

Tom Petty
March 31, 2004
Malibu, California

By Paul Zollo



The California sun is shining. It's the final day of March, 2004, and Tom Petty is in the recording studio of his Malibu home, talking about the experiences he's had making music with his classic band The Heartbreakers and also with famous friends that include George Harrison, Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash and others. He also expounds about the late Howie Epstein, a founding member of The Heartbreakers, who died in 2003 of a heroin overdose.

A week earlier Petty was in New York to induct George Harrison into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, performing two songs for George along with Jeff Lynne and even Prince, who was also inducted, and who contributed a fluidly blistering five minute guitar solo to the end of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." But now Petty is happily back at the home by the ocean he shares with his wife Dana, who comes in to talk about fish and chips for dinner.

Tom's taking the time these days to do a lot of things, the kind of things he doesn't have time to do when he's on the road touring. But he's not touring this year, one of the few years in which this is so, and is using this period instead to tend to many aspects of a tremendously busy life, including the creation of a live album, and the design and expansion of his own website, for which we conducted this interview.

I loved seeing you and Jeff Lynne on "The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame" show, in which you inducted your friend George Harrison.

Tom Petty: It was a lot of fun. That whole weekend we had a lot of fun. It was a good crowd that year.

Did you choose the songs to do? You played George's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" and also The Wilburys' "Handle With Care."

No, since they televise the whole thing [laughs] they have this habit of choosing the songs. They pretty much always tell you what they would like you to play. It was okay.

Had you ever performed "Handle With Care" live before?

We had performed "Handle With Care" in London at the "Concert for George." We did three songs, with Jeff Lynne, and Dhani [Harrison, George's son]. We've done it on the road from time to time.

Jeff Lynne really sang the Roy Orbison part well. He's got a quality in his voice that sounds a lot like Roy.

Jeff's amazing. Took a little coaxing to get him to do "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." Because he never appears live. Ever. He just doesn't do it. Hasn't done it in years and years. So it took a little coaxing to convince him. [Laughs] On everybody's part. And I think he was really happy that he did it.

His harmonies with you were really nice.

Yeah, we practiced a lot on those harmonies. We came over here and practiced that.

It was quite a band for the Hall of Fame. You had your drummer from the Heartbreakers, Steve Ferrone, on drums.



Scott Thurston

Yeah, he played drums and we had Scott Thurston, who actually played bass, which he doesn't usually do, and harmonica, which is an odd thing to do. [Laughs] And then we had Steve Winwood on the organ. Dhani played acoustic too, and Jim Capaldi played percussion.

And Prince played that amazing five-minute solo at the conclusion of "While My Guitar."

Yeah. He was really terrific.

Did you rehearse with him?

Yeah. He was really inspiring.

"Handle With Care" was the first Wilburys' song. Did George start it?

Yeah, it was mostly George's. He had the frame of the song. And we recorded that just across the road [from here] at Bob Dylan's house, in his garage. And we all wrote the song there. We wrote the lyric together. Mostly George and Bob and myself. Jeff sat down with George – I remember them sitting down in the grass, and working out that middle-eight section. There's an augmented chord in there. A "naughty chord" as we call it. They worked that out.

Bob and I came up with that other bridge: "Everybody needs somebody / to lean on..." That was Bob and me. And then the lyrics are just kind of a communal thing. George took the title off a box, a packing box, which said "Handle With Care," which is the actual title, and he took that off the box because he just needed a title.

It was a good day's work. Cause the song was all finished and recorded that night. Almost. Pretty much everything. I think we did an overdub or two the next day, but for the most part, it was finished.

That middle section: "I'm so tired of being lonely" is so perfect for Roy's voice. Did George and Jeff write it for Roy?

Yeah. They wrote it specifically for Roy. Because it just turned out that everybody was there that day. I think George always had that idea in his head of the Traveling Wilburys. Actually, we had all been hanging out for some time by then. We had all been hanging out socially. I think maybe we had already done part of *Full Moon Fever* by that point. Probably recorded part of it. Roy had just come on the scene, because Jeff was going to do a track with Roy.

The first day I met Roy, Jeff and I and Roy wrote that song "You Got It." "Anything you want, you got it..." We had written that song. So everybody knew each other. We had been hanging out. And George decided -- cause he was just trying to do an extra track for single -- so he thought, if we're all here, let's design something for each of us to sing on. And when he got the record on, he felt it wasn't really a George Harrison record, it's more of a group. So what do you say we have a group? So that's how that ball got rolling. It was a great band. It was really fun being in that band.

And now with George and Roy being gone, we see how historic it was to have the five of you together.

Yeah. And to stay together that long. There were a few years of it. It's pretty amazing when you look back at it. [Laughs] But the truth is that it was friends. It was really just a friendly thing. It was kind of like we were going to hang out anyway [laughs] so we might as well make a record.

When all of you would work on lyrics, how did that happen? Would you all sit around with guitars and just toss in lines?



Traveling Wilburys

Yeah. We often did. It was like a community kind of thing. I had never done it that way. Usually somebody would find the thread. Like, okay, here's what this is: Here's the title, and here's the idea. And we all had usually sketched out the track. Like, here's how the music will go. Not always but sometimes. And then somebody would say a line and somebody else would say a line, and you'd kind of get this thumbs up or thumbs down. Like "Yes!" or "Noooo!" [Laughs] "Yes!" And then sometimes that would carry on

through dinner.

I remember being at dinner and the writing pad going around the table and discussion about the lyrics. How about this line, how about that? And, of course, Bob [Dylan] was really good at that. It was a real eye-opener just how brilliant he is. It was great to see him do it. He just has a really good sense of the craft of writing a song.

Usually it didn't take too long. Sometimes we would struggle with words, and it would take a while to finish something off. But if I remember things right, usually things were written pretty quickly. Usually within a day. The lyrics anyway. Sometimes more. Sometimes the music and the lyrics.

Would you usually finish the music first and then work on the lyrics?

Yeah, usually music first. Though sometimes they came together. I remember George having that song "End Of The Line." We were all sitting in a room singing, "It's all right..." And George had the ending of the line, "We're going to the end of the line..." He had that much together on that song. I don't remember it all. But it was quite an experience. We probably will never see anything again like that.

Does Jeff Lynne sing a lot on the album? His voice is the hardest to discern of the five of you.

Well, see, to me, I hear him really clearly. George and Jeff produced the record. Jeff had a *huge* contribution to all that. And as far as arranging the harmonies, because it was really a harmony group. That's what we did the best. Jeff was the one who would figure out that harmonies, and what we were going to sing. His contribution was enormous to the Wilburys.

One time you told me you learned a lot of new chords from hanging around with George. Were there actually new chords he showed you that you didn't already know?

Sure, yeah. He showed me a lot of things on the guitar. Not only new chords, but different ways of playing them, or simpler ways to find them. Little tricks on guitar. It would be amazing – things that I thought were really hard, like things in Beatles songs that I thought was a real hard thing, he'd show it to me, and the way that he did it was really simple.

He was a really good chord man. He really knew his chords, and different ways to play them. But that's really what I picked up the most from him. We did a lot of casual playing, and he was quite good at showing me, "Oh, you know, there's an easier way to do that, or there's another way you can make that chord."

George was a great, great musician. One night we were at my house, and it was really late. And I had a bass for some reason. And it was just the two of us there and it was really late at night. And he started playing electric guitar, and he started playing the blues. And he just played the *shit* out of the blues. And I had never heard him do that. I asked him, "Why have you never done that? I had no idea you could do that." And he said, "Oh, that's Eric's thing." [Laughs]

He could really do that. He could really play the blues. And he said something like, "It didn't occur to me that when Eric came out with that kind of thing that everybody would leap on it and try to do it. I always looked at it as really Eric's kind of thing."

It was nice seeing you with Dhani, George's son, who looks so much like George. Is he a good musician?

Yeah. Dhani I've known since he was just a little boy. And my girls, especially Adria, kind of grew up being pals with him, and they're still very close. Our families are close. And we've remained that way. We're still very close friends.

Dhani is a good musician. I think he told me he has a group together. And they're going to make a record.

He looks so much like George, it's kind of haunting.

It is, isn't it? It's like George just traded bodies or something. [Laughs]

I just read the passage in the new Rolling Stone you wrote about The Byrds.

Did that come out okay? I haven't read it. David Wild of Rolling Stone interviewed me, and kind of took me off-guard. Time to think about The Byrds. But that's another friend of, *God*, 25 years. [Roger] McGuinn. So I'm pretty steeped in The Byrds, too. But I've always liked The Byrds.

You said that you wanted The Heartbreakers to be kind of a cross between The Byrds and The Rolling Stones. You said, "What could be better than that?"

Yeah. [Laughs] That's how we saw what we were going to do as a group. We wanted to have a sensibility that was kind of a mixture of the Rolling Stones and The

Byrds. So we had the kind of R&B rock and roll thing, and then a kind of a nice harmony song sense. And a lot of other influences, but that's probably the simplest way to break it down. We wanted to be a mix of those things.

Were The Beatles also a big influence at the time?

Oh yeah. McGuinn got the idea of the 12-string Rickenbacker electric from seeing George play one in *A Hard Day's Night*. The Beatles were an *enormous* influence. A *huge* influence. But then they were on everyone, I guess. I still love The Beatles. And listen to The Beatles a lot. I just rotate around the albums, you know. [Laughs] I love The Beatles. You don't really hear people say it much, but if you came out of the Sixties like we did, there were the two big obvious ones: The Stones and The Beatles. Everything else was another road. And The Beach Boys was another one that we really loved.

Did you?

Oh yeah, we adored The Beach Boys. And Mike [Campbell] and I had always liked Fifties Rock and Roll: Chuck Berry, and Elvis, Little Richard. When we met, we both knew all that music. Very few people played it. It's kind of odd when you think about it, but the truth was that in 1970 there wasn't that many people playing that kind of music, like Chuck Berry.

Yeah, it already seemed old by then.

Yeah, I think it was that group Sha Na Na that made it seem kind of gimmicky, with poodle skirts and juke boxes. I think they were trying to make it into that. But we knew that music, and I think that also played into what we were doing. Still does.

When you formed The Heartbreakers, was it always Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers?

I think it was always Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers, because Mudcrutch, the band that Mike and Benmont and I had just before that, got burned so bad. We made a record, and then we put a single out, and the band broke up. And I thought, "If I'm going to start another group, I'm going to put my name into it, so at least I get something out of this." [Laughs] You know? And I wanted to have a lot of say in what went down. In the other group, I felt I had to stand silently by and watch it self-destruct. So I really wanted to be the leader.

Were you writing songs from the start when it became The Heartbreakers?

Yeah. I was really the only songwriter. Mike wrote a little bit. I think he might have co-written one or two songs on the first couple albums. Where he really blossomed as a writer was *Damn The Torpedoes*. That's when he really started bringing in the great stuff. But he was learning. In the very early days of the group, it was up to me to come up with the material. And it was so easy then. [Laughs]

Was it?

Yeah. *Much* easier than it is now, 500 songs later. It was so much of a kind of fresh, clean palette. All those songs came really quickly. Most of them were just written to have something to do.

Did you write them on guitar from the start?

Mostly. I wrote a few on the piano. I remember, it was during a break while making the first album, that I wrote “Breakdown” on a piano. I wrote “Breakdown” and “The Wild One Forever” on that break. These were just strange days. I wrote the whole songs, words and music. It’s something I wouldn’t really think I could do now. But I guess I could. But when you’re young, and just so innocent, it was just something that happened. You know, we weren’t going to sit around for two hours and let them fix the mikes or whatever without doing something, so we did that.

You wrote “Southern Accents” on piano?

Yeah. I’ve used the piano a lot. “Don’t Do Me Like That” was a piano song.

Do they come up differently when they are piano songs?

Yeah, because you have the bass line with your left hand. So you find different chords than if you were going to play guitar, and sometimes a different feel. I’ve used the piano quite a bit.

Do you enjoy playing piano?

Yeah. *All of The Last DJ* I wrote on piano. I think almost everything. I know it’s always there, [laughs] and it always figures in to some degree all the time.

Do you ever do both, and switch back and forth between guitar and piano?

Yeah. Sometimes if I’ve got something going on the piano, I might switch over to guitar and play it on guitar just to see if something else might happen. Sometimes it sets me off into a new direction. I’m not the greatest piano player. I’ve become a lot better [laughs] over the years.

Do you use a drum machine when you make demos?



Steve Ferrone

No, very rarely. I can play the drums a little bit. I can lay down a click, and then do one thing at a time – or sample and make a loop of the bass drum; play a little pattern and then loop it. Sometimes, if it’s not too fast a song, I can do it, I can play the whole thing. [Laughs] I’m not Steve Ferrone.

His drumming is so good.

He's *incredible*. Just an amazing musician. He can do anything in one take. He's just amazing.

He has such a great feel for your music.

He never plays anything that doesn't feel great. That's what I liked about him *immediately*. Every time, every take, feels good. Somebody might make a mistake, or you might want to change the arrangement or this or that, but it doesn't take really long to get a track because he's so rock solid with his feel. And he's a really bright musician. He actually can read and write music, which I can't do. I see him in the sessions just making little notes, sometimes writing on his floor tom. And so he gets the arrangement down really quick. Yeah, he's terrific. I just had him over here the other day doing some stuff with me. And I still am in awe of him. He went with us to New York.

And funny enough, I met Steve Ferrone through George [Harrison]. [Steve] was in Eric Clapton's band; George did a tour of Japan with Clapton and his band, and did one show in London. But Eric couldn't do it. So George got Mike Campbell to play lead guitar, and they played the Albert Hall. And Mike came back from that saying, "Listen – this drummer, Steve Ferrone, is really a good drummer." [Laughs] And we were in the market for a drummer –

Stan had already left?



With Dave Grohl at SNL November '94

Yeah, Stan was going. We had done one television show and had used Dave Grohl from Nirvana. And Dave came *close* to joining the band. Kurt Cobain had just died. And I really discussed Dave joining the band. But Dave had his own career going. He had just done his Foo Fighters album. So it

clearly wasn't going to work. And Steve came along at the perfect time.

And you've replaced Howie Epstein, who died last year?

Yeah, Ron Blair has replaced Howie. He's always been kind of an official Heartbreaker, so that was pretty seamless, adding him to the band. He stepped right in.

The Heartbreakers are an amazing band.

Yeah. They're ridiculous. I think they're one of the best rock and roll bands there is. For sure. It's kind of like you feel guilty if you don't play. [Laughs] Because they're *so* good that you want people to see them. So we've worked a lot over the last four years. We've really done a lot of touring. And this year we're *not* touring for the first time in a long time. We decided to give it a break and try to live life for a while, and have a semblance of a normal life for a year. So there's not going to be any real touring this year.

Are you going to write new songs during this time?

Yeah, that's the plan. We're going to make a record. [Laughs]

Do you already have new songs? *Ron Blair*

Not yet. I'm just starting to work on them. So it's too early. But I'm just starting.

Your last album, The Last DJ, was somewhat of a concept album. Do you think you would do that again?

No. [Laughs] No, that album was a shame, really. My idea with that album was to sort of do an album about morals in the 21st century. It seemed so obvious to me. And I guess as a framework, I took the music business, which is something that I was close to. And then I wound up really being hammered over the head for it. You know, I really took a beating.

Did you?

Yeah [laughs]. From a lot of people. And the day the song came out, it was banned from a lot of stations. Which in a way kind of pleased me, it made me feel good. But that wasn't the idea. It was just a little work of fiction. It was almost a sci-fi film. But there's been so much written about that album. It even got taken to the Senate. There were Senate hearings on radio monopolies, and my songs were being read into the record. You know it became much more than I intended.

The drag about it to me is that it's a really good piece of music. And the music became so overlooked because of the lyrics. The lyrics became the focal point, and I



think, in reading about the album, you'd never know that it's got this really nice music, and melodies, and humor. That kind of got pushed aside.

I saw people say things like, "Where has Tom Petty been? Has he been under a rock for thirty years? I mean, this is not news." No, I *haven't* been under a rock, and that wasn't the point. *Everything in the record is relevant.* And I think time will bear me out on that. I wasn't trying to make an up-to-date study of the record business. I was just using it as a *tool*, as a metaphor. And the whole record isn't even about that. But in this day of really short attention-spans [laughs] I think the focus really went in on the first few songs, and it didn't go much past that.

The record actually has a lot of hope in it, and ends that way. So it was a record I worked really hard on, and it was kind of a concept record. But I don't think I'd do it again. I don't think I would take on a concept record. At least, not in the near future.

Were you surprised, when writing about the record business, that people would conclude that this is your statement on the industry?

I guess not. I guess I was naïve in a way to think that they wouldn't see it that way. I have a problem in that I can go into a song as a character, and write as a character, but the audience always sees it as me. And I forget that.

I think I was kind of naïve to think that people would take *The Last DJ* as a book, or as different characters per song. And they *didn't*. They took it as me *literally* taking a stand. And in all the promotion I did for the record, I could never get past these points. I could never talk about the *record*, it was all about what was going on in the record business.

It made it seem as if you were pissed off.

And maybe I'm a *little* pissed off. But I've got far more to do than be pissed off at the music business. It's such an easy target. It wouldn't have been something that I wanted to make my life's work. So I found myself in this kind of merry-go-round of that's all that anyone wanted to talk about, and the more I talked about it, the more pissed off I looked. So it was kind of a disappointing trip [laughs] all the way around.

You've always cared about maintaining the meaning of your songs, and the connection with your audience. You've always been careful about keeping your ticket prices reasonable for your concerts.

Yeah. I've done the best job I can at that. You can go [laughs] and see those year-in polls about who made the most money on the road. And we've seen a lot of situations where we actually sold a lot more tickets than people that were in front of us in the poll, because their ticket price was so high that their gross was much higher. So that's a really hard thing, too, because all around you the prices are going up-up-up to even mount a tour. As with everything else, I guess, it just gets more and more expensive.

But the audience wants to keep the ticket price in the same spot. And it's hard, because we have seen our prices go up a bit over the years. But I try to be just as decent as I can. Without getting too greedy.

There's one group that I know of - I won't mention their name - but we played the same venue - I think it was a 20,000 seat venue - we played it back to back one night. We both sold out the venue. They made \$500,000.00 *bucks more than me*. [Laughter] I don't know if people realize this, but we kind of walked away from that going, "Hmmm, this is a lot of money."

I guess it doesn't matter, if people want to see it, to pay that kind of money. But my audience -- and I've done a lot of research about this -- my audience, which kind of makes me happy, is the salt of the earth. They're not wealthy people. For the most part. Even at our age, our audience is a rock and roll audience. It's a rock and roll crowd. They're great audiences. They're downright *frenzied* audiences. Then I can go and see the Eagles, and the crowd is a completely different kind of crowd. They seem to be much more well-to-do. Maybe it's just my imagination, but they seem to be wealthier people and they're on a nice night out, and they're enjoying the show that way. But I kind of have the flat-bed truck crowd. [Laughter]

For a long time, you were on a songwriting roll, where songs kept coming.

Yeah. I haven't written in a while. I'm kind of excited to do it again. I've been touring so much, that since *The Last DJ* I haven't written anything. But I'm just now getting my mind around that, to say, okay, I'm going to sit down and try to write some songs.

Where do you start?

I usually just play my guitar and piano a little bit, and let something drift in. There are days when the instrument feels friendly, and days when it doesn't. I just kind of get some kind of regimen of, okay, I'm going to spend a few hours today to play guitar and piano, with the mind of writing something. And maybe something will come in. Maybe some ideas will come in. And sometimes they do.

Also I spend some time, when I get in that mode, writing things, writing lyrics, writing whatever interests me at the time, whatever feels right. And sometimes I'll sit and write lyrics. I'll just write in my notebook. I'll jot down ideas or titles or something that seems interesting to me. And then there's the other side of the coin where [words and music] both come at the same time. Those are the ones I really like, where I'm just playing and start to sing and a song starts to appear.

Many have said those are their best songs, when words and music come together, but that it's rare. Is it rare for you?

It's about 50-50. It used to be that that was the *only* way I did it. I didn't really know any other way to do it. And then we became more and more professional, and so much of my life became about having to come up with twelve songs here, or you've *got* to have another hit single. You've got to have one every year, or every six months. [Laughs] You've *got* to have another hit song.

So when you get into that situation, you really have to organize your time and your energy. I can't go off fishing for six months. I have to pay attention to this.

So I think as I came up doing that, I learned a lot of craft. And a lot about the craft of songwriting, and how to do it, and how to apply it to making a record of the song. Because the song, to me, is really a record. First, I want it to be a great record, or there's not much point in me doing it. So that's where I began to kind of stock-pile lyrics and ideas. You write them all down, so when it comes time sit down and write a batch of songs for an album, you've got a little help. You're not just going from nowhere to do it.

But I do love them when they just appear.

Any examples of ones that just appeared like that?

Probably most of my earlier work.

"American Girl"?

Certainly, yeah. Yeah, "American Girl" kind of all came at the same time.

"Breakdown."

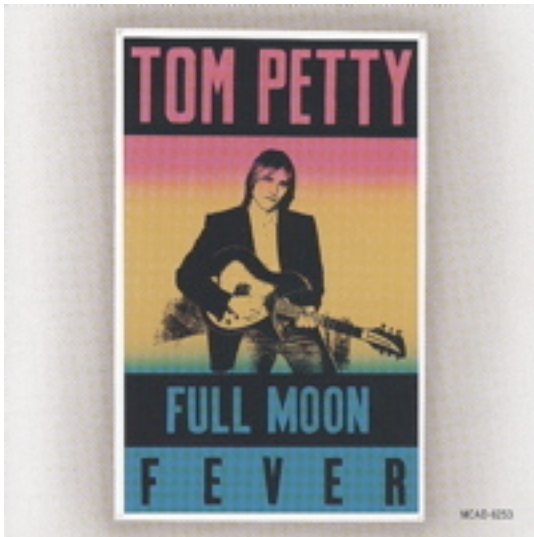
When you had that pressure to write hit singles, was that from the record company?

Well, it was just to stay in the game. I don't know if it's different now, it's probably not. But radio was a really important part of what we did. And then MTV. You had to have a hit song to stay in the game. So, you know, I stayed pretty much on the job.

[Drummer] Stan Lynch was out meeting girls, and I was home writing songs [laughs]. I was the one who had to come up with another song. So it's kept me pretty busy.

Did it add pressure when you were thinking a song had to be a hit?

I didn't really think that way. I just thought, "I've got to come up with some more music." You just kind of hope and pray that one of the batch, or two of the batch, sometimes three and four of the batch, will be hits.



Full Moon Fever

The funniest story of hits to me was the *Full Moon Fever* album. I think there were five hit songs on that record. When I first brought it to the record company, they *rejected* the album, saying there were no hits.

Is that so?

I'd *never* had that happened, before or since. I'd *never* had a record rejected. Imagine: I did that record, and brought it in, and they *hated* it. They said, "Uh, sorry, we don't want to put this out. We don't hear any hits." And this had "Freefallin',"

"I Won't Back Down," "Running Down A Dream," "You're So Bad." I was completely, *really* depressed. I went away *completely* depressed by it. So I waited six months and brought the same record back. And they loved it. [Laughter]

Did they know it was the same record?

I didn't bring it up. [Laughter]

It's amazing that they could hear a song like "Freefallin'," for example, and not hear a single.

I think it was one of the biggest selling records I ever had. But they didn't hear it. After six months, I guess personnel had shifted. And so I went right back with the same record. I said, "Hey, what do you think of it now?" Giving the impression that I'd been working on it [laughs], trying to make it better. And I *did* try. I thought, "How could I make it better?" And I *couldn't*.

Finally, I thought, this is *crazy*. Just put it out as it is and I'll take my chances. I just brought it back and said, "Hey, what do you think?" And they said, "*Great.*" These are the things [laughs] that you come up against from time to time in this business.

That was one of the first albums you made that came out as a CD as well as an LP. And in the middle of it, you have that funny passage in which you say, "For those of you listening to this on LP, you can stand up now, or sit down, and turn over the album. We'll give you a moment to do that."

[Laughs] I forgot that. You know why I put that in? At that point I had always thought of albums as two parts. It kind of bugged me that there was no break between the two sides [on a CD.] So I think I put that in for pacing, actually.

Did that change how you made albums?

Yeah, it's changed. Though I think I still think, pacing-wise, when the first half's over, and it's time to move into the second half. I really struggle with the idea anymore that anybody's even going to listen to it all in order. Or that people are oriented toward the record as one thing. Especially now that you can so quickly just dash from track to track, or that you can sample or download the songs you want without even hearing them. And I'm guilty of that, too.

Are you?

Oh, yeah. I'll go up on my I-Tunes and say, "Let me hear thirty seconds of this, oh, I don't want that." [Laughter] And the drag is that I've had albums where maybe on the first play, I didn't like it this song or that song. But as I lived with it, I really came to love that song.

Sometimes songs take a little while. You have to live with them to get them. And I think we're losing some of that, because the technology has made everything so much quicker and there's so many more choices. But all you can do is still make them as good as you can. That's what they are, and so I keep my blinders on and say, "To me, I'm making this as a piece of music, whether most of the audience hears it that way or not, I don't know."

You said you're concerned with making each song into a good record--

Well, you just can't make a good record without a good song. You just can't do it. If you don't have a song, you don't have a record. You can have all the best production, all the best musicians, even the best arrangements. But if the song isn't good, it just won't fly. And a good rule that I've always stuck by is if I can't get the song over with a guitar or a piano, it's not done. I should be able to sit down and sell the song to you with just a guitar and my voice. And if I can't, then there's no reason to make the record. [Laughs]

Do you think in terms of production and record-making while writing the song, or does that come later?

No, not till it's done. Maybe a little. It's usually an afterthought, where you finish it, and then there's a million ways to approach it. You think, "Wow, now what kind of record am I going to make?" And that's a whole other area. Starting to make records.

When you play a song for the band, do you have a clear idea of what you want it to sound like?

Yeah. More and more I do. Sometimes too clear, I think, for their liking. You don't want them to feel like hired hands.

It's a little bit of a problem if I've done a demo, and I've completely worked out every note of the record. It's not what they want to hear because they want to contribute what they feel as well. So you have to strike a happy medium. And really every time, I

can have the idea, but, say, what Mike [Campbell] is going to bring to it is going to be a little more than what I did. That's the beauty of having a band. Because they really have a way of taking what you had in your mind and making it even greater. That's a really good band.

Is it always clear where the harmonies are going to go?

No, not always. It's just hit and miss. Howie [Epstein] used to have a mike on the floor, which is really unusual, at tracking dates, because there is so much leakage and everything. But he'd have a mike turned on really low, and a lot of times he'd just try harmony things while we were tracking the song. Usually they're during playbacks, while we're doing the overdubs, I'll sing along with it, and I'll think, "This would be good here." But very rarely do I have the harmonies before we do it.



Howie performing

Howie's harmonies with your voice was a great sound.

He was a great, great singer. Just a *fantastic* harmony singer. I miss him. Tragic story. [Pause] It's just a tragic story. I always think of people who have dope problems as people who have a lot of pain to kill. I kind of feel that I couldn't really get a handle on where his pain was coming from. But he was clearly a person in a lot of pain.

Howie was such a loner. His life was always isolated. He was very gregarious and nice, and the sweetest guy you'd ever meet. But his life, his social life, was in another area. He always seemed *very* remote. He didn't have much family; his mom and dad had died, and he had one brother who he sort of saw and one brother who he never saw. I think we were his family. The Heartbreakers is kind of the family unit for all of us. Because since we were kids, this has been the hearth. The Heartbreakers. And I don't think any of us had much family outside of the group.

We always questioned, did we do enough for him? Did we help him? And I think we did. We tried so hard to pull him away from that. It's such a strong drug, such an evil drug. I mean, it just took *years* to kill him. It's kind of like in that last year, we kind of knew it was going to kill him. You just had to look at him to know it was going to kill him. We were all very prepared for it.

You were?

Yeah. We knew he was going to die. We kicked him out of the group. That was the last thing we could do to tell him to wake up. It got to be where we felt we were enabling him. All we were doing was keeping a steady stream of money coming in for him to live that life. And we thought that maybe if he lost the group, he'd have to get his shit together. And we got him to go to rehab. But he just wouldn't stick with it. Then, of course, you know heroin makes you a fabulous liar. So it was kind of hopeless. But I do miss him, and I loved him, and we all did. He was a great musician.



Howie Epstein

It's hard to believe there was such pain in his life, because he belonged to one of the world's greatest rock bands.

Yeah. That's something you really have to do: You have to say, "Hey, life is great. I mean, we're really lucky boys. Look how great things are." Because you don't see it that way day to day. You get kind of caught up in life. You need somebody in your life to remind you. I have [my wife] Dana to tap me on my shoulder, and say, "Hey, this problem really isn't that great. Take a look around. Things are really great." I don't think he had that person that cared about him in that way. I think there were people who said they did, but I don't think they really did. Maybe I'm wrong, but you need that so much. You need somebody.

It's such an unusual life we've been through. And such an *extraordinary* one, in so many ways. But you're still a person. Success is never going to make your life simple. It's everything that it's cracked up to be, but it's not going to simplify the fact that you're a human being trying to live on the planet with other people [laughs] and you want to be happy. It's not going to do that. You have to do that.

It reminds me of your great line from "Crawling Back To You": "Most things that I worry about/never happen anyway..."

[Laughs] Yeah, I like that line. Well, worry is just thinking about something that hasn't happened yet. That's what some wise person said. [Laughter] I think it was Deepak Chopra. Thinking about something that hasn't happened. But I still do it all the time.

Do you?

Yeah. It's human nature. We all worry.

There are those who think that when you are a successful rock star, like you, that there are no worries. That's it's just perpetual paradise.

[Laughs] Right. There are people who think if you are a rock and roll star you just run up on stage, and have an arena full of people love you, and then you go off and party and do it again. That's just not the truth. There's a lot involved with what we do. We work really hard at what we do. It's more than a full-time job.

Is it?

Yeah. I'm only, at this point in my life, getting a little time off. [Laughs] I'm having to learn how to live life when there's *nothing* going on. I go completely besides myself. Like what are we going to do? Dana says, "We're just going to relax. We're just going to relax." I'm used to, at 4:00, we go to sound check. [Laughs]

You've been on a constant schedule of writing, recording, touring, doing promo, and doing it again. It just keeps going for years.

And Heartbreakers has become a big business over the years. There's a big business to keep an eye on. There's publishing, and merchandising, and you name it. It just goes on and on. If I let it, it can consume me. There's just so much stuff to deal with.

You get involved with all that stuff?

Oh, yeah, yeah.

Because we think you have managers, and business managers, to deal with that stuff for you, so you can stay creative and think about music.

Yeah, and then you don't have any money one day. [Laughter] I am very involved -- always have been -- in our management, and how the group's presented. And really every aspect of it. I do have a business manager, and a long-time relationship with Tony (Dimitriadis) and Mary (Klauzer), our managers, that does allow me to step away and be creative. But you've always got to step back in, too, and take a look at what's going on, and say, "This is how I want it to be done." They call me a control freak.

Do they?

Tony does. He says, "You're just a complete control freak." But it's not really being a control freak. I just want us to be presented in the way I want to. If we're Kentucky Fried Chicken, I'm the colonel on the bucket. If it's being done in my name, I really want to see that it's being done the way I want it done. But I can't always do that. It's bigger than me. But I do try to keep an eye on the business. That's a lot of what I'm doing this year: just catching up on running the Heartbreaker empire. [Laughs]

The website, that's a whole other thing. Like this interview, I wanted to do it just to have a chance to speak to everyone. Say, "Look, here's where we're at, and here's what's going on." Because you don't really get a chance to. And they probably have a lot of questions.

I'm particularly excited about the idea of websites. I think there's so much you can do that hasn't been tapped yet. It's such a perfect way of delivering music, and really giving things to the hard-core fans, giving them extra things that they might be interested in more than the casual fan. And that's a business as well. You have your store, and your merchandise, and your records. But I think it can actually be an artistic enterprise. But what the problem with it is that it takes so much time to get all that together, and if you're playing as many dates as we do, and in the studio as much as we do, and somebody says, "Hey, how about the website?", you just get a groan of "Uh huh. It's not time to deal with the website." But that's something that I want to work on this year. I want to work on it a little bit, and try to bring it up to speed.

For my birthday, Dana asked me what I wanted for my birthday. I told her I wanted to go to the record store, and be allowed to stay there as long as I can. Because when I go to the record store, everyone usually wants to leave before me. But I said, "On my birthday, I want to be able to shop for as long as I want." So I went there, and I stayed for two and half hours. And I just bought a huge amount of records. They had to get me a box.

You buy new music and old music both?

Yeah. I buy anything that strikes my fancy. That's one of the nice things, the nicest thing, [laughs] really, about being wealthy in a way, is to do that. Because that's *such* a luxury. Because I grew up pretty poor. I used to go to the dumpster and get bottles out to cash them in, any way I could, to buy an album. And now I can afford it. And I think it's a good thing, because you're putting money back into the industry. I think it's a good way to support the industry, and it's so much fun. So I love to do that.

I've always had the feeling that free records don't sound as good as the ones you buy. Because you're not rooting for them. [Laughter] If you *bought* it, you really want it to be good. So you're sitting down and really rooting for this thing. Whereas if somebody sends it to you, or gives it to you, which is something that happens in the music business, I don't really like to get them that way. I'd rather buy them. I often say, especially with my friends, "No, I'm going to the store and buy it."

Are there any new bands or artists you like?

Not incredibly new. I like the White Stripes. I think they're good and they're really starting to hit their stride. I like a lot of different kinds of music. I listen to all kinds.

Do you listen to jazz?

Just the classic stuff. I don't really listen to any new jazz. I buy a lot of old albums. I love the older stuff. I think that's where my heart is. I'm still working my way

back. [Laughs] You know I go further and further back trying to find stuff I missed, or stuff I always wanted to hear but never really got the chance to. There's *so* much music.

You know I'm doing a series of radio shows now for the XM satellite channel. It's going to be "Tom Petty's Buried Treasures." It's going to be hour-long shows of music I put together by whoever. I've got eight shows completed already. Mostly old music. With an eye to turn people onto stuff, especially younger people, who might not have heard this stuff. And it's a lot of fun.

XM Radio is pretty cool because you can get a whole show of great songs.

I love it. It sounds terrific, too. If you're going to have that many choices, you might as well have them all. [Laughs] You know? I drove all the way out into the desert on this trip we took, and we were in the car for four hours or so, and I was completely entertained all along without ever putting in a CD. Just by going through the channels and listening to stuff. Yeah, I think it's terrific. I think radio needs to see something exciting come along. I think it's exciting.

One of the things that The Last DJ touched on is that record companies don't take artists and nurture and develop them like they once did. So that every year there seems to be a bunch of new artists, but none of them stay around very long.

Yeah. I think it reflects the culture we're in. We're in a culture of short attention spans. There's a lot more media than there used to be. There's a lot more specific areas to go for music. Like you don't just turn on the radio and hear everything. You go to a specific place for different kinds of music.

And that's so expensive, to nurture a group. It's really expensive. With us, for at least a year before we had any record out, the record company completely supported us. They paid our rent, bought our food. We lived as employees. We were just taken under their wing, and given a studio to work in, and we developed, and learned our craft. And they stuck with us. Though we were kind of unusual in that our first record became a hit. And we continued to have hits. So when you're in that situation, they *really* nurture you.

But I also know people the [record company] didn't just drop though they didn't have a hit. Because it isn't always about having a huge hit record. If you're an artist, you're going to go through periods when sometimes you're doing stuff that's completely valid, but maybe not commercial. I think that is kind of vanishing, where they want success or they don't want you at all. Maybe it's easier to bring along the next new thing than to take a chance on somebody coming back with something again.

But I think it hurts in the end. Because I don't think the artist develops a relationship with the audience. I always felt we had an audience that kind of knew us. And that's how I felt about the artists I admired. I felt I knew them, and that I was taking the ride with them. Though I think maybe now it's a bit more quick fix than that.

The result is that you see these artists who are maybe really successful *record* artists, but they can't sell 3000 tickets. Because the audience doesn't really know them, or trust them, to that extent. So good things still come along. And I think the audience is really happy with it. And maybe some day it will turn around to where the record companies will see the value in development. But I don't really know. It's beyond me now.

You now have such an enormous repertoire of songs. Even if you chose only hits, that's still too many songs to play in one show.

Inevitably, after every show, there's someone who's upset that you didn't play this or that. But you're going to be there forever if you play everything. Plus, we want to keep ourselves interested. So I kind of try to rotate as much as I can in the show, and at the same time I want the show to be good every night. And I want it to have a pace. Because everybody doesn't travel from Detroit to Cleveland to see the next show. [Laughter] But the 50 people who did are like, "Hey! This is the same thing I saw last night." Well, yeah it is, because a lot of these people didn't get to see the show the night before.

How do you keep yourself interested in doing the same songs each night? Do you change the arrangements?

Yeah, they vary tour to tour a little bit in how you play them. We have, fortunately, such a large catalog of popular songs that we can actually rotate them year to year, or tour to tour. The next tour I do I'm thinking of doing a completely different set of music. That I think would still be popular songs, but maybe the second rung, so that they're not so overplayed. But that's way down the line. Tours. I don't know how many I can do.

And you'll have another new album by that time, right?

Yeah, that's the idea.

Speaking of second-rung songs, I wish you would do "Two Gunslingers," which is a great song. I love that line, "I'm taking control of my life now."

[Laughs] We've done that song occasionally. On rare occasions. I used to do it alone. I used to just go out and do it on guitar. It was fun to do.

Another great one is "All The Wrong Reasons," also from the Into The Great Wide Open album. It's got great lyrics, and a beautiful melody.

Benmont [Tench, the keyboardist] likes that song. [Laughs] He brought that up recently, that that would be a good one to play.

Would you consider playing it?

Yeah. I'd play anything, really. I don't mind. You can do a whole show of hits, and people really love it. But you do strive to fit other things in there as well. I don't think you'd want to do a show where there are no hits. I think people would be disappointed. I'm from this school of wanting to please the audience. [Laughs] And I know there are people that don't really see that as an artistic endeavor. But I do. It's worth doing. [Laughs] But you do have to be very careful. You want to offer them new things, too, and you want to challenge them a little bit too. I think you always want to give them something that has a little bit of a challenge for the audience. And then by the time you get to the end of



Benmont Tench

the show, they feel as if they've been somewhere. You know? We've been somewhere at the end of this music event. We've heard a *lot* of music, and we've heard a lot of different kinds of music, and different textures. And we've been somewhere. And then by the end, we can all party and hear the big hits [laughter] or whatever.

But getting the program for a show down is really important. And the pacing of a show is very important. I'm talking about arena shows. I guess in a bar you can do whatever you want. In an arena, where you're playing to a really large crowd, and they're some distance away from you, there's an *art* to it. Of how do you that, and how you make it work. And we're really good at it. We're one of the best at it.

Are there any songs you will never perform?

I don't think so.

You told me once you didn't want to play "You Got Lucky" again.

You know what, though? We did that, and I really enjoyed it. I was surprised. See, you just don't know. Sometimes we'll go back to a song and I'll go, "That's a good one." [Laughs] Sometimes you've got to go away from them for a while. But nothing just leaps to mind that I don't want to play. "Breakdown" I don't want to play very often. I think because early in our career we played it *so* much, I think I relate it to being 25. It doesn't feel like a song I would sing now. But never say never. That's one we don't play very much. Hardly ever.

It's such a great song.

Yeah, it is. It's a great little record. When I hear it on the radio, I really like it.

You said earlier that you can't make a good record without a good song. But can you take a good song and not make a good record out of it?

Make a bad record out of a good song? Yeah, that could happen. I could see how you can do that. Well, the good thing about the studio is that you can fix anything. As opposed to life, where you can't. I think I like the studio so much, because just about anything can be fixed. You can find a way to make it work. If you're patient. I think I'm much better at making records than I used to be. I don't know if I'm *better*, but I know it's easier to make a record than it used to be. I'm *much* better at the whole thing, at the craft of putting one together.

Because it used to be that we didn't really know how it was done, and we were just kind of hoping. And fumbling through the dark. And, fortunately, some good stuff got made. Now I think as record producers, we're much sharper than we used to be. We can do it much quicker than we used to, and it's more fun that way. Because it's not so much fun to labor over a song for months and months in a studio.

It can get tedious.

Yeah. "Refugee" was a good 100 takes. It went on for days, weeks, months. You know, of coming back to it. It was a really hard record to get. I think if that song came along now, and we wanted to make the record, we'd make it really quickly, it would take us a day or two. But back then it took us a long time. I think we're just better record makers now. We know more about what not to do. What to leave out. We know as a group the *minute* something wrong happens. "Wrong! Don't do it!"

We'll usually run through something. Before we're going to do many takes. Maybe the first take we do, or the second, we'll go in and listen to it. And then everybody will make their notes. Like, This ain't working. Or, This bit *is* working. Let's concentrate more on this, or maybe there's not enough space. Maybe you should not play as much, or you should play more, or *whatever*. Or the tempo should change. But that's a good thing to do before you spend an hour playing the song, and you're all beat on it.

You seem to be in great shape. Do you regularly work out?

Yeah, I'm 53 now, and I have to work out a lot. I'll work out five or six times a week. Because it's so physical. The show is physical. And the traveling [laughs], and everything. I always say, "Teenagers would drop in my wake." [Laughter] Sometimes life really starts to go fast. And you really run. It's not unusual for us on a day on the road to wake up in one town, fly to the next town, do the sound check and the show, and then get back in the jet, and fly to the next town. So by the time you go to bed, you're in the third city that day. I defy many people to do it. [Laughs] It really takes a lot out of you. That's one of the things I always laugh about when people think, "Oh, your job is just jumping up onstage and playing." Try doing 150 plane rides in three months.

What kind of work-outs do you do?

I box, mostly. I box a heavy bag, and lift weights, and various other things. I have to be a little more diligent with it now than I used to.

Does staying in shape physically help the songwriting, too?

I think it helps everything. To stay mobile and physically fit helps everything. It helps your state of mind. Nobody wants a big fat Tom Petty out there. [Laughs]

I've heard you don't like to talk about the Echo album, because it was such a dark period for you. But that's a great album. It really holds up.

You know, that was my position for a long time. I didn't listen to *Echo*. That was one of the worst periods of my life. When I made that record. I was going through a divorce, and really life had just gone to hell. [Laughter] I was having a really hard time. Living alone. Rick Rubin [the producer] swears I wasn't there on that record. Yeah. So that's the best Tom Petty record that Tom Petty wasn't at. [Laughter]

I didn't play it for many years, and then we were driving into town one day, and it came on in the car, because Dana had been playing it, and I started to turn it off, and she said, "No, listen to this." And I did, I listened to it, and I really enjoyed it. It was so much fun, because I had *no* idea what was coming next. It was one of those records during which I had shut down *so* much, that I didn't even remember some of the songs. They came on and I said, "What's this?" I've never done that before. [Laughs]

But then again, there's other things like that. Rick Rubin came by the other day and gave me this boxed set of Johnny Cash. And there's a duet on there of me and Cash singing a Merle Haggard song called "The Running Kind." And it was a really good take, and I have no memory, at *all*, of us doing that. I can't remember it. I guess so much happened in that period, that I don't remember doing it. [Laughs] That's a nice surprise when you hear things like that.

But we did so much recording between *Wildflowers* and the end of *Echo*. There was a lot of recording done, with different projects like the Johnny Cash stuff. I still think that's the best Heartbreakers record. *Johnny Cash Unchained*. It's the best playing we ever did. I *love* that record. And I'm so proud that we did it, and did it so well. And now I guess there's more stuff on the boxed set that's come out. There's nine or ten tracks we did that didn't come out.



Cash, Petty, and Perkins

There was one night in the studio when Carl Perkins was there. And we were recording with Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins. And we had the *best* time. It was just a million laughs, till your ribs hurt. We were just *so* in awe of these guys, Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash, and I felt

so great when I was reading the liner notes, and Johnny wrote, "That was one of the greatest nights of my life." And that made me feel so good, because it was really one of mine, too. And I didn't know John felt that way about it.

What a voice he had.

What a *man*.

Was he healthy during that period?

Yeah, he was pretty healthy.

He would get sick at times. He would get very tired. But he was so determined. I know there would be times when he would just stop for an hour, and take a nap. He'd stop for an hour, and then come right back and hit it again. He was determined. Of course, he worked right to the end of his life and left such a great store of music. Just that thing Rick brought me was five CDs



Cash and Petty Live October '97

of unreleased music. You listen to it, and it's great.

So that was inspiring. That really inspired me to hear that boxed set. Cause I kind of struggle in the world with the fact that I'm getting older [laughs], and what do I have to offer? If I'm going to keep doing this, I want to make sure I have something to offer. So that kind of inspired me – look at *this* guy. He went much longer and really was relevant all the way out.

You've made great music both during times of great happiness and dark times. You made Echo during a dark time, and it's a great album.

Well, I'm glad you think so. It was a dark, dark time and I think some of that is reflected in the music.

I love the song "Counting On You" from Echo. It has kind of an R&B chorus, with that line, "There's a rumor going round..." It's a great record.

Yeah, "Counting On You." See, that was another one that I forgot about. Why didn't they put that out as a single? That was such a good single. I don't understand why they didn't release that. Why you would release "Room At The Top" as the single instead?

Well, "Room At The Top" is beautiful, but not a typical single.

It's *de-press-ing*! It's a depressing song. That's one thing that record companies do that kind of weirds me out in this day and age: They don't *listen* much beyond the first track. I kind of feel if I put "Counting On You" as the first track, that would have been the single.

They decide what is going to be the single. And you can go in and say, "No, you're wrong, this is going to be the single." But then you're dealing with a bunch of people who are going, "If this doesn't hit, it's not *my* fault. I told you." [Laughter] So you're kind of damned if you do and damned if you don't. So you try to get behind what they want to do. But I think that record had a lot of good songs. When I heard it recently, I just thought there were a lot of good songs that just didn't see the light of day.

The song "Echo" itself is beautiful. It has a gorgeous melody.

Long song. But it was a good song. But, again, it's not the most upbeat thing in the world.

You thought "Room At The Top" was a depressing song?

Yeah, I thought it was depressing. I thought it was a very lonely, removed song.

It's a nice opener for the album.

Yeah, it made sense to start the record that way. A lot of stuff that we've done, the nicest thing is that you can go back to it and it will hold up. I would be really disappointed if I went back and felt this was crap. And I don't really have that feeling about much of it. The one that annoys me the most is *Hard Promises*. Because I think it's mixed shitty. I would love to go back and mix that record.

But of all your albums, there's not one somebody could point to and say that its mostly filler. All of your records are packed with strong songs.

You're going to have your songs that stand out more than others. But I think they all serve their purpose. And there's always someone who's going to like a song you didn't dare dream they would.

If your fans wonder what you're going to be doing now, since you're not touring, what is the answer? You're programming the XM shows and working on songs for a new album?

Yeah, I'm almost done with the radio thing now. I think I'm going to do ten. And then we'll see how the show goes.

And my plan now is to start writing and recording. I don't know if we will get a record out this year. I think it will probably be next year. Then I think there will be another side project of putting out a live record. We did a live record in '84 and I never thought it was the great live album that this band should put out. And we've recorded so much stuff on the road. Really almost every show we've done on the road for years has been recorded.

It's the project now of Robert Scovill, our sound engineer on the road. He's sorting through these mountains of tapes. And he's going to bring me what he thinks are the best takes of a *lot* of different songs. So that's kind of another project we have going, to get this live album recorded and out at some point. If it went really quick, maybe it would be out this year. But I don't know yet because I haven't heard it.

When we did twenty nights at the Fillmore, all that was recorded. And we played 120 different songs over the twenty nights. So it could be an exciting thing. But it's just such a *huge* project, that if I was going to get too deep into it, I would never get anything done. So I've got Robert helping me, and whenever he gets it down to 20 or 30 tracks, that's when I'll get involved. He's going to give me choices of each song, and a list of songs, and then I think we can get it down to a two-CD album. I think it could be really good.

There's also talk of bringing out *Greatest Hits, Part II*. With maybe a new song on that. These are all things I don't know if they'll happen this year or the next.

Basically, I'm just trying to get the Heartbreakers' house in order. There's been a lot of projects that we'd like to do, but we just never had the time. So we're going to take the time this year. And it's going to be my job to oversee it all. The live album is one thing that has been there and has been neglected for years, because no one wants to take on all that work. And I think that we should make a new record. It's time. And that's always a long process of getting the material and then getting the record done.

To come up with that material, do you have to seclude yourself and get away from everything?

You kind of never stop writing, in a way. I kind of always think about it. I always have the guitar in my hand, and I always think about it. But when I know I'm going to make a record, I kind of dedicate a period of time to it, and sit down and really

dedicate myself to coming up with some music that I like, and which is worthy of recording. And that can be a lot of trial and error.

Over the last ten years, I've been writing a lot more than I use. The hardest part of it is that I don't think that I ever write a really bad song. But I write what I call my "A stuff" and my "B stuff." And sometimes the "B stuff" can be really deceiving. You want all "As." So usually there's a lot of stuff written, and it will be demoed up, in most cases.

The Heartbreakers have a club-house, with offices, and a stage where we can play. So for a long time we went there every day and played, with no agenda. Just jammed and played three or four hours a day. And it was all recorded. So one of the engineers has brought me several CDs of stuff they mixed down from that. And it's *really* good, some of it. The band would start to play, and I would improvise, and we'd see what we got. There's probably ten or twelve of those things that I would like to put out. But I don't want to put it out as a serious project. I just want to put them out to whoever is interested. [Laughs] So that's another thing.

For quite a while there, between tours, we were going there and playing. We did the *Tonight Show* about four times last year, and we'd used it to rehearse. And then it got to where we said, "Let's just come in every day and play for three or four hours, just to keep our hand in." And it's also a way of kind of exploring thing. Sometimes there would be ten minute jams on things, and then we'd sit and play it all back. And it was fun. And what I want is for people to hear how ridiculously good the band is.

Most of it starts with me playing through a chord progression once on guitar, and then they fall down on it, and you just can't believe how good they are on it. It's *staggering*. I'd really like people to hear it. I think there's a portion of the audience who would really enjoy that. So I think that's the kind of thing I could release through the website somehow.

This is what I would like to see happen with the website. Where it becomes an outlet for music. And there's another idea about making the website a kind of trading post for bootlegs. Because there are so many hundreds and hundreds of bootlegs. I would kind of like to make them authorized. To make a place where all these bootlegs can be attained. Maybe for a membership, you can have as many as you like [laughs]. If you're really into that sort of thing. So there's a lot of things that I want to get done with the website that I'm going to try to do this year. Not all of my fans will want bootlegs, but for those who do, I want to have that musical outlet on the website.

You spoke about the "B" songs and the "A" songs. Can you ever rewrite a "B" to make it an "A"?

Sometimes. Sometimes they're modular. Sometimes you'll say, "That song isn't really that great, but it has a really great bridge." [Laughs] Or it had a really great set of words in one verse. Maybe take that set of lyrics and try to make it work elsewhere. So sometimes they're modular. Like we're hunting for a middle-eight, and you say, "You know what? There was a really good one in this other song, and if we can make it fit into this rhythm, maybe it will work." Sometimes it does, sometimes it don't.

Does the band have much say into what they consider an "A" song or a "B" song?

The Heartbreakers really have never held back having their say about anything. [Laughter.] The phrase that comes up is "It's a rough room." [Laughter] "It's a really tough room." They are not short of opinions. Not an easy place. And that's good. For something to survive that room, it's got to be pretty good. Cause they're not shy at all about saying, "I don't like it." Between mainly Ben and Mike and myself, there's a lot of opinion in the room. But it's *good*. It's people who have played together since we were really young, and we know each other really well, and they know if I'm working where I should be.

When you write, you like to write alone mostly?

Yeah, pretty much. For *Full Moon Fever* and *Into The Great Wide Open* I wrote with Jeff Lynne quite a bit, nose to nose, in the same room. We did a lot of writing that way.



Mike Campbell

Mike [Campbell] and I have never written that way. It's usually by tapes. He'll do his bits, and send it to me.

On song like "You Wreck Me," which was based on Mike's music, does he give you a track with no singing, or is there a melody in place?

No, it's just a track. Almost always.

It's interesting, because that song has series of fast moving cascading chord changes, and the melody just floats over the top of it.

Yeah, that's the good thing about having two people write a song together. I might see a song completely different that he does. There are times when he sent me something, and I wrote the song, and he *liked* it, and he'd say to me, "You know, I had the chorus where you have the verse. It's completely turned around from the way I had it in my head, but I like this way better."

So he'll send me the chords, the basic track, and I'll write to that, and often write a bridge on my own and change a chord or two. But sometimes I don't change them at all. We have never, ever, sat down and tried to write a song together. But with Jeff, that's how it worked.

With Mike, have you ever given him a lyric first?

No, I've never done that. But that might be an interesting thing to do. [Laughs]

You said "You Wreck Me" took you years before you got it right.

It took a long time. I knew it was there [laughs] . It just needed to fall into place, the words. It was called "Mike's Song." [Laughs] It didn't have a title for a long, long time.

And then it was "You Rock Me."

Yeah, it was "You Rock Me" for a while. I knew that wasn't going to float. When it changed to "You Wreck Me," the whole song was right there in front of me.

That's a great example of the way one key word can change an entire song.

It really can. You've got to be careful with every line. It makes all the difference. And if it ain't there, it's worth waiting for.

You spoke about how the Heartbreakers are a great band, which is certainly no new news to your fans, but one great affirmation of that is when you played with Dylan.

Yeah, we've backed up a lot of the great ones by now.

With Dylan, nowadays in concert he'll often do songs which are so changed they are almost unrecognizable now. Did he do that with you guys or would he play his songs the same each night?

He would do that. He would change them from time to time. Though a lot of nights, he would play them the same way. He wasn't as radical as some people say, but some of the times, he would throw something out that we hadn't *ever* played. And you just had to get it, and get with it.

His way of doing shows is really different than our's. He's going after a different kind of thing. On some nights, it can be *really* spontaneous. I always thought, after those shows, that I played a *lot* of music. I'd always go back to the bus, or my room, and just feel completely drained, and I felt like, *wow*, I played a *lot* of music tonight.



Petty and Dylan late 80s

But I think Dylan, he did so much for this band. He really took us that extra mile. He made it a band that maybe it wouldn't have become, in a way. He showed us a whole different side of performing, and gave us a lot of courage that I don't think we'd have had. A lot of courage. Like, "Let's do it. Let's just throw this song down and do it."

Or "Let's change directions suddenly." And he's a genius at that.

We did a lot of rehearsing for that. But a lot of times, the show wasn't anything that we rehearsed. I guess it was kind of like working out. You build in your muscle, and then you use it. But we didn't always do what we rehearsed. You learned a whole bunch of songs, and then when you got to the show, it was a whole different set of songs.

Nowadays you will see him sometimes, and it can be hard to figure out which song he's playing, because he's changed it so much.

Well, he's a riddle wrapped in an enigma. [Laughs] It's hard to talk about Bob Dylan, cause I just don't have the answers. It's his vision. He's got one of the great minds of the 20th century. One of the true geniuses. There aren't many geniuses.

Are there any other messages for your fans that you want to impart that we didn't get to today?

[Laughs] We have really good fans. They've been really loyal. They're the greatest audiences to play to. If you'd never been to one of our shows, I think you'd be surprised at just how frenzied the thing is. It's really exciting, and the adrenaline is just going. Say I do a show at 9:00, it'll be dawn before I come down from it. It will be several hours after it before I really even make sense. I'll pace. I'll just be pacing around, and not really myself for a few hours. And then it will take me a *long* time to go to sleep, and then the process starts over again in the morning. You spend a day gearing to do it, and then a night getting over it.

Is it tough, the day of a gig? Are you comfortable?

Yeah, I've gotten to where I'm pretty comfortable. I don't really get nervous until about an hour before it. And then I have to be alone. It's everybody out of the dressing room. I need this hour to kind of set my mind, and think about what I'm going to do, and

get in that frame of mind. But up to then, I'm pretty okay. I've learned not to let that throw me. [Laughs] I'm not going to spend my day worrying about it.

It's a challenging thing to do day after day. You don't feel like doing it every night. That's another thing people don't think about. Some nights you just don't feel like doing it. But as soon as you hear [the audience], you do. You really count on them. And with a group like us, especially, the more they give you, the more you're going to give back. Our band *thrives* on the audience.

But I don't know if people understand what it's like for us. We've never been a band that hangs out after the show and shakes hands. There are a lot of musicians who want to hang out after a show and be told how wonderful they are, but we've never done that. I leave *immediately*. I leave the second the last chord is played.

Why is that?

Because, honestly, if I met you, or talked to you, I wouldn't hear you. I'd be in another place, nodding, smiling, shaking hands and not really listening to you, which gives you kind of a queasy feeling inside. And too much of that will make you nuts. And also I need to get where I'm going. Because I have another town to get to, and I've got to try to get a little bit of sleep before this thing starts again. So that's really the reason we don't hang around.

And I'm actually kind of a shy person. I'm a very private person [laughs]. To be a rock and roll star is an awkward position to put myself in, my particular personality and temperament. I don't do it that well. As far as being in a room with a *lot* of people in it, I get kind of shy and scared. And I don't know, maybe scared is not the right word. Those meet and greet things, *much* to the record company's aggravation, I just never have been able to do it, or do it very well. I see what other acts go through. The amount of stuff they do. To me, it's just far-out stuff. Just the amount of interviews they do. It's far-out to me, how they can do that.

When we were young, when we were kids, and we did a town, we'd do three radio shows, and do the show, and stay, and meet all the DJs and everyone. And you can do that for years, but I can't do it anymore. I haven't done it for many years. I kind of like to save all that energy up to get a really great show. If I spend my day talking, I'm not going to sing well that night. You can burn yourself out. So I just like to stay focused on what we came there to do.

Is it ever hard for you to play the old hits, or can you always find a way to connect with the older material?

You know, when you hear that big roar in the first couple of seconds of it, you connect.

That does it.

Kind of. Because you know they want to hear it so bad. So you pretty much connect. [Laughs] I think. If they hated them, I wouldn't connect. But, you know, "American Girl," is probably not what I would go to to play if I was playing. But they're clearly just overjoyed to hear it, that you kind of just swing with it. And it's fun.

Songs like that bring back parts of our lives –

And mine. It does the same for me. It brings back a part of my life.

And that song, and others you wrote back then, are still very powerful songs.

It's really a blessing to have those songs. You can't take that lightly, to have such a great catalog of songs that you enjoy and that hold up. It's really a blessing.

Where did all the great songs come from? Was it hard work, diligence, luck, or more?

I don't know. One at a time they came. I know this: we really loved doing it. We really loved doing it, and still do. It was never like work. It was like we would have done it anyway. It was a really enjoyable thing. I *loved* doing it.

When you did Full Moon Fever solo with Jeff Lynne, did you always know you would return to The Heartbreakers?

Yeah. I never ever thought I was going to leave The Heartbreakers. Maybe they did.

Will you do other solo albums?

Yeah, I think I will. I wouldn't be surprised. I think when I did the solo thing and The Traveling Wilburys, [the band] felt a little uncomfortable. You know, "Is he leaving? What's he doing?" I understand that. But I wasn't going to leave. It did me some good to have a little space. And when I came back to the band, I was really happy to be back. So I think that goes on with all of us. I think that's Mike's trip, you know, with his band. And I don't think he's going to leave The Heartbreakers. I think everybody just needs a little space from time to time.

But we all recognize and really respect what a good band it is. Whether we're angry with each other, or whatever's going on, we all respect *that*. We're not going to rock that boat. [Laughter] Nobody's going to come to the stage and not try to make it the great wonderful Heartbreakers. [Laughs] You know? It's a pretty happy family, after all.