coinciding (it wasn't the cause of it) with a Mod revival (or "renaissance," as Townshend puts it). In America, the reception has been mixed. The film has done well in cities, but elsewhere business has been slow. American youth movies have been so concerned with psychedelia and/or cars and motorbikes that maybe the Yanks are mystified by a flick about

neatly clad pillheads with strange accents who ride gleaming motor scooters and are given to violent outbursts at the sight of leather-togged Rockers (or "bikers" as they have it across the Atlantic).

In New Zealand, we experience a distillation of British and American influences. As in the mid-60s, the impetus for change in music and accompanying lifestyles is coming from Britain, not America. Not for any love of mother country did we turn to Britain in 1965 (the setting for *Quadrophenia*). That was where it was happening. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Kinks, Who, Pretty Things, Yardbirds. What was coming out of America? Precious little. Dylan was picking up an electric guitar, there were a few hits from Motown and Stax, but the music of black America was being championed, secondhand, by the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Kinks, Who, Pretty Things, Yardbirds. American bands tried to pretend they were British. Pete Townshend notes wryly that punk bands in Los Angeles are currently singing with English accents. For the new Who album, Townshend has encouraged Roger Daltrey to try a more "English" voice rather than his usual "trans-Atlantic" tones.

Mod Mirror

In New Zealand, Mod was a "look" rather than a lifestyle, based on the imagery of magazines and record sleeves. Unaware of the strict barriers of British Modism we quite often got it "wrong". But as Thelonus Monk said, "Wrong is right," and it became something else. Here it usually meant longer hair, which would have been unthinkable for Jim and his mates. Local heroes also came in for emulation. The tartan trousers worn by the La De Das (1966) had a following, and Lou Rawnsley set a style for blue sneakers. A sartorial leader was Murray Grindlay, once an Underdog, now king of the commercials.

But in Britain it was a very serious matter indeed. "Modism", said the late Peter Meaden, "...an aphorism for clean living under difficult circumstances."

Meaden was a mod, one of the hard-core. He was also a rock publicist. He found the Who, called them the High Numbers, wrote a record for them ("I'm the Face"/"Zoot Suit") and was lost in the shuffle when new, more business-minded managers elbowed in. He was further lost when Mod died. He put its demise down to psychedelia and kaftans.

Meaden made Mods of the Who and gave them a ready-made audience. But it doesn't appear to have been an exploitative thing. "All it was, as I said to Pete Townshend, 'I only made you into the Who because I wanted you to be my mates.'"

"I was the feller who saw the potential in

Modism, which is the greatest form of lifestyle you can imagine — it's so totally free, totally anti-family London — in so much as that there were lonely people having a great time. Not having to be lonely, not having to be worried about relationships, being able to get into the most fantastic, interesting, beautiful situations, just out of music. You could dance by yourself. You could groove around."

Meaden's comment about lonely people may be the key to *Quadrophenia*. If it is about anything, it is loneliness. Townshend, its creator, admits to a lonely childhood which (along with the derision aimed at his hooter) coloured his thinking.

Four Faces

Of course, Jim needn't be lonely. He's a four-way personality. The title *Quadrophenia* derives from the concept of "a personality split into four separate facets", combined with "an inability to control which facet is foremost at any one time."

The original *Quadrophenia* album used this as a contrivance to introduce, rather preciously, "themes" for each member of the Who. It seems a cumbersome device, principally aimed at maintaining democratic balance in a quartet notorious for its volatility.

More to the point seems to be the adjectival form of the word, as noted on the back of the cover for the film soundtrack album:

Quadrophenic: extremely volatile state of mind; a condition of today.

Phil Daniels, who plays Jim, says, "I had a really interesting talk to Roger Daltrey one day on the beach at Brighton. He's saying there's a Jimmy in all of us, we're all Jimmy in a way. Like if you come out of that Mod era, that mum and dad number, you know, the music's too loud."

"So that's how I try to play it, like a typical kid. In the film he's an anti-hero. You've got to have that focal point but I try and make him a bit of a wanker as well."

Jim is shown to be as guilty as anyone has been of acts of cowardice, as in the sequence where he leads a retaliatory attack against Rockers who have beaten a mod. Two greasers, caught unawares, get a kicking. To Jim's horror, the bloodied face before him turns out to be that of a school chum. Jim flees, leaving his former friend to his fate.

Restless Energy

The film is amoral, but at best it crystallises the careless energy of growing up, of living one's dream momentarily or having it shattered with a vengeance far outweighing its fragility — as when Jim, finally alone and desperate in Brighton encounters his hero, "the Ace Face" (played with authority by Sting of the Police), the Supermod. But Ace is no longer the One. He has a job in a hotel once trashed by rampaging mods. The once-commanding Ace is now a bell-boy (even as a bell-boy, Sting cuts a dash), and Jim retreats in anger and confusion.

I won't be a spoilsport and reveal any dramatic turns, but the wound-spring energy of the film seems to flag beneath the weight of the symbolism imposed on the final scenes, when Jim takes a last ride on the edge.

But by and large, *Quadrophenia* is well-realised, even if occasionally non-period cars and a few other anachronisms creep into frame.

The best of Townshend's music has been retained and re-recorded (splendidly). Three new Who songs have been added to cover amendments and expansions to the original story-line (a mere thread, after all) and there are seven mid-60s pop and soul hits that have something of a classic status, including "Louie Louie", "Da Doo Ron Ron" and "Green Onions", which made the English Top Ten on re-release.

The soundtrack album is arranged intelligently, working as an album in its own right and not tied to the dramatic appearance of the songs in the film.

A song that doesn't appear on the album is central to a scene that is one of the movie's lingering images. A smoochy love song is wrenched from the record player at a party to be replaced with the two-chord anthem of "My Generation". Suddenly, the floor is taken over by leaping mods. A petty gesture, aimed at impressing an uncaring girl, becomes a movement.

Hope I die before I get old...

Quadrophenia captures adolescence in all its pain, exhilaration, confusion, ugliness and exultation.

Ken Williams

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