

SOME PEOPLE; they won't stop talking, others don't even want to start. Tom Petty, he's most definitely in the latter camp. "I hate to sit down and talk about what I did in the past," says Petty, "because I didn't do anything in the past, nothing of any consequence anyway."

We're enjoying that least satisfying of interview situations, the transatlantic phone-call, Tom Petty and I. And the reason I'm talking to him is that, if you don't know it already, Tom Petty and his band the Heartbreakers are responsible for what is undoubtedly the finest American debut album to come my way and a lot of other people's way in a long time.

Anyway, about this mist-shrouded past of Mr. Petty's — the lack of information began by way of the Shelter Records biography which accompanied Tom's platter. It was, how you say, a little less than forthcoming, one of those 'let the music do the talking' numbers in the form of a mock interview with TP during the course of which nothing was revealed. And sure, of course it don't matter one jot who or what is making the music — particularly when it's as fresh and exciting as Tom Petty's indubitably is but all the same it's only natural to be curious.

Fortunately Tom Petty isn't that secretive at all. It's not that he has anything to hide (no, it isn't Jobriath with a nose job), simply — like he says — that there ain't too much to tell.

Turns out Tom was born and raised in Florida, playing in local bands until three years ago when, as part of a combo revelling in the somewhat less than earth-shattering name of Mudcrutch, he moved west in search of fame and fortune.

Petty played bass with Mudcrutch, it seems, and was one of three singers who also wrote original material.

"They were sorta popular in the South but we cut out because everything started getting sort of flannel shirts and barbecued blues down there. And I got more of a pop consciousness — the bands that turned me on were all the English groups from the 'sixties and from there I got into other things. In other words, I dig Slim Harpo and Jimmy Reed and all that but I got it sorta second-hand from the Stones. So I couldn't really get behind the Lynyrd Skynyrd trip at all."

As it turned out the three-way pull within Mudcrutch broke up the band by the time the lights of LA loomed on the horizon. Little or no legacy remained. "We recorded a lot of demos but all they ever released was a cassette-mixed single that nobody was very happy with," Tom recalls.

Fortunately for Petty he'd already made some good

connections on the West Coast, one of them being producer Denny Cordell.

"He called me up just before I left Florida and asked me to stop over in Tulsa and do some demos. Finally I decided to just do a solo album. I started to do the whole session thing with Gordon and Keltner and all the session players but I didn't dig that at all because good as they are it wasn't a rock band. So that never really

got off the ground because I couldn't really get behind it."

Next, Tom met Leon Russell of Shelter. "I hung out for a while and then gradually met these guys — The Heartbreakers. They were all guys that I knew in Florida who had come out to LA over the last few years. And one night I went into the studio to do a demo and they were all there and they were all so good that after we'd done a couple of tracks we

decided to make a band."

FOR SOME remarkable reason known only to the US rock press the album caused little initial excitement when released last winter. One of the people who did get worked up about it however was Al Kooper. Kooper had met Petty back at the time of the aborted 'super session' album and had liked his songs. When the album came out Kooper asked Petty and

the Heartbreakers to join his then current tour. Part of what went down is now etched on vinyl in the form of a one-sided 'official bootleg' album just put out out Stateside by Shelter.

Like I said when I picked TP and the Heartbreakers as one of the acts most likely to be big when *SOUNDS* did its usual writers' predictions number back in January, a whole lot depended on how well the group could recapture the raunchy fizz generated by the record. Happily they do just that and more on the four tracks on the 'boot'. Kicking off with a splendid 'Jaguar and the Thunderbird', one of Chuck Berry's least trampled over 'classics', the bootleg features versions of 'Luna' and 'Fooled Again (I Don't Like It)' that are every bit as invigorating as the albums originals.

Finally there's a new band composition 'Dog On The Run', once again a more than worthy addition to the already dud-free Petty canon. "It was cut at a smallish club in Boston with about two hundred people in," says Tom. "I was real nervous about it at first because it was only about the sixth time we'd played live and it was done on a four-track machine in this bus outside the club."

Petty himself has only heard the recording over the airwaves it turns out. All the same the extensive airplay it's been getting seems to be sufficient approval for the quality of its contents. "I really didn't want to do a live album," says Tom, "because everybody and his brother seems to be doing that these days."

After a short break for Christmas the band are now working again, drawing enthusiastic responses every place they play and finally getting radio exposure for the album.

We finally get to talk about influences, albeit in a somewhat roundabout way. See, there's a whole thing about 'influences' when it comes to the 'critical' side of writing about rock'n'roll that I'd particularly avoided in the case of Tom Petty's album. It basically hinged on the old sore about the difference between an influence and a steal. Now to me it doesn't really matter where one ends and the other begins as long as the final result is enjoyable of itself. 'Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' is a precise case in point.

Sure, it did remind me of a lot of other things at first but that wasn't what got me excited. What caused the buzz was the whole package — the songs, Petty's vocals, the various instruments. So where's the point in nit-picking? To me it was just a simple case of conveying as

much of the buzz I'd gotten off the album as written words would permit.

All the same I have to agree that picking out the various threads that make up the whole can be amusing. The English aspects we've touched on already, although I'd probably never go as far as the American writers who've apparently compared Tom to Graham Parker, even if there are obvious parallels in what both men have listened to along the line, principally in the form of one Van Morrison.

MIND YOU, 'influences' can be used as a cudgel too. Seems Tom just got a particularly heavy put-down from Lester Bangs, an American writer who once used to like rock'n'roll. "He said everything I did sounded like Bruce Springsteen," says Tom. "And the thing is I'd never heard any of his records. I'd seen him play once and liked him but I didn't buy any of his albums until after this review. So I got his albums and it just sounded to me like he'd heard a lot of Van Morrison. So maybe that's where it came from because I went through a time when I really listened to a lot of Morrison too."

Other times influences can pay off. Petty's 'American Girl' for example, is a very undisguised tribute to the sound of the Byrds. Anyway, turns out Roger McGuinn really liked the song. Liked it so much in fact that he's covered it on his upcoming album. "That knocked me out because I really did like the Byrds very much when I was back in Florida and growing up."

The connection goes further than a mere cover version it turns out, with McGuinn having invited the Heartbreakers to join him on the road later this month. "Roger's a really great guy," says Tom. "But when we first met he kept calling me a punk. He thought that was really funny but I didn't know what he was talking about. I know the punk thing is very big in England but in the States we checked out CBGB's when we played New York and it seems to me that it's eighty percent image and twenty percent music. And we're not against image — that's why none of us are weighing two hundred pounds and wearing straw hats — but it seems to me that it's the music that should be more important."

I tell Tom not to worry about the music — if the bootleg's anything to go by there ain't a thing to worry about.

"Well," he draws, "I don't usually get too excited about bands but I'm real excited about this one."

And, oh yeah, Tom says he just heard this morning that a British and European tour are definitely on the cards, possibly as soon as late March, early April. By the way Tom, how long you been playing?

"Don't know. I guess I never really counted."

Hot potato Tom Petty (remember where you read about him first) tracked down courtesy of the GPO

MYSTERY MAN

by
GIOVANNI
(I canna
pick 'em)
DADOMO

