

TOM PETTY - Interviewed by Alan Bangs -

24. April 1999

Hamburger "Docks"



Alan Bangs hat mit TOM PETTY nach seinem Rockpalast-Konzert in Hamburg gesprochen. Hier könnt Ihr das komplette Interview nachlesen und als Real Audio-Stream anhören (Länge: ca. 26 Min.):



Interview
audio

Alan Let's just start with a very basic question. I mean, it's been four years since your last record came out. Did you
Bangs: approach the new record in a different way to the records you made before?

Tom
Petty: More electric - less acoustic...

Alan Was that a question of attitude or was that a matter of the songs that you've gotten written in advance? That you
Bangs: just had to say that these songs had to be done electrically?

Tom A little of both. It was - ah - it was more a question of ... I just felt I have been through my acoustic, introspective
Petty: period and it might be more fun to just plug in and turn up.

Alan
Bangs: Do you always associate introspective with acoustic?

Tom
Petty: No, no. I was trying to be funny.

Alan
Bangs: Sorry

Tom
Petty: Oh, it's okay.

Alan
Bangs: I'll pick up an...

Tom
Petty: You must have missed a frown on my face.

Alan
Bangs: There's a number of lines on the record ... Well, but what I wanted to ask you is: You write a lot "in character".

Tom
Petty: Yeah.

Alan You presumably obviously therefore hear the voices of those characters. Do you see them as well, I mean are
Bangs: these people that you can imagine? Or are you just hearing their voice?

Tom It's harder to see them. It's... I can only see vague outlines of them. I'm, not sure I see them vividly. But I know
Petty: them, you know?

Alan Which would imply that they are characters that have reoccurred over a period of years on different records or
Bangs: are they different people each time?

Tom
Petty: I think there's one that reoccurs a lot. And the rest kind of come and go.

Alan
Bangs: How would you describe the character of the one that reappears a lot?

Tom
Petty: There's always this girl that is trying to get somewhere else. You know?

Alan
Bangs: The girl in "Swinging"?

Tom Yeah! See, I thought I completely had written her out of the album and then I did this improvisation near the end
Petty: of the album and there it was! You know?

Alan
Bangs: Does she have a name for you?

Tom
Petty: For me?

Alan
Bangs: Yeah, I mean you think of her as this specific person...

Tom Ah, does she have a name now? Well, I wouldn't want to tie it down like that. I think that really frightened me if I
Petty: would give her a name.

Alan You find then that certain song in that sense - obviously with her it would be the case - but other songs as well
Bangs: are like chapters in a book. That you return to a character that might be a slightly different character on the new record but it's like that same person maybe ten years on?

Tom
Petty: Maybe an isolated instant here and there on occasions. I don't think it happens a lot.

Alan What about permanence and impermanence? I'm thinking about as a lot of characters in your songs that are
Bangs: either up or down. That are talking about "If I'm down I gonna get back up again fairly quickly" Or if you take a song like "Room at the top" it's always this feeling "I'm on the top now" but you know that tomorrow that person won't be in that room any more. Like I said it is both sides that you've got the people in there. There is a song on the record that says "I'm down but it won't last long!" So...

Tom Yeah, well, yeah I wrote that on purpose, actually, to - ah - to kind of turn this thing around a little bit into the
Petty: album. But it's interesting to me that you know the guy in "Room at the top" won't be there the next day. Because he never really says that but you know he won't be, you know. You know he's escaping. It's an escape, isn't it? I don't know, you know, it's ... it's so hard to ... what I'm writing ... I try not to think much about what I'm writing or who I'm writing ... I just let it start happening. And it's usually in retrospect, you know, when it's done or when I finally make a tape of it, or something. And I can listen that it starts to sink into me. Here's what we were doing, you know. I see what we're singing about, but... I think if I knew when I sat down exactly what I wanted to write, I wouldn't write because I'd be intimidated. I'm sure, another me would come out. But you know when you write characters they're often very revealing of yourself, you know. They're just different sides of your brain.

Alan Do you find sometimes that you've written a song that you think you know what it's about? And you find that
Bangs: maybe two or three years later you suddenly realize it's actually about something very different altogether.

Tom Yeah, I'm sure that has happened to me. I can't remember when. But I seem to remember having that feeling
Petty: once, you know. But I don't know where it was.

Alan There's quite a lot of songs from you as well which to me seem that to do with compromising or rather the lack
Bangs: of compromise. I mean "I won't back down" is a typical example of that. Someone that says "stand my ground". As you get older what are you're feelings about compromising and idealism? Do you find that generally - I'm not

speaking about you specifically - that as you get older most people find that there's no way around compromising? Is it possible to go through life without compromising your ideals?

Tom I don't know. I think, - I think it's all about trying not to compromise your ideals. You know, we're all different - I mean there are some of us that compromise right away, you know. And I think that we're supposed to be, or we wouldn't have garbage men and janitors and people that are willing to accept that side of life, you know. They are just as essential as pop-stars, you know? But then you have us, you know, these certain sort of people that say, "Well, you know, I don't want to scrub kitchens. I think I'll be a TV-Host." you know? And well, you know there's no work for TV-Hosts but there is work as scrubbing the kitchen. Well, you know others do without: I just rather do or I'll have no money, you know, and I'm gonna do this! So who compromised then? I don't know, you know? Well as I get older idealism is a rare thing, you know? It seems rarer and rarer. But to me I worry that it's rarer in youth than in older people. I think older people seem to be the more idealistic group. You know? Young people are very cynical now, you know? Very cynical! They've been taught cynicism, they've been - they've been bred cynicism. So, I think it's important to give them hope and realism in the same package, you know? You can be realistic but there should be - there should be hope in it. Because hope's what we're about. If we don't have hope then we don't go on.

Alan What do you think that is? I mean, if you are saying that older people are maybe more idealistic and that younger people are being bred or taught cynicism. They're being bred and taught though by the generation ...

Tom No, no, no, they're being bred and taught by the media! I mean, I don't think they're being bred by their parents.
Petty: Not in my country! They're being bred by the media, by the satellites and by the cables. And what that's teaching them, you know, is questionable, you know. I think for it to be unhip to be idealistic is weird, you know? I mean, even all the best rebels to me had some sense of hope in them.

Alan Absolutely!

Tom You know, But I don't understand the ones that have no sense of hope and invest in hate. That's not gonna work
Petty: out, you know? It's a waste of your time!

Alan Then maybe it's a good point to talk about technology generally as you've mentioned it with cables, with satellites and so on. Because it always struck me that although your music is very much down to earth in many ways you are interested, too, in technology. I'm thinking for instance that you did videos very early, for instance. You're interested, too in the possibilities of the Internet. Where does that all come from? Is that just, you know, another part of your character or is that something that developed later?

Tom I just think that - ehm - they were entertaining areas like, I like film a lot! I like the idea of making little short films.
Petty: I've become very bored with video now. I got an ...(?) that I've become extremely bored with! I wish it would go away for a while, but... And the Internet, you know, the Internet - I don't even know how to turn on a computer, but I like to see the Internet! And I like the idea of it's vast possibilities, you know. That - ehm - it's another of those things like radio or television, you know. It has so much good that it can do and at the same time it can be the most evil thing you ever dreamed of, you know. So it's kind of fascinating to see how the people balance it between good and evil. Because it's full of evil. You know that just by the colors. But there's so much good in it, you know, so it will be interesting to see how we balance it.

Alan A lot of musicians say when they have written a song that it is then almost public property and the interesting thing is how people interpret those songs. But in terms of video, I mean if you - as you say, you're interested in film, and in certain sense you've got videos that tell a story as well. Did you think about that when you were making videos? Are the videos made you know "I'm gonna give the people the story!" rather than let them have their room to come to something totally different?

Tom Well, you know, you can only do what ... I mean I did - I think - the first narrative video for "You got lucky" back
Petty: you know early eighties and...

Alan It was before MTV in fact! Right?

Tom Yeah! We started making them before MTV's promo clips which you know a lot of people did. We had made enough promo clips that we were bored with lip-singing. And the idea was, "let's make one were we don't sing and see if we can get away with it!" And-lo and behold-it was, you know, immediately MTV arrived dead after these clips. Everybody saw it, everybody started to imitate it. So we always had a huge leg up on video because we were way ahead of everything. So, for a while it was pretty creative, you know, I thought. I just think now, I'm opposed to the idea of nailing the song down to a film. I think that you should have a lot of films in your head, you know. And that everyone should create their own movie. But sometimes it's very hard to do if the video is very powerful, you know. "Don't come around here no more" I mean I wrote that song, right? When I hear this song, I think of Alice in Wonderland, you know, Now I damn shouldn't think of that when I wrote the song. When I

wrote the song, you know, - but when I hear it now, I see Alice running through the checkerboard jungle, you know? That's a pretty strong image. So, I don't know, they scare me! Those things - ehm - and I don't know what's left to do in one that nobody else has done. I mean I've seen enough glasses turn over in slow motion for a life, you know, I mean I don't know what's left to really do or how... Now it's about being clever. Which is the most boring thing you can do in art is try to out-clever each other. So I think, you know, there should be like a moratorium where we say, "Okay, for three years no videos!" We can't have them for three years. And when you come back in three years, you can't use directors. Only the band can make the video.

Alan Your are not alone with that opinion. Daniel Lanois once told me that he thinks we should stop making them for
Bangs: the next twenty years.

Tom Well, I'd go with that if he want to have twenty! Let's have twenty 'cause its for Daniel! But I think that, you
Petty: know,we should have a few years off from these damn things. And you know why? Because it's ruining your young rock groups! Because they have to be independent movie producers with their own money, you know, with their own borrowed money as soon as they start their band. And so, if the first record doesn't sell a million copies, well, "get out, we spent too much money on this band". But that's because they had to make this cheesy little video, that ain't about them. It's somebody else's vision of them. It's a vision of one song, you have no idea what this group's about! That money could be put into giving this group an environment to create, to have time, to tour, to perform. It's wrong to make all the music people movie producers! You know, it's wrong. And they need a brake from it. And you could develop acts. And I'm still entertained by the idea of seeing someone actually play their instrument. You know, I mean, I know, it's an old concept, but it's a good one!

Alan You know what I was thinking as you were saying this was: What would happen, if the video directors said,
Bangs: "Maybe we shouldn't make music for the next three years" And what I am suggesting is, if they were saying...

Tom Well, that's not fair! They've got their whole arena to work in. They've got a huge arena to work in, you know.
Petty: They've got film, TV, they've got commercials, they don't need me! You know? And if nobody made music, nobody would watch the fucking movies! You know? You got to like... it all works together. What I'm saying is that Rock 'n Roll kind of put itself in a bad place. It put itself in a place that will run out you know, like it's - it's not pure! It's not a pure thing. It's fine - it was fine for a while, but we need to set is down for a while, too.

Alan
Bangs: To see that...

Tom I'm sure none of this will happen! But it would be nice, you know. We're daydreaming here. on national
Petty: Television!

Alan Do you see major differences in terms of the way that Rock 'n Roll has developed? I mean, I don't see anything
Bangs: wrong. I don't see why it makes any difference what people do as long as it's what they like doing. I mean, for people to talk about your music being retro, suddenly, I mean, it's the music that you do! Is the music that Bob Dylan plays, "retro"? It's the music of Bob Dylan! I mean, it seems to me ...

Tom
Petty: Well, it's not retro in my house, because it's the newest thing that came up that day.

Alan
Bangs: Yeah, exactly!

Tom And I don't really care. I mean, what they want to call it. I'd like them to like it. You know, just listen to it.
Petty: Prejudice to music is as dangerous as prejudice anywhere. You want to accept all music. You just listen to what you like. And just go where you like. And don't be influenced by anything else. Don't let anybody... How can anybody tell you what you like? You know, you either like it or you don't. You know, if you're red, you know, the color blue is really the color you'd like and if you wear red, you're just not with it.

Alan Does this attitude that a lot of people have, that, you know, that if you're successful in terms of having hit
Bangs: records then to certain extent maybe you're compromising yourself. And I remember reading something that you one read - ehm - wrote, say - or said, why should that be that way? Why should that be a bad thing? I think, you know, coming from the sixties as well, it was always great to write a hit single. Plus the bands at that time like the Kinks or the Searchers or whatever, would write a song that would be rock music, that would be a hit single. And at the same time would be a good album track. And all that kind of got separated to a certain extent later on.

Tom
Petty: Yeah

Alan You know, I never understood why in every area, you know, there are good hit singles and there are bad hit
Bangs: singles, maybe, but there's nothing wrong with a hit single as such. What I want to ask you is, I mean, when you sit down and write, because you've had success in those terms, are you sometimes under pressure? Do you

sometimes think about writing a song that you feel is going to achieve success in that area?

Tom I'm not... I can't do it! Because any time I've ever tried to do it, I didn't like the results, you know, like ... It's a much smarter idea if you want to do that to kind of forget about it. Do your best work and probably some of your best work is gonna fit into that mold, you know, and into that area of being the single or the track that they are using to promote the album. But - yeah, I think that it's a curious idea that that ever even crapped into that idea, I think it's some antiquated like punk idea, that I don't want to be successful! Even when they're dying to be successful. You know, it's a kind of a strange thing because I mean everybody wants to be successful. So, I don't believe people don't want to have successful records. So, you know, you just do the best work you can do. And sometimes it's successful and if it is, then, you know, you thank the lucky stars above. Is all I know, you know.

Alan What about when you collaborate, I mean, take as an example the "Traveling Willburies". Was that a project
Bangs: where you just sat down to have some fun? Or was it a project where there was a lot of clashes of egos or was it a question of "Let's sit down and write some hit singles"?

Tom It was really about fun. It was more of a social thing, you know, like we were at that time all of us were in the same area in sort of each others lives socially. And I think that moved into a band, you know? And George Harrison took a great ... You know, he really pushed it into happening. It was him that really made it happen. It took somebody to say, "all right, we're gonna do this" And egowise, I think everybody left their ego at the door, you know. There was... it's a kind of a rough room to get egotistical in. And there was no need, you know? No need for ego, you know? And we worked hard, we worked hard on the songs and we wanted to have fun, you know? Just wanted to make a good solid enjoyable record. But I don't remember anybody ever saying, "Oh, we're making a hit single."

Alan In retrospect, I mean, when you worked with the Traveling Willburies, when you were on tour with Bob Dylan,
Bangs: when you made a record with Bob Dylan, were you aware later of how that experience had affected your own writing. Did you notice a change in your own work having spent time working with other people like that?

Tom I think, it must have influenced me in some way. I don't know what, you know. But I'm sure it did, because I'm
Petty: always too exposed to too many new things at once, you know? Playing behind Bob Dylan for two years, you know, I was ... it was quite an education, you know. I mean music and - I don't really know - I couldn't define it for you but I know I picked up a lot that I didn't know. And the same with the Traveling Willburies. When you have five of you, four or five. And you really all sit down in a circle with your guitars to write a song. It's quite an experience because you get to see as each person contributes, they have a whole different style, different way of working, you know. And how, you know, you tie it all up. It's really amazing. I wish - I really wish that someone had filmed some of these writing sessions. Because they were fascinating. To see how everyone - and you know what I got out of this: I got this kind of boldness where I'm not afraid to throw a line out, you know. Like if a few saying well, you know, "Tree in the monkey man we're hard up for cash, we stayed up all night smoking cocaine and hash." "Good!" "That's in!" Or but a few just said or you could say, "Taking out the trash!" "No!" "Out!" And it was just like that, you know, "Good!" "No!" you know? And so your ego goes away. You're just throwing lines. And it was great to have that many minds there. Or if somebody got a line, you know, and you have Bob Dylan finish it of it's really convenient.

(Pause)

Alan Do you see a relationship between your music and Los Angeles itself. The reason that I ask is, I've been in Los
Bangs: Angeles a few times. I like the place a lot. And I love to get to the airport, rent a car, turn on the radio. When I hear your music, that to me is just - there are certain things I heard for the first time in Los Angeles and it just struck me, that is the sound track of this city! I'm not talking about the songs that surrey that refer like to Mull Holland or the value there is. It's not a question of the textural reference there is. It's much more a question of the feeling of the music is to me, coming from Europe the feel of Los Angeles. Is that the way you feel about it, too? Did your music change basically once you stated living there?

Tom Yeah! It did. I kind of feel that way, too. I think us and the Beach Boys, you know, we're probably like the
Petty: "Second Generation Beach Boys" But it's very much, you know, well like car music, you know. In LA you got to have a car, you know, and - 'cause it's so spread out. You need a car. And when you're stuck in your car a lot and so you really rely on your music. And for a lot of years they been playing us on the radio there and I guess it just has become that I been writing about Los Angeles - I did write quite a bit about it - so, yeah I feel that way.

Alan Do you have very mixed feelings about Los Angeles? Most people that I know have very mixed feelings. It's a
Bangs: love/hate relationship.

Tom Well, it's the craziest place on earth. There is no crazier place, I mean there's no - no place that makes less
Petty: sense. Which I think I really like. But I - I like the place because, you know, I mean, it's everybody that didn't fit in anywhere else, went there. And I, you know, relate to them. And I met fascinating people there. But it has its

bad sides. I find myself moving further and further away from it. You know, I'm probably twenty-five Miles outside of town now. And I don't use the town for much any more. But I'm reluctant to leave because I have so many friends there.

Alan
Bangs: What's the worst thing about Los Angeles?

Tom Violence! Without a doubt. It can be very dangerous. Guns again, you know. Guns, guns, guns, it's all about
Petty: guns. Ever time - you know, anywhere you look and there's trouble in America you can trace it back to a gun. You know, it's silly!

Alan I once asked to Warren Zevon the same question. He told me the worst thing about Los Angeles is the light. I
Bangs: never really understood the answer but I thought it was a good answer.

Tom
Petty: Well, I don't know. I never really understood Warren Zevon!

Alan But he has, you know, records that have very much to do with Los Angeles I think as well. But in a very different
Bangs: way than your own.

Tom
Petty: Yeah

Alan Last question: I'm just interested in your thoughts, I guess. I'm working on a project which has to do with the
Bangs: word "to lose", loser, to lose consciousness, to lose the train of thoughts, to lose whatever. Just spontaneously: When you think of - like - losing: What's the first thing, that you think of? As I say, it can be losing consciousness, it doesn't have to be losing in terms of losing money or losing...

Tom
Petty: Buttons, definitely! Yeah, losing buttons has always annoyed me.

Alan The next time I'll see Warren Zevon I'll ask him that question and say, "You know, what Tom Petty said?"
Bangs: Buttons! I never understood that answer! But it was a great answer!
That's it, thank you.

Tom
Petty: Okay, thank you.