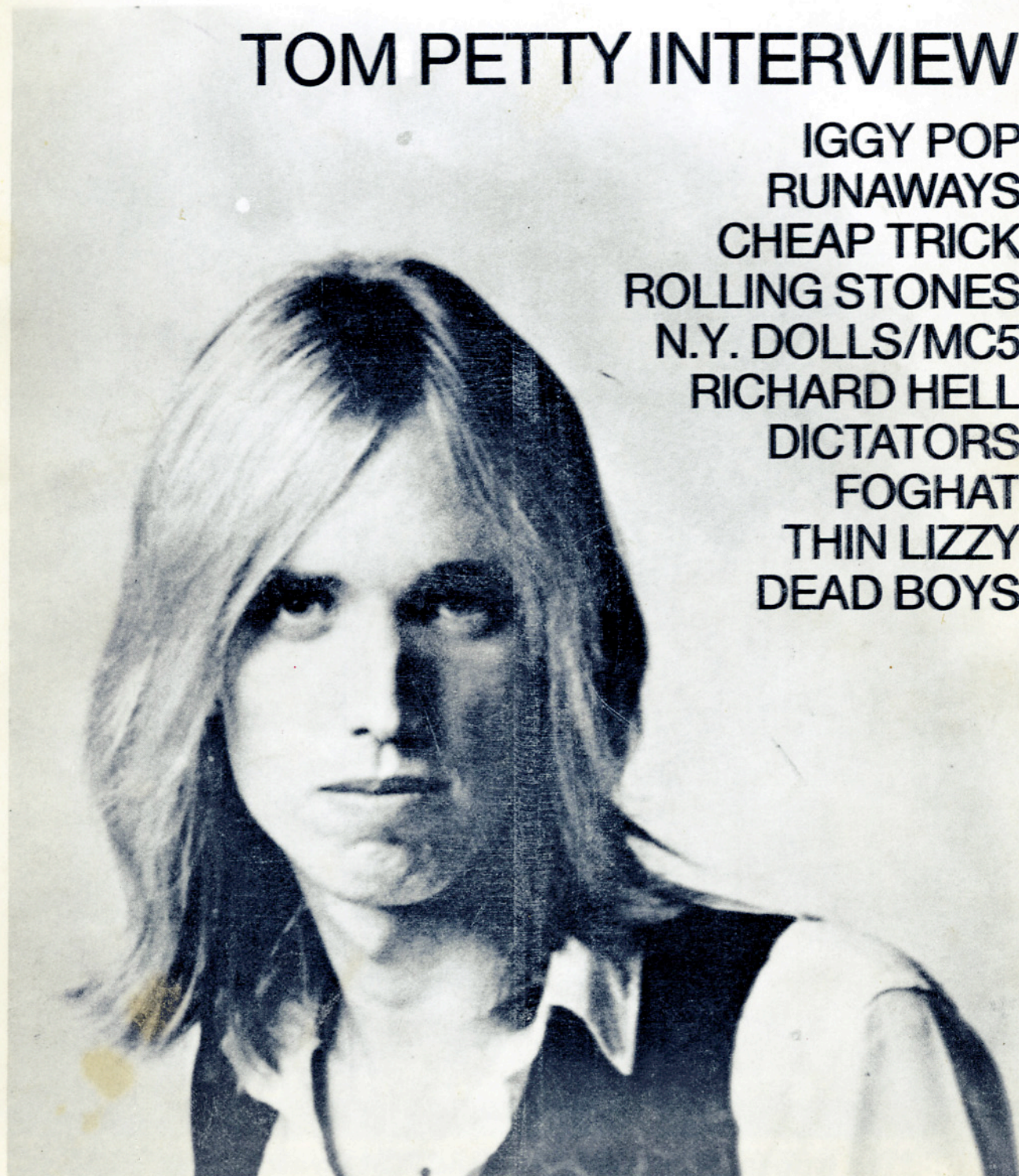


BACK DOOR MAN

TOM PETTY INTERVIEW



IGGY POP
RUNAWAYS
CHEAP TRICK
ROLLING STONES
N.Y. DOLLS/MC5
RICHARD HELL
DICTATORS
FOGHAT
THIN LIZZY
DEAD BOYS

Tom Petty Tom Petty Tom Petty

**"CALL ME A PUNK
AND I'LL FUCKING CUT YOU!"**

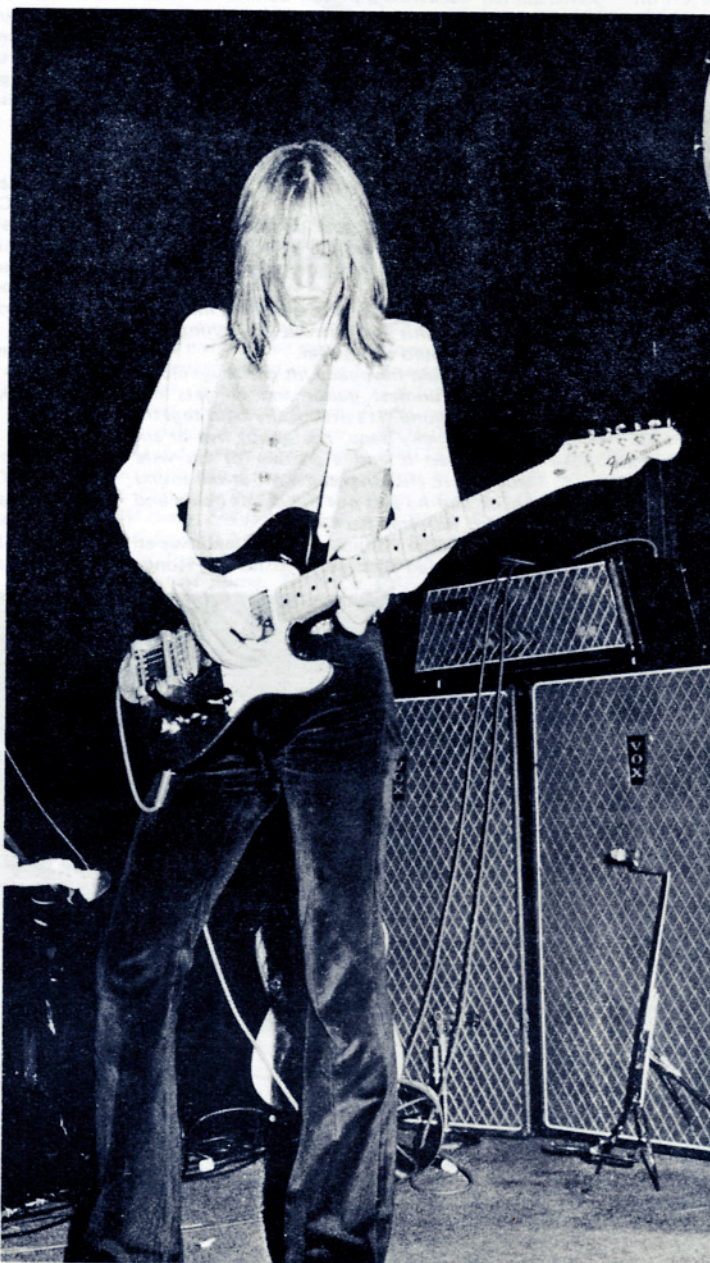
Just what the fuck is going on here, anyway? I, for one, would like to know what happened to scandal? Where are the reincarnations of Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper now that we need them most? What we need is a rock & roll Rona Barrett to fill us in on the gossip, the real behind-the-scenes dirt. (Say Lisa, are you available?) The *National Enquirer* meets *Rolling Stone* — The new Hollywood Confidential.

What is this world coming to when pop stars wait until the tape runs out to speak their alleged minds? In my day, pop stars raised a few eyebrows — they were either bigger than Jesus or they pissed on walls — now all one has to do is call these same stars old farts and they get press.

Tom Petty, a native of Florida who now resides in Los Angeles' own San Fernando Valley (where they make lots of soap and lampshades) pulled this on *BDM*. After close to one full hour spent discussing today's music scene he waited until the tape supply ran out to say: "Now that the tape is gone . . ." and proceeded to talk over everything from the Aerosmith/Nugent/Kiss stadium rock events to the recent rash of Van Morrison imitators (Springsteen, Willy DeVille, Graham Parker, Phil Lynott). Ah well, one must learn to live with the fact that one may never know what Tom Petty really thinks about Gene Simmons' codpiece, Steven Tyler's scarves, or Bruce Springsteen's jersey.

Petty, who has an incredibly deep voice for someone of his slight build, had plenty to say about the new wave while the tape was running. And for one who is supposedly a part of this scene, his angle of vision is comparatively wide. And why shouldn't it be? When the debut lp by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers was released the term "new wave" had not yet come into common usage. Only through touring with new wave bands and playing at new wave clubs did he become associated with this group of upstarts. It had nothing to do with taking a stand against established rock acts for the youth of today.

The fact is that Tom Petty cares for very few of these new bands — "... they're not hip. Nobody is really playing music. It's insulting to me and I think it insults the kids. Are they (punk musicians) in it for the music or are



they in this for just stance? Or, are they just trying to get chicks? Are they having trouble getting girlfriends, is that the problem? The new wave is a fact, there is a new wave, but god it's corny, ain't it?"

Well, corny or not, the new wave is a fact: By the time you read this the Sex Pistols will have been signed to Warner Bros. Records here in the States and their debut lp, brilliantly titled *Another Load of Bollocks from the Sex Pistols*, will be out. They will also have pulled off a major publicity stunt by advertising the album in the *Wall Street Journal*. (After all of their troubles they deserve all the success in the world.) Also, Stiff Records (the world's most flexible record label) will be distributed by Columbia Records (the world's largest record label) here in the U.S. Mercury Records will soon be starting its own new wave subsidiary label and Sire will have damned near cornered the market.

Not to mention that every Los Angeles newspaper has reported on punk rock, as has *Time*, *Newsweek* and NBC's "Tomorrow" and "Weekend" shows. It was even satirized on "Fernwood Tonight." Then there's that matter of new wave fashion in major department stores.

The point is that new wave music is finally catching on — slowly, but catching on nonetheless. The majority of the record buying public turn to Boston, Heart or Foreigner for new sounds, however the tide is slowly turning. What was once an elite few has become an elite few more — those who are turning the other cheek and inserting a safety pin into it.

On top of the new wave acceptance list is Tom Petty — he gets more FM radio airplay than any other new wave band — hell, more than all the others combined. He has also toured with a few major bands and done some live radio broadcasts. With play lists as tight and concert promoters' openings as few as they are, this is a feat that deserves a hand.

Tom Petty and his Heartbreakers, for these reasons, will be around with a very few other new bands when this whole scene capsize. They play rock & roll the way it's meant to be played — free of pretensions, set concepts, and rules of thumb — just like the Stones did, or the Byrds, Zombies,

Kinks, Yardbirds and, earlier, Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran, and Elvis Presley.

Elvis was a very big influence on Tom, and as this interview took place just a few days after his untimely death, I felt compelled to ask him about it. At first all he would say was "I don't want to talk about it" but later opened up, voluntarily, and told me the following:

"I heard about it and it fucking killed me, crying, the whole bit.

"It was just a surreal day, it was black when I got up. I had just gotten out of bed and I heard there was an earthquake in Santa Monica. Then the phone rang and Elvis was dead. I went into a blur for maybe twenty-four hours. I put on the radio and I heard about it."

One Los Angeles radio station, remodeling at the time of his death, was unable to reach any of their Elvis records. Instead they played music by artists who, according to the disc jockey, got their energy from the same source as Elvis, played with the same vitality, emotion, and intensity as Presley. That set included two Tom Petty songs.

"It was just getting more surreal all the time. I put the TV on and there he is again. *Melody Maker* is on the phone wanting to know what I think. I really don't know, it's one of the strangest things that ever happened to me." Then he added, as an afterthought "This generation needs its own rock bands."

Petty obviously thinks that the punk bands are not of or for this generation. Certainly they're not for his generation or more specifically — him: "Call me a punk and I'll fucking cut you. I'm fucking serious. I don't fuck around. From the beginning, I think because I have a



Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers: (L. to R.) Ron Blair, Benmont Tench, Tom Petty, Mike Campbell, and Stan Lynch.

leather jacket on (on the album sleeve) they called me a punk. Don't fucking call me one. I don't like that. I ain't joining nobody's club, I've got my own club. I'm in a rock & roll band."

He went into a bit more detail on this rather controversial subject: "... a crock of shit. It's bullshit. Anybody with some fucking pin through his ear is a fucking poof as far as I'm concerned.

He seemed to like the Sex Pistols, though he had not yet heard all of their singles. On their success (if that is what you want to call it) he had this to say: "I think that's great, they're an original band. I think they're creative

above and beyond their music. Johnny Rotten is a rock star, a real one."

I was originally going to review Petty's album after seeing his L.A. concert debut a few months back when he opened the bill for Blondie. The piece started out with a few lines saying how Petty and the Heartbreakers were a better Southern band than Lynyrd Skynyrd because their roots were closer to Elvis'. Somehow that seem a bit inappropriate today, but the fact remains that this band has that curious ability to get a crowd moving, the likes of which haven't been seen in years.

Opening a bill for Blondie in Los Angeles at the Whisky is a rough job. Blondie brings in about the strangest audience of all the professional new wavers, also the most dedicated (except maybe the Ramones'). When Petty hit the stage it was silent. A typical Whisky hipper-than-thou crowd. But Petty had them screaming for more by the end of the show.

When he returned to headline a few weeks later, he had matured considerably as a performer. No longer as nervous and unsure as he once was, he commanded the stage and showed signs of the swagger that he now employs full-time. Some might even call it punk.

After seeing Petty play with Blondie and enjoying it immensely (But then I'd get off on watching anybody play with Blondie. Better yet . . .), I bought the album and was frankly disappointed. The sound was too close to that of the Dwight Twilley *Sincerely* album. (Twilley and Phil Seymour both appear on the record and joined Petty on stage at the Whisky during "Strangers in the Night.") The record grows on you though. What originally sounded dismal next to the live show now sounds like it should — like the studio pop-rock album it is. See, they're a pop band in the studio and a rock & roll band live, I just heard it in the wrong order. Album stand-outs include "American Girl," "Breakdown," "Fooled Again," "Anything That's Rock & Roll," and "Rockin' Around with You." That's one half of one great album which is a better percentage than most new wave albums. And yeah, I guess it is new wave, only 'cause it ain't old wave not 'cause he's a punk.

Thom Gardner