

The Boy Who Heard Music

By Pete Townshend

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Four days ago, on 6th September 2003, Marcus Chown in *The New Scientist* wrote[1]:
“Einstein showed that inside a black hole space-time is radically transformed; matter or energy stretch space and time, rather like someone standing on a trampoline. The tremendous gravity inside a black hole distorts space-time so much that the only way to safeguard the speed of light traveling in this region is for space and time to swap roles.....”

“.....so space and time swap roles. Instead of being a place, the centre of a black hole exists in the future and you can no more avoid it than avoid tomorrow.”

Today, on BBC Radio 4 morning news, it was announced that—true to Pythagorus’ predictions of the existence of vibrations in the Universe he called ‘*The Music of the Spheres*’—a black hole two hundred and fifty million light years from Earth has been observed by cosmologists to be making a low, musical sound. Probably B flat[i].

Chapter 1. Prologue – The Note

There was once a young ex-art student who called himself Spin, trying to find the *Lifehouse*. Activist, marijuana smoker, dreamer, muddled dystopian, confused utopian, visionary and spiritual fool blowing

and sucking on a mouth organ, he left his family in the Highlands of Scotland, where they were safe from the troubles in the English cities, and travelled in an old camper bus to London to find a place he had heard about on Ham Radio where a Great Concert was planned. Then there was Raymond Highsmith. Stagename: Ray High. He called himself the *Psychoderelict*. Ray High was the man Spin later became, a musician with an audience, a man who graduated from mouth organs to towering electronic musical machines. For him, in the end a defeated and ruined rock star in demise, his teenaged dreams as young Spin were fast becoming distant memories. In *Psychoderelict* he elaborated Spin into *Spinner* and gave his new alter ego his old grand idea, his old life, his old nightmare and his old dream. He put himself back inside the young man he once had been. His efforts to revive his ailing career by this device failed, though by a peculiar twist of fate we will learn about later Ray did succeed to become one of those generic celebrities we know more about because of their ability to survive without apparently working than for their artistic achievements.

Spinner was Ray's Great Dreamer. With Spinner as Ray's eyes, ears and alter-ego he saw the future. He even predicted parts of his own demise. But this Prologue belongs – at least to begin with – to Raymond Highsmith when he was still calling himself *Spin*. This was a time when here and there in his childhood neighbourhood there were still a few remaining examples of his graffiti *tag* spray canned on the old walls by the railway tracks.

It happened in 1971. A young man drives a big, lumbering American camper bus across open Essex countryside. In his mouth he holds a tiny mouth organ that he can play without using his hands, it squeaks like a mouse, and the small spaniel travelling with him finds the noise excruciating, and barks and howls as the young man laughs. He passes a large power station on the opposite side of the sweeping Blackwater estuary near Osea Island. Suddenly the inside of the vehicle is filled with noxious fumes. Sulphur, carbon monoxide, ozone, methane. The air is surely not really that bad in 1971, perhaps the young man has a sensitive nose? He shuts his driver's window and reaches for the air conditioner mounted on the roof. The air quickly clears as the unit filters the pollution. He is safe in his 'capsule', like a man on the moon in a space pod. He breathes freely again, but is overcome by a huge wave of anxiety. Future fear. He pulls into a layby. He holds up a photo of his young wife, newly pregnant with their second child. His little dog needs to pee and he lets him out. The dog runs straight into the sea and appears to begin to drown. The young man strips off his shirt and takes off his watch as he runs and leaps into the sea. As he dives in to save the dog he swallows something. It is a jellyfish, or part of one. He is swimming in a plague of jellyfish swarming in the over-heated water expelled from

the power-station in the estuary. There are thousands of the creatures. Possibly millions. Like connected beings of another nature. He pulls out the dog and looks around for his watch. It is buried somewhere in the thin sand on the beach. He looks at the bare spot on his arm. No time.

Holding his shivering, wet and frightened little dog, looking over the estuary that feeds into the North Sea just above where the river Thames does the same at its enormous delta between Southend to the north and Ramsgate in Kent to the south, he remembers himself as a day-dreaming young teenager. As a boy he had feared the bomb. The apocalyptic threat that every Japanese person knows as a daily reality, a simple memory, is for us in the West a more fantastical horror. He then remembers becoming an art-student walking to college in November of 1962. That nuclear fear had been challenged in the Cuban crisis. They had all been meant to die, but it didn't happen.

He gets back into his bus. As he looks around he thinks of his present fear of what is superficially quite benign technology. Commerce. Money. Banks. Radio. Television. But there is something else. He has heard about a series of old telephone cables that link the major news agencies of the world. One of them is being used to directly link the stock exchanges of London and Tokyo. Shares can be traded, and millions of dollars moved around the globe, in seconds. For some reason he is reminded of the myriad, multiplying jellyfish in the warm sea nearby. As he sits contemplating the unreasonable and vulgar power conferred on whoever has control of such a network, he has a terrible vision.

A proliferation of such cables, an entanglement, a tangled web, grid-like, criss-crossing, weaving, almost alive. Trucks and ships and even planes laying new cables every minute, spewing them out all over the land and into the oceans like veins, tubes, drip-feeds. And then in an instant he knows what is going to happen one day, very soon. The transmission of news, information and money will kick off this revolution. But what will make it the most devastating event ever to engulf the globe, indeed it will be an event to finally define and entrench the very idea of 'Globalisation', is the fact that this network will connect people directly to, and interface them inextricably with, those who wish to control and subjugate them. He rolls what he knows will be his last joint, and smokes it a little sadly.

Without knowing he is doing so he imagines what we now call Virtual Reality: alternative lives, events and human conjunctions and interactions transmitted down these cables and happening only in the souls and minds of the little people. People who act like receivers. Such events would be created by new Masters, those who would preside – as once did the barons who controlled the line between the

stock exchanges - over the network. Network? What the young man foresaw was more solid than a mere net. It was as permanent, as immovable, as unchanging as a metal lattice. It was a Grid. An enmeshment of ladders, a matrix of metal cables, tubes and clusters of fibrous wire. The stinking, polluted atmosphere of the future (that he almost psychically scented in his bus by the beach) would drive people to take refuge in their homes. Or in their air-conditioned travelling 'pods' like his bus. Thus imprisoned, they would be satiated and calmed, reassured and massaged, by entertainment, art and mundane life itself - piped to them from studios around the globe. Studio empires controlled by the barons, the money-men. He foresaw a promise being made that soon the globe would be clean again, pollution would be controlled as long as the people spent some time locked away in their homes and secure pods.

A special suit (that would become known as an 'Experience Suit') would be invented that allowed family members to safely retreat completely from the bleak and suffocating reality of their claustrophobic homes. Each suit would feed the occupant with experience after experience, life after life, closely monitoring, auditing and feeding back the result of each episode and allowing the programme controllers to carefully refine the programmes that followed to suit each individual. Food and liquid would eventually be fed down the tubes to each suit. Whole legions of people in towns, villages and cities, would be virtually trapped in their homes, their only relief the time they spent in their suits. If they strayed into the streets police trained to maintain calm would gently guide them home. Under such circumstances it would be hard to know how much time was passing, but after a period the people would realize that little was changing out there in the world. The air was cleaner perhaps, but towns and cities still appeared to be wastelands.

The barons would make some crucial discoveries while investigating the feedback from their 'audience'. They would find they could influence the spiritual growth of an individual through the manipulations of the programming he or she received. An element of tailoring would begin to creep in. Then outright mind-control. The population would be better subjugated when *spiritually* more pure, easier to keep quiet when serene and passive, philosophical about the chaos around them. This would permit the barons to live in decadence, enjoying control, but also the space and fruits of the ever improving planet surface. Any incentive to bring the population out of their suits reduced to zero.

A great business would grow that involved millions of actors and technicians who produced the 'life programmes' for the poor souls trapped at home. A bizarre but critical aspect of the programming

would pivot on the discovery that the one form of entertainment and art that penetrated in a direct way to the audience was music. It would cause unpredictable results. So the barons would slowly begin to exclude the most vigorous music from all their programmes. They would reduce the power and effect of music by making it generic, abstract, universal, insipid, meaningless – it would become like an aural colour wash. The same colours would be used again and again, and for all kinds of purposes. What would once have inspired suspense would inspire disinterest. What would once have induced calm and serenity would inspire apathy. Music would promise spiritual ecstasy at the same time as selling soap. Music that mattered to you would matter equally to someone else. Music that meant little to you would mean just as little to them. Music would be like rain and sunshine, benevolent to everyone. Nothing unique about us would be reflected in this music. Nothing spiritual would be tormented or excited by it.

Out in the countryside small groups of rebels would begin to throw off their suits and liaise with those who farmed the land. They would make old fashioned music secretly and plan to overthrow the barons by hacking into the Grid that then enveloped the entire globe, and putting on a concert that would feature music that in an ironic twist used the very same spiritual feedback system developed to keep the population serene, to create music that would engage, reflect, inspire and ultimately energise the audience to rise up, leave their suits and gather in groups to make music together, and to defy the barons. Every person on the Grid would hear their own music.

This, in 1971 is what this young man saw in the future. As this young fellow, who had once been Spin and would one day soon become Ray High, looked at the sea, the images began to fade. He played a piece of music on his guitar and sang an ancient prayer. The music and the prayer came together magically even though he had not intended them to combine. His little dog shivered under a towel. He set off again on his journey.

Where was he going? To the city to reconnect with a family locked away in their cell-like home? Or was he travelling to the North, to the hinterland of farms and rebels?

And today, in the early years of the new millennium, for today it is 10th September 2003, we know that the young man's vision carried a terrible warning for us. For today, we are indeed subjugated by the media barons who control the press, the satellites, computer software, the internet, the banks - they even influence those we democratically elect to govern us. Those that govern, under the influence of

these barons, fight wars in our name that many of us cannot justify. They spend billions of our taxes to maintain a status quo that refuses to honour our claim to a new morality. If we complain too loudly, we can find ourselves attacked, humiliated, reduced. The press is so powerful it can destroy anyone. The mere humiliations suffered by Ray High are no longer enough. The press need to invent and destroy, emulating Nature because they certainly can't accept the notion of any kind of valid God. Our air in the West is polluted, but with imperceptible toxins and radiation rather than noxious gases. This reduces our sperm count, damages our unborn children, increases cancer, reduces our immunity to disease.

Our arts are torn apart by fundamentalist reactionaries on one side and anarchic commercial cynics on the other. Art itself has become a means to finance the power base of the barons. Music, the most divine art, is undermined by piracy. Composers cease to function. Most popular music becomes part of the swill. On the internet (what the young man foresaw as a 'Grid') terrorists, fascists, racists, paedophiles, sexual deviants, bullies, extremists, narrow-minded pedants, obsessives and political and religious fundamentalists rally together to strangle and stifle the flow of normal communication and religious and spiritual thought. At least on the internet a composer can pass his or her music freely to an audience. But the price is a high one. The composer shall starve.

Banks are growing richer from the mere movement of money - just like those first barons who controlled the movement of shares from London to Tokyo. Pornography is the principle economic backbone of the credit card companies milking business on the world-wide-web. And yet pornography is damaging to both users and purveyors in various ways. Anyone pointing a finger at this moral hypocrisy is quickly crushed. Those who suffer inside the pornography industry are despised. Those who complain are ridiculed. Those who act to defy the distributors are humiliated. Those who become addicted users of internet swill become the dregs of humanity, disregarded until their money supply runs out. Then they are cut off from their vital 'supply'. Life is not very good today. But as yet the barons have not completely taken over our society or our right to live as we wish.

But in 2003 many journalists have too much power. They increasingly live in fantasy, speculation and money-grubbing. Those in the media truly wishing to present truth struggle hard. Facts are distorted, the truth is often hard to divine. The old and honourable professional of journalism is often reduced to a daily business of trawling the internet for stories, snippets and gossip to poach, borrow or steal. Too many facts in this information age can obscure simple messages of love and hope. Any protesters, however sincere, and of whatever political colour, seem absurd – sometimes even stupid and naive. We

live in the age of a new plague; the pullulation of evil and disinformation in clumsy combination; the proliferation of slime and darkness; pollution; industrial, agricultural and bio-chemical pestilence; sexual prurience and hypocrisy; pathos. We live in a pathetic age. Shored up only by hopelessly hopeful, ultimately empty visions. Dystopian. Utopian.

The young man saw the future. And he was afraid. Today, as this hopelessly hopeful story below begins, he is already an old man. Beyond Ray High the rock star, born, died and reinvented, he is now merely a vapour, a legend, a memory. Now he can see the past, and wisdom has always grown most powerfully in those who understand history or are willing to accept its lessons. Ray will tell you this story from here on, and he is, once again your faithful narrator Ray High. His story begins, as all really stupid stories do, in the distant future.

[1] ...of the work of Ivor Navikov, head of the Theoretical Astrophysics Centre in Copenhagen.

[i] **By Dr David Whitehouse** BBC News Online science editor

Astronomers have detected sound waves from a super-massive black hole. The "note" is the deepest ever detected from an object in the Universe. The black hole lives in the Perseus cluster of galaxies, located 250 million light-years away. The pitch of the sound can be determined. Although far too low to be heard, it is calculated to be B flat. With a frequency over a million, billion times deeper than the limits of human hearing, it is the deepest note ever detected from an object in the Universe. The B-flat pitch of the sound wave, 57 octaves below middle-C, would have remained roughly constant for about 2.5 billion years.