



**FROM
THE
ASHES
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**...COMING
ASIA**

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Hard promises, tough times

TOM PETTY:
CENTRE PAGES

TED NUGENT

TUBES

PETER TOSH

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MAGAZINE

TENPOLE TUDOR



BENMONT TENCH remembers the day well. "It was April Fool's Day 1974 when we drove to LA," he recalls. At the time, keyboardman Tench, guitarist Mike Campbell and a scrawny blonde kid called Tom Petty were part of a band from Gainesville, Florida, called Mudcrutch.

The momentous move to LA got off to a disastrous start. Two blocks from home, the van broke down. "We weren't even outside the Gainesville city limits," Mike Campbell says ruefully.

Seven years on, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers are four albums old and near the top of the tree in American music. The new album, "Hard Promises", is homing in on the American number one slot, though not as quickly as its seven inch counterpart "The Waiting". It's confirmation of the breakthrough marked by the best-selling performance of Petty's 1979 album, "Damn The Torpedoes".

They have a way to go before they approach Springsteen's legend-in-a-lifetime status, but they sometimes get mentioned in the same breath. It seems, I say to Petty, that apart from you and Bruce, there are precious few artists carrying the flag for the great American tradition. "Yeah, it's gettin' to be a shorter list," he says simply.

Los Angeles basks in the white heat of the midday sun. The stick-shift Honda seems indecently agile as it sprints past rows of sluggish automatic saloons. Jeeb, who's driving, stabs the tuning buttons on the radio impatiently, trying to find something more stimulating than early-Seventies Stones and REO Speedwagon. Suddenly, there's the familiar nasal moan, ringing guitar and surging organ. "It wasn't no way to carry on, it wasn't no way to live," sings the voice. "But he could put up with it for a little while, he was working on something big..."

Petty's pursuit of the elusive something hasn't been all plain sailing. A crippling legal dispute kept the band out of action for a year, after their original label, Shelter Records, was sold to MCA. A settlement was eventually reached, allowing Petty to sign with the MCA subsidiary label, Backstreet Records.

"I know that it changed me, I'm not sure how," Petty says of the lawsuit interregnum. "We got pretty beat up, right? Every fuckin' thing that could happen happened, and somehow we got through it, and we kinda feel now that... I don't know what could really happen to us that could fuck us up like that. So in that sense, professionally I feel more secure."

Far from splitting the Heartbreakers, the trauma drew them closer together. "The band was all we had," says Mike

Campbell, with more than a hint of pride.

"At one point in the lawsuit, they were arguing about letting me go on the road for six days," Petty remembers. "The other side were saying, 'unless he can stand here in court and show us some security for him being allowed to make this much money, he can't go'."

"And the judge says, well what have you got to say? An' I said there is no security in rock'n'roll, and the whole courtroom just burst into laughter and the judge laughed and he said you can go on the road."

Now, with the new album promising to earn its keep with a vengeance and with "Damn The Torpedoes" behind him, Petty can afford to look on record companies with a more charitable eye.

He even goes so far as to describe MCA as being "pretty decent" for agreeing (reluctantly) to drop the list price of "Hard Promises" from \$9.98 to \$8.98. It wasn't long ago that the Heartbreakers played the sixth and final date of their "Lawsuit Tour" at LA's MCA/Universal Amphitheatre, wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the motto "Why MCA?"

Taking further advantage of MCA's apparently limitless resources, the Heartbreakers are rehearsing for their imminent American tour in one of the big movie soundstages on the vast Universal/MCA movie lot in Universal City. It gives them a chance to check out at least a portion of their tour PA system as well as their new lighting rig.

During the day, tourists trundle round the studio sets in open-sided trams, pointing their Pentaxes at the streets of Laredo or ancient Rome or at the ersatz shark already signed up for "Jaws 3". By night, the soft California dusk drapes itself across the sprawling lot, and even the ghosts call it a day.

Back in Lot 42, the movies make way for the music biz. Lighting supremo Jim Lenahan sucks on a pipe and gabbles away to me about his new automatic colour changers, while crew members dangle vertiginously above the stage on slender ropes, aiming spotlights out onto the extended apron sections of the stage which give Petty and guitarist Mike Campbell the chance to make strafing runs out towards the audience.

Not that there's much incentive to do so in the huge empty shell of the building, with the dozen or so people scattered around the interior preoccupied with specific tasks. The Heartbreakers run through their songs easily, and on the second night I watch them, they really begin to work up some steam.

It's a little strange, though, to see them storm through a crashing workout of "Shadow Of A Doubt", Petty jack-

knifing over his guitar to finish the number, to be met by a hollow silence where the applause and the yells should have been. Photographer Dennis Callahan holds up his lighter in ironic salute. It's a little eerie.

I guess you either succumb to Petty's music or you don't. Though "Hard Promises" moves away from the smooth, majestic sound of "Damn The Torpedoes", songs from all phases of the Heartbreakers' career slot together with surprising ease.

"American Girl", "Wild One", "Listen To Her Heart", "No Second Thoughts", "Shadow Of A Doubt" — they're obviously from the same pen as new ones like "Woman In Love" or "Letting You Go". When they hit their stride, the band are breathtaking.

Of his own playing, Petty observes drily: "They never mix me loud enough. They'll never put my guitar up, and I'll go 'I CAN PLAY, REALLY'. It's the whole song to me. I wrote the song playing rhythm, and now I'm doin' it and they play with it. And it's real loud onstage."

Petty himself is as normal as the bloke at the off licence, just more shy. He speaks with a surprisingly dark Southern drawl, pausing often to release a slow grin, either at me or at the floor. The professional purposefulness of the rehearsals centres unobtrusively round Petty.

"We've never been big on rehearsing," he claims, but there's minimal time-wasting. After a break for beers and food, Petty quietly suggests they get back to work. Everybody gets up straight away and heads back for the stage.

The band's collective experiences with failure, success and the gruelling mechanisms of the law have made them as near unshockable as it's possible to be.

From being the underdog trying to scurry out from under the crushing wheels of a giant record company, Petty suddenly finds he can sell huge numbers of records without getting out of bed, and radio stations come to blows over him.

KLOS/Los Angeles, for example, started playing the new single "The Waiting" in advance of the official release date, causing the rival KMET station to retaliate by playing a couple of other songs off "Hard Promises" ahead of schedule.

And in Chicago, FM station WLUP staged what the LA Times called "one of the most amazing promotional stunts in rock radio history". The station forked out over \$170,000 to buy all 15,000 seats for Petty's June 11 gig at Rosemont Arena, which were then given away to Petty fans in various promotional events.

Naturally, WLUP isn't doing this as a public service, but to regain its ratings lead over rival station WMET. In retaliation, WMET was considering an airplay boycott of "Hard Promises".

The whole thing bewilders Petty. "They came to me and said they wanna buy all the tickets and you get paid and the kids get in free. I said 'I can't argue with that'."

"I thought it was a great idea and I still do, and if they don't play us on the other station, then they won't. I mean, I went through years of them not playing us on a lotta stations..."

Though the Heartbreakers only started to come together in 1975, Petty has been playing music with Mike Campbell for ten years now. He's full of praise for him.

"I'll tell you, there's no music he can't play. I'll say 'do me a flamenco part' or 'play like Chet Atkins or Jimmy Page', and he can do all of them excellently. I'd be lost without Michael, cos the way we



Adam Sweeting and TOM PETTY
get sun-tanned in
Los Angeles

Tuning up the



criminal kind

Pictures by Dennis Callahan

play, the guitar player really is called on to play a lot of different styles."

Though the prolific Petty writes the bulk of the band's material single-handedly, there have been several notable collaborations between him and Campbell, including "Hurt", "Refugee" and a trio of tracks on the new album. They've also penned a number called "Stop Dragging My Heart Around" for the impending Stevie Nicks solo album.

Campbell explains it thus: "As soon as I get a free minute I just get a tape recorder and a guitar. I just get a kick out of it. That's my one real drug I guess, trying to come up with new ideas.

"I'm really bad with lyrics. It's kinda hard with Tom in the band to bring in a lyric, y'know, the standards are pretty high. But I'm real good with music, and lately Tom's been really receptive. I'll just get a coupla things together and give him a cassette, and he'll come to rehearsal one day and say 'this is what I've done with this idea of Mike's'." He shrugs. " 'Refugee' — all *right!*"

Though it's still uncanny to hear how much Petty's voice sounds like Roger McGuinn, he maintains that he never consciously listened to the Byrds that much. Lennon, Keith Richards, Creedence's John Fogerty and Elvis Presley seem to be key names in Petty's background. He spent his early years singing Creedence songs in Florida bars, not out of choice particularly but because landlords demanded it.

The circle is unbroken, though, since nowadays Petty finds his own songs being covered by other artists. The most celebrated example was McGuinn's hit version of "American Girl", though Petty mentions Grace Jones' version of "Breakdown" as a particular favourite.

Of "American Girl", he says: "Over the years, you always read that Roger wrote it or I wrote it and Roger had a hit with it or that we sound alike, but right there when they were both out at the same time it always seemed to me that the two versions sounded totally different. If you listen to him sing it doesn't sound anything like me at all."

Maybe that's because you sound more like him than he does. "Yeah, I know it freaked Roger out pretty good." He chortles at the memory.

With the new album, there was a conscious effort to break away from the sound with which the Heartbreakers have become identified, though "The Waiting" is firmly in the old mould and none the worse for that.

The studio team of engineer Shelley Yakus and producer Jimmy Iovine (veteran of Patti Smith's "Easter", Lennon's "Walls And Bridges" and the Boss's "The River") was retained from "Torpedoes" days, though the relationship between them and the band was different second time around.

Petty explains: "With 'Damn The Torpedoes' they had this incredible sound, with the drums and all that. We were just getting to know each other, so we pretty much said okay, let's get into whatever Jimmy's got goin' and do somethin' interesting — and it was."

"And this time, I think that Jimmy listened to me a little bit more, because to tell you the truth, when I played him the songs he didn't quite understand what I was gettin' at."

"He said 'this is great, it's just not what I expected at all'." It wasn't clear exactly what Iovine did expect, but Petty pointed out that he'd better get used to the songs 'cos they were indeed different from the previous batch.

"I didn't play him all the songs that are on the album in the first place anyway, because some were written during the process of recording. But once Jimmy could understand what I was getting at, he was into it."

"But we did try to get a little rougher sound than the 'Torpedoes' album. This time it was like 'let's not worry with the sound so much' — just don't worry with it as much as we did before, and try and do more songs."

"So we dealt with a lot of songs, 18 tracks I think we cut. And we livened up the room a little bit with some room mikes to make it sound good and live."

A lot of the songs were recorded live, including a live vocal. "And then I went back and tried to beat a lot of 'em — and couldn't. So I'm real comfortable with that, singing live."



"We always had the six of us playing, the band and Phil Jones on percussion, on every track. And then we'd overdub, or we might say let's change a guitar part, pull a guitar part out and put another one in."

"But not very often. Sometimes you need to give it a little more rhythm or somethin', get an acoustic guitar back there just chompin' around a little bit. We just call 'em like colour instruments, somethin' to bring it out."

A lyric sheet was included this time, the first time Petty's done it. I don't know if this is the reason why the lyrics seem stronger this time than on the three preceding records, though I can't work up much enthusiasm for "A Woman In Love" or "A Thing About You".

But on "Something Big" and especially "Insider", a genuinely poetic ballad on which Petty duets with the ghostly tones of Stevie Nicks, the Florida phenomenon has made demonstrable artistic steps forward.

He's not keen on delving too deeply into the, um, "meaning" of his lyrics — "it ain't rock 'n' roll once it's an English class" — but he's more than happy with the results this time around.

"I think the better songs are the ones when you can take it this way or you can look a little deeper and take it this way" — he laughs nervously — "or you maybe think a little more general and take it this way. Those are the ones that I really like."

Having agreed with Tom that you shouldn't analyse his words, I start asking him about some of them anyway. The line "I'm the one you couldn't trust" from "Insider", for example.

"It's one of those things in a relationship that really is the stinger," he says slowly. He leans back, and the famous Tom Petty grin breaks into loud laughter. "You know, you didn't trust me, you couldn't trust me . . . that's the way it always come out. Trust."

"When I wrote that song, I wrote it very quickly, I mean maybe in ten, 15 minutes." The tune as well? "Aaah . . . well, maybe give me another ten minutes for the tune, I don't know . . . (more laughter)" I just wrote it all down on paper and then I just picked up the guitar and tried to sing each line out. It took me maybe an hour to do that — it don't happen every day, fans! But the lyrics were real quick."

Several of the new songs focus on losers, schemers, criminals — the lonely Speedball in "Something Big", the narrator of "Nightwatchman" who claims "I got potential", the target of "Criminal Kind". Just how much of this is personal reminiscence?

"Well there has to be some of me in it or I couldn't write it — I couldn't sing it, anyway. To me, it's just like people I've seen around, y'know, over the years you just see these guys."

"And this business — it's like 'Something Big', it's like one of those seedy businesses where there's always some person where you can see no visible credentials, right? This guy has nothing together and he always has some big project."

"In Florida it was always like some guy who had a big dope deal or some guy who was gonna start a rock band

and make millions or some guy that was gonna open a bar and, y'know, there was always some kinda seedy thing."

"Always the big thing was how do we get up that first payment? Inevitably some adventure comes down about how you're gonna raise this money real quick. That was just kinda the idea for it. I fucked around with it a little."

"Criminal Kind", on the other hand, was inspired by Tom OD-ing on the LA media. "I mean I hate to look like a moralist," he begins, screwing his face up, "but it's just living here and watching the news every night is just like *starting to bother me*, you know, starting to bother me, and I would see the news and it's like there's so many people killed every day . . . these gangs and stuff, their one big pastime is to get a pistol, right, and to go around and pick people off street corners from their car window."

"They shoot kids or . . . a two year old kid shot in the chest with a shotgun by his six year old brother, or somethin' like that, and I just keep seein' this."

"Well, you see the poverty creates a lot of it, then on the other hand you see the general loons that have everything in the world and are still blowin' each other away."

"The way the song came about was actually from seein' this Vietnam veteran, he died the other day, who drove his jeep through the front door of the veterans' hospital, saying 'I'm dyin' from Agent Orange, I'm crazy and I'm tryin' to tell you' — and they wouldn't treat the guy or somethin'. And he killed himself."

"I was on the road somewhere and we were stopped in the freeway traffic, and I looked out the window, and sittin' next to me in this kind of fucked up old Ford was this guy. And you could just look at this guy's face and you could tell that this guy is trouble."

"And then I noticed that round his mirror he had his Army dog tags, like they hang dice. I would have bet money he was a killer, y'know, and it just stuck with me and we did that one tune. I just thought it fit the album, that we should get into that for a second."

So it isn't all drugs and sunshine out in California, despite the evidence to the contrary. There's a recognition in the Heartbreakers camp, nonetheless, that Los Angeles can suck the vital juices out if you stay there too long.

Both Mike Campbell and Petty feel it's time to find a new location to record the band's next album, with Memphis or New Orleans being possibilities.

Despite their smooth California-style sound, the Heartbreakers haven't yet become victims of the LA superstar ghetto mentality. But they're moving closer to it, and it worries them.

Petty isn't resting on his laurels yet — it isn't long since he was filing for bankruptcy, and he's been down far enough to remember just how bad it can get.

"If you're in this business, if you're looking for security, there are a lotta other things I would advise," he warns. "I'd always kinda accepted that I would have to do without a great deal of security to do this."

"I'm livin' day to day — probably always will."