

Petty, Cocker boxes surpass expectations

Artists stay true to roots, offer surprises

By Steve Morse
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It's boxed-set season again — and two of the best this fall are from Tom Petty and Joe Cocker. They're both seasoned road warriors and unbridled singers whose idols date back to the dawn of rock 'n' roll. Petty's all-time favorite is Elvis Presley, while Cocker's main man is Ray Charles.

Both sets surpass expectations,

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becoming state-of-the-art examples of what boxed sets should be. The hits are all there, but so is a wealth of previously unreleased material that sheds new light on each artist's career. Cocker's four-CD box, "The Long Voyage Home," has 14 previously unreleased nuggets, including marathon jams climaxing with his Woodstock '94 triumph.

But Petty's six-CD "Playback" box goes even further. It includes two full CDs of unreleased tunes — many of them astonishingly good — and a third CD devoted strictly to B sides, many of them also fabulous. Petty's reputation is already at a high level, but this box could push it up to Dylan-esque levels. Sure, that sounds gushy. But if you doubt it, then just strap on some headphones and give a listen.

How many artists have enough in the vaults to match Petty's two CDs of previously unissued, quality tracks? Petty plucks them from throughout his career, from his

fledgling days as a garage-rocker in the early '70s band Mudcrutch, to this summer when he and his group the Heartbreakers finished the appropriate "You Come Through." It's a funky, Sly Stone-influenced song with Lenny Kravitz, of all people, on drums.

Other new discoveries span the twin-guitar, pile-driving backbeat of "Can't Get Her Out," the jangly "Waiting for Tonight" (with the Bangles on ethereal vocal harmonies), the country-ish "Travelin'" ("I've got a traveling jones," Petty sings in his famed nasal drawl), the all-improvised "God's Gift to Man" (talking about a lover), the playful "Come On Down to My House" ("bring your baby sister, it's ages since I kissed her") and the folkie, bongo-driven "Keep Me Alive," with a melody inspired by the Everly Brothers.

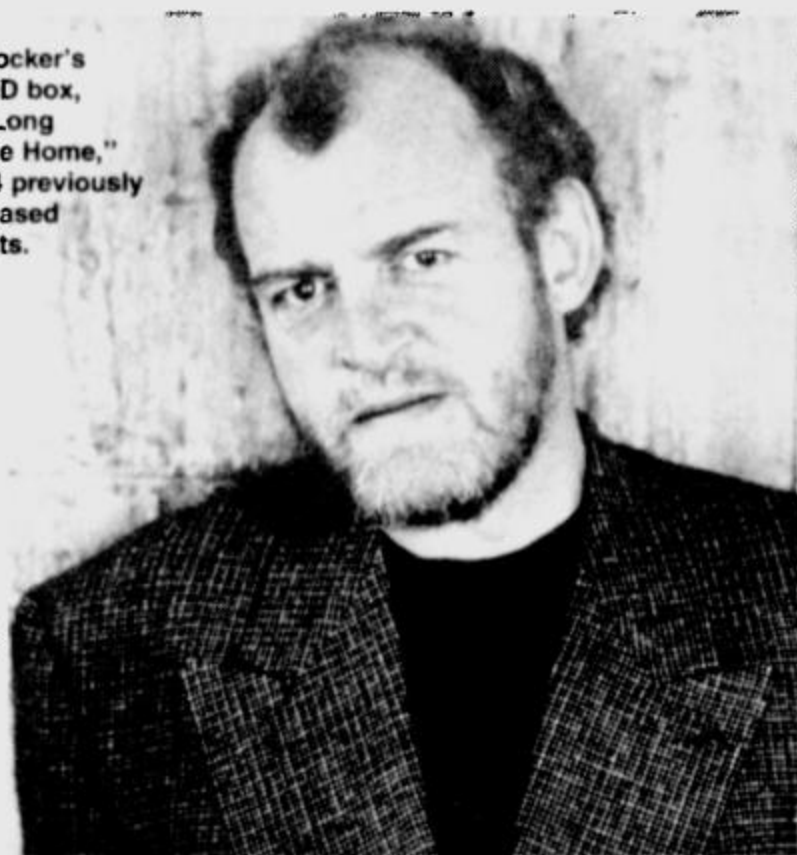
There are also some never-before-released covers of Elvis songs — the churning rockabilly of "Baby, Let's Play House" and the acoustic "Wooden Heart," pulled from the soundtrack to the Presley movie, "G.I. Blues."

Several of these tracks are from 1993 sessions with depart-

ing Heartbreakers drummer Stan Lynch. There's a youthfulness to these songs that connects to Petty's days as a scuffling bar-band leader in Florida. There are also revelations in the informative liner notes about how Lynch's 1993 replacement was almost former Nirvana drummer Dave Grohl.

"He came very close to joining the band — and we would have been glad to have him," Petty says of Grohl, who instead formed

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his own, currently successful group, the Foo Fighters. "When you have a chance for your own career, you should follow that," adds Petty.

Petty and the Heartbreakers broke through in 1976 with "American Girl," which boldly trumpeted Byrds/Dylan influences. But the boxed set even has several previously unreleased tracks before that with legendary Dylan keyboardist Al Kooper. That helps explain why Petty first toured the East Coast as the opening act to Kooper.

The new box also finds Petty generously emptying the vaults of B sides, many of which only came out in Japan and Europe. There are a few stinkers ("Heartbreakers Beach Party" hammily notes how "we're going to have a cook-out, we'll have potato salad and a lot of wieners too"), but most of the B sides soar. Petty's love of rockabilly seeps into covers of Charlie Rich's "Lonely Weekends" and Eddie Cochran's "Somethin' Else."

Besides a love of rock pioneers (and a love of Dylan), both Petty and Cocker also at times used noted rock producer Denny Cordell. Cocker dedicates his boxed set to Cordell, while Petty

says, "He was the guy who saved us from oblivion."

It was Cordell, along with Leon Russell, who produced Cocker's breakthrough hit of the Beatles' "She Came in Through the Bathroom Window," along with soul-fried versions of the Box Tops' "The Letter" and the Ray Charles-identified "Let's Go Get Stoned." Cordell brought out the blue-eyed soul in Cocker's voice.

The Cocker box is simply incredible. It starts with his unfettered liftoff on the Beatles' "With a Little Help from My Friends" (with Jimmy Page on guitar) and ends with a dramatic reprise of the song before a new generation 25 years later at Woodstock. And what's in between is even more breathtaking, such as a 16-minute jam on "I Don't Need No Doctor" (from a Fillmore West show in 1969) to a 12-minute blues medley at the Fillmore East that contains Sam & Dave's "When Something is Wrong with My Baby" and Otis Redding's "I've Been Loving You Too Long."

Cocker, a British native who somehow combines a longshoreman's lung power with a torch singer's finesse, shows why he's a world-class song interpreter on this boxed set.



Tom Petty