

Petty he ain't!

THE FEMALE guard at the sound-stage door is becoming a nervous wreck. Some rock star is coming in to rehearse — Tom something, never heard of him, now Al Pacino she's heard of and he's filming in the sound-stage next door — and he's a big deal, they tell her, so she's going to have to check my name off her list.

Last time this rockstar was here, someone sneaked in and stole all his equipment and it isn't going to happen again. She peers at a small handwritten list. Bugs the Roadie gives me the nod, brings me in, shows me where the beers are and gets back to work.

No-one else has arrived yet, and the rehearsal room on the Universal Studios lot in Hollywood, next door to Tom Petty's record company, is as cold and big and echoing as an aircraft hangar in winter.

A skinny, good-looking blond bloke slowly ambles through the door. The guard looks up from her *Cosmopolitan* and looks down on him, this little man in the scruffy jeans and black leather jacket with his shirt hanging out underneath. Can't come in here, she says, unless his name's on the list. Tom looks around him shyly. His name isn't on the list and he's not exactly Dave Lee Roth, he's not going to shout and wave his arms and make a fuss.

Bugs to the rescue again, and Petty is allowed in to his own rehearsal. That's him? the guard whispers as he heads off for a Coke. She looks a little disappointed. Maybe they'll let her next door later and she can guard a real star.

In the States, Petty is most definitely in the mega rockstar league. His albums go platinum and better. His massive arena shows sell out. Just the other month he was top of the bill at the 200,000-seater "Us Festival", and now he's got a new record that you can't turn on the radio without hearing. Magazines have him on their covers. Girls camp outside his Hollywood house and he's had to have a guard posted at the gate to stop them climbing over the walls.

"I don't know if I've gotten used to it yet", he laughs nervously and speaks in a soft Southern drawl. "I think you just get to where you take it for granted that the rent's paid and things like that, and when I didn't have any money I used to think, if I could just have a place to stay and didn't have to worry about paying for it it would be great..."

He drifts off in thought. "It's funny, you know; when you're broke no-one gives you nothing. Then as soon as you're doing okay and you don't need anybody..." They all want you. The sentence goes unfinished. He shrugs: "You have to learn how to deal with that and try not to take it very seriously."

The only things Petty takes seriously (other than his wife and two kids, the latter of whom like Devo and Olivia Newton-John but

hey, they'll grow out of it) are his songs, his singing and his guitar-playing. Especially his guitar playing. He's the kind of guy who walks around the house with a guitar strapped round his neck.

"People that come over sometimes think I'm strange, or it's hard to talk to me. I've done interviews where I was playing the guitar and they'll say, 'will you stop that, because it's going all over my tape and I can't hear what you're saying?' It's what I like to do. You'd think I'd be better than I am", Tom laughs, "from playing all that much!"

Tom Petty comes from the Deep South. Now we've all heard that people from down that way are a *bit strange*, but to first get into rock and roll from watching cowboy movies? Little Tom turned on the box, saw Singing Cowboy Gene Autry with a guitar strapped round his neck, and though he "wasn't even old enough to carry one then", decided that's what he wanted to do with his life.

"That was the first time that I thought guitars were pretty hip when I saw the cowboys with them. I watched all those cowboy movies. I was a little older when I actually got my first guitar."

He was 13 years old at the time. He went to see his friend down the road in Florida, and the boy's brother had an electric guitar. "It looked like a spaceship because it had all these little knobs and switches on, and I just thought wow! I couldn't play a lick on it, but it was just like — *boinnng!*"

No cheap acoustic guitar for him, Tom persuaded his parents to lend him the money to buy an electric one. "My Dad fronted me 35 bucks and I bought it and I mowed lawns to pay him back. It was actually a very good guitar for \$35. We found it in a music store."

He didn't take any lessons.

"I went to one. At that point I thought I should, and I went to one lesson and it was so dull that I never went back. They were trying to teach me to read music and stuff. And I was like, I want to play 'I Wanted To Hold Your Hand', I don't want to read music!" he laughs.

"Inevitably there was a couple of guys who could play, and we'd just sit there and go 'well here's 'E', there's 'A'..."

"I still don't know much about music really. I don't know the names of all the chords and the notes and all that. I just do it. I usually have to go over to Benmont (Tench, keyboard player with the Heartbreakers) and ask him what chord this is. I still can't read or write or talk about music that well."

Any regrets?

"No. Because I've got a feeling that it might really have destroyed what I was doing if I'd taken lessons."

When the Beatles came along, Tom bought their songbook and learnt the chords. When the Stones followed them across the Atlantic, Tom bought their records and memorised them from beginning to end.

"I listened to records", he says, "eight hours a day." His first gig was with a high-school garage band. He was 13, they played a school dance, and did 'Twist And Shout' and 'Little Red Rooster'.

The girls loved him and Tom thought "it was cool." Ever since he'd seen Elvis Presley — actually seen him. The King was making the 'Follow That Dream' movie in Florida, Tom's uncle was working on the set and took him there. All the girls were going crazy.

"It was the coolest thing I'd ever seen" — Petty wanted to be a rock and roller. Combed his hair back like Elvis and wouldn't put down his guitar.

"Once the ghost got into me, or whatever it was, it's never left yet. It's very strange you know", he laughs. "I'm consumed with it. It's all I do. People ask me what I do now in my spare time and I say 'what spare time?' I don't have any time to develop any hobbies; never did. I can be here till two or three in the morning and then go home and play the guitar for another two hours. It's just habit. It's like reading or something. It's all I do."

He practiced — still does — all the time. Alone, along with records, jamming with friends, "all the above." The only thing he didn't do was stand in front of the mirror impersonating Richards and Presley and that's only because "I don't think we had a mirror in the bedroom and in the bathroom there was just a little mirror. There wasn't a full-length mirror anywhere, so that's probably why."

"From the moment I got a guitar, it was like a fascination. I felt, 'this is the way out'. Once we'd seen the Beatles and the Stones, those guys on Ed Sullivan in sweatshirts, you know. Once we'd seen that and it looked like so much fun — it's the same thing that happened to millions. How could I think about school anymore?"

They sent him to a shrink — "I was just having general conduct problems in school and a general lack of attendance" — but nothing did the trick. By the age of 15 Tom had left school, left home and was out on the road.

There wasn't much happening in Gainesville, Florida. Southern boogie bands like the Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd were the only ones getting anywhere, and though Petty *liked* them, he wasn't *like* them. He headed for Los Angeles with the only Florida band he'd been in that was actually getting anywhere — Mudcrutch — piling their equipment and leather jackets into a Volkswagen van and driving 3,000 miles across country.

The band broke up and Tom was about to go solo, doing some typical California singer-songwriter trip, until he happened upon the Heartbreakers. They were from Gainesville too, and had gradually seeped across the country over the past four years.

When Tom joined the band, it was the first time he'd been

allowed to play his guitar!

"I played bass almost all the time before. I think I was just the worst guitar player, so they put me on bass. I was pretty good at the bass though", he beams, looking like a peroxided Keith Richards with better teeth. "I got to where I could play pretty well, until this group where I changed over to playing the guitar."

"When I met the Heartbreakers I hadn't been in a band for a while, and when I ran into them they were almost formed, they had a bass player, the whole thing. So if I was going to be singing lead, it was just convenient for me to play rhythm guitar too. So I really had to get that together."

It took "a long time", he says, to arrive at his own style of playing, that jangly, chiming Byrds-meets-Stones-at-a-Wall-of-Sound-production-session.

"I've always had my own style, which is kind of bad!", he chuckles. "If you play as out of tune as me... It took a lot — really when I started playing with Mike Campbell, who's actually the guitarist. When the two of us play together, it makes that sound that people really come to call the Heartbreakers. Probably because he's just a little more melodic and proficient on the instrument, and I'm more distorted, and it makes that sort of jangly sound when the two of us play."

His influences were everyone from Roy Orbison and George Jones to Jimi Hendrix and Keith Richards.

"There's so many I like. Keith Richards I always thought was amazing, a great musician. Duane Eddy I love; I liked a lot of John Fogherty's guitar stuff; for rhythm guitar John Lennon, it's just unbelievable the way he played rhythm guitar, and he's really an overlooked guitarist. Lindsey Buckingham's another guitar player who's really under-rated because he's just a genius. I think Eddie Van Halen is an amazing musician."

"Most of the heavy metal bands, I really love the power of the music but I don't think they do very much with it. It's usually such a boring macho trip, you know, songs about 'I'm going to get you and you're going to love it!' kind of thing. But the first Led Zeppelin album was one I loved, and all the Hendrix albums, the Who. Most of the new heavy metal groups I don't really pay much attention to; it all sounds alike to me so I don't notice it."

"But I still buy a lot of records and I always go back and buy more old records. I wear them out! I'm still a big music fan. Anyone who knows me knows that I'm that way. I keep in touch pretty much. Not with the trends really, because I've never been interested in trends very much."

"I don't think there's any challenge with most trends. I don't think it's like the 60s when being underground was chic. Now all the underground bands are dying to be mainstream bands, and most of them would sell it out down the river to be mainstream."



TOM PETTY: "I've got a warehouse-full of guitars. It's disgusting . . ."

pic by Chris Walter

"I love being mainstream!" says Petty, in case you wonder. "It's more of a challenge to be mainstream than a hip cult band. They say, don't you want to go back and play bars man? Don't you miss it? I don't miss it in the least. I spent my whole life playing bars since I was 15 years old. It's a really limited trip."

The roadie's lugging half a dozen or so guitars around the soundstage right now. Most of them will be going on this tour with Tom and co.

"We've carried as many as 20 on the road. People used to think it was sort of a guitar show, you know! But I'd use a lot of guitars in the show, because I had different tunings or I'd want it to be out of tune or I'd want it to distort. A guitar player would understand that this one distorts and this one's very clean, so I would use them all."

"But now I think I've got it down to two or three that I can pretty much cover the show with. So I just have my 12-string and lately I've been playing my Old Stratocaster that I hadn't played for years and I like it a lot. And my Comini acoustic with a pick-up that I use live."

Tom's got a houseful of guitars. "A warehouse! It's disgusting to have that many guitars."

How many? "I really couldn't tell you. I'd have to sit down and make a list. But every time I see one, especially old ones, I just buy them because I have to have

them. But it's not really right, I don't think", he laughs a bit guiltily. "I still buy way too many guitars. I don't do it as an ego stroke or anything. It's just because I like them."

His current favourites are "my acoustic — that's a Gibson J2000. And then I have another acoustic guitar I like a lot that's called a Gibson Dove. I think they're both around 1960. And my Rickenbacker 12-string I like a lot. (The Rickenbacker's the California guitar that Creedence's Fogerty and John Lennon made famous, as well as the one that makes that distinctive ringing Byrds sound)."

He doesn't change a thing on them. "We're purists", he says of the entire band. "We just figure, if it ain't there, out with it! I don't like them when they've been modified. I don't like all those little switches and things."

What does he like best about guitars?

"I have this real fascination with guitars where I just like them. I think a lot of them are real works of art in themselves, just to look at them, the designs. I get real ethereal with them. I just like to hear the sounds. I don't know, I still haven't got tired of it."

He goes over to pick up an acoustic and strums a few jangly open chords. Doing things backwards, Petty started out with the electric and now plays acoustic "almost all the time. It has really good overtones and sounds real orchestral in a way, and for writing songs it's real

convenient. And I don't have to bother with the amps."

Someday he'd like to be respected as a guitar player and be invited down to play on other people's albums instead of just sing on them (with Stevie Nicks) or (with Del Shannon) produce the things.

"I just think it's too late!" wails Tom. "I'm not the guy you'd call to come down and put down a great solo. They do let me play solos within the band now and I play a lot more lead guitar than I used to. But I'm not really one that you'd say, 'oh let's get Tom Petty down and give us a solo.' I don't know if you'd want that. I'd love it. If they asked me I'd be there with bells on!"

**SYLVIE
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**Tom
Petty
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