

RECORD

TOM
PETTY

*The War
Is Over*



Exclusive Interview: Ry Cooder
Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, Joni Mitchell,
Linda Ronstadt, Yaz

trasts the beefy distortion guitar of | for long," is applied to the burst of | pulses by making the most of them | TOM STOWE

Petty: The War Is Over

By David Gans

LOS ANGELES—The war is over. After fighting with record companies, aborting a major tour when tonsillitis blew his voice out, changing bass players and enduring other assorted setbacks and distractions, Tom Petty has strung enough quality time together to break free of his troubles and concentrate on one important task: Making rock 'n' roll music. *Long After Dark*, the fifth Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers album, is in the stores and on the charts, and the band is now in the midst of a lengthy tour which Petty has been looking forward to as eagerly as his fans have.

"I want to go on a tour, and so I want to have a lot of rock 'n' roll songs to play," says Petty of the material on *Long After Dark*. He

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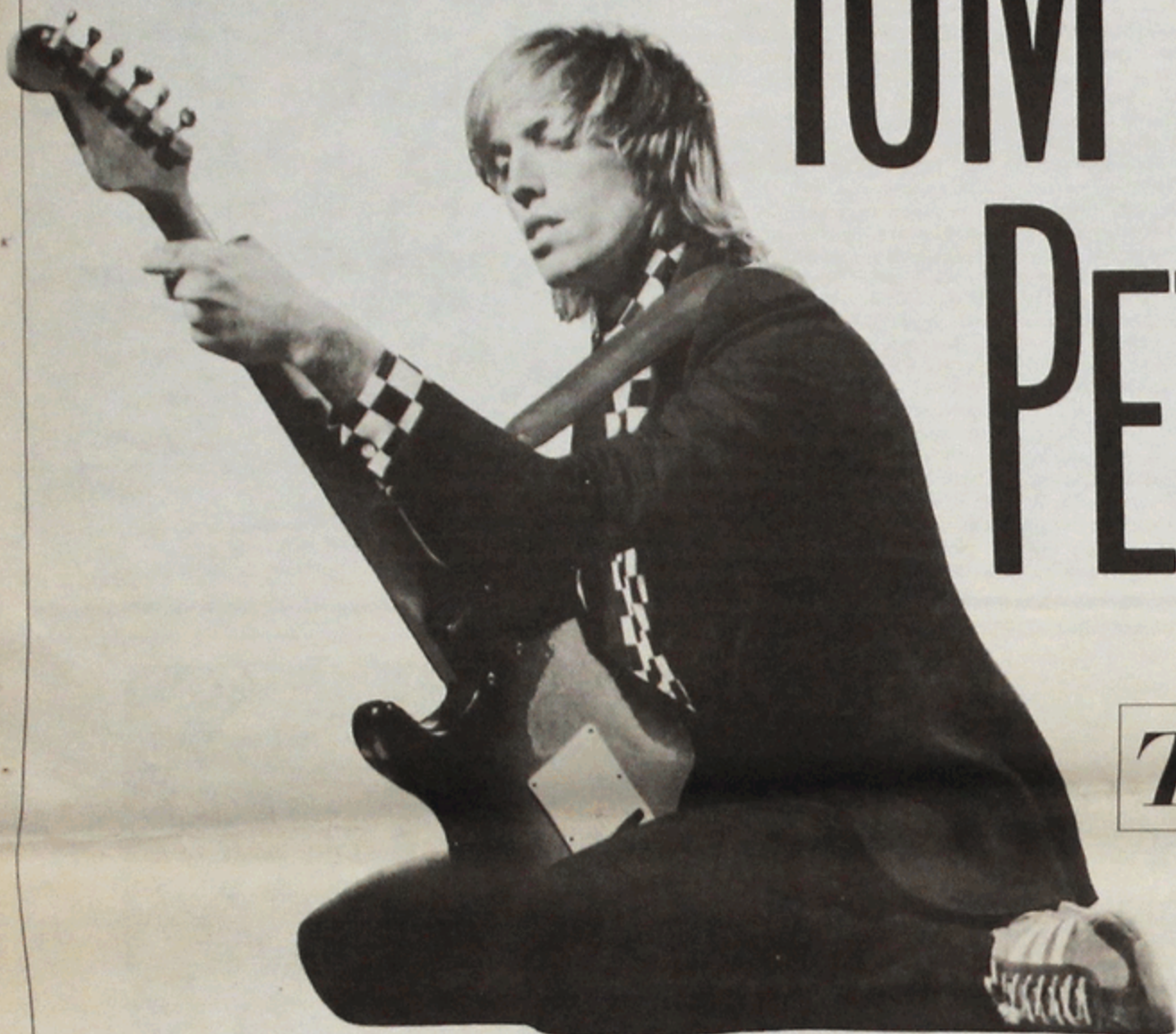
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TOM PETTY



The War Is Over

every time. A great song is a great song, whatever the arrangement is. But when you start thinking about your "career," you don't have one much longer.

What do you feel is important to put across in your music?

Well, I'm certainly not trying to preach or tell anyone what's right or wrong. I see myself as an observer, a reporter. I try to use what's happened to me or people in my immediate vicinity—and the better I get at expressing that and getting it across, the more meaningful the tunes are to people.

"Reporter" implies that you're laying out the facts but not necessarily drawing the conclusions.

I'm just putting it down as I see it. You can't be concerned with every song you write being an epic—you know, "Here's another classic for the masses." I don't think that's the attitude of rock 'n' roll; that's more the attitude of a college student. You couldn't do "Tutti Frutti" these days and get a really good review on it, lyrically. But it probably lifts you higher than a lot of nicely done poems. "Wop-bop-a-lu-bop" says a lot to me—just that feel. I want to be free to write "Tutti Frutti" as well as "American Girl."

I don't like songs where the message is too clear, where it's pounded into your brain. I like to use love

like the Clash, but up to now I haven't felt inclined to do that. I'd always rather be entertaining and take somebody's mind away from things for a while. But I don't rule out that I would get into a frame of mind to write like that and put it across. But any time you see somebody who's basically a guitar player and a songwriter taking it too seriously, you kind of want to throw a tomato at them. You know, they're just rock 'n' roll singers.

Is that what keeps you from taking yourself too seriously?

Hopefully, yeah. It's just rock 'n' roll. It's really meant to have a good time; it's not meant to be a lot. It's wonderful when it inspires you—I've hit my highest highs in rock 'n' roll, so I have all the respect in the world for it—but I look at it as entertainment first. Everything else is just fringe benefits. When I started playing music it wasn't to make a living or to buy another apartment building or whatever. You did it like you went out on a date, you know, for the sheer amusement of it. It meant the world to me, and it still does.

I think the quality of records could be better and that people could be a little more concerned about it. But then again, a lot of people think—and I understand why—that you shouldn't take a year to make an album, that it

should be more spontaneous.

Why did it take you a year to make this record?

We usually cut four or five songs, then take a break for a month or two and come back in with another five songs. This time I had such a volume of songs—each time I'd go back to write another song for the album, I'd write three. We recorded everything, and about halfway through the year we found ourselves in a huge mess—"I like this, but I'm tired of that," you know.

I had a period when I was really into pop music, and I was writing a lot of brisk, piano things. When I put three of them on a side, I changed the tone of the album. I knew pretty well the tone and feel I wanted, and this stuff made it too light. So I had to pull them off and go through another writing session.

There's a lot of experimenting with the songs in the studio. Most of the tracks are done almost completely live, without a great deal of overdubbing. We might cut a song four or five times and then go back and use the first or second one. Business people don't understand that, but it's a matter of curiosity. We try everything and play around. (Laughs) We probably spend way too much money, but we really have a lot of fun.

How do you and Jimmy Iovine organize your efforts in the studio?

It would be very easy for me to produce the records by myself and have no one to argue with, whereas Jimmy will question me until the cows come home. If he doesn't like something, I almost have to picket.

So he keeps you from bullshitting yourself, or settling for a little less than you could have.

Yeah, absolutely—especially settling. He'll push me and push me, to the point where it's ridiculous sometimes. I've seen him do it with other artists he works with too. Sometimes he's wrong, and he'll admit it, but he's usually right.

Does Jimmy work on the arrangements and the lyrics as well as the sounds?

Yeah. Sounds are mostly Shelly Yakus; neither one of us likes to even be bothered with it very much. It's easier for Jim to concentrate on the songs and the arrangements if he's not leaning over the board trying to get a sound, and I think he enjoys it more if he has Shelly doing that. Shelly's so good and so thorough that I don't question whether the sound is going to work later. I can say, "Shelly, that doesn't sound right," and he deals with it.

If you notice, it's a different sound when they work with me than when they work on their own. There are times when I say, "I think it sounds too good—let's back

up." We give each track the character and texture it needs—those are the only real guidelines that we use, and the rest is just up in the air.

How does the rest of the band fit into the format? Are they as much a part of the creative argument?

Oh yeah, absolutely. It is a group. Everyone has their say, but we don't talk about it that much. We never have—if anybody has an idea, we usually just try it. We can do it real fast. If you shut somebody off, then he doesn't feel like part of the session.

I read that you and (drummer) Stan Lynch have gone at it a few times, and that he's actually quit and come back a couple of times.

Yeah, we go at it all the time. That's just part of Stan's temperament—he's a very high-strung guy, and being a drummer in a session is like being a pitcher on a baseball team—it's always his fault. Whatever's wrong, it's the rhythm section, right? And I tell you, there aren't that many people who could live through an album with me and Jimmy, because we tend to push people very hard, and we're not always what you'd call polite. We will say exactly what's on our mind. It's not meant to be rude, it's just meant to get on with things.

The flip side of that coin is that you

have to indicate your level of respect for these people.

Absolutely. I respect the group more than anything. I feel really fortunate that I can work with a guy like Benmont Tench, even though I've worked with him all my life. He's just an amazing musician, the cream of the crop. They all are, and they know I respect them. There's an art to staying together for five years, a real art. There's a little give and take, but it's worth it. We had to decide that we wanted to keep this band together.

Was Ron Blair's departure amicable?

It really was. There wasn't any argument or fight—he just didn't want to tour anymore. He called me and said, "I have no grudge or anything, but I just can't get on that bus again. I just want to get out of the music business." He was very nice about it. He bought a clothing shop, and I think he's working on some stuff to make a solo record. He's just basically taking it easy and living off his store.

Emotionally it was a blow because we all really loved him. But musically, he'd been drifting away for so long that it wasn't a big change. He'd lost interest. It didn't change a lot of the sessions, because a lot of times Ron wasn't there and Michael (Campbell) or I would play the bass. But emotionally it was a little sad, because we missed him.

How have things changed since Howie Epstein joined the band?

He's a good bass player, man, but the main difference is that now we sing a little better, because he's a good singer with a real good high harmony.

We never really gave him much of a shot to rehearse or anything. We'd just say, "Howie, we're going to play 'Listen To Her Heart,' and then we'd run through the song—and he'd know it better than we did, really. He knew all the changes from the records.

How drastically does your material change when you go from the studio to the stage?

We usually take the same basic beat and rhythm, and the tunes just evolve on the road. But I like to do it where it's at least recognizable, so they know what song it is. They hear it close enough to what they hear at home, but they get a little more than they got on the record, or a little different slant. We know what the structure is, how the chords go and where the beat goes, and from there it's "Let's work within that: Let the guitars be free to do what they want." Sometimes it works best to do it like the record.

I think we grew a lot in performance last year. By the end of that tour the band was a mean machine. I could try anything I wanted and the band could pull it off. It was so much fun.

I'm anxious to play live again. We've been off the road for a year, and now I think I could really appreciate it. I'd like to go for a pretty good while.

Will your throat hold up?

We'll see how much the throat can take. We don't play more than three days in a row, because my throat won't hang in there. But last year we didn't miss a show, and everything was fine until the very last week of the tour, when I just started disintegrating. They knocked three gigs off the end, because the doctor said "You're gonna have nodes on your vocal chords if you push it very far."

Have you taken any voice training to improve your technique?

(Shakes head) I just go out there and scream (laughs).

And keep on smoking cigarettes.

Well, what are you gonna do? I mean, you can't live like a deacon because your throat hurts.

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got the ballads out of his system on *Hard Promises*, and that record also exorcised his record industry anxiety. "I don't think about the music business much now that my legal things have been settled," he says, adding that the songs on *Long After Dark* are "just about living life. It's a good rock 'n' roll album, not necessarily a party record but something that you can just put on and bob to."

The author of "Breakdown," "American Girl," "Listen to Her Heart," and other radio hits, Petty was expected to ascend above the rock mainstream with his third album (which was being produced by Jimmy Iovine) for the ABC-distributed Shelter label. But when ABC was sold to MCA, Petty went to court contending that his contract was not transferable and that therefore he was free to negotiate with a new label. Although the business hassles threatened to pull Petty apart at the seams, the recording proceeded. When everything was settled Petty became Backstreet Records' flagship artist; *Damn The Torpedos* was released and Petty and Iovine forged both a friendship and a productive creative partnership. "After he went through a good ten months of lawsuits with us, we were kind of like blood brothers," says Petty.

When MCA announced its intention to raise the price of albums effective with Petty's fourth record, he took his case to the public. "I didn't want to be the guy that brought records up to \$9.98," he says. "I didn't want that hung on us, because we had no part of it." It has been reported that Petty threatened to name the album Eighty-Nine-Eight to make his feelings clear, but the label backed down before such overt measures were necessary. *Hard Promises* became his most successful release.

It was a relaxed, smiling, not-quite-chain-smoking Tom Petty

who slumped comfortably in a well-upholstered chair in the offices of Lookout Management a couple of weeks before the start of the European leg of the Heartbreakers' winter tour. He talked easily and unhurriedly about the making of *Long After Dark* and the changes that continue to take place in his musical life, including the addition of Howie Epstein to the band following the retirement of original Heartbreakers' bassist Ron Blair. These changes, however, seem to have given rise to a new resolve on Petty's part to define his work more specifically in the context of contemporary American rock, and that's where our discussion begins.

There's been a recurring theme in your records, a triumph-against-the-odds theme. I hear it on *Long After Dark*, too. Aren't you ready to relax yet?

(Laughs) I wish I could, but I can't quite get at peace with things. I think if I did get peaceful, my music probably wouldn't be that interesting. I still get angry, yeah—and Michael Campbell always tells me that I attract trouble.

What kind of trouble can a man of your station get into?

Oh, man, we can get into trouble. There are two things that we can constantly do without even trying: Spend money and stay in trouble.

I don't know, I never look at it as fighting the world, but I guess the songs convey that. It's good to have something in the songs that inspires people. That's our aim with this music—the highest it can achieve is to inspire people, to lift people up. I would feel terrible if it dragged them down. I think *Hard Promises* was kind of a down album; it dealt with some morbid things. It was a little morose, but intentionally so.

I enjoyed that album—it's some of my favorite stuff. At times it was hard, because even though I was pleased with the reviews and every-

one was pretty nice about it, I could see that in some cases the kids just really didn't understand. You know, they wondered why it wasn't more like "Refugee" or something. It was the first time I'd ever really had to deal with that on a big scale.

What sort of feel were you after on *Long After Dark*?

I wanted a real guitar rock tone—I guess a kind of night-time sound. It's not really a concept album, but I was working from that rough idea. I wanted it to have varying styles, but I wanted it all to have a pretty aggressive feel. I didn't want a lot of ballads, because I did that on the last album—so of course I wrote five or six ballads (laughs).

Have you ever pulled songs from other sessions out and rewritten them for a record?

No, I never have. I like to change styles from album to album and start from scratch. When we did *Hard Promises*, a lot of people just couldn't understand why I would deviate from the *Damn The Torpedos* kind of thing when it was so successful. But I felt in my mind that if I did quality work, whatever I did would be okay—and it was. And now I'm glad that we did do something a little different and that we have those kinds of songs in the repertoire.

I think (*Long After Dark*) is really just a real good rock 'n' roll record. I don't think the last one was a real AM album, but this one probably has two or three songs that could be singles.

It's also a little more modern than the other albums. The pacing is a little more up, in terms of tempo. And production-wise, I played around with a lot of different sounds. I used synthesizers quite a bit on this album, though you don't hear them prominently. I tried to use them to create a sound texture. On "You Got Lucky" we used it way up front, but that song is really

just the same sort of thing as "Breakdown," except with more modern instruments.

Some of my purist friends think that all the technology should be avoided at all costs, but I'm fascinated by the instruments that are coming out. They're the instruments of the times, and you should deal with them. Some people probably wouldn't know it, but I like synthesizer quite a bit. One of my favorite albums of the year is the Roxy Music *Avalon* album.

When you go in to make a record, how much thought do you give to what the fans might be expecting from you?

You just do it. There really is nothing else to it. I think if you start saying, "We'd better do it this way because this is what they expect," then you don't have a band any more. I couldn't work that way.

I do this for me first. I want to enjoy the music, and I just have to trust that if I enjoy it, so will the fans. That's better than being cautious and premeditated about it.

Or trying to guess what people are going to want.

You're supposed to show them. You're supposed to be hanging your stuff on the wall, so to speak. You don't send in orders for art—if this is art. You don't order it up.

I see people starting out who have one hit record and feel the next one's got to be a bigger hit record. It's incredible pressure, and I don't think that's the way you play this game. You've got to break out of that thing and hope your whole rep doesn't rise and fall with one album. Longevity comes from offering new things from time to time and taking your audience somewhere—if they're willing to go. The good groups usually do evolve somewhat, but there's a lot of formula music that comes again and again and again, the same thing. I guess that's okay if it's a great song

like the Clash, but up to now I haven't felt inclined to do that. I'd always rather be entertaining and take somebody's mind away from things for a while. But I don't rule out that I would get into a frame of mind to write like that and put it across. But any time you see somebody who's basically a guitar player and a songwriter taking it too seriously, you kind of want to throw a tomato at them. You know, they're just rock 'n' roll singers.

Musicians do tend to keep each other honest that way.

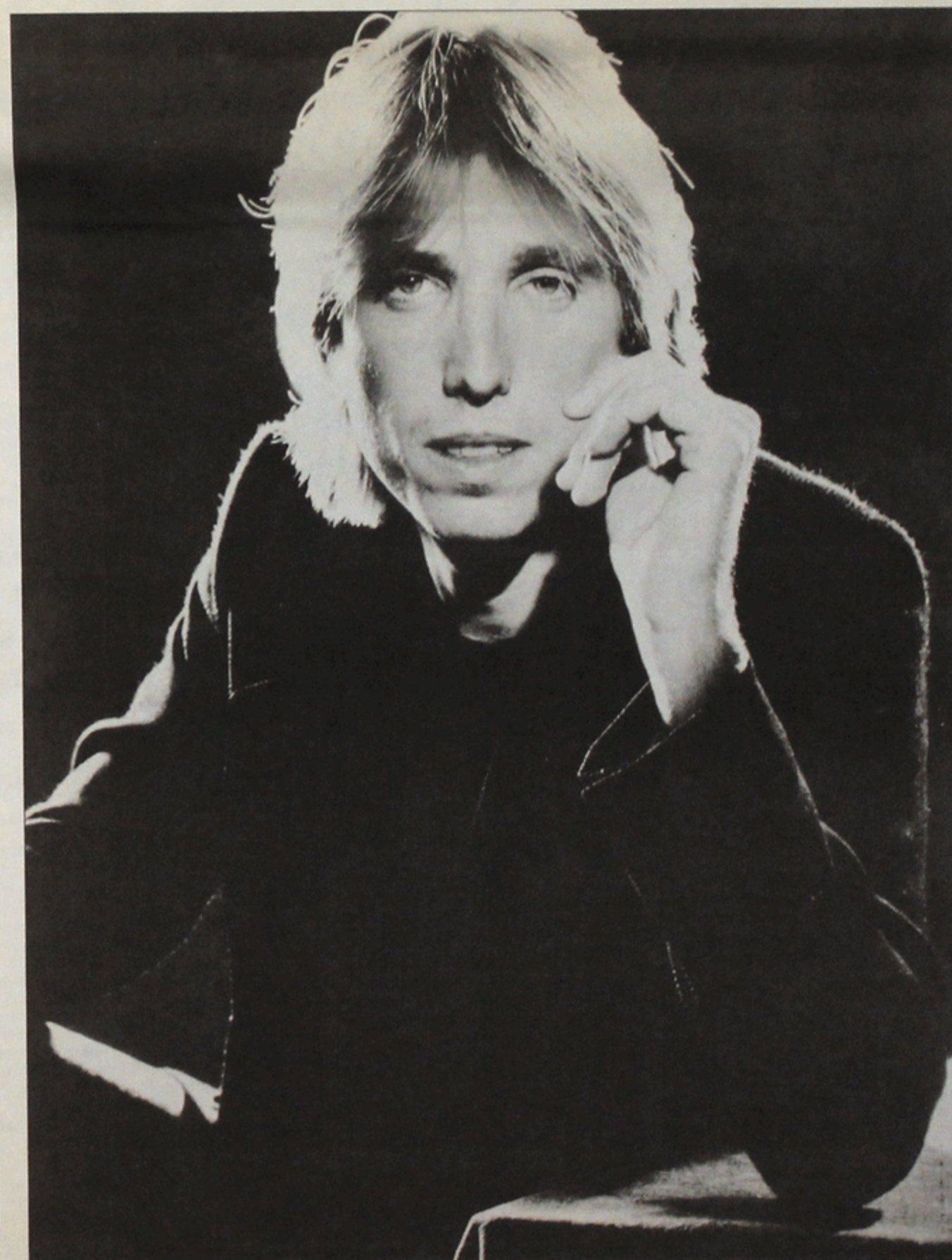
They'll say, "Look, that's a piece of shit." Or, "You've got better songs than that," or "Let's do something else. Let's do 'Louie, Louie.'"

I try to write them fairly honestly. I don't want to take it so seriously that I think everything I do is great art. There's nothing more boring than some songwriter who thinks everything he's done is worth remembering and being played again and again. They're just rock 'n' roll songs; I don't think I'm writing the Bible or anything that heavy. I'm not saying rock 'n' roll doesn't mean much, but it's different from person to person. A phrase might trigger some emotion in a person—if they've lived it or identified heavily with it—but it's not always the same to the next guy.

I'll tell you what I'm trying to do with *Long After Dark*. I just wanted to make an album that was fun—that was enjoyable but didn't insult your intelligence. What I don't like is that most good rock records are so stupid; the lyrics are so bad that they really just insult my intelligence.

So if you want to make a point about a social issue, you'll do it in a less linear, more direct way.

Yeah. Maybe the time will come when I would address it straight on



BY
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