

SIX YEARS ON THE battlefield already and, personally or creatively, it looks (and sounds) to have done Tom Petty nothing but good: teeth gleam, eyes shine, his skin is clear and supple over that uniquely planed skull, and the flaxen hair is a shampoo salesman's dream. His thinness remains more athletic than anorexic, exaggerating a gawky angularity that makes him look a lot taller than he really is. So much for flesh — it's the noise that counts, and as far as music's concerned, both their latest waxing and their recent European tour were exhilarating reminders that Petty and his Heartbreakers are a Rock'n'Roll foundry par excellence, turning out endless nuggets of purest quality with breathtaking ease and agility. The riffs, the changes, even Petty's subject matter for the most part, are the same old bits and pieces the young Holly and Presley had to work with waybackwhen — Petty and his band are one of those rare combinations who just happen to be able to make even some of the oldest chestnuts sound like they just dropped off the tree.

Bull — *shit!* as the colourful but ever so to-the-point Mr Petty himself might put it. There's no 'just happen' about it; making it look and sound easy as pie may well be the hardest part of all. Tom Petty is a man of few words, both in life as in song.

"We're just a bunch of guys who play music together," his Florida drawl imparts. "That's about all there is to it: you get up and play or you put out a record and you do it all as well as you can, and if people like you they come back a second time. I was just the same when I was a kid; I'd hear a record on the radio and I'd get that little tickle up my spine — that's how you know when something's good, when it touches you. It's only music critics that have to keep dissecting everything all the time. But then that's their job, I guess," Petty adds charitably.

"But your average guy doesn't have to go through any of that — he either likes something or he don't, that's all there is to it."

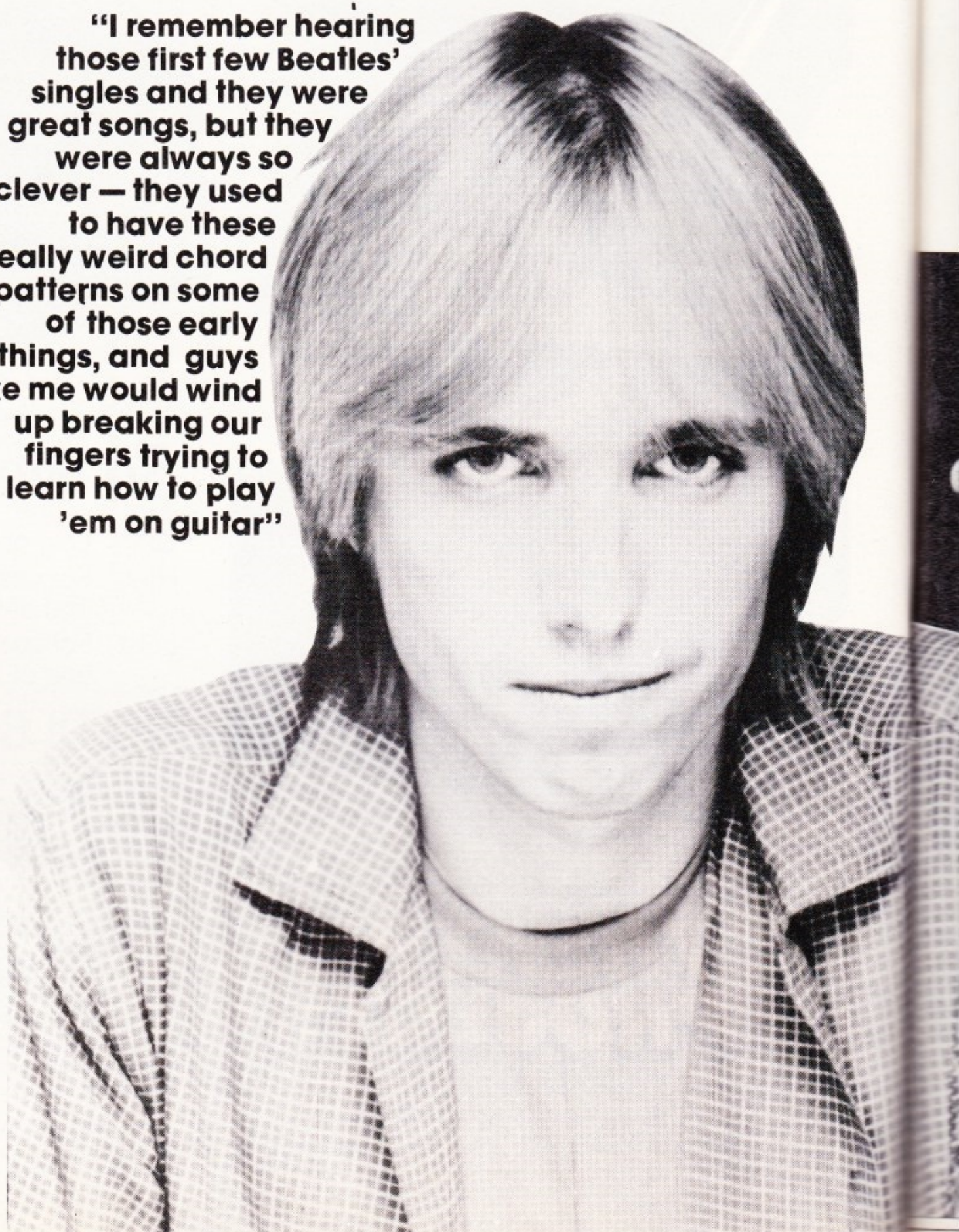
Luckily for Petty, Ms and Mr average get excited in large numbers when his music fills their ears; since 1979's aptly-named *Damn The Torpedoes* LP (short for the old battle cry 'Damn the torpedoes... and full speed ahead!' if anyone's in the dark), Petty & The Heartbreakers have been in the Platinum league as far as the US is concerned, the rest of the record-buying world jogging along not far behind.

No, indeed, it was far from an overnight success, even in America. Petty had the misfortune to have been born in the by no means world famous township of Gainesville in Florida, that south-eastern strip of the US where all the rich old people go in order to get a sun-tan so they'll look nice and brown when they finally creak to a halt. Petty's formative years coincided with the first 'British Invasion', a time when bouncy

PETTY'S PROGRESS

Giovanni D'Adamo finds Tom Petty keeping his promises

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young Englishmen like The Beatles, Animals, Rolling Stones etcetera were busily taking over the American charts with music that was raw, energetic, sexy and exciting. Like millions of other kids, Tom Petty started out buying records and wound up buying a guitar as well.

"You'd hear a record by one of these bands or see them on TV and — Bang! — somehow I just knew that it was what I wanted to be a part of," enthuses Petty.

Like most of his compatriots what he *wasn't* aware of to start with was that the new British bands were mostly modelled on an earlier generation of American musicians.

"The Rolling Stones introduced me to Chuck Berry," says Petty, clearly savouring the irony. "I remember going out and buying that first album — thought the whole damn thing was so great — and the funny part is that that's how I found out about the Blues; they were doing songs that we never even got to hear at home because the radio just ignored them."

"To me, a guitar is what I write songs with. Once I've got the basic framework down, then there's room for everyone else to add their bits"

Obviously Petty's main heroes were these self-same Rolling Stones, but other favourites included early singles from The Kinks, Who, Animals, Zombies, Searchers. Petty chuckles nostalgically as he sees his younger self in his mind's eye.

"The funny thing is, I used to think that all these groups really looked and sounded like their names! To me, The Animals really did sound like a lot of wild beasts... and you'd see The Zombies on TV and, wow, they really *did* look like a bunch of zombies! But the records were great! I remember hearing those first few Beatles' singles and they were great songs, but they were also always so clever — they used to have these really weird chord patterns on some of those early things, and guys like me would wind up breaking our fingers trying to learn how to play 'em on guitar!"

A succession of bar bands put Petty on stage in the various local clubs.

"For a long time I just played cover versions, I never even thought about writing anything myself — and anyway,

that's what people wanted to hear anyhow, so that's what you played."

Clearly Gainesville was no ideal launching pad for stardom of the Rock'n'Roll variety. Florida, overrun with geriatrics on their last legs, was no beach party either. Around '73 Petty finally migrated to LA as part of a group named Mudcrutch. Mudcrutch (a name perhaps subconsciously inspired by being forever surrounded by septuagenarians with bowel problems) went their separate ways, Petty being taken under the protective wing of a certain Denny Cordell, an Englishman who'd produced a string of hits for groups like The Move back home prior to moving shop to sunny California. DC was keen on TP's songs and singing, kind and patient enough to keep him fed and housed until the right time came.

"We kept doing things in his studio with this or that bunch of people, but it

Big Tom giving it plenty of that



always got lost somewhere along the line," says Petty.

Finally along came The Heartbreakers, a group of buddies who'd been in various bands together back in their home state of... would you believe Florida?

"That was pretty weird, how it all worked out," Petty concurs.

What started out as a session band intended to showcase Petty's song-writing eventually gelled so well that they decided to go the whole hog and become a bona fide group. *Tom Petty And The Heartbreakers* was the album, released late in 1976 on Cordell's own Shelter label.

Despite several rave reviews, it took the better part of a year for the album to really begin selling in anything like significant quantities.

"It really happened bit by bit," Petty remembers, "we literally played right across the country night after night for a whole year as one state after another started to pick up on the record."

By November of 1977 the band's distinctive heart-pierced-by-Flying 'V' logo was flashing over New York's Times Square as the group drew rave reactions at key showcase clubs like The Bottom Line.

"For some reason everyone thought we were English," laughs TP. "We'd keep doing radio interviews where the guy would start off by asking what was happening in London... Shee-it, howder hale would ah know that?"

Petty laughs, his voice having broadened into a ludicrous Good Ole Boy parody. The other point of confusion was far less amusing and, as far as Petty was concerned, even downright insulting. Simply, the cover shot of the first LP featured a sulky looking Petty in a black leather 'biker' jacket. Only in 1977 leather jackets no longer meant that their owners were probably motorcycle maniacs — black leather meant you were a punk. A listen to the record, with its solid and fluent musicianship, its blatant R'n'B roots, not to mention the elegant and poetic way that Petty had revitalised the 12-string sound once synonymous with The Byrds — such music was a million miles away from The Damned, The Lurkers and the rest of the half-chord, 120mph sneering lyric crowd who were currently the toast of London. But Petty wore a black leather jacket — surely a Punk-Rocker was exactly what he was?

"Man, that was one big pain in the ass," says the usually relaxed Petty, clearly vexed even by the memory. "And it went on for years, believe it or not; it's only been in the last couple of years that people have finally stopped asking if I'm an anarchist."

The irony is that Petty's a real old-time Rock'n'Roller, someone whose roots are obviously in the classic mould of the Pop of the '50s and '60s. This and, just as obvious, the fact Petty and his band have always been proud of their musicianship, their technical skill and so on — who wouldn't be narked

to suddenly be lumped together with a bunch of braying kids who, true or not, were forever boasting about their deliberate *lack* of ability?

"It wasn't that I hated everything the punks stood for or anything," Petty explains. "But it had nothing to do with me or with what I was trying to do."



Here comes the mirror man

"One thing I agreed about was that too *much* musicianship could be just as boring as none at all," Petty adds.

"People like Cream or Hendrix really started all that. But they were actually doing something new and exciting; and they were good enough to get away with it and still make good music. Trouble was, what happens after that is that everyone starts playing fifteen-minute numbers. And *that's* when I got bored and stopped listening. Maybe that's what gave me the confidence to start writing songs seriously myself in the first place" Petty reflects, "I had to do it for myself because it was the kind of music I wanted to hear."

What he wanted to hear, it turned out, was a glorious mix, everything from the McGuinn-ish reverberations of the surely classic *American Girl*, through to crowd-rousing stompers in the Stones' vein (*I Need To Know*, a dozen more) blistering slow songs like the narrative kick of *Breakdown*, or powerful melodic statements ranging from that debut LP's *Luna* straight down the rack to *One Story Town*, the majestic opener to the most recent Petty album *Long After Dark*.

By his own admission, Petty himself is no virtuoso as a guitarist.

"To me, a guitar is what I write songs with," he says candidly. "Once I've got the basic framework down, then there's room for everyone else to add their bits."

Most of the colouring is the work of the band's two principal soloists, Mike Campbell (guitars) and/or Ben Tench (keyboards).

"A song just isn't a song until we've all put something of ourselves in it. Anything from a tiny percussion part to a lead guitar solo can change the direction of a song when you're at the recording stage; that's when it can be

most exciting, when we're all playing off of one another."

Not surprising, considering his earlier reference to a guitar in terms that suggest a tool or appliance — in other words, a means to an end — Petty isn't one of those guys who keeps a zoo full of vintage or custom-built collector's items in the back room.

"That's something else the so-called punks and I agree on — if it sounds right, then it doesn't matter if the guitar cost fifty dollars or a thousand."

Even on this point, Petty, like most of us, makes the odd concession.

"I do love the look of those Flying V's — that always got a great reaction when we brought them out at the end. Now we don't do it as much because if we did it every single night it could end up turning into a circus," says Petty finally. He does think showmanship is important however. "People pay to come and see you, so you should give them something to look at. But that's just a part of it as far as I'm concerned; if the music's nowhere, then all the lasers and smoke bombs in the world won't save your ass for you."

Considering that The Heartbreakers have been on the road almost incessantly since their first album came out, it's almost surprising that they still get a kick out of playing live.

"That's the best part," says Petty. "It can be real hard work, it can be disastrous, but when everything goes right it's the best feeling in the world."

Indeed, probably the worst time in all of Petty's career so far was the long period when, following the break-up of Shelter, the band were virtually unable to work for the better part of a year while lawyers played legal tennis with their careers.

"That was really awful. I thought it'd never end," Petty hovers on the edge of a sigh. "In the end I had to almost become a lawyer myself to help sort the whole mess out. I should've been writing songs and playing and I was reading legal documents. Yech! But I do think if I hadn't joined in that it could easily have just gone on and on forever." Small wonder that he called his next (much-delayed) record *Damn The Torpedoes*.

The other major danger for a mainstream band like Petty's is the more creative problem of how far an artist is willing (or forced even, by this or that pressure) to go to actually please an audience's expectations. Tom Petty claims never to have tried to please anyone but himself. My own reservations largely concerned the penultimate album, *Hard Promises*, perhaps the band's one real relative weakling so far. Pandering to American AOR tastes? Petty says not. He does agree that *Long After Dark* has more bite to it.

"Maybe it's a better mix, it's not easy for me to say. I just try and do my best every time. What else can a poor boy do?"

Giovanni Dadomo