



# THE GODEATHER



# THE PUNK

BY BRUCE NEED

**T**he Who and the Clash in the Kingdome: sounds like the kind of cocksure rumor you'd hear from some joker well into his second six-pack, conjuring up never-to-be visions of Pete Townshend stalking the stage side by side with Joe Strummer, both in camouflage fatigues and matching mohawks. But it's for real, on Oct. 20, one of Seattle's most intriguing double bills in recent years.

The unadvertised star of the show is the Kingdome, Seattle's true Mound of Sound (apologies to Wayne Cody). Obviously the only place in town huge enough to house the hoped-for mob, it wasn't built with rock shows in mind. Ask people about Dome dates and they tell you that the sound stunk, but Jagger was cool to the max, or that Paul McCartney came through okay, but Led Zeppelin sounded like an amplified moto-cross event. Most complaints concern the 300 level, where errant guitar licks bounce off the walls and roof like sonic pinballs, but there are dead sound spots everywhere. It all depends on where you sit.

So after the gates open, and some people have lost their stash to the cops out front while luckier ones industriously go about getting blitzed, the crowd crammed on the Kingdome carpet will swirl and ripple in welcome as the Clash storm the stage. I love this band, but based on their June Vancouver gig I prefer them on record. For a top-notch guitarist, which he is, Mick Jones is an astonishingly shy player, hiding out in the mix whenever possible. On record this results in hidden gem guitar solos, but live the mix consists largely of Joe Strummer's guitar, lots of strums, but not many chord changes. So we get a murky jangle of guitars and bass, punky enough; but I miss their swing and gift for arrangements. In Vancouver they got by on quality material: "Police and Thieves," "Clampdown," "Armagedon Time," "Radio Clash," great songs one and all.

One also wonders if the Clash will bring along their slide show. If so, the contrast between their video imagery and the reality of the show will be bizarre. Biafran

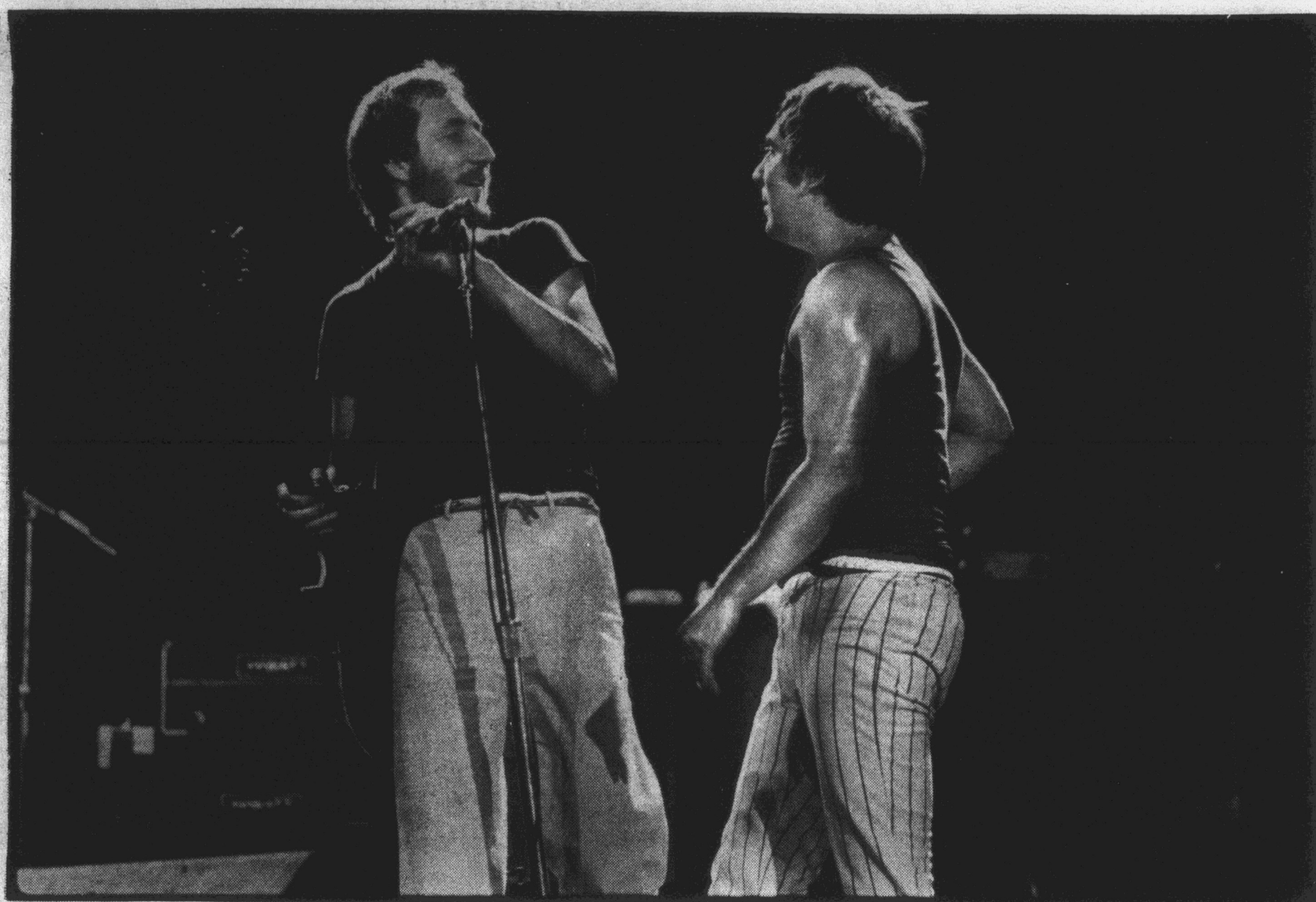


babies with distended bellies, cops clubbing people on the streets, lots of soldiers and guns and war, all visual backdrops for a moderately successful band hot off their last and worst album performing in a concrete umbrella where no one can understand the lyrics; I mean, People's bands don't play the Kingdom. These guys are in a weird career place: they want to be leftists and they want to be rock stars. At the same time they're glorifying the Sandinista revolutionaries they're marketing a line of Clash fashions, guerrilla duds for the boutique set. Right now their goals seem to be taking them in opposite directions.

One thing punks like the Clash and Sex Pistols had going for them was the existence of an established leisure-class rock life style to play off against. The Sex Pistols' brief career can be seen as a brilliant bit of conceptualist art—they raised a big ruckus, got the media to proclaim them the Next Big Thing, went on a triumphantly bonzo U.S. tour, then promptly self-destructed. The clear message: stardom equals rabbit turds. But the Clash seemed to feel that they could be rockers and still remain politically committed, that by being the best and defiantly refusing to sell out they could inspire a like-minded community into action. For a while it worked. *The Clash* and *Give 'Em Enough Rope* were punk classics, smash-em-ups as smart as they were rowdy. "Police and Thieves" may be the first of their reggae steals, but "Safe European Home," where the lads voyage to Jamaica to hang out with the rastas and feel lucky to flee home alive, is as caustically accurate a take on the relationship of white rock to its black roots as anything on record.

Then on *London Calling* the Clash went cosmopolitan, uniting punk, reggae, rockabilly, and soul under one triumphant roof and fulfilling their desire to make kick-ass revolutionary rock that knocked the pants off the competition. Naturally the achievement increased expectations on the part of their public, pressure the band positively welcomed with their "the only band that matters" promo tag. The next album was *Sandinista*, its three records and low price a spit in the eye to the marketing moguls. A huge one-world musical exploration, its variety might also have been a way of coping with all the hype. With its full side of dub (a music whose main theme is the distortion of identity), inspired oddities like Timon Dogg and Mikey Dread, plus music ranging from gospel and calypso to Mose Allison and English ballads, the album feels like the Clash tried on every musical mask imaginable so it would be hard to tell who they really were.

Unsurprisingly the last year or so has been rocky. Topper Headon, the drummer who blossomed into a badly-needed band leader on *Sandinista*, quit weeks before the current tour. The band patched up their differences with their label, releasing a single album and are backing it with aggressive touring. The album, *Combat Rock*, is their first record to break no new ground, partially moving and often sloppy. And the precise function of their politics is up in the air. More and more their songs talk about places and struggles far away, and not their own



Pete Townshend (left), Keith Moon (right): It's hard to say goodbye.

REX RYSTEDT

## THE WHO'S MUSIC IS CENTRAL TO WHAT PEOPLE CONSIDER ROCK 'N' ROLL.

lives or experience, so that the Vancouver slide show gave me the feeling they were tapping the emotional power of those fearsome images to give their own work resonance, and not proposing any real solutions to those conditions. But you can't knock their guts and willingness to stretch themselves, they're excellent musicians, and their collected material over the past five years makes other "new wave" bands look like the lame pop clones they are.

After the Clash will come the headliners, the Who. Live, their studio sound translates well to the stage; if anything it's rougher and more potent. They just dump the extra instrumentation and Townshend plays more guitar, his psychodrama stage style always revealing. Like the Stones their music is so central to what people consider rock 'n' roll that young and old will go bonkers when Townshend windmills into "Pinball Wizard," "Won't Get Fooled Again," or "I Can See For Miles."

The Who bill this as their farewell tour, but both Townshend and Daltrey shoot off their mouths in the press so much it's hard to tell. Talk about strange careers; rarely has such a major act had such perversely contradictory influences. In terms of their music and very existence as a link to white rock's supposedly glorious past, they are charter members of the corporate rock establishment. But in terms of style and subject matter they were one of punk's great inspirations.

The struggle of young men in an alien world is white rock's premier subject, so rock politics usually boils down to the fight to make good and

get yours, rather than the community of action sought by the Clash. And if the Rolling Stones claimed as their turf the strutting lust and good times of that battle, its desperate loneliness and anarchy belonged to the Who. Townshend's repressed, sensitive loners who can't play the straight game and bust out and go nuts are as true a model for the rocker as any. Since Townshend's heroes expressed both his truth and that of his audience, his songs achieved honesty and power as statements of a generation that considered acts of personal expression and rebellion to be significant political acts. The punks didn't love "My Generation" because they dug the ace musicianship of John Entwistle's bass solo; they imitated the early Who because Daltrey's stutters and yowls, Townshend's cherry-bomb guitar bursts, and especially Keith Moon's jubilant ferocious drum eruptions were a model of rock 'n' roll insanity.

But the Who's other major contribution to rock has been a downright curse. Sometime around 1968, they were the best power trio in creation, but Townshend began to complain about the limitations of the trio format, and then came *Tommy*. The first rock opera now sounds overblown and tame, but at the time its length, thematic complexity and overtly classical allusions were a big deal. Then on *Who's Next*, Townshend established the synthesizer as a legit rock instrument, in retrospect an evil day for the music.

On *Quadrophenia* the sound the Who was striving for came together. Considerably more involved both musically and lyrically than *Tommy*,

it was generally considered an ambitious failure and was ignored in the Who's live shows for years. I think it's a masterpiece, one of the few great rock records more indebted to classical than rock or blues. But *Quadrophenia's* blend of synthestrings, hard rock guitar, showy drumming and lyrics bemoaning the agonies of male teenhood, all at fever pitch, has inspired a lot of rotten music. Styx, Rush, Queen, Boston, Kiss, all ripped off the Who for riffs and ideas. Of course, none of these, er, songwriters had Townshend's gift for writing sharp, compassionate teen-songs without getting manipulative or self-serving, or his ear for counter-melodies and arrangement. Still, Styx's "Come Sail Away With Me" or Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" make for a lousy legacy.

Subsequent albums featured less ambitious music, occasional killer cuts, and various shades of boredom. Townshend the adult's songs about Townshend the adult and his band have had less impact than his earlier work, because the shared experience between author and audience has diminished. The death of Keith Moon, spiritual core of the band's anarchistic soul, helped force them in a different direction. *Face Dances*, dominated by love songs and medium tempos, was universally dumped on as a disaster, which it wasn't. But the Who, like the Clash, are self-conscious about their role in rock, and stated a need to make music of greater significance.

*It's Hard*, the brand new album, tries to address their huge audience directly, resulting in the most socially aware record the band has done in ages. There are rough spots galore. Kenny Jones is no Moon, so what were once explosions are now changes in tempo. Thanks to Entwistle, the Who can play funk, but Daltrey can't sing it; he sounds like

John Mayall, a horrible fate. The attempt to find something to say to their audience includes lots of mumbling about the blunders of the elders (thankfully including the Who). But the music, as always for me with this band, eventually kicks in, and a couple songs really do speak to their fans. Entwistle's macho challenge to young rockers, "It's Your Turn," is both hilariously stupid and appropriate, and "I've Known No War" is classic Who. Notice that it is slow and ponderous, a rhythm well-suited for Daltrey's vocal style, and contains the longest stringthesizer passage on the record. But I still don't recommend the style to anyone else.

The Who and the Clash have a lot in common: larger-than-life reputations, extremely self-conscious approaches to their roles as rockers, reputations for lyrical honesty in a business dominated by balding, paunchy over-30s acting like they just turned sweet 16. Seen together in historical perspective, their careers are a running commentary on the dilemma of the rock career. The Who depicted a personal struggle that ended either in death or maturity; and when they did survive and mature, they and their English rock peers slid into a decadent lifestyle that finally ceased to have anything to say to their fans. The punks set out deliberately to avoid that fate; five years later the Clash face the possibility of being torn apart by the contradictions inherent in their goals.

So it should be a noisy and fascinating show. The crowd will include rockers of every stripe: new wave trendies, wary young professionals, high school kids in down vests and slam-happy punks. And if any dorkhead, fuckwad, buttbrain, or pizza-face smuggles any firecrackers past the men in blue, I hope the damn things blow up in their pockets. ■