

# Rolling Stone



## Tom Petty

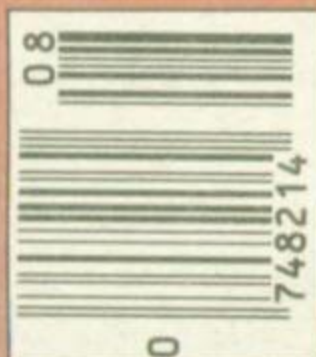
*'Damn the Torpedoes'  
and Full Speed Ahead  
By Mikal Gilmore*

## Henry Kissinger

*The Prince of Power  
under Siege  
By Tom Wicker*

## Hotline to Heaven

*A 'Holy' Housewife  
Battles the Church*



**MCCARTNEY BUSTED IN JAPAN**  
**CAMBODIA BENEFIT: Wings,**  
**Who, Zeppelin, Rockpile,**  
**Elvis Costello, Clash**



## 311 "ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS"

**COVER:** Photograph of Tom Petty by Annie Leibovitz, January 1980

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Hear NAZARETH'S mischievous new album *MALICE IN WONDERLAND*, deftly produced by ex-Doobie Brother Jeff (Skunk) Baxter who has led NAZARETH through the complex maze of rock 'n' roll. *MALICE IN WONDERLAND* From NAZARETH ON A&M RECORDS & TAPES.

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**A&M RECORDS**







# Tom Petty's Real-Life Nightmares

BY MIKAL GILMORE  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

## A TRAVELOGUE OF LOST HOPE, BROKEN DREAMS, DISILLUSION AND, FINALLY, RENEWAL

**A**T THE MOMENT, TOM Petty doesn't look much like a man who recently regained the upper hand in his career. Instead, hemmed in by hazy lights centerstage at Philadelphia's Tower Theater, he looks strained and ashen as he sings "Even the Losers," a hard-learned article of faith from his new album, *Damn the Torpedoes*. Appearances aside, though, Petty still barks with all the fervor and inflection of a raving tenor saxophone when he hits the chorus tag: "Even the losers/Keep a little bit of pride/They get lucky sometime."

Then, with barely a breath, Petty's skilled cohorts, the Heartbreakers—guitarist Michael Campbell, drummer Stan Lynch, bassist Ron Blair and keyboardist Benmont Tench—hammer into "I Need to Know." Suddenly, something in Petty's voice snaps, reverberating to the last row

With the Heartbreakers (from left): Campbell, Blair, Petty, Lynch and Tench

of the musty hall. Campbell and Tench exchange startled looks, but the group keeps pushing, with Petty's voice chafing and yanking all the way. "Stay right where you are," Petty tells the audience at the song's end, a confounded expression crossing his face. "We're gonna take a break."

Petty's comanager, Tony Dimitriades, has been sitting next to me back by the light board. His habitually unruffled face turns nettled, and he gets up to go backstage. "It sounds like he shot his voice. I was afraid something like this could happen."

It's little wonder. By his own account, Petty hasn't slept since his *Saturday Night Live* appearance three nights earlier. Since then, he's played a tour-opening date at New York's 3000-seat Palladium, filmed and refilmed a pesky spot for British television, posed for photo sessions and given a half-dozen interviews.

For Petty, the interviews demand the most. Time after time, he is asked to recount the events of his conflict-ridden year, including a bitter contract dispute with his record companies and some near-stifling wrangles within the Heartbreakers. By last summer, it seemed that the group, which in 1978 had stood on the edge of a radiant future, was tottering on the verge of dissolution, and Petty on the brink of bankruptcy.

In the end, though, Petty emerged boasting a profitable reconciliation with MCA Records and, more important, a triumphant Top Ten album. Still, reopening all those wounds has a way of peeving him. Last night, after a day of interviews, he sat alone in his hotel room, pensive and moody, until sunrise. Then today, as soon as his tour bus hit Philadelphia, it all began again with three more radio interviews.

Now, about ten minutes after Petty and the Heartbreakers had to leave the Tower stage, they're back. They ease into their springy, R&B-inflected hit, "Don't Do Me like That." Petty still bays hard, but the strain chokes his high notes and warps his face into a flushed pang. Although he skips "Refugee" because it requires him to yell like a banshee, Petty makes it through the rest of the set with an all-or-bust determination. The audience responds fervently. It's a riskier, perhaps more foolhardy performance than any of us could have expected.

**D**IMITRIADES AND PETTY pick me up in front of my hotel at noon the next day, en route to the Philadelphia airport. By the time he got back to his hotel last night, Petty's voice had deteriorated into a stinging rasp, but he declined the band's counsel to seek a doctor and Dimitriades' offer to cancel the next day's show in Boston. Finally, Petty agreed to spend the night in Philadelphia—while the band shipped out overnight on the tour bus—then fly into Boston the following afternoon.

Now, on a cold, slate-colored day, he sits in the rental car's front seat, his gauzy blond hair and a knotted gray scarf framing his crestfallen face. As I get in, he and Dimitriades are at the tail end of a discussion about the previous night's trouble.

"I fucked up a gig because I was out doing interviews," Petty says, his dry Flori-

da twang sounding a little firmer than the night before. "All that talking cost me my fucking voice."

Petty glares out the window for a few moments. "That's never going to happen again," he concludes, turning to face Dimitriades. Tom nods me a far-off hello, then directs his eyes at Tony. "I should be all right for singing as long as I don't have to do any fucking interviews in the next few days."

Petty doesn't seem exactly euphoric to see me and my tape recorder tagging along. Not that he's surly or cold, just sort of appraising and close-mouthed. Monosyllabic, even. In part, that's just his nature with outsiders—this isn't, I've been told, a man who lets many people beyond his front door—but it's also because I'm just another impending interview, another smiling interloper breathing down his lanky neck. Now, with his dictum about no interviews still hanging in the air, I'm starting to feel like a medical liability—like a virus somebody hauled aboard the *Nostromo*. This, I start to see, could be a long trip.

**I**HAD SOMETHING LIKE A PERSONAL reason for wanting to talk to Tom Petty, so I guess I have little business mewling. *Damn the Torpedoes* mattered more to me than any other rock & roll in the last year, with the exception of Graham Parker's *Squeezing Out Sparks* and a handful of songs by the Clash and Fleetwood Mac's spunky Lindsey Buckingham. In terms of musical and vocal performances alone, *Torpedoes* is easily Petty and the Heartbreakers' most cohesive and resplendent effort. The band, prodded by ace producer Jimmy Iovine (who, interestingly, is slated to supervise Graham Parker's next project), erects a stormy, full-scale webwork of howling organs and glinting guitars, slung on one of the brawniest rhythm sections around.

Petty, meanwhile, coos and snarls like some chimerical offspring of Bob Dylan steering the Hawks, and Roger McGuinn sleeking the Byrds. The Heartbreakers, as some critics have noted, may not have outgrown their models this time around, but they have fused them into a proud, personalized composite. And they've outpaced them.

But there's more to *Torpedoes* than artful structure. As much as anything, it's an album about hard-bitten faith in the face of near-insurmountable forces: lovers who frivolously desert you, dreams that invariably defeat you. In that sense, it mines some of the same motifs as Bruce Springsteen's *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, an album about people cut off from their wishes but not their pride.

On *Torpedoes*, Petty ruggedly recounts a train of twisted hopes and delays. "It just seems so useless to have to work so hard and nothing ever really seems to come from it," Petty murmurs in "Here Comes My Girl." "Then she looks me in the eye and says, 'We're gonna last forever,' and, you know, I can't begin to doubt it." Of course, in the next song, "Even the Losers," she abandons him—and by "Louisiana Rain" at the end, like Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer, the singer's seen enough to simply become a narrative device, escorting us through a travelogue of disillusion, humor and renewal. Somewhere, somehow,



it seems, Tom Petty has deepened, and toughened up.

Or maybe I'm reading too much into him. Petty himself insists that "rock & roll songs are just cheap shit—nothing deeper than that." *Torpedoes* impressed me as something deeper than cheap shit, and that's why I wanted to interview Petty.

But that conversation will have to wait awhile. By the time of the group's sound check at Boston's Orpheum Theater, Petty can barely croak. With just an hour remaining before the doors are scheduled to open, he agrees to postpone the show.

"It's obvious we're going to have to cancel all interviews for a bit," Tony Dimitriades tells me as we sit in the Hotel Sonesta's bar. "The fact is, he's traveling on that bus all day, gigging at night and giving interviews every hour in between. For now we have to cut what isn't essential. Otherwise, we're killing the goose that laid the golden egg."

**T**OM PETTY MAY HAVE FINALLY laid a golden egg, but it was a hard-fought process. The son of a Gainesville, Florida, insurance salesman, Petty (now twenty-eight) quit high school at seventeen to join Mudcrutch, a top Florida band. The group also included Mike Campbell and Benmont Tench and, like the Heartbreakers, melded British harmonies with Southern rhythms. By the early Seventies, Mudcrutch felt confident and ambitious enough to send Petty to Los Angeles in search of a record deal.

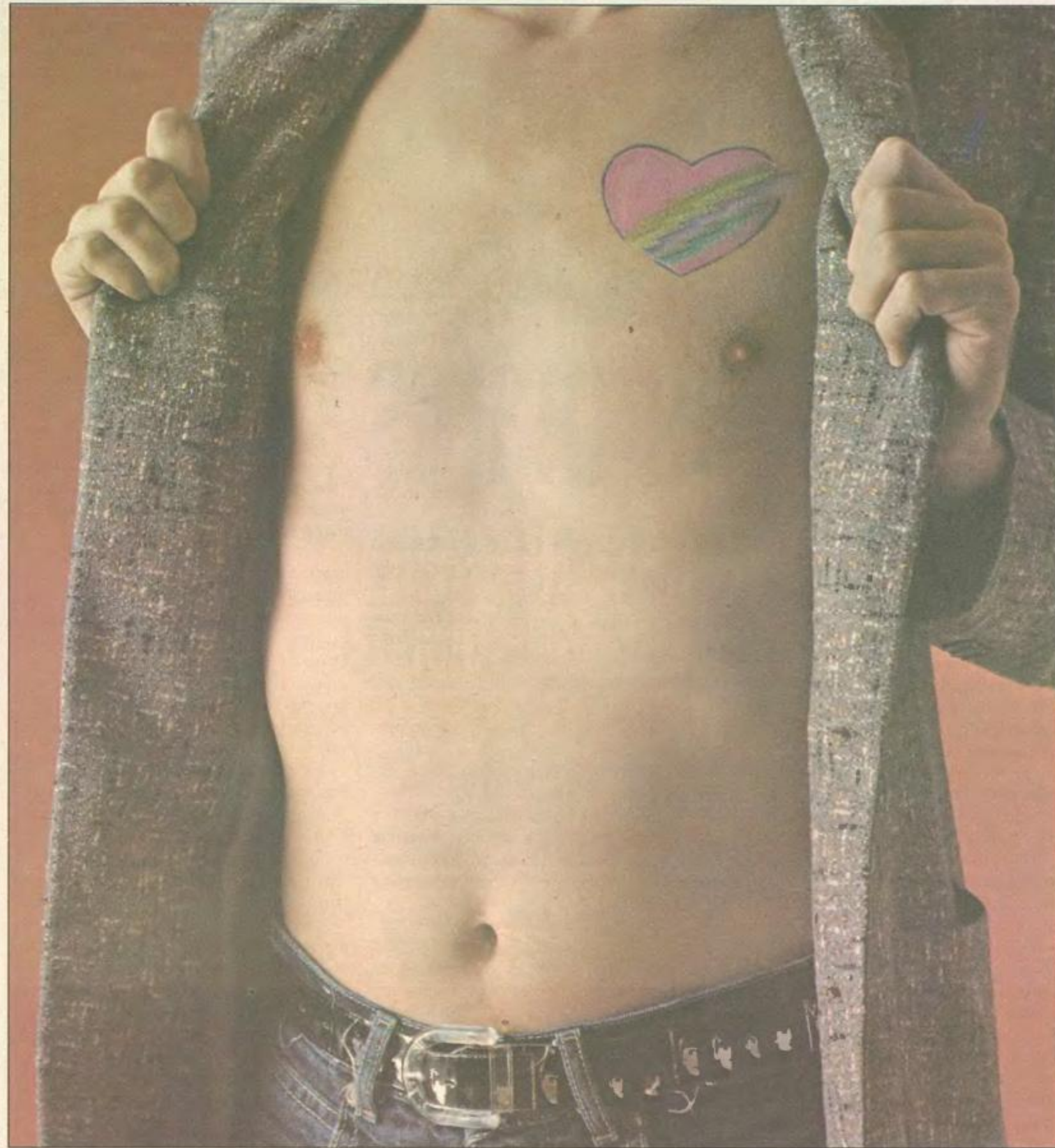
Petty reportedly collected a half-dozen offers his first week there, but the one that appealed to Mudcrutch most was from Denny Cordell, who, along with Leon Russell, coowned Shelter Records. Cordell offered the band free recording time and an exclusive recording contract with MCA-distributed Shelter. Petty, as the group's songwriter, also signed over 100 percent of his song rights to Cordell's Tarka Music in exchange for a \$10,000 annual advance on royalties. "I thought publishing meant *songbooks*," Petty now says. "I had no idea I'd never make any money if I did that."

Says Cordell: "I don't know what the going rate is today, but five years ago, \$10,000 was not an unreasonable sum for an unproven songwriter. I can show you stacks of documents where I made similar deals with other people, and on an annual basis they were ten grand better off, and I was ten grand worse off. In the end, I invested over \$500,000 in Petty—that's how strong my belief was."

Before long, though, Mudcrutch disbanded and a Petty solo album also failed to materialize. Then, one night in 1975, Petty dropped in on a demo session Benmont Tench was holding with Mike Campbell. He was surprised to find some old Gainesville rivals rounding out the studio band: bassist Ron Blair and drummer Stan Lynch. After a few hours, they tried some old Mudcrutch songs, then some new Petty songs.

By common recollection, the Heartbreakers were formed that night. They moved into Petty's contract with Shelter (by that point Leon Russell had quit the label, and Cordell had switched Shelter's distribution from MCA to ABC), and Cordell produced their maiden record.

Initially mislabeled a punk album, *Tom*



*Petty and the Heartbreakers* didn't find the charts until nearly a year after its release in fall 1976. But "Breakdown," with its seamy chords and gleaming chorus, was imposing enough to crack the Top Forty. By that time, Petty, who had been hinting in interviews that ABC had done virtually nothing to promote the album, managed to renegotiate his contracts.

Under the new publishing agreement, he would own fifty percent of the rights to his songs after the release of his fourth album. More importantly, according to statements Petty later filed with a U.S. district court, his recording contract was amended to grant him the right to "consult and cooperate in the process of selecting another record company to distribute [Petty's] recordings" in the event that the pact between ABC and Shelter was ever terminated.

The second album, *You're Gonna Get It*, spawned another hit single, "Listen to Her Heart," but the LP largely failed to live up to commercial or critical expectations. Says Petty: "That album just wasn't done the way we should've done it. It was like this incredible apathy invaded the band; we were trying to keep up fronts to each other. By the time

we started to work on the third album, we couldn't even play in a groove."

Also by that point, ABC Records was suffering its own malaise, and the financially ailing record company was sold, ironically, to MCA, Shelter's former distributor. Petty balked at the switch in labels from the start. "It was the principle: the idea of being told to report to those guys really pissed me off. Plus it was the knowledge that we would remain under that old deal, which wasn't worth shit. I could work my ass off for the rest of my life, and for every dime I saw, the people that set me up would've seen ten times as much. And at that point, MCA's attitude was, 'We know your next album's going to be bigger than your last, and we got you, son: the deal's done.'"

Petty claimed that since he had not been consulted about Shelter's transfer to MCA, his contract had been violated and he was therefore free to negotiate with other labels. MCA and Shelter sued him for alleged breach of contract, barring his rights to negotiate. In effect, Petty's career was stalled, in much the same way Bruce Springsteen's was during his altercation with ex-manager Mike Appel. Ironically, Petty had

just hired Springsteen's former engineer, Jimmy Iovine, to produce his third album.

"As soon as they thought my action might set an industry precedent," says Petty, "they rolled out the big guns. That's when I realized these guys were *mean*. It was like they were after me just because I had the potential to do something. For that, they would destroy me—fuck up my brain to where I couldn't do it anymore—before they'd let me do it for anyone else."

The legal tension also wore on the band. In particular, the strain between Petty and drummer Stan Lynch soared, and Lynch left the group. "That's when I thought I couldn't take it anymore," says Petty. "I went to the studio one afternoon and I told Iovine, 'I'm going out the back door. You tell everybody I'll call them later.' Iovine stopped me in the hall and said, 'T.P., look what you're doing. You're leaving your own fucking recording session. You gotta work this out.'"

Petty stayed and sat up with the band all night, huddling about their dilemma. Finally, at six a.m., he agreed to call Stan Lynch. "I said, 'Stanley, are you mad? I think we made a mistake. It's the five of us or nothing.'" At four the next afternoon, when Petty arrived



# PETTY ON HIS MUSIC: 'IT'S ONLY ROCK & ROLL, DISPOSABLE CRAP.'

at Sound City Studios, Lynch was already there—belligerent and drunk. He and Petty got into a yelling match and Lynch quit a second time. By midnight he was back.

"We got real honest after that," says Lynch. "There had been too many unsaid things that people were just supposed to perceive. But from time to time, I still get impatient and obnoxious. That's my role. This band can get pretty stoic and introverted. I don't care for that. I want life."

Then, in mid-1979, two things happened to break the impasse in Petty's wrangle with MCA and Shelter. In May, Petty—listing \$576,638 in debts against \$56,845 in assets (and claiming to have earned only \$38,000 in the previous year)—filed for bankruptcy. The immediate effect was a district court order preventing MCA and Shelter from prosecuting further until the validity of Petty's claim could be determined.

The other pivotal event involved the group's summer dates at Los Angeles' Universal Amphitheater (owned by MCA-Universal). Danny Bramson, a twenty-six-year-old MCA-Universal executive, was responsible for booking the amphitheater shows, and he'd feverishly pursued the possibility of a Petty appearance. Petty, because of his bankruptcy action, had to obtain the court's permission before undertaking the concerts, and MCA found itself in the peculiar position of showing just cause why Petty should not be allowed to make money for an MCA affiliate. "It was the first time," says Bramson, "that Tom and the company realized they could work together."

At the time, Bramson was also heading a subsidiary label for MCA, Backstreet Records—a name lifted from the title of a Bruce Springsteen song—and shortly after the Universal dates he approached Petty's managers, Elliot Roberts and Tony Dimitriades, about the possibility of signing the band. Says Bramson: "I intended Backstreet to be to MCA what David Geffen's Asylum was to Atlantic—a small, well-attended roster of performers where communication with the artist was more personal than corporate, yet the artist retained the sales, marketing and distribution expertise of a major label. And Tom is everything I ever wanted Backstreet to represent."

Somehow, Bramson got his wish. Shelter dropped out of the picture after Cordell, on the advice of his lawyers, settled with Petty. ("I didn't fancy the way things were going," he says. "It was better to settle and get out than let Petty successfully prove bankruptcy.") That move narrowed the battle down to two parties—MCA and Petty—and no one in either camp is willing to discuss the terms

of the settlement that found Petty signed to Backstreet. Some industry sources say that one of the main stipulations (besides a new recording contract, reportedly worth \$3 million) was an assurance that no future Backstreet artist would ever eclipse Petty's standing with the label. In effect, the agreement was a compromise.

For the record, one more Petty-Springsteen comparison remains to be made: both made their weightiest work to date in the face of career uncertainties. "To get through something like that is one thing," says Jimmy Iovine, "but to get through it with your creativity intact takes a certain personality, which both Bruce and Tom have. There were moments in Tom's case that were as heavy as anything I've ever experienced, things that would drive anyone over the edge. But what makes *Damn the Torpedoes* successful in the end is that Tom came through it with the songs. And there's something more; there's something in the guy's voice that makes you care he came through."

**D**O WE HAVE ANY COCAINE users in the house tonight?"

Petty poses this query from the stage of Chicago's Aragon Ballroom, a hall that looks like a spent Persian fortress on the inside, and has acoustic handicaps to match. An affirmative roar echoes through the auditorium.

"Do we have any girls in the house who like cocaine?"

This elicits an even louder, lust-inflected whoop. A body-perm brunette standing next to me in one of the side balconies grinds her head lasciviously, like someone who's just heard her master's name spoken.

"Well, this is for you," says Petty, crooning into his Top Forty anticocaine song, "Listen to Her Heart": "You think you're gonna take her away/With your money and your cocaine. . . . She's gonna listen to her heart/It's gonna tell her what to do. . . ." Another ditty about misplaced faith.

It's been nearly two weeks since the postponed Boston show (which Petty made good on a few nights ago). After Boston, I returned to Los Angeles, unsure whether events or dispositions would ever reunite me with this tour. Then, a day or two ago, Tony Dimitriades called to say Tom was again a restored and affable man.

About an hour after I return to my hotel from the evening's show, Petty rings my room. He feels like talking. The twiggy guy who blows into my room a few minutes later with a breezy shuffle and flops down into a deck chair, a cigarette nipped between thin, grumpy lips, is indeed a far cry from the haggard specter I last spoke with in Boston. Tonight he seems bemused, even whimsical, like a man basking in the afterglow of a particularly illuminating punch line.

"This is a good hour for me," he drawls. "I'm sure I wouldn't be anywhere near this verbal in the afternoon."

His sense of sport seems to hold up as I ask about his aversion to interviews. "I have days now when I simply can't sit down and dredge up all those same responses over and over," he says with a droll matter-of-factness. "I guess I'll quit giving interviews soon, and the press will start writing nasty things."

But, I point out, the rock press has always

treated him favorably, like a loved long shot. He nods. "Yeah, that's true. They saved my ass on that first album, and I guess I'm indebted to them. But I still get annoyed. I find it hard to believe anybody really cares that much about what I have to say. I mean, it's only rock & roll—just disposable crap that won't mean much in ten years."

That last comment gives me the opportunity to inject my notions about *Damn the Torpedoes*: that it's about a character who believes and resists in defiance of enfeebling circumstances.

Petty shrugs and picks a stitch of tobacco off his lower lip. "Well, they're just songs. I mean, I wanted this album to be more positive than *You're Gonna Get It*, which, to me, sounds like there's a sheet of glass between us and whoever we were singing to. That might've been me, because that's how I felt when we did it."

But *Torpedoes*, I note, may not sound all that positive the first time around. Between "Refugee" and "Even the Losers," the character in the songs seems to mislay anything that could matter.

Petty laughs. "You know, I don't think about these things that much. The guy in those songs isn't a loser. I've been through things where I thought it just couldn't get no bleaker. It was a bad stretch, but I had to bring myself out of it. If you can't take the attitude that even losers get lucky, I don't see how you can face life. I figure you either lose your girl or your job—sometimes both. But why let anyone know they've beat you?"

He pauses at his own sobriety, then chorales again. "They're just rock & roll songs."

Maybe, but that doesn't stop them from being meaningful. And one of the meanings people will invariably draw from *Torpedoes* is that it's an account of Petty's lawsuits and band troubles.

His long jaw tightens a little, and he douses his cigarette. "We didn't sit around and talk about making an album about that experience," he says, "but we knew we were. They get you pinned in a corner, and the last thing you can do to keep your sanity is write songs. I wrote 'Refugee' right at the start—that's how naive I was about how bad it would get. Later, I wrote some real vicious songs that I couldn't bring myself to put on the album."

"I wanted to present it as a collection of love songs—not lawsuit songs—and if there's one thing I know about music theory, it's that if you don't believe the singer, you won't believe the song. But I guess that sense of persecution was inescapable. I'm still bitter about some of that stuff. All those sleepless nights, sitting up in my house wondering *what is life?* Going a little nuts. I never got into one of those places before, and I refuse to ever go back there."

Petty smiles abruptly, as if to depreciate what he just said. "Anyway, that's over. I don't think I've been happier than I am today—which isn't the same as saying that I'm at peace with the world. It's just that, right now, we made it through a very hard time. Everybody had told us for so long that we were going to have a hit record that we stopped believing in that dream. It was kind of like a huge test, where we had to prove our integrity. I feel like we'll make it now as long as we don't get into a rut and play it too safe."

"But what can you do if you sell 8 million records? You're going to get a little decadent whether you know it or not. Then each release has to top the one before, and I know

that pressure's coming down the line for us, too. If you let that mentality overtake you, you end up being one of those people who is afraid to run off course. But the only people who ever really make the big score are the ones who run off the course."

**L**EAFY ASHES OF VINYL, THE byproduct of a Christian rock & roll record-burning party, are still blowing around a frigid St. Paul parking lot when Petty and the Heartbreakers' tour bus pulls into town the next afternoon. These guys still remember the Southern Bible Belt bonfires that followed John Lennon's declaration in 1966 that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus Christ." Maybe for that reason their show that evening seems to try to boast its own kind of hellfire.

"I called my mamma on the phone today," Petty tells the audience, in his introduction to Solomon Burke's "Cry to Me" (the song Petty performs on the *No Nukes* album). "I said, 'Mamma, I'm in St. Paul.' 'St. Paul?' she said. 'I hear it gets pretty cold there.'"

Petty pauses and flashes the crowd a knowing grin. "Yeah, mamma, but last night it got pretty hot." The audience lavishes him with a volley of cheers and a houseful of flickering Bic lights.

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' shows vary little from one to the next—song sequence and solos are plotted right down to the last salvo on the "I Fought the Law" encore—but they do get more assaultive, like a blaring replication of *Torpedoes*' steam. And the older material benefits from that verve. In "American Girl," Mike Campbell and Benmont Tench embellish Petty's rock-constant rhythm guitar with fierce melodic undercuts, while Stan Lynch and Ron Blair direct the gun-burst tempo changes. In that majestic moment, the Heartbreakers fulfill a lot of promises that Roger McGuinn and company long ago forgot.

Petty, though, is the fulcrum. Yet it's something more than his mannered cockiness and stealthy catwalk that move me tonight. For one thing, it's the way he sings the pained pronouncement at the opening of "Even the Losers"—"I showed you stars you never could see/Baby, it couldn't have been that easy to forget about me"—in a voice that sounds like it lost more than it could afford, and will probably lose it all again.

It occurs to me, standing at the back of the hall, that most of the people I know who have ever found meaning in rock & roll have done so because they saw something heroic or romantic or intellectual or transcendent about the idiom. Petty's music, at this point, offers a curious kind of transcendence, one that reminds me of something crime novelist James M. Cain once wrote about his own books: "I...write of the wish that comes true, for some reason a terrifying concept, at least to my imagination. [The reader realizes] that the characters cannot have this particular wish and survive." With *Damn the Torpedoes*, I get the feeling Petty would understand those lines—and still plow full-speed ahead after his wish.

It's like that final claim he makes in "Even the Losers": "Even the losers/Keep a little bit of pride/They get lucky sometime."

Time and again, I've watched him prove it all night.