

BAM

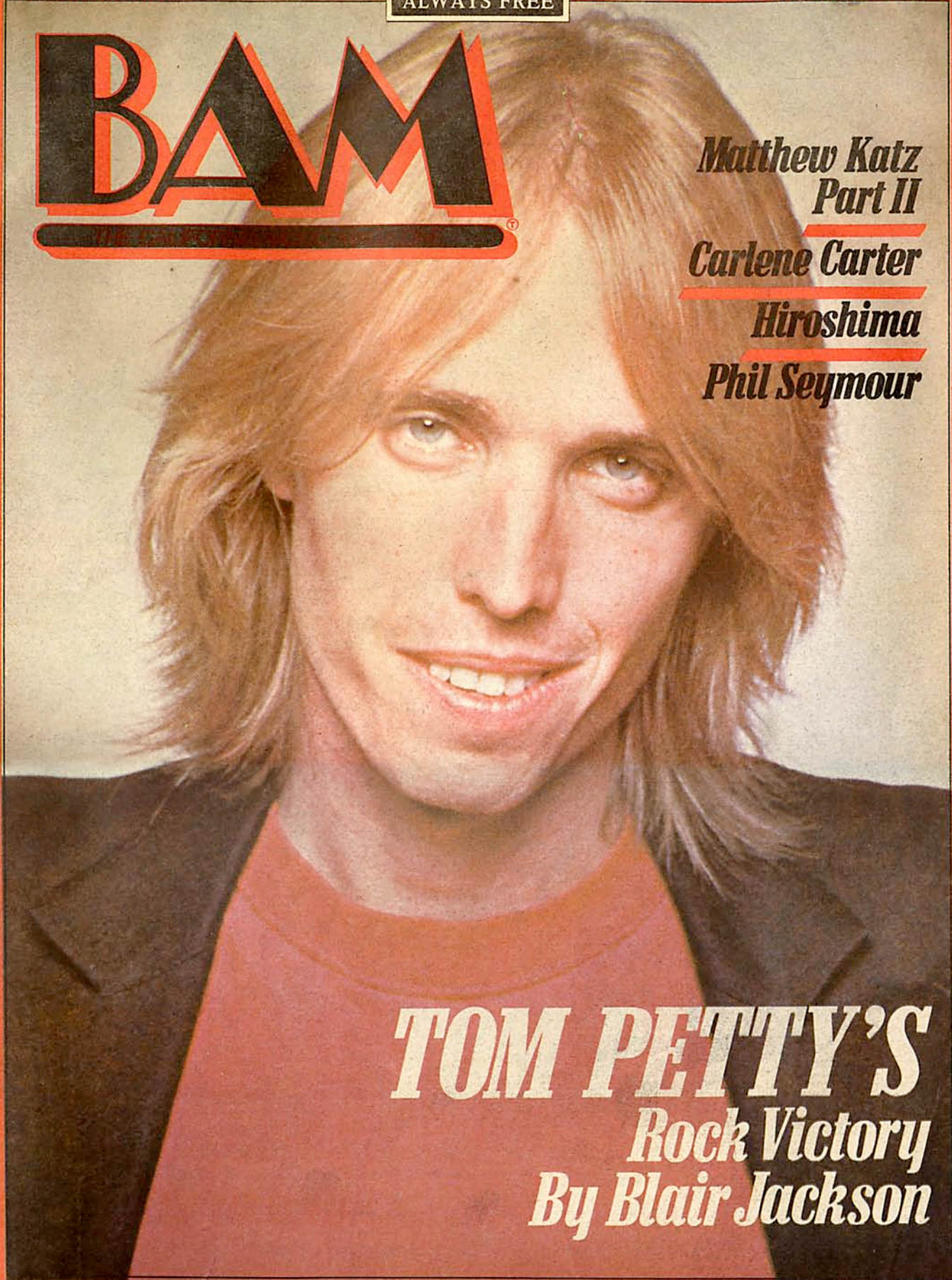
THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN

Matthew Katz
Part II

Carlene Carter

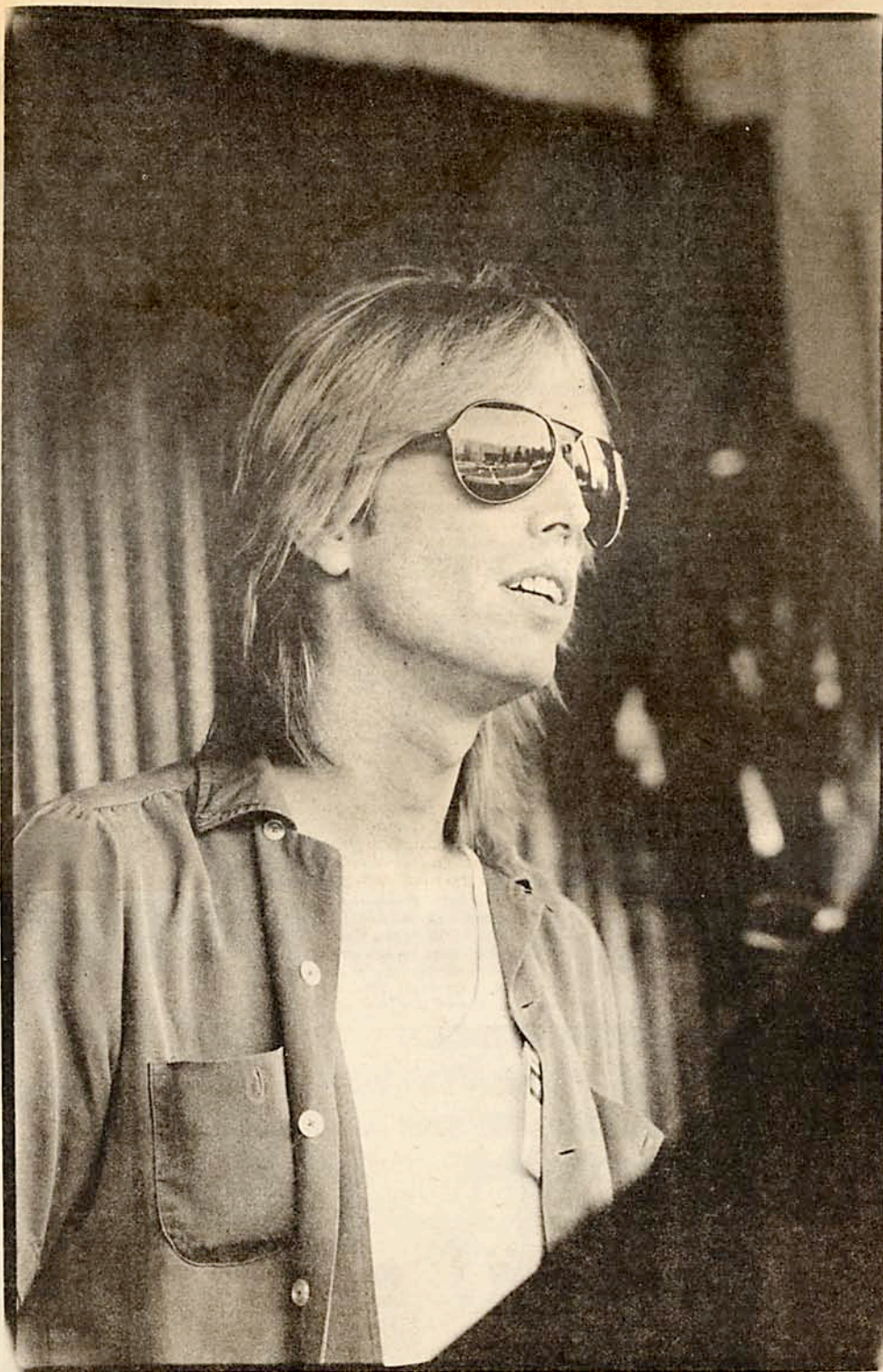
Hiroshima

Phil Seymour



TOM PETTY'S

Rock Victory
By Blair Jackson



TOM PETTY'S ROCK VICTORY

In the spring of 1961, there were two very hot rumors that every person under the age of 18 in my original hometown of Pelham, New York seemed to be buzzing about. The first was that Bob Denver, better known to the world at that time as Maynard G. Krebs on *Dobie Gillis*, had been electrocuted in his bathtub in Hollywood. That was bug stuff, to be sure, but the rumor that really had us all jumping was that Del Shannon, whose song "Runaway" was at the top of the pop music charts, had been a student at Pelham Memorial High the previous year. You would occasionally run into people who claimed to have actually seen Del wandering the halls of the school. Most people believed, or, at the very least, desperately wanted to believe that Del Shannon was one of us. There was nobody cooler than Del Shannon in 1961, and the proof was that everywhere you went that spring, kids of all ages were bopping down the street imitating that great "I wa-wa-wa-wa wonder" falsetto from "Runaway." Del Shannon had a voice that made people shiver, and that kind of singer was a rare bird in the post-Elvis, pre-Beatles era of rock and roll.

And there was that voice—shimmering, haunting, almost eerie in its power—booming from the huge studio monitors at L.A.'s Paradise Studios when I walked through the door one afternoon in late October. Eighteen years later, Del Shannon was still sending chills up my spine. And I wasn't the only person there who was moved. Sitting at the studio's main control board, Tom Petty listened intently as Del's "Liar" was played back for the twentieth time that afternoon. This was more than just a production job for Petty—it was a labor of love, because Tom Petty remembers Del Shannon, too. Petty and Shannon have been friends for a while now—Del joined Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers for a couple of songs at the group's New Year's Eve show at the Santa Monica Civic last year; now Petty was producing what everyone involved hopes will be Shannon's big comeback single, with Heartbreakers Benmont Tench and Mike Campbell helping out on keyboards and guitar respectively. Petty takes a break from his mixing chores to add a frisky tambourine line to the chorus of "Liar"; he's got it down perfectly by the second take, and the track is basically complete. If radio station program directors don't flip over the song, it'll be time to ship out to Borneo—"Liar" is one of the catchiest and most pleasing songs I've heard in years. It has "AM hit" stamped all over it.

The significance of this scene goes far beyond the magic so clearly evident in the Petty/Shannon/Heartbreakers collaboration, however. More exciting even than experiencing firsthand the successful delivery of this, Del Shannon's new child, is the satisfaction and contentment in Petty's face. It's been a

By Blair Jackson

Photos By Dennis Callahan

very painful 1979 for Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers, and to see Petty looking relaxed and happy is a sure sign that the group's fortunes are going to change. Indeed, two days later, the Heartbreakers' much-anticipated third album, held up for months because of an extremely complex series of legal entanglements, would be released. And today, a month later, the LP, *Damn the Torpedoes* is well on its way to becoming Petty's biggest seller to date; the current single, "Don't Do Me Like That," is the first real AM hit for Petty since "Breakdown" two years ago; and a tour of the U.S. is breaking considerable new ground for the band. The anticipation of all these things is etched on Petty's face this afternoon at Paradise. The suits have been settled and, as he says, "now I can get back to doing what I've been fighting to do all along—play rock and roll."

"Something like this builds you up in a way," he continues, "because you don't always realize how much you love something until you're not allowed to do that thing anymore. You realize that you take things for granted. I wanted to play music, yet I was going to court every day. I was up there on the stand like it was *Perry Mason* or something."

Petty's legal wrangles were complicated—"Elliot Roberts told me it was the biggest mess he'd seen since Neil Young tried to get out of Buffalo Springfield," Petty says—but demand some discussion, if for no other reason than they show how completely non-musical events can take control of the lives of artists. As part of the agreement which eventually allowed Petty to resume his career, recording for the newly created MCA Records subsidiary, Backstreet Records, Petty is legally forbidden to comment on details of his case, but through other sources an accurate picture of what happened can be drawn.

At the root of Petty's legal problems was the contention by him and his management that when Petty's label, ABC Records, was bought by MCA, he should have been released from his contract to become a free agent able to negotiate with other labels. MCA disagreed, of course—it is no secret that the main reason the conglomerate bought ABC was to get Petty, Jimmy Buffett, and the Steely Dan catalogue, so they were not about to let one of those plums slip away from them. When word got around that Petty was fighting MCA over the contract, numerous other labels swooped down and made lucrative offers to Petty, with some even offering to cover the legal costs that might be incurred from a long battle with MCA. Petty confirms that he "was offered deals that would make any person blush, but it's a real Catch-22. What's the point of being this hot property if you can't realistically do anything about it?" Indeed, MCA succeeded in getting a court order blocking Petty from negotiating with other labels as long as his contractual situation was unresolved.

At the same time that Petty was challenging the validity of MCA's claim that his ABC contract was transferable, he was also attempting to disengage himself from his long-term production deal with Shelter Records, through whom he had originally signed to ABC. According to one source who is familiar with the Petty-Shelter deal, the Heartbreakers "couldn't really make much money, regardless of how many records were sold."

The suits continued through the summer, with the most dramatic move being a decision by Petty's lawyers at one point to file for bankruptcy. This was interpreted by some as meaning that Petty was completely destroyed financially by his contract problems—jokes Petty, "I read a report somewhere that I

only had \$12 in the bank! It never got quite that low!"—but in most cases, legal bankruptcy is used as a protective measure to prevent legal assaults by potential creditors.

By the end of the summer, rumors were afloat that Petty was about to sign with CBS Records, but those stories proved to be unfounded. A settlement with MCA was eventually agreed upon in which Petty would record for MCA's new Backstreet label (*Damn the Torpedoes* is its only release so far) and be freed of his obligations to Shelter. The deal also gave the Heartbreakers a substantial sum of money (which was reportedly still beneath one or two of the astronomical offers made by other labels), gave Petty control of his publishing, and increased the band's royalty points. As Petty says, "we're in the best shape, financially, we've ever been in."

Some observers were surprised when, after going to court with MCA and engaging in what was, by most accounts, a fairly bitter struggle, Petty signed with MCA (though having "Backstreet" on the record label itself is a nice cosmetic gesture on MCA's part to make Petty look somewhat independent of the label; Backstreet's offices aren't even in the MCA tower at Universal City.) But it is generally agreed that a long court battle would have been devastating to Petty's career, and as one friend of his put it, "Tom is good friends with Bruce Springsteen and he saw what happened to him when he couldn't do anything for two years. I think Bruce helped convince Tom that there are times you have to compromise just to keep things going."

"It was hard on everyone," Petty comments, "but it's settled now and I think everyone is pretty happy about the way things turned out. We might have lost a little momentum in it all, but I had to trust that the kids would still be there when it was over. I always thought that they'd understand that this wasn't a money trip, it was a survival trip."

Petty and the Heartbreakers got their first indication that "the kids" hadn't forgotten them when they sold out every date of a triumphant tour of California (dubbed "The Lawsuit Tour") this past summer. "they were

probably the best shows we've ever played," Petty comments. "They were real intense. We felt like we'd been let out of prison to play for a week."

The shows also helped solidify the band after what Petty admits were a few shaky months at the height of the legal disputes. At one point, drummer Stan Lynch reportedly left the group, and Petty says, "we were all kind of bored because we couldn't really tour and we couldn't put out a record. We were fighting a lot for a while. Playing really built up the band again."

The Heartbreakers have become such a cohesive unit in the past three years that it is now almost inconceivable that there could even be a Heartbreakers without the current line-up: Petty, bassist Ron Blair, Ben Tench, Mike Campbell, and Stan Lynch. The proof of this is in the grooves of the band's ironically titled new album *Damn the Torpedoes*. ("We all have torpedoes to look out for," Petty says. "Ours missed by this much.") Even more than the other two it's a band record," Petty emphasizes. "I know a lot of people—particularly the press—sometimes focus on me exclusively, but I don't think you can really listen to this record without noticing the band...and that's great."

The album particularly represents a "coming out" of sorts for Tench, whose piano and organ lines are prominent on every track. On the group's first two LPs, it's guitarist Mike Campbell who provides the most striking colorations to Petty's compositions. On *Damn the Torpedoes*, Campbell's role is not diminished at all, and having Tench adding keyboards as almost a second lead instrument allows Campbell to vary his playing more. The interplay between the two—particularly when Campbell is playing slide—gives the record rich textures which were sorely lacking from *You're Gonna Get It*, which had an almost skeletal feel to it in places. As always, the rhythm team of Lynch and Blair comes up with consistently dynamic underpinnings for each song—Lynch mixes brute force with economy in a way that few other

drummers do (particularly live) and Blair's bass lines frequently have a sensuous, slightly exotic feel to them. The other key element in the Heartbreakers' instrumental sound—too often overlooked—is Petty's rhythm guitar playing, which seems to sound brighter and more effervescent with each album.

"I think everyone's playing the best they ever have," Petty says, "and part of that is that we've kept growing as a band through all of this. Also, I guess all the legal stuff sort of put an edge on the music which it might not have had otherwise. So the playing probably is better, but also it sounds better because of Jimmy and Shelly."

The gentlemen to whom Petty refers are Jimmy Iovine, who co-produced the album with Petty, and engineer Shelly Yakus. Iovine is best known for his work with Patti Smith (*Easter*) and Bruce Springsteen (he was engineer on *Born to Run* and *Darkness on the Edge of Town*), "but the stuff I heard by him that I liked the best was the albums he did with John Lennon," Petty says. "He gets this amazing bass sound that I had to have. He had a lot to do with giving this record so much presence, and he taught me a lot about how to get down on tape what I heard in my head."

Petty considers Iovine "one of my closest friends now," even though "he's completely insane. Imagine this combination we had going in the studio—Jimmy's a crazy Italian, Shelly's a Jew, and I'm a redneck!" And would Petty be interested in bringing back that odd combo for his next album? "Absolutely. I'm crazy. The band is crazy. We're the most unstable people I know," he jokes.

But ultimately, of course, great production is not what makes great albums. Paramount are the songs and the performances, and on both counts, Iovine and Yakus had premium ingredients to work with. As much as anything, it is Petty's songs (some of them co-written with Mike Campbell) that make this not only the Heartbreakers' best LP, but one of the best rock and roll albums of the past several years. It took them a few years, endless touring and the biggest crisis they'll

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L to R: Lynch, Campbell, Blair, Petty, Tench.

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probably ever face as a band to get to this point, but with *Damn the Torpedoes*, Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers have reached maturity.

The album's opening cut, "Refugee," immediately shows that the legal problems that have plagued Petty the past year have colored his writing to a degree. "Somewhere, somehow, somebody must have kicked you around some," he sings in an even, almost weary-sounding voice early in the song. "Tell me why you want to lay there and revel in your abandon," he continues, disdain obvious in his delivery. Then becoming urgent, passionate, he sings, "Honey, it don't make no difference to me/Everybody's had to fight to be free/You don't have to live like a refugee." And there, in the first song on the album, we have perhaps the most succinct statement Petty has made regarding his overwhelming survival instincts in the face of what was, for a while, a debilitating legal quagmire.

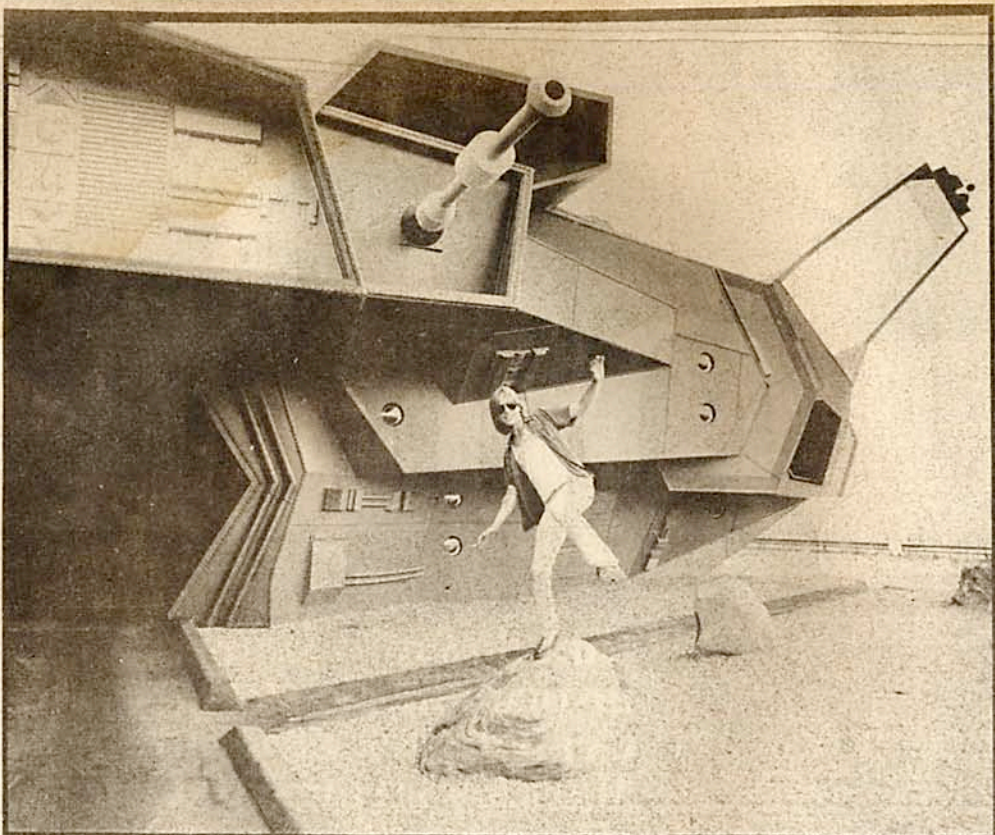
"You could probably find a lot of things that could be interpreted as references to the legal thing," Petty says, "and I suppose a lot of them would be right. But I hope that people don't sit down with the record and look for it. I've tried not to limit the songs to those kinds of interpretations. I'm not sure I think that most of songs really stand up well to heavy analysis," he adds dryly. "Most of my songs are just about girls...that's a good subject. I certainly don't consider myself a poet, or anything."

I mention that his lyrics are often difficult to decipher and that a lyric sheet would have been a nice touch on this album. "Jimmy Iovine told me, 'People'll never know how good your songs are because you sing like you've got a mouth full of food,'" he laughs. "I don't like lyric sheets. Not being able to hear the words clearly gives people the incentive to listen more closely." Petty obviously doesn't believe what he's just said and lets out another short laugh. "Or something like that," he adds with a chuckle.

As was the case with *Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers* and *You're Gonna Get It*, the focus of *Damn the Torpedoes* is on blistering, primal rock and roll with roots in the melodicism of groups like The Byrds, the punch of the best Motown, and the raw power of the Stones. "Here Comes My Girl" for example, combines a spoken rap no doubt influenced by Clarence Carter's soulful version of "Dark End of the Street" (which was in the Heartbreakers' set for a mere two shows last year—"The band thought I'd gone nuts or something," Petty explains, "I thought it was funny") with a chorus which is pure, jangly Roger McGuinn. "Louisiana Rain," the oldest song on the album (it was written for the first Heartbreakers LP and recorded two years ago by Bonnie Tyler on the same album that yielded her lone American hit, "It's a Heartache"), it has a melody reminiscent of the Stones' "No Expectations" (and heightened by Campbell's languid slide); its vocals and harmonica line recall Dylan. It also contains the most complex imagery of any song Petty has recorded to date. Interestingly, Petty did not originally want to put it on the album.

"I like it, but I wasn't sure it fit in. Plus we had so many other new songs that I liked. [24 songs were recorded.] Jimmy wouldn't shut up until we did it," he says with a smile. "He laid this Italian nag on us. We recorded it just so he'd shut up!"

The most frenetic rockers on the LP are "Century City" and "What Are You Doin' In My Life," the latter being an



Petty frolics on the set of *Battlestar Galactica*.

early favorite of FM radio programmers. Both demonstrate why the Heartbreakers have earned a reputation for being one of the most consistently hard rocking bands in America, and why they can count among their listeners both AOR fans and new wave trendies. There isn't a song on this album that would be out of place on most rock format FM radio stations, and that may, in part, explain why the album is selling so well. Three years ago, when the group's first album was released, the Heartbreakers were definitely considered by most to be on the fringe of the punk movement (which, understandably, annoyed Petty to no end). By the end of 1979, however, that type of music—and the Heartbreakers still play essentially the same kind of music they did in late '76, early '77—is considered to be mainstream in most circles. The return back to straight-ahead rock and roll, which Petty was confidently—arrogantly—predicting in interviews during the rise of disco a couple of years back, hit the nation with the force of an atomic warhead just this year. The common notion that The Knack, Nick Lowe, Dave Edmunds and the other borderline new wave artists who have had AM hits this past year are responsible for "opening up" the airwaves to rock and roll is only partially correct. Those artists could not have broken through when they did had the original onslaught of new wavers, from the hard core punks to more melodic bands like the Heartbreakers, kept plugging away ceaselessly, improving with each record, never giving into commercial pressures.

"A lot of the bands that came out in '76 and '77 went out like kamikaze pilots and a few, like us, survived," Petty says. "It had to be that radical thing to get people's attention, to wake them up to the fact that most of what they were listening to was shit. It made people either love or hate something. It motivated people: 'Have you heard Harry & the Inghrains? They stink!' And the other guy is saying 'I love

Harry / the Inghrains! They've changed my life!' Those were the sorts of reactions all of us were getting, and that was great because it's lead us all to where we are now—the radio is coming back to rock and roll. It had to."

Indicative of the new openness of many AM programmers to rock and roll has been the rapidity of the rise of the first single pulled from *Damn the Torpedoes*, the bouncy, infectious "Don't Do Me Like That." It shows every sign of matching the success that "Breakdown," from the first Petty LP, enjoyed. The current climate probably would have made both singles taken from *You're Gonna Get It*—"I Need to Know" and "Listen to Her Heart"—big hits on AM radio; but a year and a half ago they fared only moderately well.

The band is also sure to get a boost from the tremendous exposure they are certain to receive if the recently released Muse *No Nukes* album is anywhere near as successful as Elektra Records anticipates it will be. That concert series at Madison Square Garden this past September to raise money for anti-nuclear groups marked the first time that the Heartbreakers have made even a remotely political gesture. I remind Tom that in our last interview he had told me "Politics has nothing to do with rock and roll. I plan to stay out of it."

He smiles. "Well, I still think that, but we wanted to do this one show. When I was in the lawsuit and in town, I'd read the L.A. *Times* on Sunday and I'd see that people were doing these No Nukes shows. And I'd read the news and it scared me. Shit, if you look at how a recording studio can get screwed up, imagine what can happen at a nuclear power plant!"

"Anyway, I'd look at the line-ups of the shows and see that they were pretty much just reaching the Woodstock types. I thought it would be nice to try to bring a different audience in. I don't want to preach about it, 'cause to be honest I don't know that much about it,

but I do know that nuclear energy is the most dangerous thing going."

Petty does not foresee playing any other benefits in the near future. "That was the big one. I feel that with the show and the record I've really done something." (Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers are represented on the *No Nukes* album on a song called "Cry To Me.")

Petty is naturally delighted that his woes, which at one time must have seemed insurmountable, have in just two months metamorphosed into what has probably been the most productive period ever for the Heartbreakers. Once largely a West Coast phenomenon, Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers are increasingly becoming a national rock and roll treasure. Even the Midwest, the toughest region for non-heavy metal bands to crack, seems to be succumbing to the Heartbreakers' irresistible rock and roll. California continues to be their strongest region, however—for proof of this consider the fact that on New Year's Eve Petty and the band will be headlining at the mammoth Oakland Coliseum (14,000 capacity) and in mid-January will attempt to conquer L.A.'s colossal Forum. Petty remains remarkably unaffected by the surge in his fortunes.

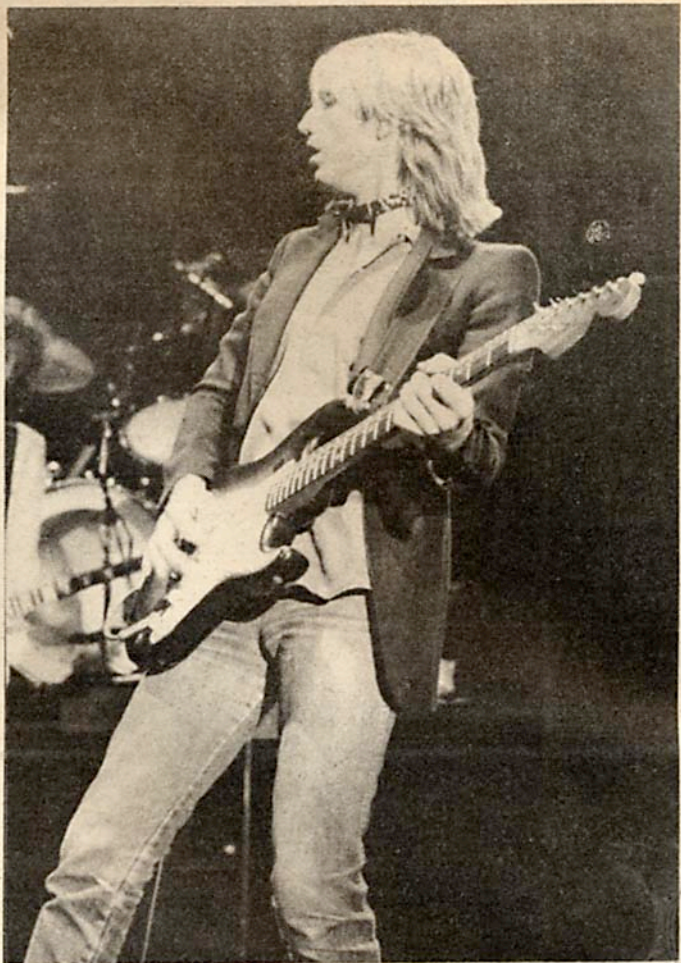
"I ain't gonna go out and buy a big house and fancy cars," he says. "I still drive my Camaro. I'm just glad that people like it and that we can take our music on the road again. We thrive on the road. That's our lifestyle. Sitting around L.A. for a year is not my idea of excitement. You've got to get out there and see the people, keep in touch with them."

"This band is the thing. It's the only thing that matters. The money isn't what matters. Lawsuits don't matter. We want to play rock and roll." He pauses and smiles slightly. "What can I say? We're back on the Heartbreaker trail." □

AXE



Tom Petty (L) just extricated himself from an annoying contract dispute. The Knack (Doug Fieger is above) signed a lucrative contract with Capitol. Photos: Richard McCaffree.



Tom Petty. Photo: Sylvia Foley.