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touch by the vague white-reggae tint that's as common a trademark of English power pop as is the distinctive ticktock guitar riff—once the signature of the Beserkley bands, then later mechanized by the Cars—of the genre's American contingent. But while the Yachts come on like flaky Tories, the Members' rigid purism is a far more literal-minded example of power pop's innate conservatism.

It's striking how few of these bands have strong, identifiable frontmen—power pop would seem to be a group aesthetic, and a rather faceless one at that. The most visible bandleader, in fact, is a woman, Martha Davis of L.A.'s the Motels, who's also one of the few women in power pop at any level. (Even more than in the Sixties, this is real boys-band turf.) Davis has a forceful, quirky and evocative voice, marred slightly by its showbiz traits. In her lyrics, she tends to strike poses. Musically, *Motels* is glossy and solid, though the group can't quite escape the sort of session-player stodginess that makes Davis' invocations to excess ring rather false.

Stephen Cummings of the Sports tries to establish a dominant persona, too. But his nasal, drawling yet fast-paced vocals, while effective, also accentuate this Australian group's already obvious similarities to Joe Jackson, whose style hardly bears imitation. Though the Sports have some excellent tunes ("Tired of Me," "Suspicious Minds" and especially "Who Listens to the Radio"), these guys are short on ideas. Like so much current power pop, *Don't Throw Stones* seems strictly designed for the radio.

More than any other American band, the Shoes, from Illinois, embody the Sixties-revisionist side of power pop at its most lushly romantic. They play off sweet, breezy lead vocals and high harmonies against lunging, tightly controlled, Byrds-like guitar riffs. Their one problem is that while Jeff Murphy's perpetually breathless singing captures a certain kind of adolescent bittersweetness practically to perfection, he's not a strong enough singer to live up to the vocal and instrumental tensions that the group is working toward. *Present Tense* is almost too pretty and fragile, with some of the same wimp-music undertones that limited and dated so many of the Sixties radio bands. With the Shoes, I find myself wishing for more tough-mindedness.

The Pop are in just about the opposite situation. Despite its upbeat name, this San Francisco group's most interesting aspect is an aura of grimness and doomy fatalism that runs through nearly every song on *Go!* The top-heavy rhythm section is pushed way out front, with a spiraling, stuttering lead guitar piercing the wall of

sound only intermittently. Banks of Eno-esque synthesizers punctuate the beat, and the vocals are harsh, even desperate: when the Pop sing "Waiting for the Night," it sounds more like a cause for dread than for joy. At their best, the Pop take the Cars' commercial synthesis of art-rock techniques and pop themes into more adventurous, less commercial territory.

In many ways, *Go!* spells out what should be obvious—that power pop today is often no more than a convenient blanket term for several different kinds of music that may be evolving toward a common goal but are traveling by very different routes. Of course, some groups can be defined as power pop only by virtue of their commercial ambitions. The Sinceros, once Lene Lovich's backup band, still sound like a backup

band on their first album, *The Sound of Sunbathing*. They're barely able to sustain the illusion that they've written original material. L.A.'s 20/20 come off as blatant poseurs (with cover art neatly lifted from the Jam's second record) on *20/20*, manipulating studio gimmickry, pseudopunk themes and baldly used pop influences to underwhelming effect.

Overall, however, the energy, craft and freshness that most of these groups display is heartening. Even their similarities have a good deal more variety and life than, for example, the California country-rock monolith. The middle-ground audience needs a new middle ground. For the present anyway—or at least as long as the supply of one-syllable English nouns holds out—they may have found one.

## Full speed ahead for Tom Petty

**Damn the Torpedoes**  
Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers  
Backstreet/MCA

By Ariel Swartley



**D**AMN THE TORPE- does is the Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers album we've all been waiting for—that is, if we were all Tom Petty fans, which we would be if there were any justice in the world, live shows for all, free records everywhere and rock-in' radio. Mostly justice. Songs like "I Need to Know" and "Listen to Her Heart" from 1978's *You're Gonna Get It* and "Refugee," "Here Comes My Girl" and others from this year's model are bedrock—they will endure. Petty & Company have mined some solid veins: you can hear traces of the Byrds (sweet silver flights of twelve-strings, but without the moonshine) and the Band (though citified and sexier).

I don't mean that Petty turns rock & roll into ancient history, something to re-create and ironically allude to. In "Louisiana Rain," there's a touch of Jesse Winchester in the verses, a slide guitar from the Rolling Stones' "No Expectations," some Bob Dylan in the rhyming ("refugee" with "beanery," say) and a hum-along chorus that would make a Nashville outlaw proud. Also, night scenes from the highway and tales of the hitchhiker as poor wayfaring stranger, last of the unbiased observers. A *Reader's Digest* condensed version of the Sixties, right? Wrong. The familiar riffs are just there because

they belong: old stuff too fine to waste.

"Louisiana Rain" is a convincing slice of American gothic. Petty takes a middle position between rock's romantic visionaries and urban nihilists—his observations are as flat and down-to-earth as his heartland twang. Bobby McGee may whistle up a ride from Baton Rouge straight through to the Coast, but Petty's road, like yours and mine, is a series of long waits and short hops, bad weather and weird scenes in four-in-the-morning restaurants.

An innovator or an ironist only half as good might be easier to write about than Petty and his middle ground. Believing in a lover and expecting her to succumb to temptation at any minute (roughly the situation of "Listen to Her Heart") is so crushingly normal that it's hard to sell. But, for Petty, rock is neither a cash crop nor a code of honor, not salvation or a cultural neutron bomb. The Heartbreakers haven't duded up the music with myth. In their book, playing rock & roll doesn't need this or any other justification. It's what we'd all be doing if we could.



A viewpoint that matter-of-fact is simultaneously arrogant and self-effacing, which is part of Petty's charm. Who, you wonder, is going to feel sorry for a guy who looks like a Lutheran angel on Avenue A—in other words, maximum street-pretty—when he complains about girls not leaving him alone? Except that in "What Are You Doin' in My Life?," Tom Petty never takes the attention for granted. And, better yet, the girl's shameless persistence is working: Petty sounds more helpless in every verse. Still, he sings "I didn't ask for you" with enough of a gulp to suggest that he knows he sort of did. Low-slung guitars and all that jumping around with a microphone—after all, ladies get ideas.

Obviously, matter-of-fact doesn't have to mean humdrum.

## Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers take a middle position between rock's romantic visionaries and urban nihilists.

Petty and the Heartbreakers avoid the curse of craft and the Creedence Clearwater-Dave Edmunds trap of faintly dowdy classicism. They're eager enough to dress for success and hungry enough to show their teeth. In the past, they've flirted with black leather and bombast, intimations of tough-guy, flower-power pop and an occasional nervous New Wave beat. And carried off a lot of it. But what makes *Damn the Torpedoes* their best album yet isn't so much its sound (though that's clearer and punchier than before, thank heaven and coproducer Jimmy Iovine) but its assurance. Mechanical rhythms are hip, but something more fluid makes better time with the flowing organ and guitar surges Petty uses so well, and *Damn the Torpedoes* glides like a supertanker. What starts out tough ("Someone must have kicked you around some"), and might have stayed there, turns tough-minded ("You don't have to live like a refugee")—certainly a more durable attitude.

Best of all, sparks fly. "Here comes my girl," Tom Petty sings, and it might as well be Christmas and heaven and summer vacation

all at once. Maybe it's the way the chorus soars into harmony after the spoken introduction, maybe it's the way the phrase comes simple and straightforward after the self-conscious swagger of the verse. Whatever the case, "Here comes my girl" sounds like a line you've heard a thousand times before—and the only one that will ever say it all.



### What Goes Around Comes Around Waylon Jennings RCA

By Martha Hume

FOR THE PAST TWO years, Waylon Jennings' position in the firm of Nelson & Jennings, country-music outlaws, has been increasingly that of a junior partner. Though the two—still considered the founding fathers of the musicians' revolt against the Nashville establishment—sold well as a duet act, Willie Nelson's latest solo albums have consistently outshone Jennings' efforts. In 1978, for example, Nelson was garnering rave reviews and crossover sales for *Stardust*, while Jennings was getting puzzled comments about *I've Always Been Crazy*, his scatter-gun attack on everybody he thought didn't like him. If Willie Nelson seemed to be occupying the spot next to Walter Cronkite in the hearts of the public, then Waylon Jennings was seen as country music's Kenny Stabler.

Though it's true that Jennings' recent work on record has been inferior, it's always been a mistake to underrate him. Nelson may be the more cerebral, but Jennings runs on instinct—and sometimes instinct beats intellect all to hell. From the first cut of *What Goes Around Comes Around*, it's clear that Waylon is now ready to give Willie a run for his money. Gone, for the most part, is the old "eat shit" bass (so-called because the bass sounded like it was saying "eat shit" over and over), replaced here by a lighter and more imaginative rhythm line. Gone, too, are the supermacho, semiparanoid numbers. Instead, we get ten well-written, well-arranged songs.

Rodney Crowell's "I Ain't Living Long like This" is Jennings' finest performance since "Honky

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