



“I don’t know the ins and outs of string making. I just know the sound I like.”

Jeff Lynne
Electric Light Orchestra

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Pop evangelism

Tom Petty's rock fervor

By Mikal Gilmore

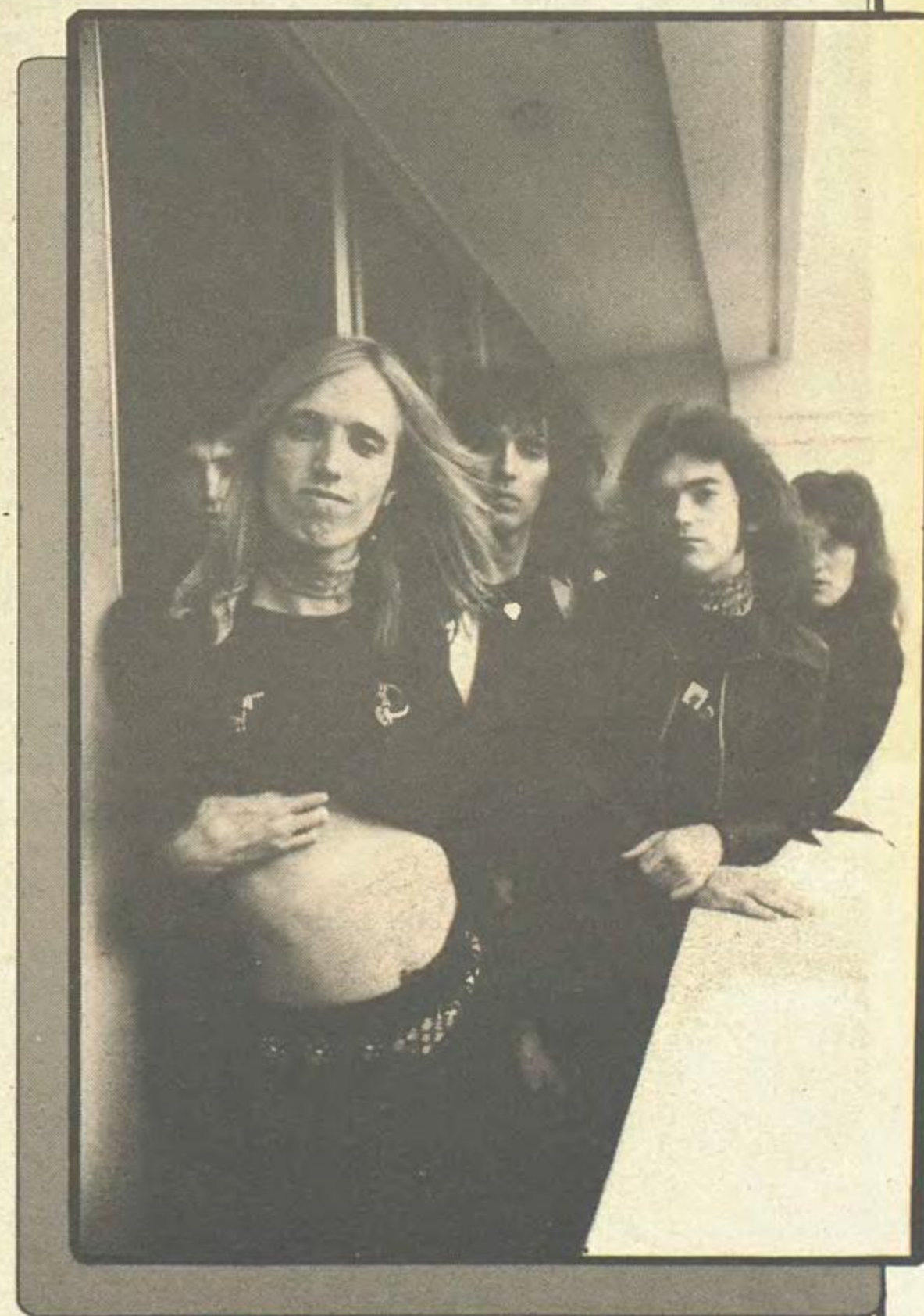
LOS ANGELES—Tom Petty has been touched by the spirit. Backed by his band, the Heartbreakers, the emaciated Petty prowls the Whisky's stage, scanning the audience with a serpentine squint and then spraying them with his Flying-V guitar. When he sings his "Fooled Again" like Van Morrison in delirium, you believe him. His pinched face and wispy blond

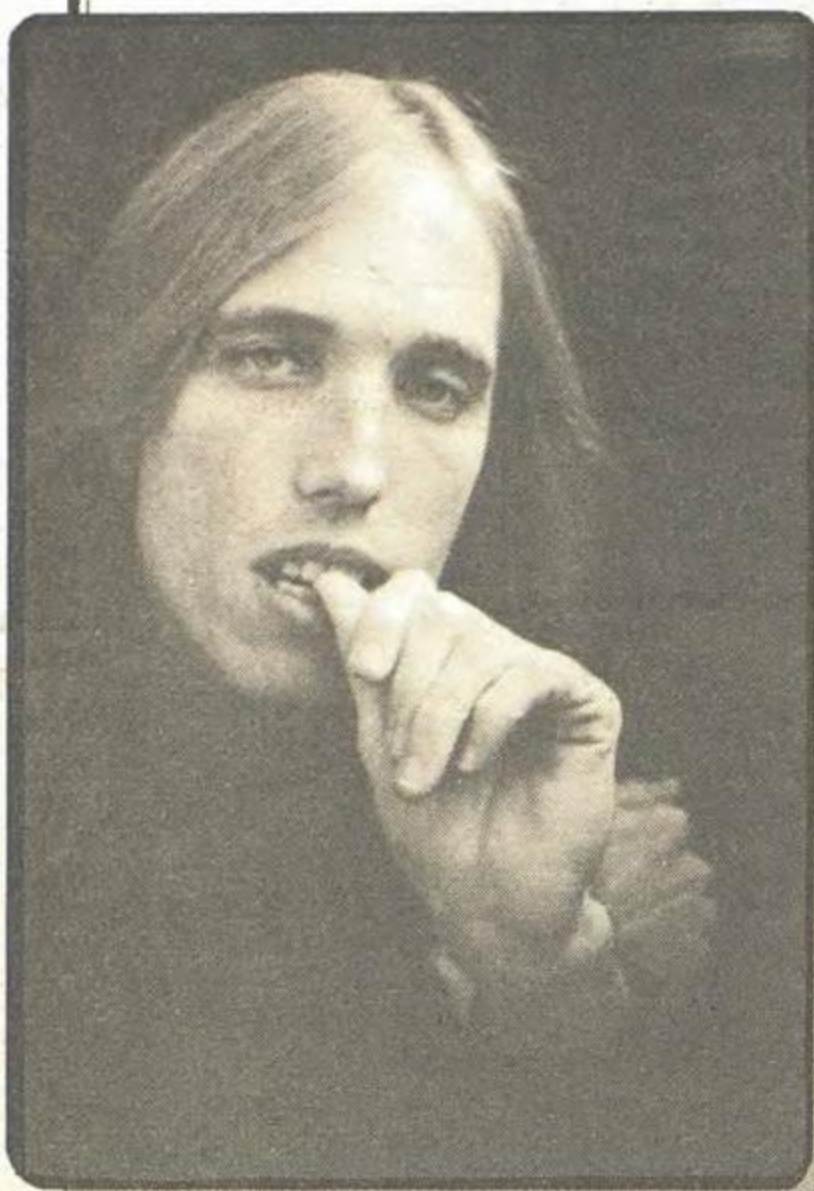
hair, ablaze in a crimson light, heighten the tension in the Heartbreakers' music. It's all powerful testimony, and the audience fans the spirit with a volley of exhortations and clenched fists.

Petty and the Heartbreakers have been generating a modest but steady wave of such zealous responses since the release last winter of their good-time rock & roll debut LP, *Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers*. Critics have been especially kind to them, comparing the band's melodic hard-rock to that of Van Morrison and Roger McGuinn.

But Petty prefers an adversary relationship with critics, favorable or not. Speaking recently as he began work on his second album at the Sound City studios in Van Nuys, Petty recalled his dismay over his initial reviews. "I never paid much attention to the rock press until I started seeing things about me," he said with a modest Southern accent. "It's so jivey. I found myself looking things up in the dictionary a lot just to see what the guy's saying. And shit, if I'm doing that, who knows what in the hell the guy's talking about? Who is he writing this to? And then I have to ask, who am I making [Cont. on 33]"

Touched by the spirit (left to right): Campbell, Tom Petty, Blair, Tench and Lynch





ance, and the Heart-breakers were formed that night.

Petty's commitment to rock & roll approaches religious fervor. "We're a rock & roll band," he says. "We ain't no punk band, we ain't folk rock, jazz rock, or any of that bullshit. Just rock, and we don't put no other name on it than that. We'd be stupid if we did." And Petty is not satisfied that his first album got that message across.

"I like the album," he says, "but I think we're way out in front of it live. We're a better rock band now; the sound is

bigger. When I hear that album it sounds like *Afermath* or *Flowers* or one of those records: kind of crude, but right in there. The live show gets down to the floor."

As Petty speaks, the Heart-breakers are gathered across the room watching a videotape of one of their February shows at the Whisky. "I was really sick that night," Petty says, glancing intermittently at the screen. "It hurts just to watch this. . . . But it always helps to have a few rows of girls up front—that just makes it more rock & roll. If you take any of the physical components away, it isn't the same. I tear my fingers, throw my knee out, bruise myself, batter myself."

On the screen, the band finishes "Dog on the Run," a moody Dylanesque rocker, and then disappears from the stage. "What? No encore?" asks an engineer making some microphone adjustments close by. "You know, the more you give, the more you get."

"No," corrects Petty, donning his best snake smirk and citing a prime rock & roll axiom: "The more you get, the more you get."

'I'd never listened to Slim Harpo or Jimmy Reed until I got into the Stones, but I was completely up on Elvis. Next thing the Beatles were here and I was just gone.'

Tom Petty

[Cont. from 30] records for? I ain't making records for somebody who's going through their dictionary. I'm making records for kids, for rockers. We're just trying to spread the word."

Not surprisingly, Petty's pop evangelism springs from a Southern background (he was raised in Gainesville, Florida) and the secondhand source of radio and records (rather than the more classic wellsprings of live gospel and blues). "I'd never listened to Jimmy Reed or Slim Harpo until I got into the Stones' albums," Petty explains, "but I was completely up on Elvis. I was real weird over him. The next thing, the Beatles were here and I was just gone. I had a purpose."

From the age of 14, Petty belonged to a baker's dozen of rock amalgamations in the Gainesville area. The last was Mudcrutch, which included Mike Campbell and Benmont Tench, the guitarist and keyboard player respectively for the present-day Heartbreakers. Northern Florida, however, was less than hospitable to an English-sounding band. By 1973, Mudcrutch had relocated in Los Angeles, where Shelter's Denny Cordell took an interest in them. But by the time the band entered the studio, the freshness had worn off and they split of mutual accord, leaving Petty as a solo Shelter artist. Two years later, while assembling material and musicians for an album, Tom regrouped with his former Mudcrutch cohorts and fellow Floridians Ron Blair, on bass, and drummer Stan Lynch, for a late-night session. There was an immediate, sympathetic exuber-

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