

Townshend's latest effort a 'rock musical'

Pete Townshend and The Who have experienced a media resurrection lately. The Stones' tour has been swept under the rug by The Who's 25th Anniversary bash. Then you have Pete's hearing problems, first reported more than a decade ago. And a new Townshend album? Now, 15 years after they reached their creative and popular peak, 1989 is the summer of The Who.

That being said, with *The Iron Man*, Townshend has created another concept epic in the tradition of *Tommy*. However, this work is dubbed a musical, as opposed to a rock opera. *The Iron Man* is based on a 1968 children's story of the same name by Ted Hughes. In the story, Hogarth, a ten-year-old boy (played by Townshend) tells of the confrontation between the Space Dragon (Nina Simone) and the Iron Man (John Lee Hooker), a robot that tries to destroy any threat to humanity. The plot initially seems ridiculous, but aren't the storylines behind musicals and operas intrinsically silly?

Townshend must have been under extreme pressure to follow a string of well-received albums, including *It's Hard* (The Who), *White City* and *Deep End Live!*. While *White City* had a vague storyline as its musical

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Album

guide, it was less of a concept album than a collection of energetic, independent songs. *The Iron Man* is the sort of album to which one must listen start to finish. Musically, it resembles the mixed-bag artistry of *Empty Glass*.

The Who's version of *Tommy*, while a landmark work, lost some clarity of plot with band members singing all of the parts. The soundtrack version, by contrast, was rather embarrassing. On *The Iron Man*, Townshend combines the best of both approaches by being producer-composer-participant and handpicking his collaborators. In addition to Townshend, Hooker and Simone, The Who appear on two tracks. Other vocalists include Billy Nicholls, Chyna and Nicola Emmanuel.

The album begins with the Vixen (Deborah Conway) and the Woodland Creatures urging Hogarth to be brave and upstanding. The song, "I Won't Run Any More," is upbeat and strong, with Simon Phillips demonstrating why he was chosen as the

new Who drummer. Townshend, despite tinnitus, puts in a credible guitar performance, as he does throughout the album.

"Over the Top" marks the first appearance of the Iron Man, as he topples over a cliff and must put himself back together. John Lee Hooker's life-weary voice is perfect for the Iron Man, even alongside upbeat rock and the restrained chorus of the Soldiers.

Simon Townshend, Pete's brother (leader of Simon Townshend's Moving Target), is the Owl, observing in the quiet "Man Machine" that the Iron Man has built to protect humans from their own destructive inventions.

The Who perform "Dig," in which farmers dig a trap for the Iron Man, who has eaten all of the barbed wire, farm machines, etc., on his path to the cliff. This song resembles much of Roger Daltrey's best solo work. If this is the sound of the current Who, then the July 27th Raleigh show should be phenomenal.

Hogarth lures the Iron Man into the trap and then feels remorse on the first single, "A Friend is a Friend." The song's only annoying trait is its use of a children's chorus, although it is understandable in the context of the story. All seems well until some

picnickers disturb the Iron Man's grave. "I Eat Heavy Metal," the Iron Man proclaims, as he devours military equipment and prepares to defend himself from nuclear attack.

Hogarth decides to lead the Iron Man to a scrapyard. Meanwhile, a star is interpreted by all as meaning that Hogarth will have to endure great suffering before starting a new, better life. The resulting song, "All Shall Be Well," is another of Townshend's dichotomous songs, juxtaposing a quiet verse with an aggressive chorus not far removed from "Face the Face" (*White City*).


"Was There Life" is a ballad in which Hogarth falls in love with the girl's beautiful face that he sees in the star. When the image crashes to the earth, it reveals the demonic (and hungry) Space Dragon instead. "Fast Food" is one of the album's highlights, featuring Nina Simone's vocals against Townshend's plastic soul pop. Who cannot laugh to hear Simone sing "Frisky little children/Served up in the nude/Keep them coming/If you want my gratitude?"

Hogarth is embarrassed at having loved this creature, as he explains in "A Fool Says," another quiet song reminiscent of Billy Joel circa *The Stranger*. The Iron Man and the Space

Dragon agree to an ordeal by fire. The Dragon must fly into the sun, the only fire large enough. The Who's version of "Fire" (originally produced by Townshend for Crazy World of Arthur Brown) is another different sound for the band, with The Who approaching dance music.


The Iron Man is victorious. The Space Dragon's body releases the souls of millions of children and Hogarth's beloved, all formerly trapped inside. The Iron Man sends the dragon to the dark side of the moon, left to pursue his own metal munching. The released souls all glorify in a "New Life," the poppish finale.

Townshend has crafted an exceptional album of musical diversity and strong songwriting. Few other musicians could incorporate a children's story into a work and actually pull it off. This album is part of an even longer work which Townshend has completed. The other songs will wait for a stage/film performance (or a Townshend *Crossroads*-type set). The two Who songs make one wish for a new Who album. This will do quite nicely for now, though. If you want something besides typical summer radio fodder, this is your album. Now we can only wait until July 27!



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