Number 10 35p

DARK STAR

Tom Petty

C S & N

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Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' debut album on Shelter released early this year is quite simply the most impressive first outing for any American band that I've heard in years. Their Gainesville, Florida origins and the extensive coverage they've received in the music press here do not disqualify them as candidates for a major feature in DARK STAR. Hopefully, this article will attempt to do three things: First of all it will attempt to provide an extensive chronicle of the band's history; secondly, in setting out the band's history I hope it will become clear the extent to which the band falls within the sphere of Dark Star's declared West Coast interests; and finally, the lavish praise heaped on the band by the music press and the intrinsic qualities of the album aside, I want to try and give some indication of why, with such a comparatively brief track record, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers are a force-to-be-reckoned-with.

Tom Petty, 24 years old and one quarter Cherokee Indian, grew up in Gainesville. His first idol in the world of rock'n'roll was Elvis. At eight or nine he was taken by his uncle to a movie set in Florida where Presley was shooting one of those hokey movies he churned out in the early sixties. Petty was introduced to Elvis and remembers being impressed by all those good-looking chicks losing their heads over him. At eleven he acquired a bunch of the King's singles secondhand, including some of the Sun material.

But orgasm came in the form of The Beatles when he saw them on the Ed Sullivan show in 1964. That was the Don't-Look-Back point for Petty. He got his first guitar and began learning songs and chords from Beatles and Stones songbooks. He let his hair grow and within about three years was playing in local bands. As with any self-respecting rock'n' roller, as gigs became more frequent, school became more of a drag and after going through up to a dozen different bands, he eventually settled down to just one or two. The scene was local teen dances at first as none of them were old enough to drive, mostly Friday and Saturday nights with occasional battles of the bands, the winners qualifying for month-long residencies. The gigs would be four or five sets a night playing the latest Rolling Stones album from start to finish. Petty remembers the Gainesville music scene with some affection. Gigs were plentiful - high school dances, parties and concerts at the nearby University of Florida, roadhouses and bars (using fake IDs).

Older musicians from whom Petty used to learn licks included future Eagles Bernie Leadon, and Don Felder who used to live across the park. By 1973, Mudcrutch, with whom Tom played bass and whose number also included Heartbreaker Mike Campbell on guitar, were the most popular band in Northern Florida. It has been printed elsewhere that Heartbreakers keyboards player Benmont Tench was also a member of Mudcrutch. This is unsubstantiated and the reasons for this misconception are possibly to be found in Tench's role in the formation of Petty's current band, about which more below. Two reasons seem to have dictated the next stage in Mudcrutch's (and Petty's) development. Boogie fever a la Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynrd and the Outlaws was just beginning to sweep the Southern States. Petty recalls, "Wherever you turned there were dozens of slide guitars jammin' for what seemed like days on end. Things really got quite outta hand and degenerated into tuneless triple live boogie albums." Petty claims he never identified very strongly with the South apart from rhythm'n' blues. He listened to Percy Sledge, Otis, Pickett and Slim Harpo (whose "Scratch My Back" was an outtake

Stan Lynch Tom Petty

from the album because of the abundance of original songs), Jimmy Reed, tastes developed mostly secondhand via British bands like The Beatles and the Stones. Also, there were no recording studios in Florida. It was starve in New York or starve in LA. Mudcrutch borrowed 100 dollars for gas and headed for LA. Armed with a home-made demo tape, they began approaching record companies for appointments. Within a week, no less than seven companies had offered them studio time on the strength of the tape. The band immediately high-tailed it back to Florida for rehearsals and to tie up personal loose ends before heading back to LA for the grand slam. The night before they were due to set off they got a call from Denny Cordell of Shelter Records with whom they'd left a copy of their demo. Cordell suggested that if they were motoring West, why not stop off at Shelter's studio in Tulsa and do some demos. They did and instantly hit it off with Cordell spending twenty hours straight in the studio. By the spring of 1974 they were back in LA, and in August they signed with the label without even bothering with the other record companies.

Mudcrutch collapsed almost immediately, for two reasons, Petty claims. The band was unable to adjust to working in a studio, and, with no less than three songwriters in the band, there was friction about what was going to be recorded. After one particular dispute Petty and another member of the band handed in their cards and left. The band folded almost immediately, leaving only a lot of unreleased demos and a cassette-mixed single with which nobody was very happy.

But Petty stayed on in LA living in a six bucks a night Hollywood motel, surviving on the publishing retainer Shelter was paying him and hanging out a lot with Cordell through whom he got to meet musicians of the calibre of Al Kooper, Jim Gordon, Jim Keltner, John Sebastian... The object was a solo album but nothing ever came of it, Petty being somewhat overwhelmed by the LA professional studio session thing. The other important event during this period was a call from Leon Russell, Cordell's partner at Shelter. Russell had heard the original Mudcrutch demos, been impressed by one of Tom's songs, "Lost In Your Eyes", and invited him to work on some new songs with him. The project was an album Russell had in mind using a different producer on each track, to be done at his own 40-track home studio. Petty looked on in awe as the likes of Brian Wilson, Terry Melcher, George Harrison and Bobby Womack drifted in and out of the sessions. The album never came out as Russell had just got married.

Then, early in 1976, Russell left LA to tour giving Petty the run of his mansion and studio where he spent about four months working on his own songwriting. But Cordell and Russell, both of whom Tom dug, were at that stage falling out over Shelter leaving an embarrassed Petty in the middle. Either way, two things seem to have sunk into Petty as a result of these experiences. The LA session trip, playing with musicians five minutes after you'd shaken

hands with them for the first time, wasn't his scene, as educational as it had been. Secondly, Cordell, with whom he shared a lot of musical tastes, must have exercised a considerable influence on the lad in reinforcing his belief in the great British bands of the mid-sixties. "Denny's a pleasure for me to work with, and I definitely think he's the sixth member of the band. I think Cordell is one of the greatest producers in history. He is in my top five... Denny might go through a ten-hour session and he won't say anything, never open his mouth and then I know we're doin' fine. He's sort of a sounding board to us, you know, to tell us, 'You had it an hour ago and you passed it. Why don't we change tunes and do it again in the morning'. He's a good balancer. And he's a real rock'n' roller. What's funny to me is that he's also a record business executive. He's the only honest one I've ever met. He's spent so much time with musicians that he can't help but take the musician's side of things."

"He don't produce a lot of albums anymore. I'm always saying to him, 'Why don't you go ahead and do that album you were gonna do?' He's been out of the public eye for a while but he'll be back."

If Petty's claims for Cordell seem excessive it's well worth remembering his record which includes no less than four or five landmarks in singles production - "Go Now" for The Moody Blues, "Night Of Fear" and "Flowers In The Rain" for The Move, Procul's "Whiter Shade Of Pale" and Joe Cocker's "With A Little Help From My Friends". But the reason I call that roll is not so much to retrieve a reputation as to show where Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers are coming from musically. Petty himself says;

"I don't have much use for a tune that you can't play on the radio. Whether it's two minutes or twenty minutes. "Layla" was a really long song, but it was definitely a radio song. I don't believe in filler at all. I used to hate that, you know. I'd get a Stones album and there was never no filler on the thing. And if I got the Swinging Blue Jeans album, there might be two killers and the rest are just remakes of "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On". I could never do that in any conscience."

But we're jumping the gun a little here. First we'd better get the band together. So, on with our history lesson.

We left Tom in something of a dilemma, not particularly wanting to do a solo album, but burned by his experience with Mudcrutch and not particularly wanting to go through that again. He still had a recording deal and a publishing deal, though Denny had never leaned on him too hard to put anything out just for the sake of 'product'. The Heartbreakers were all guys Tom knew in Florida. Benmont Tench (keyboards) was called up by an engineer who could get him some studio time to see if he had any songs he wanted to cut. He called up all the musicians he knew who happened to be from Gainesville. Finally, Tom came by the studio to do a demo, heard the band, did a few tracks with them, and immediately decided to stay. They did "Strangered In The Night", Tom rushed off to Malibu to play the

tapes to Denny. Denny dug it and they went straight to work on an album, acting as guinea pigs in an unfurnished new studio Shelter were building in Hollywood. That was last June of 1976.

The band's name, Petty maintains, is misleading; "The point is that it is a group. It's not me and my back-up band. I joined that band and I want that to be known, that it's a band." The reason it's billed as Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, he claims, is because of his existing contract with Shelter.

The recording details of the album are interesting. With only two songs, "Strangered In The Night" and "Hometown Blues", in his pocket plus rehearsal standards by Bo Diddley, The Yardbirds, Stones, Bobby Fuller, Slim Harpo, recording was completed in just fifteen days - fifteen songs, fifteen consecutive nights. From his days with Leon Russell, Petty had learned to write quickly and what happened was that he'd come into the studio in the late afternoon alone and sit down and write a song. When the band turned up with Cordell at about nine, they'd spend the rest of the night working the song out, arranging and recording until dawn; one night, one cut. Apart from the ten songs on the album, the band cut four more originals plus the aforementioned Slim Harpo classic.

The final mixdown was completed by August. The album came out last winter before the band had really gigged live. Al Kooper, who'd worked on Petty's solo sessions and liked his songs - Petty maintains Kooper's presence was the only thing that held him together at all during his solo phase - heard the album, liked it, and persuaded the Heartbreakers to join him on tour. In the meantime they'd rushed back to Florida to rehearse, a couple of small bar dates, an auditorium with Kiss (???) and then off on tour. Their sixth date, on December 12th last, was a small club in Boston. Five tracks from that gig were recorded on a four-track Teac recorder and released as a single-sided promotional 'official bootleg' album. The American pressing has one track less than the one sent out here. The band rocked out on Chuck Berry's "Jaguar And Thunderbird", three songs on the album ("Fooled Again", "Luna" and "The Wild One Forever") and a nine-minute plus version of a Petty original not on the album entitled "Dog On The Run" which proved conclusively to the British press that the band could certainly cut the mustard live. "Dog", for instance, is based on a killer riff reminiscent of the best of "Sticky Fingers" and "Exile On Main Street" which puts the band through its full dynamic paces. Understandably, it's now a collector's item fetching up to £30.

'"It was never intended to be out like it is. It did us a lot of good and in the States it's played more than the album. Whoever's decision it was, it was probably the right decision to get the name of the band around, but we didn't really want to do a live album at the time."

"Just before the band left America, we did a session at the Record Plant in Sausalito, San Francisco. We were doin' a radio concert and what you do is you go in, it's 24 tracks, you get a sound, there's a small audience of about 30 people in the studio, and they play it over the radio. The day before I was

going down, Al Kooper called and said, 'Hey, can I come down and see that everything goes right?' So this was sort of Al's baby. He sat in and he did a great job. There was nothing you could overdub and it came out really well. And I got this really paranoid feeling that someone was going to press it up and start sending it around."

Since the tour with Kooper they've gigged continually on bills as diverse as Bob Seger, The Runaways, The Atlanta Rhythm Section and Roger McGuinn. Petty's connection with McGuinn has been the source of some misunderstanding, mainly because of the song that closes the album. "American Girl" instantly struck most reviewers as vintage Byrds pastiche-high-pitched nasal vocals, Rickenbacker jingle jangle guitar sound and an instantly memorably high-flying tune. McGuinn himself was sufficiently impressed to cut the song for "Thunderbyrd" earlier this year.

"We played with Roger three nights running in one place, so the audience was getting a big dose of "American Girl". We did two shows a night, so we were all hearing it four times a night. The last night we did it together, that was an interesting version there; it was very different from either one of them. We did it in kinda like Everlys harmony, the two of us. I played guitar with his band so you can imagine how that altered things. I played louder than his whole band, I think. But the McGuinn thing has gotten highly out of proportion. I like Roger McGuinn; Roger McGuinn is a friend of mine. I admired The Byrds, I didn't live daily with The Byrds. I have no intention of imitating The Byrds, of being the new Byrds. I dug Roger and Roger turned me on to Dylan. But there are so many influences. I think that came about because he cut the song."

"American Girl" was just a song he wrote on Bicentennial July 4th without particularly thinking in terms of a homage or rip-off of The Byrds. "I'm flattered that he did it, but it's not my favourite song. And he's probably the same way. I think he thinks I'm sort of a punk or something, and he has a few kids, you know." The punk pigeonhole has been another problem for Petty; "When I did that album cover, that day I had on a leather jacket and some bullets, and there is this never ending stream of questions, like, 'Why are you wearing the bullets?' 'Are you in the punk-rock movement?' We're not a punk band. We're just a working rock'n'roll band. Since we've put an album out all we've tried to do is get better. And I think some bands don't. Some bands immediately, with the slightest bit of success, lay back. Still, at last there are a lot of young bands playing again. For a long time the young bands were just joining the old bands. The word punk was a stupid name. Everybody knew it was. New Wave is probably stupid, too. What I don't dig is that there is very little music involved in it... a great deal of stance... but very little music. It seems to me that a lot of these bands get their stance way in front of the music."

Which isn't something the Heartbreakers can be accused of. All four dates I saw during their recent tour - two supporting Nils Lofgren whom for my money they blew off the stage, and two headlining in their own right (at the Rainbow and Friar's, Aylesbury) - confirmed my hopes that this band is gonna be really big. All five members of the band are excellent - drummer Ron Blair and bass Stan Lynch comprise an excellent rhythm section, Mike Campbell plays some scorching lead, Tench's keyboards are equally adaptable to the swirling neo-psychedelic menace of "Luna" or simply rocking out on "Dog On The Run". Petty's compositions are, so far as I've heard, dud-free, and that includes three unrecorded songs previewed on the tour - "Surrender", "Listen To Her Heart" and "I Need To Know". Petty's own rhythm playing (he mostly sticks to a 1965 Strat., occasionally switching to a Telecaster) underpins his tightly-structured sub-four-minute songs with a chording sense that makes you long for the sixties all over again.

The Heartbreakers have got the looks, the songs, and the musical ability to cut straight across the prejudicial age barriers that separate Radio One listeners from Dead Heads.

Don't miss them when they come back and if you only buy one more album this year, get this one. I think they're gonna be around for a long time.

ROD McSHANE

Thanks to Tom for the interview and most of all for songs that remind us that singles aren't dimly remembered archaeological relics which pre-date 1967.

All Petty photographs by Adrian Boot.