

# “The Who Sings My Generation”—The Who (1966)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Original album*



*Original label*



*The Who*

Founded in England in 1964, Roger Daltrey, Pete Townshend, John Entwistle, and Keith Moon are, collectively, better known as The Who.

As a group on the pop-rock landscape, it's been said that The Who occupy a rebel ground somewhere between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, while, at the same time, proving to be innovative, iconoclastic and progressive all on their own. We can thank them for various now-standard rock affectations: the heightened level of decadence in rock (smashed guitars and exploding drum kits, among other now almost clichéd antics); making greater use of synthesizers in popular music; taking American R&B into a decidedly punk direction; and even formulating the idea of the once oxymoronic sounding “rock opera.”

Almost all these elements are evident on The Who's debut album, 1966's “The Who Sings My Generation.”

Though the band—back when they were known as The High Numbers—had a minor English hit in 1964 with the singles “I'm the Face”/“Zoot Suit,” it wouldn't be until '66 and the release of “My Generation” that the world got a true what's what from The Who. “Generation,” steam-powered by its title tune and timeless lyric of “I hope I die before I get old,” “Generation” is a song cycle worthy of its inclusive name.

Twelve tracks make up the album: “I Don't Mind,” “The Good's Gone,” “La-La-La Lies,” “Much Too Much,” “My Generation,” “The Kids Are Alright,” “Please, Please, Please,” “It's Not True,” “The Ox,” “A Legal Matter” and “Instant Party.”

Allmusic.com summarizes the album appropriately:

An explosive debut, and the hardest mod pop recorded by anyone. At the time of its release, it also had the most ferociously powerful guitars and drums yet captured on a rock record. Pete Townshend's exhilarating chord crunches and guitar distortions threaten to leap off the grooves on "My Generation" and "Out in the Street"; Keith Moon attacks the drums with a lightning, ruthless finesse throughout. Some "Maximum R&B" influence lingered in the two James Brown covers, but much of Townshend's original material fused Beatlesque hooks and power chords with anthemic mod lyrics, with "The Good's Gone," "Much Too Much," "La La La Lies," and especially "The Kids Are Alright" being highlights. "A Legal Matter" hinted at more ambitious lyrical concerns, and "The Ox" was instrumental mayhem that pushed the envelope of 1965 amplification with its guitar feedback and nonstop crashing drum rolls. While the execution was

sometimes crude, and the songwriting not as sophisticated as it would shortly become, the Who never surpassed the pure energy level of this record.

While much of the album is the authorship of Pete Townsend (he would contribute eight of the album's songs including "My Generation," "A Legal Matter" and "Kid's are Alright"), the band also here pays tribute to American R&B with covers of James Brown's "I Don't Mind" and, before it was deleted from the US pressing of the album due to its alleged sexual content, Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man."

And though all of the album's cuts are radio-ready and single-worthy, two have definitely stood the test of time: "My Generation" and "The Kids Are Alright."

The former, conceived as a generational anthem has become just that. And how could it not be? Especially when a group of 20-year old, scrappy "Mods" are singing lines like:

*People try to put us d-down  
Just because we get around [...]*

*Why don't you all f-fade away  
And don't try to dig what we all s-s-say*

If that message, at face value, wasn't enough, then the music underneath it would certainly make up the difference. Rock critic Dave Marsh describes "My Generation" as "fast, frantic and furious" and celebrates John Entwistle's "amazing" bass work and Keith Moon's "slashing" drum attack.

Over 30 years since its first play, "My Generation" has continued to speak to every generation, helping to explain its wide, continued airing and endless covering by such disparate artists as Alice Cooper, Hilary Duff, Oasis, Iron Maiden, Patti Smith, Rick Springfield and Green Day.

Meanwhile, "The Kids are Alright," though not successful as a single in England or America when it was released, has since also become a famous youthful battle cry. It has also been the subject of various tributary covers by the likes of Pearl Jam, Green Day and Matthew Sweet. Later, it would also serve as the title for a documentary about the band.

Since the bombastic debut of "My Generation," The Who have continued to rock on. They made their first foray into the US charts in May 1967 with their song "Happy Jack" which reach #24. Five months later, their "I Can See for Miles" went all the way to #9.

Their string of hit singles over the years include cuts from various albums: "Magic Bus," "Pinball Wizard," "I'm Free," "Summertime Blues," "See Me, Feel Me," "Squeeze Box," and "You Better You Bet."

Later albums solidified The Who as a band equally able to entertain and please music critics at the same time. There was "The Who Sell Out" in 1967; "Who's Next" in 1971; "Quadrophenia" in 1973; "The Who By Numbers" in 1975; and "Who Are You" in 1978. In 1979, the band made the cover of "Time" magazine where they were celebrated as a band who had "outpaced, outlasted, outlived and outclassed" almost all their contemporaries.

The band—and all of rock music--went high-concept in 1969 with their double-album, concept album "Tommy." It told, through 24 songs, the story of a blind, deaf and mute boy who remakes himself into a messiah. In 1975, it was turned into an all-star film and has since been adapted for the Broadway stage.

The Who has even survived various tragedies. In September 1978, drummer Keith Moon died of a drug overdose. In December 1979, the reconfigured band—with Kenney Jones, formerly of Small Faces, taking over for Moon—was involved in one of the worst tragedies in rock history when 11 people were killed in Cincinnati when fans stampeded into that city's Riverfront Coliseum for a sold-out concert that offered unassigned, first-come/first-served seating.

These events, constant touring, and the rising commitments of solo ventures—musical and non—helped draw The Who to a conclusion in 1982 when the group formally disbanded.

But it's been an uneasy finality. The members reconvened to play Live Aid in 1985 and reunited again in 1989 for an anniversary tour. In 1991, they gathered together to record Elton John's "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting" for a tribute album. They toured the US in 2000.

Even the death of founding member John Entwistle in June 2002—while once again on tour with the band-- has not been able to halt The Who's ongoing life. With alternate musicians, Daltrey and Townsend released "WHO2" in 2006, followed by a world tour. In 2010, they played the half-time show at the US Super Bowl.

In 1990, their first year of eligibility, The Who were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In 2001, they were inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame and in 2008, the surviving members of the group were honored by the Kennedy Center.

All of this is in recognition of their longevity, creativity and, at times, their dichotomy--for all the angst and rebellion the band has sung about (as in "My Generation), and built their rock and roll reputations on, their music remains throughout their careers surprisingly upbeat, catchy, even optimistic. From the beginning they have musically and successfully summarized the mood of youth while still giving the kids something to dance to.

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