

Conceptual "Iron Man" showcases songwriting talent of Pete Townshend

By Robb Frederick
Entertainment Editor

Throughout his prosperous musical career, Pete Townshend has repeatedly returned to the concept of the "rock opera" as a vehicle for his lyrical genius.

As guitarist and chief songwriter for the Who, Townshend conveyed his ideas and principles to millions. His operatic tendencies were showcased on the conceptual *Quadrophenia* and 1969's *Tommy* which remains as one of the Who's most celebrated works.

The Iron Man, Townshend's latest solo offering, exemplifies the songwriter's continued writing excellence, while providing a much-needed boost to an otherwise stagnant solo career.

Based upon the 1968 children's story by Ted Hughes, *The Iron Man* invites listeners on a fantasy journey led by a ten-year-old boy named Hogarth, played by Townshend.

The storyline is fairly simple: the Iron Man is a giant machine designed to "protect man from his own inventions." Local townfolk, led by Hogarth's father, begin to feel threatened by the Iron Man and decide to topple and bury the giant, much to the anguish of Hogarth. The boy saves and befriends the robot, which returns the favor by vanquishing a fierce space dragon who is fond of devouring the area's children.

To represent the many characters included in *The Iron Man*, Townshend has assembled a superb roster of supporting musicians. Although many of these contributors are not well known, each donates a distinct performance that allows *The Iron Man* to become a diverse, interesting musical.

The most heralded support comes from the other members of the Who, who have forgotten past differences and combined their talents for two tracks. As the recent Who tour has proven, the band's members have lost none of the magic which catapulted them

to one of rock music's highest thrones. On the song "Dig," Roger Daltrey, acting as Hogarth's father, forcibly directs his fellow townfolk as they overwhelm the Iron Man. On the driving cover version of "Fire" the band performs with an intensity rarely seen in a group of this age.

The character of the Iron Man is portrayed by blues legend John Lee Hooker, whose deep, gut-wrenching vocals vividly depict the robot's pain of betrayal as he is attacked by his creators. On "I Eat Heavy Metal," Hooker breathes life into his mechanical character by detailing the cravings and needs of Hogarth's rejuvenated Iron Man.

The Space Dragon, the Iron Man's colossal antagonist, is superbly played by Nina Simone, whose soulful sound can be compared to no other. On "Fast Food," Simone laces her lines with hints of demonic possession, and the results are haunting.

The varying styles and the resulting versatility present on this release enable *The Iron Man* to become an enthralling musical opera. As the unusual characteristics emerge, the listener is drawn further into the web of Townshend's story.

Although the diverse guest appearances highlight *The Iron Man*, Townshend's presence is dominating, and rightfully so. His lyrics are presented in a simple and direct fashion which enables listeners to follow the story's plot with ease. And Townshend's vocal ability, when demonstrated, is respectable, particularly on the release's first single "A Friend is a Friend."

Unlike much of Townshend's *Tommy*, this conceptual work lies far from the mainstream. The music, however, is fresh stimulating, and the interesting plot ties the music together with ease. This release is a welcome addition to Townshend's solo repertoire, and it again proves that Pete Townshend has found life after the Who.

Entertainment Briefs

Ono announces environmental project

Yoko Ono has announced a \$100 million environmental fund-raising project. The effort will focus on the preservation of the environment, through the provision of scholarships and the promotion of cultural exchanges. Other artists pledging support include Michael Jackson, David Bowie and Billy Joel.

Crue vocalist punches Gunner

Motley Crue vocalist Vince Neil punched Guns N' Roses guitarist Izzy Stradlin after the recent Video Music Awards show. Neil justified his actions by citing a 1988 incident involving Stradlin and Neil's wife, a mud-wrestler named Sharise.

Stone to tribute Morrison

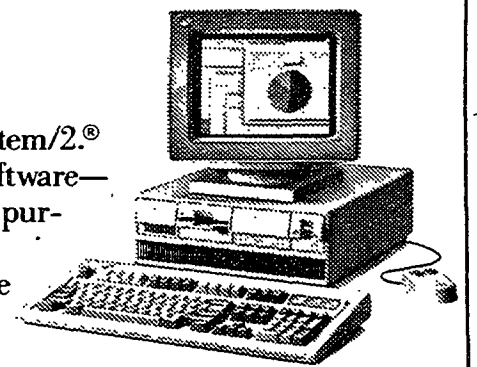
Filmmaker Oliver Stone has two Jim Morrison-related films in the works. The academy award-winner has expressed interest in the movie rights to *Woderland Avenue*, and he plans to write and direct an authorized film account of the Doors titled *Riders on the Storm*.

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