Petty Gets His Torpedoes Together And Damns Ahead To The Airwaves

By David M. Gotz

After six months of legal manuevering, Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers have their third album on the streets. With nine solid rock 'n' roll tunes, Damn The Torpedos *is the kind of record so many of us have been waiting for T.P. to produce. The big sound and hard hitting hooks erupt in an emotional foray. On release in late October, the response from radio stations around the country was overwhelming; Americans know when to get behind their own and go for rock 'n' roll at its best — passionate and proud.*

Earlier this year I interviewed Petty (RR August, 1979), so it was indeed a treat to talk again. This interview was one of the most enjoyable I have ever done.

Did Danny Bramson (head of Petty's new label, Backstreet Records) have alot to do with settling your legal entanglements?

Yeah. Danny saved the day, in as much as he got everybody to sit in one room and talk again. It was a long, long course of events, because we had actually started going to trial. After so many months it's kinda cloudy now, but at the time it seemed like it was never gonna end. It just finally, bit by bit, got painstakingly settled, and everybody came out pretty happy, I know we did.

While that was going on, were you cutting new tracks and trying to keep your head musical?

I was tryin' to, not all the time because there was a while there when I wasn't allowed to work. I had to go in and get the permission of the judge in court, and get a ruling where I could go back into the studio. The judge let me go, so everything I did in the studio couldn't be taken away.

You must have had alot of tunes to choose from, how did you arrive at these nine?

They were really just our favorites. There were a couple tracks that I liked, but I couldn't find a place for them to fit into the album. At times I think the album is a little sketchy, a little schizoid, but that's kinda the way I am anyway. I kinda dug it.

I noticed that "Casa Dega" got dropped from the album, but it's on the B side of your first single, why was that?

I didn't think it fit in lyrically, it's about a town in Florida and lyrically it didn't fit in with the rest of the album. I also didn't want to put in too many of the softer songs, 'cause I thought we had plenty.

Why was "Don't Do Me Like That" chosen as the first single from this album?

It had nothing to do with me, the company guys take care of that. I would have chosen "Here Comes My Girl", I think it's the best song we've ever done.

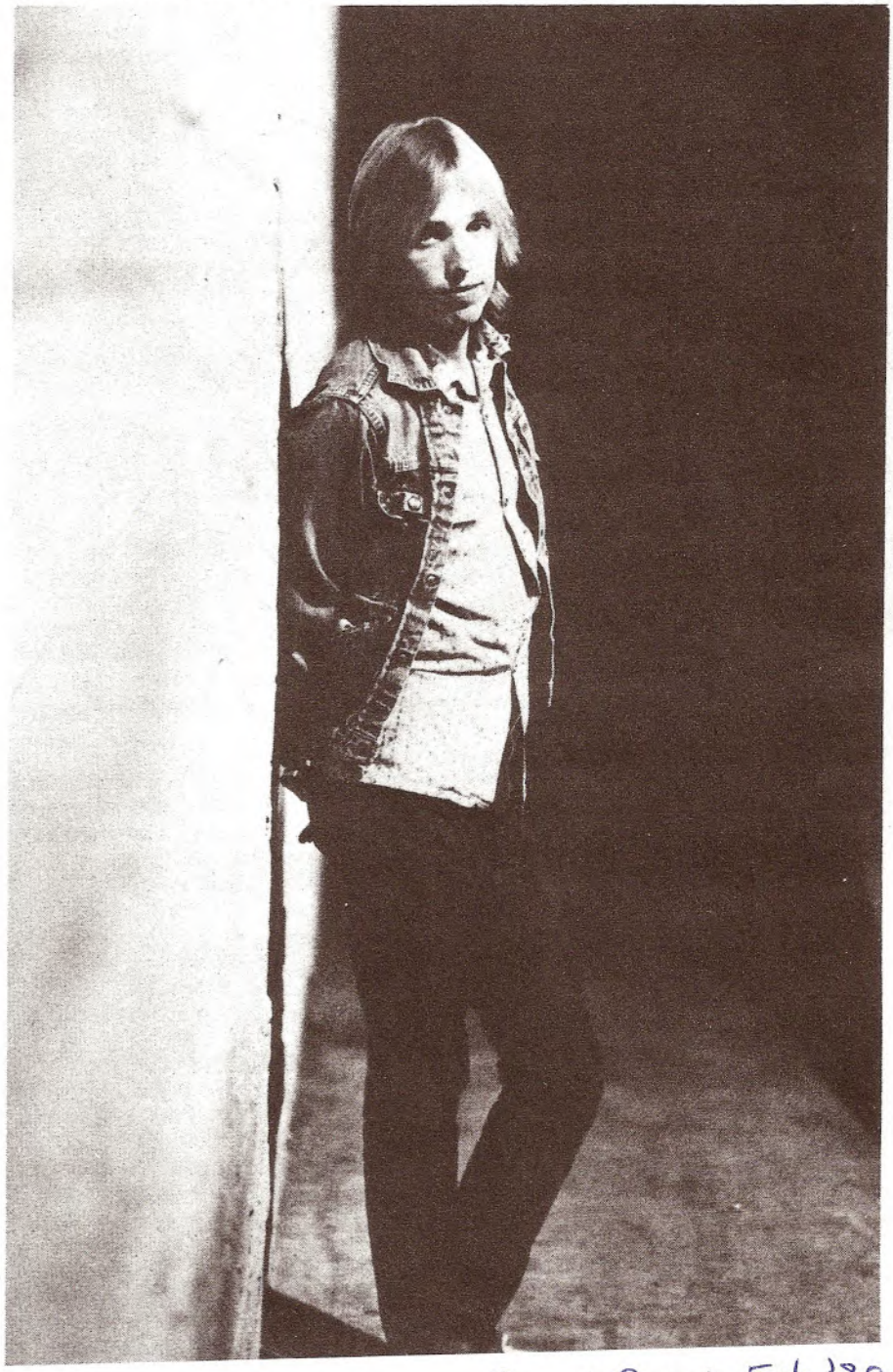
Is having a hit single on your mind at all?

Not really, no. I'd love it you know. I'd love to have a hit single. Our biggest hit single is "Breakdown", which would have been the last song I would have thought would be a hit. I think it's great if they come, and if they don't, we'll press on anyway. I don't know much about that. I know from the business that you're supposed to have 'em, but I think we're slightly unique in that we get away without them.

Where did the title come from?

Damn The Torpedos? That was kinda our motto throughout the making of the album. You know everybody has their torpedos, and we had alot of torpedos, it's a miracle that we got this thing done and on the streets.

Do you have any feelings about this



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album now that it's done and out?

Yeah, thank God it's out! I like this album, it's most of the show this time on tour, and it's certainly doing much better than the others, it's had much more of an immediate acceptance. I'm just relieved really. I mean after a year and a half off the road, you wonder if you're still in touch or not, you'll be sayin': "Well I like this, but will anyone else like it?" So when it came out the way it did, with all that noise and everything, I was grateful and very relieved, people like it and that's great.

Are the stories that you tell in your songs based on facts or are they general tales?

They're mostly based on fact, it would be very difficult for me to write totally fiction, and I don't think it would be very honest. So the names and places are changed to protect the innocent sometimes, and sometimes it's twisted around, but they're mostly true.

I've noticed alot more young songwriters doing the love song route; do you have to be continuously looking for new ways to write about this well worn subject?

Oh yeah, you can't write about the same thing over and over. But maybe what you're writing about didn't happen last week, maybe it's something that happened years ago, and you can draw on that. Or you can see somebody else go through something that you're close to and it can effect you enough where you can write from their point of view. I think there are alot more people tryin' to do it now, but most of it sounds insipid to me. So many of the new love songs sound like, "I'm not really interested". I'm not interested in some of these people because it sounds contrived to me, like I don't believe that what they are sayin' is really goin' on, or if it is it's not special enough for anyone to care. It's a real fine line, all that stuff.

Do you find yourself emotionally involved in your own songs?

Yeah I am when I write them. I try to put more in them than just the surface value of the song. The really good songs to me are the ones that go beyond. You can take them at face value as the love song or whatever, but if it creates other images, (pause) this is awfully intellectual.

That's OK.

If it sets up more to relate to than just a love story, then they're really good songs. If they give you a feeling of optimism or a positive thing or a negative thing or a hopeless thing or whatever, then it's much more than a love song.

Do you ever surprise yourself with the inner meanings that come out of your songs?

Sometimes it happens and you don't even know. I've written songs where it was a long time later that I actually put it together, and that's really weird to me. Like I was writing this, but now I realize what I had way down in the bottom of the song. But I don't know if anybody ever gets it just listening to the radio.

Do you get people telling you about the different things they get from your songs?

Oh yeah, all the time, people tell me things that I didn't know were there. Sometimes, what really makes me laugh, is when they didn't understand the lyrics right, and they've got their own lyrics, and it means so much to them, and I say great. I'm not gonna tell them any different.

I think that happened to alot of people with Rolling Stones songs.

Yeah, yeah, I'm sure. It was always more fun when you figured out what they were really saying. Jimmy Iovine (co-producer with TP on *Damn The Torpedos*) always says I sing like I got a mouthful of food. Well I say, what's the difference. I listen to Otis Redding records, and all those black records, you develop a knack, if you will, for hearing all the lyrics. Now I don't have any trouble understanding Rolling Stones lyrics. I used to, but after 10 years I understand them, I can hear what he's sayin'.

Do you think that in a song that the accessability is in the music first and then the lyric?

I don't think there are any rules, there's not any formula. I know with Dylan, especially his older records, it wasn't the music that pulled me in, the first thing to hit me was some line. Then I'll hear alot of records where the track might pull me in, or the rhythm. I think the rhythm is the most seductive thing about records.

"The album is a little schizoid but that's the way I am anyway."

What's with the little snipets between tracks on your new record?

The snipets? (chuckle) Most of that stuff was on the tapes. The stuff you accumulate somehow, before and after takes. We edited the tape over the telephone, Jimmy was in New York and I had to come back here for court, so we did it over the phone. So I'd say: "Stop, cut here, cut on this beat, and aw leave that stuff in". (laughter)

All those things were just left in, were any left in for a reason?

The little organ seg. thing on "Louisiana Rain" is Michael playing one of those chord organs, and I just liked it; he was just fooling around. Jimmy didn't want to use it, he kept sayin': "I don't understand, you must be on dope". But I just like it, it's just 30 seconds of music, and if somebody doesn't like it, well they can skip over it.

Is Mike all happy about you using it?

He didn't care. Mike still doesn't understand why I wanted to use it.

Are you interested in hearing more cover versions of your songs?

Well it's happening more and more now. I'm into that, I enjoy other people doing them. I heard The Searchers doing one on their new album, and that was really weird to me, because it didn't really set me on fire. There's one that isn't available in America, but it's out in England; a guy on Stiff Records called Lew Lewis does "Hometown Blues" and it's a real interesting cover, it's the only cover that's been done well in a long time. Bonnie Tyler did "Louisiana Rain" last year, before we did it, and I wasn't very pleased with that. That's how we came to use it on our album though. Jimmy heard the Bonnie Tyler record and he kept nagging me to do it, and I didn't see it at all. I gave it away, I didn't want it. He'd say: (T.P. does his imitation of New Yorker Jimmy Iovine, he sounds more like a mafioso though) "Naw, it's a great sawng, you gotta do this sawng, it's grreat!" So finally we cut it and it sounded great. (laughter) So there's the value of a producer.

But covers are very flattering, I owe alot to those people who do my songs. I think it's really made me more respected as a writer, than if I was the only one to do my songs. I guess that's really what songwriters are, they write for more than themselves.

Bruce Springsteen has alot of his songs done by other people, have you ever talked with him about that?

Yeah, he feels the same way that I do. He came down to the studio while we were working on this stuff, and it was right when that Pointer Sisters thing was out — I thought it was amazing, he didn't seem as taken with it as I did. I kept sayin': "God Bruce, what a song", and he said: "You know you work on a song for three weeks and then nothing, and then you do something like 'Fire' in ten minutes and it's a big hit", and that's the way it goes I guess. You know somebody as good as Bruce is bound to have covers, I don't think it has anything to do with anything, just that he's a great writer. He has such a universal kind of feel to his stuff.

Is that something that you develop?

I think you're just lucky. (laughter) I don't know, I really don't know.

Do you try to develop your songs so that they're more accessable to others?

No, I try to write for the Heartbreakers really, that's my motivation, is to write stuff for our records. I still look at it as a band, and I try to write things that the guys will enjoy playin', and be behind them, and be able to relate to them. That's a pretty rough panel of judges too, and they'll tell me, fast, that they don't like a song.

Are there songs that get halfway there?

Oh yeah, there are alot of songs that didn't make it. Some get put together from parts of others, but there are some that you'll work on for a week and then just say: "It's not there, it's just not comin' through". But I enjoy it, writin' songs, it never bothers me, it never seems like work.

With all the time you put in the studio for this album, you must have written alot of songs.

I had all this time, and there was nothing I could do to help my case, and no way to

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fight back. The only thing I could do to fight back was to write songs. I was pinned in a corner.

Springsteen was in a place like that too.

Yeah, we talked about that. I think it's just one of the big sharks in the waters of the music business. (chuckles) It's one of those dangers you're gonna have if you're a recording artist these days.

Do you think your whole recording career has been plagued by that?

Yeah, I probably hold the world's record. I mean everybody has been pulling from different directions. Being the future of rock 'n' roll before you've even made a record, I mean before you've had a chance to do anything — it's as much of a curse as a blessing. People get very possessive about you, you're their duck that's going to lay their golden eggs. I'm there sayin': "Let me make some records and then we'll talk about it, leave me alone."

So it started before you even recorded?

Well just as the first record was coming out. It was just the biggest joke in the world to us, I mean we really used to get yuks about that! We used to sit around the Tropicana Motel (not a classy joint) and read about us being the future of rock 'n' roll.

And then it became a drag?

It was never a drag, it was nice that people got behind our first record.

There is very little instrumental soloing on your records, do you think about that, do you save it for the live situation?

Alot more creeps in during the live shows than on records, I don't know, I kinda miss it on the records sometimes. The first two records we made there were hardly any solos. On the first one we were sayin': "We're not gonna have solos, we're sick of solos, everybody has alot of solos, we'll make it without solos". But we've loosened up a little, because they're so good, and they can play good solos. I like the solos on "Refugee", Ben plays an organ solo, then Mike plays and it was such a good interaction.

With all the time you spent on this record, do you think you came up with your best singing and playing ever?

Yeah, I really do, of course you always say that, you always feel that way about your new record. But I think that overall this album is our most cohesive.

Do you actively work on your singing ability?

No not really, I'm not careful about my voice: I smoke and do other sorts of bodily harm to myself, I stay up all hours, I'm not like in training to sing better. The thing about vocals, the only thing about vocals for me is believeability, it's not about being in tune or hitting a note, it's not doing anything except making people believe what your singing.

Are you concerned that all of your mischief might make your voice fail you one day?

I've wrecked it before, but not too often. Not sleeping is what really hurts it the most, so I try to watch that aspect. It ain't fair to the people paying to see me perform if I can't make some noise.

I talked to a real good singer, Southside Johnny, about this and he said that even if he couldn't talk all day, that emotional charge at showtime helps you come up with stuff you didn't think you had.

He's right, I've been in pain you know, and had doctors come and shoot me full of things, and when you go on stage it just works. Boy when you come off, the pain sets back in, just ahhhhgh, and you go into a corner and curl up. But while you're out there you don't think about being sick. I never have much sympathy for musicians who are too ill to go on. I don't believe in that, you go out and play.

Do you ever worry about the band breaking up?

We confronted that during this album. It's a good thing that we did, there was alot of pressure and these legal things happening. We fought, we fight alot still, but we're still together, and I think we all still want to do this. When we confronted it we just said anyone who doesn't want to do it, shouldn't, just walk right out the door. So the result was that we all wanted to stay. I think we're pretty good friends, we've been around each other so long. I hope it never breaks up, because I would feel slightly disoriented, but I'm not afraid of it.

Are you looking forward to this new tour to solidify the band?

Yeah, 'cause that's more our lifestyle, in a year and a half off you do other things, and you miss it. I miss it alot.

It's gonna be a long tour.

Yeah, around the world. I think it's a real privilege to travel around like that.

Are you concerned that your first show will be in front of a huge audience on Saturday Night Live?

It doesn't seem that difficult to me, it's only a couple songs, it's nothing like going out for 1½ hours, I mean that's so much more physical. Naw, the nerves haven't set in, anyway, not yet. I tell you, we just feel real good, we're back in rehearsals, we got our same old crew back, the little entourage has assembled again, and we're all gettin' on a bus and goin' out for a year! That's what we've always wanted to do, for a year that's all we've really wanted to do. Now that we've gotten all this shit out of the way, for the first time in our lives we've got our business straight, we've got good management, a good agency and a good record company. I mean everything has settled down, so now all we can think about is music. I feel real good, I wanna play.

No refuge for a Heartbreaker (from left): Stan Lynch, T. P., Ron Blair, Benmont Tench and Mike Campbell