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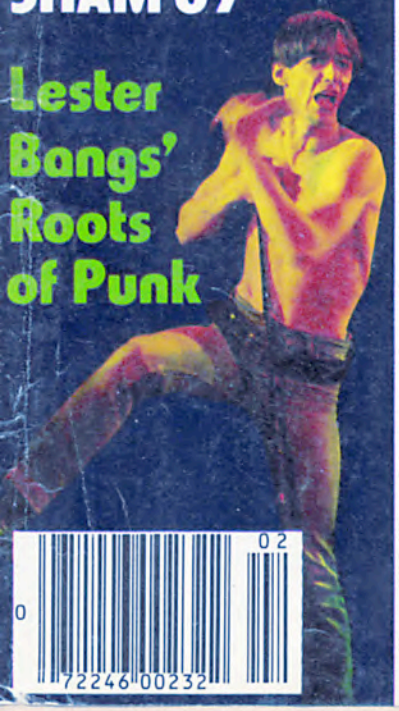
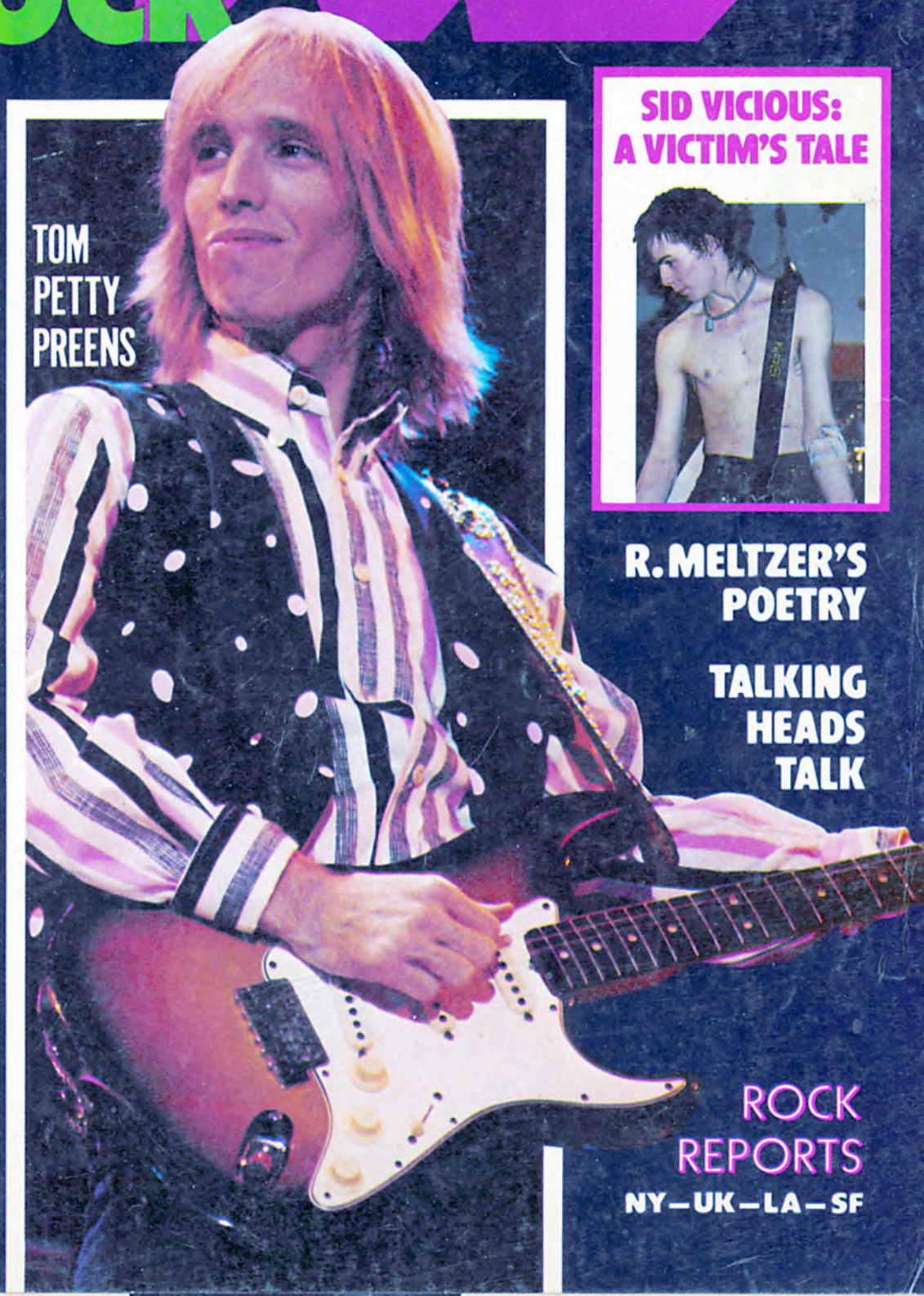


Lester Bangs' Roots of Punk



TOM PETTY PREENS

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TOM PETTY

Heartbreaker At Home & A Broad

by Michael P. Liben

When I was asked to interview Tom Petty, I had one nagging thought: Is he new wave? Granted the press has labeled him new wave (spelled p-u-n-k), but superficially I had my doubts. First of all, he's from Southern California (and before that, Gainesville, Fla., former stomping grounds of the Allman Bros., Lynyrd Skynyrd and two-fifths of the Eagles). Secondly, he looks suspiciously like Jackson Browne, who's also from So. Cal. and has this nasty habit of making me wretch from his all-too-laid-back approach to er, um . . . music? Lastly, I've heard a number of Tom Petty tunes on WNEW-FM in Noo Yawk and as we all know, they don't play much noo wave music over those airwaves.

On the other hand, the first place Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers played regularly was L.A.'s Whisky (I think that's a plus), they're signed to a not-so-major label (Shelter, whose only other artist, as far as I know, is Dwight Twilley), and they're a big hit on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. As a matter of fact, they had two hit singles, a hit album and a headline tour over in England but when they came back to the good old U.S. of A. were lucky to find a weekend booking at their home turf, the Whisky.

Judging by the music, Tom Petty sounds like he's sincere. He's not avant-garde and he's not a dazzling guitarist but he writes good tunes and is true to his R&B roots. He's not a punk, at least not in the contemporary sense, but he is, for all intents and purposes, a juvenile delinquent (even at the ripe old age of 25. Musicians never grow up. It's their constitutional right.)

Despite the considerable amount of press Petty & Co. have been receiving of late, the only thing I really knew about them was that they had a pair of hit singles, "Breakdown" and American Girl." So in order to discover what the real Tom Petty was like, I tried to conduct our meeting as more of a leisurely rap than anything else. Of course, I began with my most pressing question.

NWR: How do you associate with the new wave?

Tom: I'm asked that question at least every day and I never know how to answer it. I guess I'm a card-carrying member, I don't know. I don't think of it as any sort of label. I think that it's wrong for groups to put themselves under an umbrella. If they make up all these rules then they'll be just as hokey as everyone before them 'cause they'll have to adhere so rigidly to it. If you say, "New wave bands don't use symphony orchestras," then they can't use them. I would never say that because I may want to bring in a symphony orchestra one day. God knows what I'll do with it, but I might. I might bring in a hundred chanting Eskimos.

I think it's good, all the punk rock and whatever they called all those buzz saw bands because a point had to be made and a point has been made. Anybody that really had something to say is still around. There's a lot of jivers around. It's just like 'flower power' to me, just like hippies or something. But there were a lot of sincere guys that sort of survived it all.

NWR: What new wave bands turn you on?

Tom: There are quite a few. You gotta understand that I really don't get into anyone's trip these days. I kinds go by the tracks on a record or the shows that I've seen. I saw Nick Lowe and I was real impressed by that. And I think Elvis Costello is fantastic. And the Cars; I've heard two songs by them and I can't get 'em out of my head. And David Johansen. He was out on the road with us and I liked him a lot.

NWR: You've been to England recently. Did the English audience do their usual punk thing of spitting and hurling beer mugs at you?

Tom: It wasn't that way at all. We didn't have the safety pin crowd. We just had the girls. The punk bands all had guys—which never appealed to us very much.

I've seen those (punk) gigs and I always say, 'well, the kids aren't listening. They didn't come to hear the music." It's such a poseur's . . . like I was in England in June and you couldn't find a punk under a rock. It's so gone and there's a real confusion. All of a sudden they don't know how to dress—nobody knows what clothes to get into. They'll think of something.

NWR: What about the other countries in Europe? Like when the Dictators were in Germany earlier this year, they got hassled because the local populace thought they were terrorists and called the cops. The German police pulled them off the side of the road and hauled them out of the VW microbuses they were driving and were pointing machine guns at their heads the whole time . . .

Tom: We got pulled into one of those *MISSION: Impossible* rooms over at the airport 'cause they found some hash in someone's bag. They held us for three and a half hours, stripped us and put us through all sorts of amazing indignities.

NWR: At least they didn't lock you up.

Tom: They were going to. They were squeezing out all the toothpaste claiming there was LSD in it. They had little litmus paper and they said, "Aha! Das ist LSD. Das ist cocaine." Oh man, they thought they had the haul of their lives. We were supposed to be doing a TV show and finally the TV people talked them into cooling it. But there was the hash. As it turned out, they guy destroyed all the hash putting it into the solution to test it. They had no evidence so we walked right out.

Ha Ha. The real dirt.

NWR: You just mentioned that you did a TV show over there. Do you do many of them?

Tom: Yeah. Over here we just did the *Midnight Special.* I was pretty pleased with it for a *Midnight Special.* The sound was pretty good. We've done a lot in England and Germany. I don't think they've figured out how to put a rock band on television yet.

NWR: Here or there?

Tom: Anywhere. It's a real hard thing. It's a difficult thing to get together right—the sound and the right at-

Ebet Roberts

Courtesy ABC/Shelter Records

This buncha Heartbreakers hail from the state of Florida—via L.A.—and won't be found jamming at Max's Kansas City every other weekend.

mosphere. It's a cold thing, television.
NWR: I've always found shows like the *Midnight Special* to be pretty boring. You know, six minutes of show and fifteen minutes of commercials.
Tom: We wouldn't do it for awhile and then we started thinking, "Well, we're getting thousands of letters from all these kids and the letters were from places like Idaho and other places that we knew we weren't going to get to all year long." There's no other show to go on to play rock and roll on television so we finally went ahead and did it.

When I saw it I was really surprised. I was sitting there waiting for something really terrible and it was okay. I danced with Wolfman Jack.
NWR: Speaking of dancing, it seems to me that your music would be more suited to small clubs as opposed to large concert halls. You used to play the bar circuit when you first started out . . .
Tom: We haven't played bars in awhile and I miss it. You can see everybody right there. I don't mind playing bars, they're fun. It's just like the last time we played the Whisky was just the biggest mess I've ever been through. There were thousands of people outside and thousands of people inside this little place and no one could breathe.

We played the Knebworth Festival in England. There was 100,000 people and it was just disgusting. We've refused all

Michael P. Liben

Ax-man Mike Campbell is the only Heartbreaker that takes his leather jacket seriously.

year to do any outdoor gigs; festival type things. Then we got slightly hypocritical because when we went to England, we didn't have time to tour because we were committed to this one (here in the states). So we said, "Well, we could play Knebworth and there would be 100,000 people and we could do the whole country in just one day."

Jesus, you knew nobody could see you because I couldn't see nothing. I walked out to the press area and all I could see were little specks and mountains of p.a. And it was all during the daytime so they couldn't even put lights on you so a roadie on the side of the stage was just as prominent as anything else. Biggest mess I ever saw in my life. People bummed out in the mud and the sun all day. Yecch. That's no way to hear rock 'n' roll.
NWR: Didn't you go to any of those big outdoor concerts when you were younger?
Tom: I went to one in Florida because the Stones were playing. I was never into that hippie thing. The whole time I was saying, "Get me away from this mud. What is this anyway? This is no way to enjoy rock 'n' roll."
I couldn't enjoy it because I was fighting the elements. It's not fair to charge those people $15 and treat them like cattle. Those things are gonna die.
NWR: I don't think that they're gonna

fade. There'll always be groups to play them. It's very tempting financially. It's not easy to turn down $100,000 plus a percentage of the gate for one lousy show.

Tom: Yeah. Plus you don't have to carry sound and lights. You just go and do the gig.

NWR: How do the rigors of the road affect you? For instance, having to do interviews in every town you visit.

Tom: They get brutal. They (the record companies) put in 15 a day and don't even think twice about it. After you've done that for about a week, you're really batty and you don't know what you think about anything. You're just talking and an hour later you've got an entirely different opinion than what you just told this poor cat that's going to print it up. It's a real strange syndrome. It's like you're assuming a position of authority and I'm not. I'm not an authority on anything. And sometimes you just go so crazy you don't know what you're saying. I've had terrible troubles with interviews and it'll come back and I'll go "Oh God! Did I really say that?"

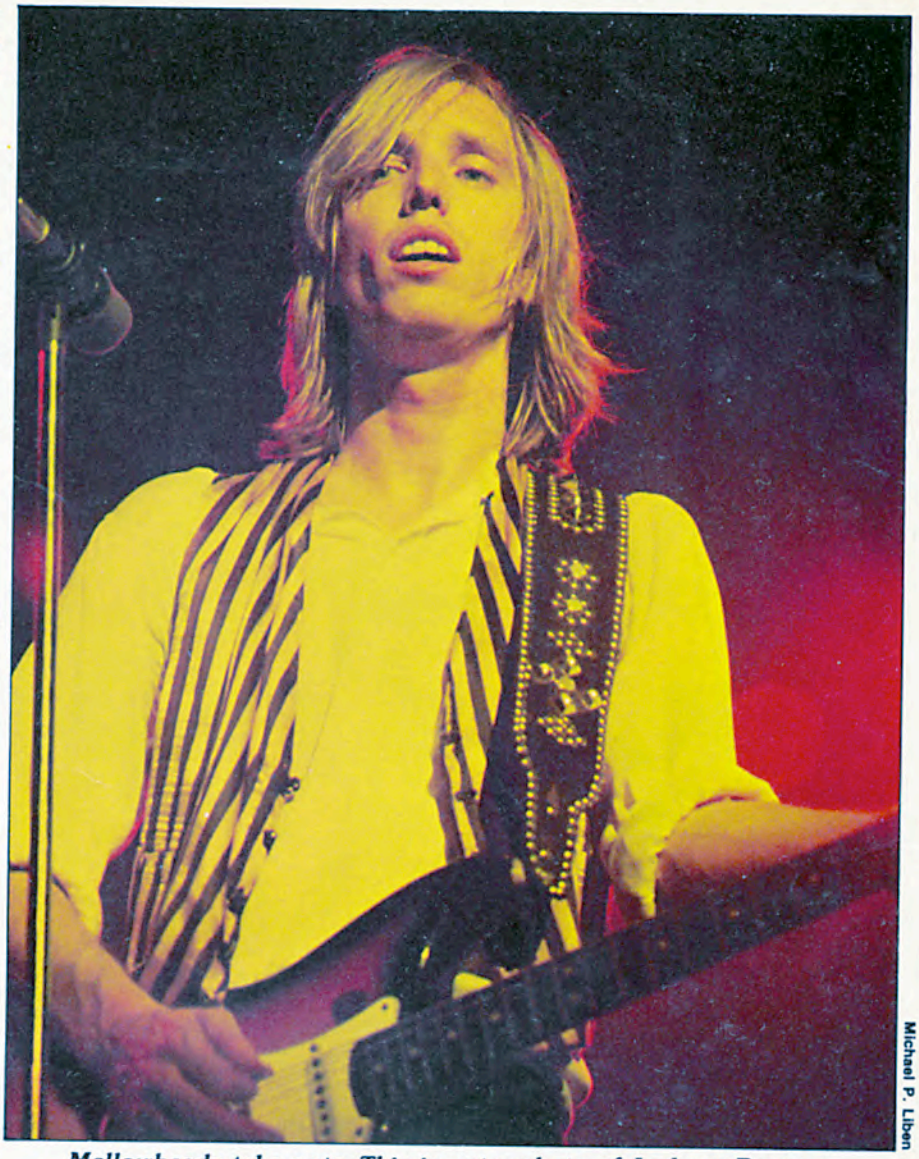
NWR: What's the worst misquote that's ever been printed?

Tom: The most repercussions I've ever had from a quote was when I said to somebody—it was a chick—in some interview that came out over in England; it was like the end of a day of interviews and she said "Why are you in this business?" I said "I'm in this business for the chicks." They said, "Oh really?" and I said, "sure," and then indulged: "Yeah, I don't care about anything except the chicks."

So it comes out in big, bold type: HE'S ONLY IN IT FOR THE CHICKS. So we get to England, and by the time we got off the plane they were there. I mean every hotel. Chicks everywhere. It was really crazy and every day I had to say, "No, really, I like music *too*."

I've had some funny ones. I've made some people really made. I never mean to but people get really mad. I had a jock walk off the air on me one time. I guess she didn't have the same sense of humor I had because I didn't mean to offend her. I wouldn't do that. I'm not that way. I was sitting there and she said, "Tell me something about the movie *FM*." and I said "I couldn't tell you a thing about it." She said "Aren't you in the movie?" I said, "What, and she said "You are! You're in the movie *FM!*" and I said, "That's news to me." I was just kidding her and she's looking at me like "Why is he doing this?" and I was just handing her blanks 'cause I thought it was funny. *FM* is a terrible movie and I didn't want to talk about it. Then there was dead air and I said "boring" and she thought I said she was boring when I was saying that I was boring and the next thing I know she's out the door.

I think I eventually got across to her that I was kidding and that she was dealing with a sick mind. They calmed her down a little later explaining "He's a little weird and liable to say anything."



Michael P. Liben

Mellowheads take note. This is not a photo of Jackson Browne.

NWR: I can see their point. Do you have any other interests besides music?

Tom: Right now it's really hard to say because I'm never home. I'm really consumed with the band. I've always been consumed with music. I don't really drift off to too many other things. I'm probably pretty boring if you take me out to dinner and just talk.

NWR: Do you have any hobbies?

Tom: Not really. Pinball, something like that.

NWR: Do you have any long-term plans that you formulated, say two years ago that you might still follow up on?

Tom: I think if you did that and really believed that you'd go absolutely fuckin' crazy really fast. I think you'd be putting your head through the windows. I don't think we're much different than the way we were. We probably spend more money or waste more money or something, but we're having a good time. I don't look at it as, "What are we gonna do?" If you're worried about your career, you ain't got one. All we were doing was getting better as a group, which is a pretty full-time job.

I wrapped up the interview at this point because the clock had just struck one and I had to crawl out of bed to go fishing in another four hours and needed at least a little sleep. I had a good time talking with Tom Petty and I found him to be much more interesting than I had expected. Is he new wave? Sure, why not? He may seem a little idealistic in some of his convictions, but then again, aren't we all? Sure he's a little wired, but remember what I said before about musicians never having to grow up? Besides, much of his apparent craziness stems from his philosophy of life which is, more of less: If you're doing something, you may as well have fun doing it 'cause if you're not having fun, it's not worth it.

How true. •