

Behind Who's eyes

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Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey at the rehearsal studio with their musical director, Frank Simes. Photo courtesy of Frank Simes.

By Lee Zimmerman

Although he's played a critical role in dozens of high-profile projects over the years, for most, the name **Frank Simes** is unlikely to spark even the faintest glimmer of recognition. That despite the fact that the artists with whom he's worked — Mick Jagger, Don Henley, Timothy B. Schmit, Don Felder, Englebert Humperdinck, Stevie Nicks, Rod Stewart, David Lee Roth, Warren Zevon and Roger Waters, among them — are some of the biggest in the biz. Indeed, as the musical arranger for The Who — he arranged and scored the band's recent reworking of "Quadrophenia" and the solo work of Roger Daltrey (including the singer's own tour with "Tommy") — he's been charged with overseeing two of the most revered works in rock history.

His role as Daltrey's musical director led him in turn to Pete Townshend, who charged him with creating the first live production of their early '70s epic, "Quadrophenia." Last year, Simes toured with the band as they took the project around the world. Indeed, the recently released Blu-ray, DVD and CD recorded in London finds Simes' credits as musical director and keyboard player.

Goldmine recently had an opportunity to speak to Simes after he returned from a series of shows with Daltrey in Hawaii.

GOLDMINE: Let's talk about your current work with Roger Daltrey and The Who as a whole. How did that come about?

FRANK SIMES: I met Roger over 10 years ago. In 2000, I helped Don Henley put his new band together. He was known to clean house every few years and fire the old band members, or they'd quit on their own. Then he'd find new musicians to inject fresh blood into his act. I recommended a drummer friend named Rob Ladd, who auditioned, along with five other drummers, and wound up filling the seat. Four years later, Rob returned the favor by recommending me for Roger Daltrey's charity band, which Roger named The How.

I later learned that Roger was finicky about guitarists (no surprise), and he had fired the first two guitarists, one after the other. Roger had asked the members whether they knew a guitarist who could handle The Who's music, and Rob said he knew someone who could. I got a phone call from the musical director who asked me to come to a nightclub in West L.A. where Roger had set up a makeshift rehearsal room. Years later, he asked me to be his musical director and to help him form a band for his solo endeavors.

GM: What do you remember most about the audition?

SIMES: After setting up my amp, I started tuning my Telecaster to prepare to play. With no warning, Roger Daltrey sauntered in the front door, mindlessly strumming the chords to "Behind Blue Eyes." Everything seemed in slow motion. Roger strolled through a cone of white light emanating from a single overhead stagelight. The air was hazy and the look of the moment was like a David Lynch film set. Dim, surreal, dramatic.

Back in 1970, when the film of "Woodstock" had just been released, I paid big money, for me at the time, to see it eight times. I wished that I'd been part of the scene that Woodstock represented and to be at Woodstock itself. Watching all the artists perform was astounding. But, more than merely captivated or inspired, I was spellbound by The Who.

Watching The Who play "See Me, Feel Me" drew me into a dream world. Seeing Roger flailing his arms, bare-chested in his fringed, white chamois vest, swinging the mic over his head, and watching Pete Townshend exploding with energy, jumping up and down, doing his windmills and destroying his guitar at the end of "Summertime Blues" had me mesmerized. The lyrics "gazing at you, I get the heat" danced like magic in my head. I said to myself "I want to be like that, I want to do that!" What I really wanted to do was meld into the film and perform with them.

GM: And then you got your chance!

SIMES: There I was, in the nightclub in West L.A., seeing the guy who inspired me to pursue music. Wow. I knew “Behind Blue Eyes,” so I started playing the arpeggiated electric guitar part. Roger looked at me with a nod and a raised eyebrow, smiling, as if to say “Oh, you know it.” He went up to the mic and started singing. I fell in line with the harmony vocal parts. We were surrounded by 20 people, standing in the shadows, including the other members of The How, the production crew and the rest of the entourage. Roger and I finished the song and he said to me, “Well, that’ll do!” He put his hand out for me to shake it and with a thick Cockney, he said “Ro-jaah.” I said “Frank.”

GM: How did the offer to play with him come about?

SIMES: A few days later, played a warm-up show at the same club. The show was unannounced but the place was packed like sardines. After the show Roger squeezed his way through the crowd to get to me and said “How would you fancy putting a quartet together and doing some corporate shows?” “I would fancy that,” I replied.

Three years later I got a call from Roger to help him put together a touring band. I heard several weeks later that Nigel Sinclair was instrumental in persuading Roger to hire me as the musical director. Nigel told me months later that Roger said it took him “25 years to find someone I could trust,” meaning me. It was a gigantic feather in my cap.

A few months later Roger’s management booked us on our first tour and rehearsals began. We concentrated on songs that The Who never played or played only a few times early on, some of Roger’s solo material and a few choice covers. I deconstructed and scored the three to six-part vocal harmonies on such songs as “I Can See for Miles,” “Pictures of Lily,” “Tattoo” and “Behind Blue Eyes.” In the early days when The Who played live, there were only three singers: Roger, Pete Townshend and John Entwistle. Our band with Roger could sing up to six parts at once because everyone in the band can sing. It was thrilling for everyone in the band, including Roger, to hear these vocal parts as they were originally arranged and recorded but had never been sung live. To date, the band has learned over 100 songs. We’ve toured North America several times and toured twice in Europe. We also opened for Eric Clapton on two arena tours.

GM: How did Roger’s tour with “Tommy” come about?

SIMES: Roger decided to tour a band version of “Tommy,” so I set out to score the opus in its entirety, a massive undertaking. What made Roger’s new version of “Tommy” distinctive was that the live presentation was true to the original recording, with all the backing vocal, horn and guitar parts as it was arranged for the 1969 album. The Who never tried to re-create the album on stage. Their versions of “Tommy” were, according to Roger, like a “rock ‘n’ roll circus.” We have now done tours of “Tommy” in the U.S., Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, France, Italy, Belgium and Japan.

GM: How did you meet Townshend?

SIMES: Pete attended one of the rehearsals at Shepperton Studios in Sheffield, U.K., where I had the pleasure to meet him finally. He also performed “Acid Queen” on his own and then “Baba O’Riley” with Roger’s band at the 2011 TCT event. We were joking and exchanging stories with ease. They both seem to feel comfortable with my dealing with matters of musical intricacies. They have both commended me on all the choices and recommendations I’ve made. I do understand the explosive power and the freedom their music represents, which is something I never forget as I’m working on the details. We – Pete, Roger and I – have an unspoken understanding about it. There are times when I have to deal with some prickly matters and a bit of friction – could you imagine The Who without them? – but most of the time it is quite a happy experience.

GM: How do you handle such an enormous responsibility as being the arranger of such monumental work like “Tommy” and “Quadrophenia?” How do you go about arranging these works in a practical manner while still staying true to the recordings? What did Roger and Pete tell you when they gave the assignments to you? Did it give you the jitters?

SIMES: All my energy gets funnelled into my focus, so, no, I don’t get the jitters. I don’t have any energy left for them! Pete said he didn’t want “an all-too tightly-knitted show,” and I believe I dispelled his doubts about how I would go about putting the music together when I said that I understand that The Who is about explosive energy and the freedom and the power of the moment.

GM: There must have been an incredible amount of pressure on you.

SIMES: Of course there was pressure. According to my gauge, I did about a year’s work in three-and-half months. I worked 15 to 17 hours a day, seven days a week, often working two shifts – from noon till 7 p.m., then from 10 p.m. till 6 a.m., or longer. And then, in the early morning, I would field emails, phone calls and Skype calls from the U.K. As I said, I worked at this pace continuously for three-and-a-half months.

GM: So what did your role entail?

SIMES: In both settings, with Roger’s solo band and with The Who, I act as the musical director and leader, so I direct the rehearsals and the sound checks. Should any issues arise, I am there to resolve them.

On a technical note, I scored all the horns, strings, synthesizer (ARP), backing vocals and some of the keyboard parts twice. That is, once according to the studio recordings, and once according to past live performances. I made over 260 mixes of the individual songs, emphasizing different instruments, primarily for the horn players and keyboardists to pick off their parts. I made lead sheets for all 16 songs, that is, charts containing the chords, melody and lyrics, primarily for structural reference. I made separate horn scores and charts that included three trumpets, a trombone and a euphonium for the most part, and included parts for the mellophone. I had to divvy up the parts among the two live players and me. They played two of the five parts and I played the remaining three parts. I made non-linear click tracks for six of the songs, as these needed to be synchronized with the visuals. “Non-linear click tracks” means that the tempo

would change, speed up and slow down, as The Who's music, particularly the songs of "Quadrophenia," which is very much like orchestral music, accelerating and decelerating according to the emotional dynamics of a given piece. Unlike other acts that play to a lot of recorded vocals and instruments, we played everything live. I made executive decisions about how to edit John Entwistle's bass solo from eight minutes to two-and-a-half minutes. I recorded all the horn parts in a studio, from which horn samples were created. I programmed these samples into my Kurzweil keyboard and, of course, learned how to play these parts. I also learned how to play all of Pete's guitar and vocals parts, in case Pete could not attend a particular rehearsal or a soundcheck, as his schedule at the time included a commitment to be on a PR tour for his book, "Who I Am." I also took part in all personnel issues, including finding a new pianist and the horn players.

GM: What's it like being on stage with a musical legend like Roger Daltrey?

SIMES: Today, when I'm on stage with Roger and we're singing "Listening to you, I get the music" and much of "Tommy," I get goose bumps and a building euphoria. When Roger and three others sing in four-part harmony, I flash back to when I was 14 and saw "Woodstock" those eight times. It's over four decades later and sometimes I still ask myself "How did I get here?" It is surreal. Mind-boggling. Hallucinogenic. The clock goes backwards and forwards at the same time. And then time and my world stand still. That's every time I play and sing it. These feelings never leave me. When it's time for my solo in "Listening To You" toward the end of "We're Not Gonna Take It," the final song, I'm so excited that I almost lose control of my guitar-playing. It's a fantasy realized.

GM: When you play with Roger or The Who as a whole, how much showmanship can you put into your performances without taking the spotlight from the central players?

SIMES: With Roger, I play guitar and can play with as much showmanship as I want. Roger is comfortable with my role on stage. With The Who, I play keyboards and there isn't much room for showmanship there, nor does the role call for it.

GM: What other projects have you done with The Who?

SIMES: The Who made a documentary titled "The Amazing Journey," produced by Nigel Sinclair, Robert Rosenberg (one of their two managers) and Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey. Robb Ladd and I appear in the film, in which we demonstrate and explain what made Keith Moon's drumming distinctive.

GM: What's on tap for future projects? More touring with Roger and/or The Who?

SIMES: More touring with The Who for their 50th anniversary. An occasional one-off or two with Roger. Possible co-writing with Roger.

GM: What about your solo career? Any plans to release a solo album or launch your own band?

SIMES: An album titled “Topcat“ is available on iTunes. I wrote or co-wrote all the songs on the album. I’m also writing a bunch of songs now that will be released under my name as a solo artist.