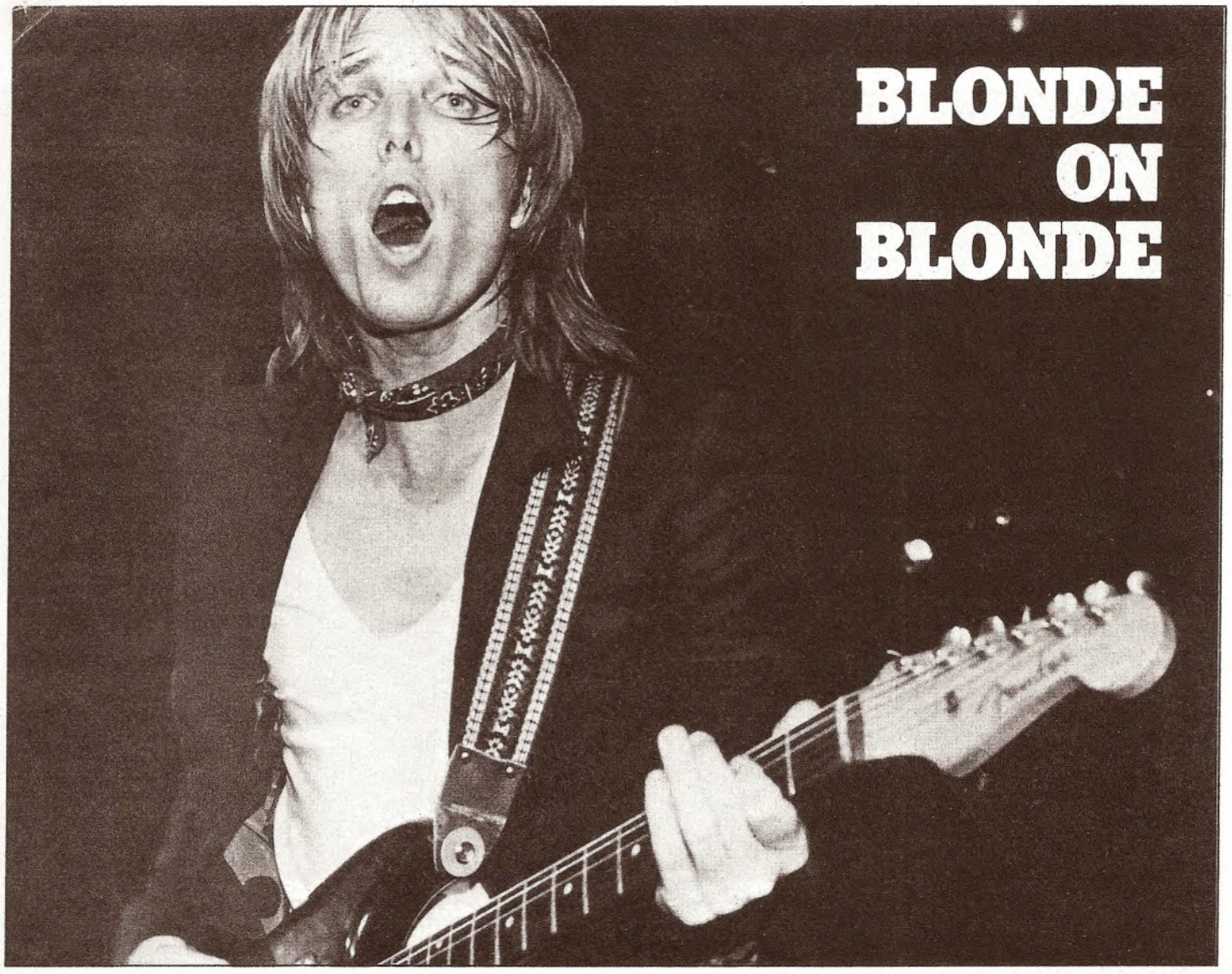
BLONDE ON BLONDE



Ebet Roberts

By Steve Morse

In Tom Petty's life, the clues to existence are food, shelter and rock 'n' roll. And not necessarily in that order. When his school principal sent him once to a psychologist to learn why he preferred rock over book-learning, Petty's answer was short but sweet. "Rock was more fun," he said.

Now on the threshhold of superstardom, Petty still views his songwriting craft with a clear, cut-the-nonsense eye. "I don't go at it as if I'm writing a great novel," he says. "Hell, I go at it as if I'm makin' records."

Although the Knack and its endless stream of Beatlesque imitators have dominated radio of late, it was actually Petty and his Byrds-influenced group, the Heartbreakers, who first made fundamental, no-frills rock 'n' roll acceptable again on the airwaves. That's something Petty (speaking via phone from Los Angeles) doesn't want people to forget.

"I don't hate AM radio. I just thought it should change and give the rockers a chance," Petty says of that sputtering time. "So in the later part of 1976 and 1977 we just toured and toured and hammered at the door until finally we made some progress. We got a Top 40 hit ['Breakdown'] and had a couple of hit albums. I think it had a lot to do with opening the door and making the new stuff more accessible. Actually, we're proud of that. It worked, and I think that battle is pretty much won now. Now it's a matter of, 'OK, you guys have the ball. Where are you going to take it? What are you going to do with it?' All it did was just prove that there is an audience out there for rock 'n' roll that's as big as anything else. All I thought was that they weren't being represented on the radio, but that's pretty much over."

Another sign of the changing times is that Petty's latest LP, **Damn the Torpedoes**, went safely into the Top Ten of the charts and onto countless radio playlists, both sure signs that Petty's time has come. "Now that's a switch, isn't it? That's a lot different than a couple of years ago. So I'm real happy about it. I think that radio's finally shaping up."

As for the bogus rockers out there—and I suggest to him that the Knack leads this dubious list—Petty, in his lingering Southern drawl, turns philosophical for a moment. "There's always somebody who isn't as good as Picasso, but is maybe trying to cop that style. But I don't worry about that because I think there's a lot more honesty in rock 'n' roll in the last two years. I think the honesty is paying off for these people, for the honest stars. There's always going to be a Monkees-type thing, but I don't really try to come down on anybody. Like the Knack ain't my favorite thing, either, but I wouldn't really come down on them because for all I know it's as honest as they get...But I agree with you. Some of it ain't great. In the end the kids tell you what the real thing is."

Petty's belief in "the kids," which is as unflappable as the Who's kids-are-alright slogan, dates back to his boyhood in Gainesville, Florida. He was a rocker from the word go; one of his first jobs was working in a music store with Don Felder, another Gainesville product who later became a member of the Eagles.

Gainesville, a college town dominated by the University of Florida, also produced Petty's band, the Heartbreakers (which includes guitarist Mike Campbell, drummer Stan Lynch, keyboardist Benmont Tench and bassist Ron Blair), along with Jeff and Marty Jourard, who are now in the Motels. These various friends would play in overlapping configurations, and Petty started performing publicly when he was only 14. He's 27 now, so he's actually a 13-year performing veteran.

Petty recalled the early days of playing six to eight sets a night, six or seven nights a week. "It would depend on the county you were in as to just how late the night would go. Sometimes you'd play in a place until

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"A band should never make rules for themselves."

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two a.m. and it would close, then you'd go down a couple of blocks to the bottle club where you brought your own bottle. Then that could stay open 'til dawn, so you'd just start all over again."

Looking back today Petty says, "Boy, that was rough—but at the time I never really thought of it as rough. I just thought: 'This is what it is."

Just how rough did it get? Did he ever play in places, such as Willie Nelson did in Texas, where they put chicken wire in front of the stage to protect the band from flying bottles? "Yeah, we've done those sort of things. The bar circuit in the South is kind of rough. And we used to play topless bars a lot."

Yet Petty doesn't regret the experience. "I haven't thought about it in a long time, but I think that's really good for you in a way, because you learn to play, that's for sure. It's *play or else*."

Petty wasn't writing original material in those days, for a good reason. "In most bars nobody wanted to hear it. They wanted to hear the hits of the day more than hear something you wrote. They wanted to get off on their favorite songs. We played mostly R&B music; you know, Sam & Dave and Wilson Pickett. And we would always do the Stones and that kind of thing."

Eventually, the Gainesville scene dried up. "Everybody started to leave because there really wasn't much opportunity to record down there. There wasn't anywhere to record, in fact, I guess Macon, Georgia was the closest place, which was still pretty far away. And that was Allman Brothers-style music and we didn't fit into that. So we said, 'Let's go out to California.' We figured it would be better to starve in the sunshine than go to New York and starve in the snow."

After their national breakthrough a couple of years ago, Petty and the Heartbreakers have been well-nigh invisible this past year because of a prolonged lawsuit. "I hate to even start because it would take two weeks to tell you all about it," he says.

Basically, it was a quarrel with MCA Records, which bought out ABC Records, the company that distributed Petty's first two albums (which were on the Shelter label). "We felt contractually we weren't assignable to MCA and that made us free agents. Then all the record companies moved in and wanted to sign us, but we couldn't because MCA sued us. It took us a year in court to finally come to a settlement. So now everything's rosy, but it was a bummer, a bad time."

Although financial figures have been kept hush-hush, it is known that Petty and the Heartbreakers are receiving a small fortune under the MCA agreement—somewhere between $1 million and the $3.2 million that CBS paid not long ago to acquire Paul McCartney's contract. And *Billboard* reported that Petty wanted more money to re-sign than leading MCA artist Olivia Newton-John.

"Yeah, we did," says Petty, scarcely concealing his pride. "But the point was that MCA was in a position where they didn't really own the band. The offers from everyone else were pretty staggering and we thought, 'Well, you guys have got to pay the going rate of what we can get from anywhere else.' And eventually they did, and they paid a half-million dollars in court costs on top of it...But we just had to show them that we were serious and that we would just sit for a year rather than do it their way."

A compromise was also reached whereby Petty's new album—while still being distributed by MCA—would come out on a new label, Backstreet Records, headed by a friend of his, Danny Bramson, who also owns the Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles. "Instead of us giving in and going over totally to MCA, we kind of have our own office now," says Petty. "Bramson was setting up a label within MCA and he came in as sort of the peacemaker."

After a pause, Petty says, "But I'm on really good terms with MCA now." Besides, he laughs, "Kids don't want to read about that anyway."

So onward to **Damn the Torpedoes**. The album has the expected Petty diet of open-eyed boy/girl rock 'n' roll, although it includes a satirical song, "Century City," dealing with the California locale that, as Petty says, is "full of the legal sharks than run the music business."

Not wanting to reopen the wound of the lawsuit, I comment on the overall surprising

Greg Helgeson

Not quite the Holly/Petty team of yore: Gary Busey (ex-"Buddy Holly Story") and Tom cheek to cheek.

depth of the album. Petty willingly grabs at the cue.

"Yeah, that was pretty conscious," he says. "This time we didn't really do the three-minute and two-minute songs that we used to do. Some of these are longer. We really wanted to see if we could do that because we're known for doing two-and-a-half-minute rock songs, which never seemed strange to me but did to everyone else."

Told that the album appeared to be his most polished so far, Petty, however, shoots back: "I wouldn't say it had gotten polished, but it is a lot 'bigger' than the other two albums from a sound perspective. But the next time around, god knows, it'll probably sound as if it was done in a garage. There's no telling what'll happen. Just so long as it keeps changing, I'll feel good."

A live-by-his-own-rules rocker, Petty confronts the future by adding, "I think we would do anything that we felt like doing at any particular time. If we wanted to bring strings in, it wouldn't bother me a bit. I really think that the worst thing that a rock band can do is make rules for themselves—that you can't do this or you must do that. It's just death that way, because then where are you going to go? I'm not at all interested in refining one thing down, because I like too many kinds of music. I want to roll around a little bit and do some different things. So if we wanted to do an Eskimo hymn or something, we'd do it. Anything that rocks. The key is: Is it rock 'n' roll? And have you done something to it that makes it worthwhile?"

Even the use of synthesizers isn't out of the realm of possibility, he says. "For a long time we didn't want to do anything with synthesizers—and we haven't really—but now they sort of interest me because I see things that can be done with them that aren't normally done."

Relishing the thought that he never wants to be pigeonholed, Petty continues, "I think we'll always kind of be at heart a little five-piece rock band. It's hard for us to think in any other terms than that. But I wouldn't make any rules. Then again, I don't think we'll turn around and go Barry Manilow on anybody, either. It's just not in us. We couldn't do that."

A final point that Petty wants clarified is that he has no interest in a film career. One reason Petty is considered Hollywood material is his looks: blond, angular and unmistakably cool, somehow reflecting innocence and road-weary jadedness at the same time. He seeks to do more work creating music for films—he just wrote a song for the upcoming Robert Stigwood movie, *Times Square*—but acting is another matter.

"It just doesn't come natural to me. I'd rather play and be out on the road. Why take six months to do a movie? I think it's fine for the people who do it well, but it's kind of like actors who want to sing. Very few actors are good musicians."

Petty did have a cameo role—a rather silly appearance as a rock star in last year's film about rock radio, *FM*—and he is still embarrassed by it. "I thought the title was *SM*, which meant an entirely different thing," he says, forcing a laugh. "Then it turned out to be this kind of beach-party thing and I didn't dig it too much...So if people ask me if that was me in the movie, I always say, 'I don't know what you're talking about. That wasn't me.'"

Petty receives a lot of scripts, but they invariably call for him playing a rock 'n' roller and he's just not interested in the stereotype. He and the Heartbreakers turned down the lead to the film, *Rock 'n' Roll High School*, starring the Ramones. "As a matter of fact," he adds, "when we passed on it we said the Ramones should do the movie. Sometimes I get a little miffed at reading more about how I look than how I sound," he says sharply.

That's true of all the Heartbreakers, he adds. "We take a lot of abuse sometimes for the way we look, which has never been a premeditated thing. We just look that way. Sometimes in the press they'll say, 'Well, they're so pretty.'

"But that's all rubbish. We're just normal. Or pretty normal. Well, almost normal." ■

Reprinted courtesy of the Boston Globe.