

play). Spawned by intense discussions with John Hart, producer of the Broadway version of *Tommy*, the disc features a virtual arcade of *Tommy* arcana. There's factual, left-brain material: samples, annotations, and comparisons of every *Tommy* incarnation, including the original 1969 double album and the 1975 Ken Russell movie. Then there's dreamy, right-brain eye and ear candy: gorgeous visual collages that accompany the songs. And finally there's just plain *brainy* stuff: snatches from demo tapes and interviews with the 50-year-old composer himself as well as band mates John Entwistle and Roger Daltrey. Though the disc includes no complete songs, it should have Who fans tilting their pinball machines in glee.

But apparently not Townshend, who has reservations about the final product. "It certainly hasn't set me alight," he sighs. "It doesn't seem very relevant to what I do. But f--- it—if I wasn't going to be there [to help put it together], I'd be upset about that, too." This reaction is hardly surprising, considering Townshend's history with the new, much-hyped medium. "Most of the time," he says, "I've been a fairly disappointed user of CD-ROM"—including discs from some high-profile fellow musicians he diplomatically refuses to name. "Going into this project I was sanguine in the British sense, not skeptical or imperious or disdainful. I had to persuade myself to be as open-minded as possible."

But even as a sanguine, computer-conversant musician, he says he was irked by the collision of technical and aesthetic sensibilities in the production process. "[Programmers] are living in a different kind of brain space than the user," he says. "It's an agonizing and wearying process, like trying to drive a car and build a car at the same time."

Thirty years in the music industry have prepared *Tommy* CD-ROM producer Brian Christian (sound engineer for Pink Floyd's *The Wall*) for dealing with unsatisfied artists. "They're never happy," he says, "and if they were it would be a scary thing." But he understands Townshend's frustration with CD-ROM production, which is much more complicated than that of CDs. Says Christian, "He was absolutely wonderful and cooperative, but he doesn't know how to design a program."

Michael Azerrad, music editor of the SonicNet website and editorial director of the *Tommy* CD-ROM, says that when the programmers took over, the "massively intelligent" Townshend "registered his unhappiness in unambiguous terms."

There is at least one aspect of the project, however, that

Townshend seems genuinely to have enjoyed. "The research," he says, "was fascinating." It helped, he adds, that he's tried to keep the original *Tommy* lyrics and demos in mint condition, "though every time I let a box of bits and pieces out of my hands, it comes back with a bit or piece missing."

"It was amazing to hold some of these things in your hands," Azerrad says. Indeed, among the more fascinating items on the CD-ROM are the original lyrics to "Pinball Wizard" scrawled on the back of a shopping list (which is also reproduced) and Townshend's casting notes for the *Tommy* movie, including two performers who were considered but finally not chosen, Grace Slick and Joni Mitchell.



ANN-MARGRET AND OLIVER REED TREAT DALTREY (CENTER) IN THE '75 'TOMMY'

Speaking of movies, Townshend's aesthetic inclinations appear to set him at odds with the solitary experience encouraged by CD-ROM. "Art," he says, "requires a powerful element of congregation. We thought [home] video would kill cinema, but it's had the opposite effect. Young people rented videos, became interested in movies as an art form, and went to the cinema, so now you're sitting in a room with a bunch of other people." Unfortunately, he adds, "this is something that CD-ROM doesn't pretend to be embracing."

Townshend's ambivalence toward multimedia may have more prosaic underpinnings—*Tommy* could be such a well-documented, oft-performed work that even an archival CD-ROM can't hope to add much. That would explain why he's more animated talking about *Lifefhouse*, which he's seriously considering as his next interactive project now that he's completed work on a documentary about the conceptual piece for BBC radio. "I think it would make a spectacular CD-ROM," Townshend says, adding mysteriously, apropos of this Legendary Lost Rock Masterpiece of which only he knows the details, "There is an intimate pathway that exists between people on the Internet." (Perhaps a bit too intimate: Lately Townshend has been keeping tabs on an impostor who's been surfing the Internet claiming to be him. "He's better at being me than I am," Townshend says.)

Despite his mixed experiences with CD-ROMs and the Net, Townshend is still willing to let these new forms of entertainment confound his expectations. "Three or four years ago I was as cocky about interactivity as I was, before that, about music video. Now video is starting to change—there's some incredible creativity coming out in the dance videos, something I never really envisaged. So who knows?" Well, you did, Pete—back in the '70s, remember? ♦

