

'Politics? What a useless trip. If they're gonna drop the bomb, drop it. But I don't wanna write songs about it.

'Ecology? Man, I still throw coke bottles out of the window. Somebody will pick it up.'

SHELTER RECORDS may have the coolest offices in America, a ramshackle wooden house nestled under a grove of tall trees set well back from Hollywood Boulevard. There's a genuinely rural flavour about it, a substantial earthiness which contrasts the surrounding city of electric lights and sky, Los Angeles, the mirage in the desert. Shelter is not just "casual", which is now a designer's term for expensive clothes — it's totally loose.

True to his environment, Tom Petty clomps in loudly in scuffed suede boots, an unironed shirt, and naturally faded jeans. He detours around a bamboo couch and a heavy oak desk, crashes easily into an old rocking chair, and bends down to strike a match off the bare, hardwood floor. Sighing lazily, he lights his cigarette and flashes an engaging, crooked smile from under his straw-colored hair.

The face is still pale from three months in the studio recording his punchy second album, "You're Gonna Get It!". At 25, Petty fronts one of America's sharpest rock outfits, The Heartbreakers, who play with the brawling, barbed-wire power of Crazy Horse, crossed with the glistening, 12-string crispness of the Byrds.

"Yeah, this place is not like L.A.," Petty agrees, his easy southern manner dismissing the swank, cushion-carpeted headquarters of the epicurean West Coast pop elite. "I don't like to be over at that other side of Hollywood once it passes Western. It's really bad bullshit, really sick people, they take all the sparkle off everybody who goes over there. What's over here? Slums... Mexicans."

Fortunately for Petty, Shelter has its own studio, a private playpen which he shares with label-mates like Dwight Twilley. "We can't get anything done in those Hollywood places — it's all wrong. If I went over to the other side of Western and said 'I want this to sound like a 4-track,' they wouldn't understand why. They'd say 'You can't do that'. The thing I don't like about the production of most new records is it's so much alike. It never varies, and no one takes any chances."

One of Petty's main talents, it seems, is realising when he's bored, and taking steps to fight it. "To live outside the law you must be honest," Dylan wrote, and Petty's music is taut, simple, and "true". It's as fresh and reactionary as his nonconformist background.

Of high school in Florida, for instance, TP says bluntly: "I didn't go a lot. Once I got in a band, how could I take it seriously? This guy worrying about my hair touching my ears is gonna teach me something? I failed everything. Never did no homework."

The local rock fare didn't suit him much either. "I think the Allman Brothers were one of the first bands I ever saw at the American Legion, when they were in the Escorts or some band like that playing Beatle songs. And Skynyrd were around, they used to open for Mudcrutch (an early Petty band), but they were more like a heavy metal group than a boogie band in those days. There's probably a lot of people who surfaced out of that... Bernie Leadon and Don Felder of the Eagles were Gainesville cats."

"But there wasn't anybody doing what we were doing. We were kinda outside things because we didn't play long solos, and I never really copped to the blues. We dug r&b, but it was more like Wilson Pickett stuff and Stax. We didn't cop to the barbecue. It's what drove us out of Florida — all those overalls..."

Petty headed for L.A., where he became disillusioned with solo records when he couldn't get them to sound right with the session players available. "Then I ran into these guys and we played and I got real excited about it. And I guess the next day we started playing for the first album. They were building the Shelter studio at the same time — it was still boards and wires. I think we cut everything in about 15 days. It was all written in the afternoon and cut at night."

The first album out of the new studio, "Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers" was instantly acclaimed by critics in Britain, notably Giovanni Dadomo of *Sounds* who was the first to pick up on it, but in the USA it languished after its 1976 release until ABC Records' alert promo chief, Jon Scott, turned "Breakdown" into a Top 40 single. As a result, the band toured ceaselessly last year, drawing rave reviews and producing a limited edition, one-sided Official Live Bootleg (recorded December 12, 1976 in Boston). Petty is less than thrilled with it.

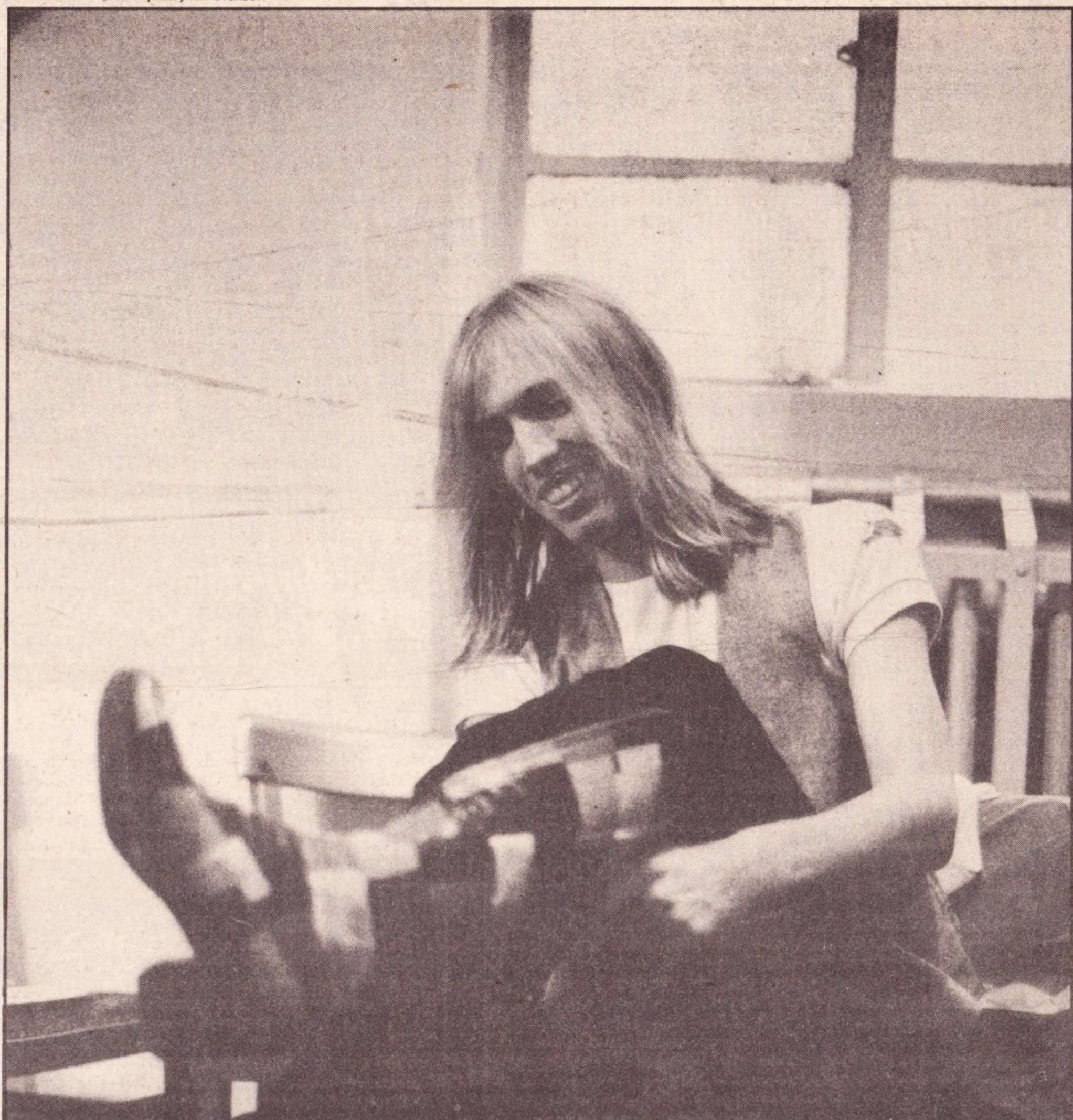
"I never really dug that a whole lot because it was recorded under such adverse conditions, and about six gigs into our career as a working band. We had to be better live, because we'd never played together before when we made the album."

Though they're still far from rich, the group are now at least solvent, and Tom indulged himself with a traditional American street monster, a silver Camaro.

"I never had a car worth a shit in my life. So I went out to the lot and said 'I wanna hear all the radios'. I went through all the cars listening to the stereo and tape deck, and when I got the best one I just paid the guy cash and took the car. When I left, he was standing there looking dumbfounded — so that was a giggle. I was broke the next day."

"We made enough money so we all have places to live now. Stanley (Lynch, drummer) bought a video-tape recorder, that was his big splurge. I still haven't got a decent record player yet. Most of our money goes back into equipment to make the tours sound better."

pic by Ian Dickson



NEW BOOTS & PETTYS

INTERVIEW BY
STEPHEN DEMOREST
IN HOLLYWOOD

Petty and lead guitarist Mike Campbell carry 15 or more guitars on the road, and often use 10 per show. "My main one I play a lot is this old Stratocaster. I'm also using a Vox Phantom 12-string now, and a Rickenbacker 12-string, and there's a Gibson Flying V. And I got this Fender Telecaster called the 'Red Dog' that's got this thing called the "destroy" button — when you hit it, you get crazy sounds from a pre-amp inside. I also got a Gretsch Rok-Jet; it's an old, orange, really ugly thing with silver-grey pickups. It looks like a pregnant Les Paul."

"You're Gonna Get It!" is as near an instant album as Petty could make it, an attempt to capture the creative process live in the studio. "I Need To Know" and "Listen To Her Heart" were part of last year's stage show, and "Magnolia" came off an old demo tape, but the remaining seven numbers are brand new.

"I wrote some of them in my house, but for the most part I wrote them in the studio because it's much more immediate. When I get halfway through something, I get so crazy I rush down here and finish it so I can cut it as soon as I'm done — you get the actual thing on tape."

"We insisted on doing at least the rhythm tracks live to get the 'moment' thing — sometimes you have to take somebody out, but

usually it's at least four of us playing at once — and that's why it took us so long to do the album. When we didn't get one, we couldn't go back the next day and do it again because no one would stay interested. I lose interest real fast. I'm lucky to have a record company that understands the nature of the act. They let us go three months when they desperately wanted the record."

"Our group just can't rehearse; we can't pay attention. 'When The Time Comes' is the first take anybody did. I played it for them about three times and then they all just did it. And 'Hurt' was done one night when we didn't have anything to play. Denny Cordell (president of Shelter) said 'Michael's been playing a riff that's pretty cool,' so we sat down and the riff wasn't that cool but we kept playing. Everybody else just hung out and flew the helicopter around. We have this little toy helicopter in the kitchen and we throw things at it — it's about the only recreation there. So they hung out till we got the song done, and then we brought everybody in the studio and had 'Hurt' done by sunrise."

Another one Campbell co-wrote is "Baby's A Rock 'N' Roller". "He makes a lot of tapes at home on his TEAC machine, and I wrote this little song to the tape he had. While we were cuttin' the track, Cordell and Lenahan, one of the crew, took a cassette

pic by Adrian Boot



TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS: overgrown juvenile delinquents

recorder and just left it on as they walked down Hollywood Boulevard. It's an interesting street to walk down at night, and the stuff they got was amazing, so we chopped it all up together.

"No Second Thoughts" they thought I was mad for awhile, because I wrote the song on an acoustic 12-string and wanted the band to sit in a circle with acoustic instruments. Once they got over that, we put a big plastic shield around some conga drums and Ben (Tench, keyboards) put his organ right in the middle. All the mikes were open so everything bled together. There's crazy overtones from doing that. I swear I hear a flute going on, but there is no flute — it's just harmonics from the bleed.

"Magnolia" I wrote for Roger McGuinn when he was doing the 'Thunderbyrd' album. He wanted to do 'American Girl' and I taught him that, and then I made a little demo of this and sent it over. Roger dug it, but they couldn't make it happen to where they were pleased with it. So it laid around until one night Michael said he had the demo at home — we'd never thought of it. Phil Seymour from the Dwight Twilley Band came in the next night and did some backups."

THE HEARTBREAKERS' lean, sinewy sound reflects Petty's impatience with nonsense in any form. The longest cut on the new album runs 3:22 because, Tom says, "I don't have an attention span much longer than three minutes. I get bored if something doesn't happen. I don't like any dead space at all."

Literally, he's similarly straightforward. "I just wanna believe it. Nobody ever fools me with some shit they don't believe. I have a slight aversion to people getting too cosmic on me. You can tell when someone's bullshittin' you about his trip to Venus. Now if you really *been* to Venus, all right."

"And you don't have to throw some useless political trip on everybody that you're gonna regret three months later because you're a chump for saying it. My idea of rock 'n' roll is you don't give a fuck about politics because you're listening to records, man. I don't have time for news. If they're gonna drop the bomb, fuckin' drop it — I dare ya. Blow my ass off. But I don't wanna write songs about it. What a useless trip."

"Ecology? Man, I still throw Coke bottles out the window. Somebody will pick it up; in fact, somebody will make money on it. We used to go collect bottles to eat. There's a little old lady goes by here every day with a basket full. If they didn't make such a big deal about it, maybe I wouldn't, but you pass one of them 'No Littering' signs on the road, you try to hit it, right?"

Petty's own lyrics have the ring of an authentic personality talking, keen reporting with the same dead-on accuracy as last album's heartbreaking "American Girl":

*Well, Jack up the street says you might go solo.
Good friend of mine says you're leavin' by your back door.
I need to know, I need to know,
If you think you're gonna leave then you better say so...
Who woulda thought that you'd fall for his line?
All of a sudden it's me on the outside.
I need to know, I need to know...
— "I Need To Know"*

Instead of boasting about a recent conquest, he captures the confusion of good old love-at-first-sight:

*Her lips were as warm as that wet southern night,
Her eyes were as black as the sky,
And I wondered aloud just what I had done right
As I lay there with her by my side.
"Magnolia"*

Petty also distinguishes himself by not tarding up his stage show any more than he does his music. "We just walk out and play and leave, and whatever happens between the first note and the last is the show. I'm not against theatrics, but we wouldn't do it — we'd feel foolish. If you get it all choreographed down, what a drag."

For all their integrity, though, the Heartbreakers are no band of rigid purists. "I don't wanna be no more than a working rock 'n' roll band," says Petty, "but that doesn't mean there can't be an element of fun. You don't have to be so serious that you bore the hell out of everybody."

The Petty group are such a playful lot of overgrown juvenile delinquents that it seems they'd be as much at home in a toy store as in a recording studio.

"Michael beats rubber ducks, makin' all kinds of strange noises," Tom says nonchalantly, "and I found a toy keyboard that's much cooler than any synthesizer. Those things work, and it's more fun if you don't know how to play it. On the first album, Ron (Blair, bassist) played a cello on one song and he didn't know fuck-all, but it started to sound good so we put it on. It's more fun than calling up the union for a cello player. I think we'll get more

into strange noises as we go along.

"Noah Shark and Max Reese (engineers) had this great sound with that Mattell 'Slime'. It's this yicky toy — I can't believe they're giving it to kids — it looks like a big handful of snot. And now they're got 'Slime' with plastic worms. If it gets on you,

you're dead — it's the worst feeling you've ever had. God, please don't ever put that in my hand again. But if you shake it with a little set-back echo on it, you get a real crazy sloshy sound."

LATER THAT NIGHT, I'm lounging around S.I.P. Sound-Stage Two as the band rehearse their tour set — when they feel like it. A large, velvet-draped wooden room with a couple of couches and deep chairs, it's as relaxing as a clubhouse on Saturday morning — perhaps too relaxing. As Tom says, they don't like to rehearse, and they're actually just screwing around with the sort of inspired laziness central to their style. Squealing monitors provide a great excuse to flop down, light up, and procrastinate.

Tonight's joke is the auditions on the neighboring sound-stage for Magic Mt., a Disneyland-type plastic amusement park. An endless procession of Grand Funk-ish copy bands in dazzling white pants and pastel shirts is churning out the heavy metal era's greatest hits, and the Petty crew is ranking them out mercilessly though discreetly from the doorway — snickering across the subcultural generation gap. Imitating one particularly frippery tune, Ben Tench take a frilly flutter at his piano and croons in a cracked falsetto: "I'm *sai*-ling a-way..." and the rest of the Heartbreakers join in.

They never do runthrough their set. In fact, they rarely play one entire number. Instead, they play whatever comes to mind, making up spontaneous little exercises that tighten their timing as Petty, shirt-tails flapping, wanders on and off the stage. No one would ever think of trying to boss anyone else, and that includes the "star". Finally they work on "You're Gonna Get It", with Petty and Campbell sending up a gorgeous guitar clangor that you won't find on the record. They play it five times; I could stand more.

Suddenly, however, strains of the "Theme from Star Wars" drift in from next door and — as if on cue — everyone whoops, drops his instrument, and dashes to the doorway to goggle in disbelief at the idiots in their space costumes. It's another half-hour round of slap-happy one-liners before the Petty gang can coax themselves back to work.

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