

# THE CRITICS VS. TOM PETTY

Some N. Y. critics want to bar  
Tom Petty from rock heaven;  
Dave Marsh defends good  
old rock 'n roll.

By Dave Marsh

Ordinarily, I'm the least mild-mannered of men, whipping out opinions the way that rock and roll doctors administer pills, apologizing only when the chips are down for good. I've been fighting the symptoms of an unaccustomed defensiveness, which ebbs and flows in spurts coinciding precisely with the obsessiveness with which I listen to Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' *Damn the Torpedoes*.

Such fanaticism is so commonplace in my life that it's long since ceased to be troublesome by itself. My taste is built around mainstream rock and roll, a genre that's never chic and hardly ever respectable. (Which is one reason that I dote on it.) But *Damn the Torpedoes* is desperately unhip these days — at least among the denizens of big league, Manhattan rock criticism. It's probably OK to like it, but only as an addendum to an aesthetic which prefers Lene Lovich butchering Tommy James and the Shondells and Joe "King" Carrasco flubbing? and the Mysterians licks. So it feels embarrassingly retrograde to be championing Petty's variations on white, urban R&B when all of my colleagues are wrapped up in the Gang of Four, Pere Ubu and Essential Logic.

Even understanding how adventure-some such avant-gardists must be, (taking my colleagues at their word, I mean) it's still incomprehensible to me how someone could get so awfully excited about that music as rock and roll. (Of course, if Pere Ubu and the like isn't a new and superior kind of rock and roll, you're forced to realize that it might be a rather mechanistic and inferior rendition of licks Ornette Coleman tosses away for sport.) The Gang of Four uses variations on Steve Cropper guitar licks, and uses them fairly creatively — still, this hardly means that Gang of Four plays rock and roll or soul music, any more than Eric Carmen's pilfering of a melody from Rachmaninoff made him a Russian classical composer. If rock and roll is either a kind of music or an historical tradition, this stuff quite simply doesn't fit within it. And if rock is neither of those things, then Johnny Lydon is correct, it's a dead horse and one might as well discard the term and the ideas associated with it.

Which is partly why *Damn the Torpedoes* strikes me as a great rock and roll



Tom Petty seems something new, a straight-forward, emotionally involved rocker.

record — it comes along at just the moment when you'd almost given up on anyone but the old stand-bys doing anything inventive with the form. Petty uses stinging guitars and whiplash organ, a solid backbeat and steady bass and he makes those instruments mesh masterfully, almost as a single instrument, which is a hallmark of most great post-Spector rock and roll.

Even Petty's singing, dramatic in an age when theatrics are out, fits into the rock tradition better than the more directly R&B derived singing or someone like James Chance-White. And though what Petty is singing apparently strikes some as not terribly meaningful ("...whether he has anything to say remains shrouded in banality," proclaims Robert Christgau, dean of American Art-Rock Ideology), there is not much difference in purpose between a Petty song like "Only the Losers" or "Refugee" and the Clash's "Death or Glory" and "Stay Free."

But *London Calling* is a Critical Big Deal, while *Damn the Torpedoes* is accepted, if at all, as a nice job, a commercial breakthrough by a mere journeyman. Petty isn't taken as seriously as the Clash, as nearly as I can figure out, because his mode of expression (not what he is saying, but how he says it) defies current critical orthodoxy. The Clash, and most punk/new wave performers, are ironic and indirect; Petty,

and the best mainstream rockers, pride themselves on being straight-forward and emotionally involved. It's ice vs. fire, with ice, as always, a lot easier to handle — or at least explain. Petty is also erotic in a way that even the most sexually-obsessed new wavers (Elvis Costello, Chrissie Hynde) are incapable of being; it's easier to defend his more narrative music, but I'd also like to throw in some praise for "Here Comes My Girl," a genuine love song in an era without any.

It's interesting to note that Petty was regarded as — almost — a New Wave performer himself, until *Damn the Torpedoes* was played extensively on the radio, and accepted by mainstream listeners. (It will be even more interesting to note how many current Clash fanatics defect if and when *their* music ever goes Top Ten.) Despite their leftist rhetoric, this is only the latest symptom of the unwillingness of most rock critics to be found in the company of what many of them would snobbishly categorize as "the punters."

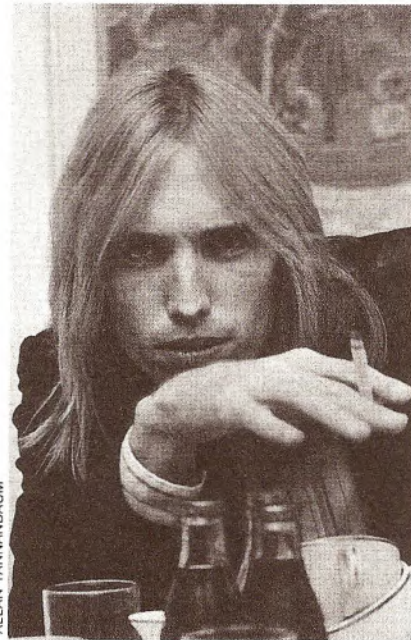
There's nothing new about this attitude — you don't even have to look at the common Seventies examples (David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen) to find a parallel. Such elitism has been built into every trendy avant-garde rock movement since the psychedelic era. Tom Petty, in fact, is merely the inheritor of the John Fogerty Syndrome. The

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achievements of Creedence Clearwater Revival achieve more resonance with each passing year, and the recordings of Fillmore heroes like the Grateful Dead grow more lacklustre. But it would be a mistake to forget that during CCR's actual reign on the Top 40 charts, Fogerty's work was regarded as too simplistic (he made great singles, not concept albums *per se*), and insufficiently experimental (he played rock and roll, four to the bar with very little extended soloing) to merit serious "artistic" consideration.

In fact, the argument for punk-rock's complete demolition of the mainstream rock aesthetic (which is what allows critics like Christgau to dismiss Petty so cavalierly) is itself founded in a maze of contradictions. The new wave aestheticians don't automatically dismiss commercial success as a criterion of lasting importance — that's part of the reason for the excitement over *London Calling*, which made the Clash the first hardcore punk band to make the U.S. Top 40. Nor have the current new wavers completely rejected studio craft and technique — everyone is willing to acknowledge Guy Stevens' contribution to professionalizing the Clash's sound, and although it's harder to admit, no one could readily deny that Nick Lowe's Ball



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of Gauze is precisely what's prevented Elvis Costello's *Get Happy* from connecting as powerfully as last year's *Armed Forces*. One can hardly claim that Petty has sold out by becoming No. 2 instead of No. 32, and to maintain that Jimmy Iovine's extension of the Spec-

tor/Springsteen Wall of Sound is inferior to Stevens' mere competence serves only to reveal the essential ignorance of most critics about what's really involved in contemporary record production. However slick it may seem, Iovine's production style is utterly inconceivable in any genre other than rock and roll.

In the early Seventies, when Lester Bangs and myself, among others, developed the pre-Sex Pistols theory of punk rock, it was designed to challenge critical heterodoxy — our argument was that what occurred slightly beneath the surface of the big trends was, in fact, what rock was really about, and that the kind of musical tastefulness and competence then in vogue was aesthetically contradictory to the natal impulses of rock and roll.

So it's especially interesting to me that Bangs defends the current rock avant-garde not as rockers but as "punk jazz" — although not nearly so interesting as it might be to read what a jazz-based critic would have to say about the validity of such music in the jazz tradition. But no one has yet built a case for Pere Ubu as a more logical heir of Elvis Presley than Tom Petty. Recovering my assertiveness, I'd like to challenge someone to try. **M**

Robert Fripp God Save The Queen



Musician

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