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T O M P E T T Y

h o t s p e l l

Lighting Up The Night Under The Spotlight.

—by David Gans—

"I was fired from every job I ever had, except this one — and I may get fired from it," says Tom Petty with a laugh. The only career plan he's ever had, he says, has been "to avoid work as much as possible."

Petty doesn't mind making jokes like that, because he knows just how hard you really do have to work to make it in the music business. "I know what real work is, because I had jobs," he says. "This ain't like having a job, you know? It *is* work, but it's fun, too. As much as I can complain and say I'm tired, the truth is that it's a lot of fun. If it wasn't fun, there wouldn't be any inclination to do it.

"Sometimes the music business can be such a pain in the ass, but the payoff is so big and the fun is so enormous, that it kind of balances things out. I just try to dwell on all the positive aspects of playing in a rock band." While **Long After Dark**, the new album by Petty and his band, the Heartbreakers, isn't all just fun, fun, fun, Petty says that it is "something that you can just put on and bop to.

"It's not really a party album, but it's more like a party album than what we've been doin'," Petty adds. "It's just about living life. I wanted to do a good *rock* album."

Petty's last two albums, **Damn the Torpedoes** and **Hard Promises**, were recorded during periods of stress brought on by problems with the record industry. He waged a well-publicized battle for self-determination when his label changed distributors and the new company, MCA Records, assumed his contract. Petty argued that nobody had the right to sell him like so much office furniture, and he went as far as to file bankruptcy papers in order to prevent any of the parties involved from acting without a

judicial decision.

While that was going on, Petty and the band were trying to make an album with producer Jimmy Iovine whom Tom had retained because he liked Iovine's work on Patti Smith's recording of *Because the Night* and John Lennon's **Rock and Roll** and **Walls**

and **Bridges** albums. "I don't even like to talk about those days," Petty whistles.

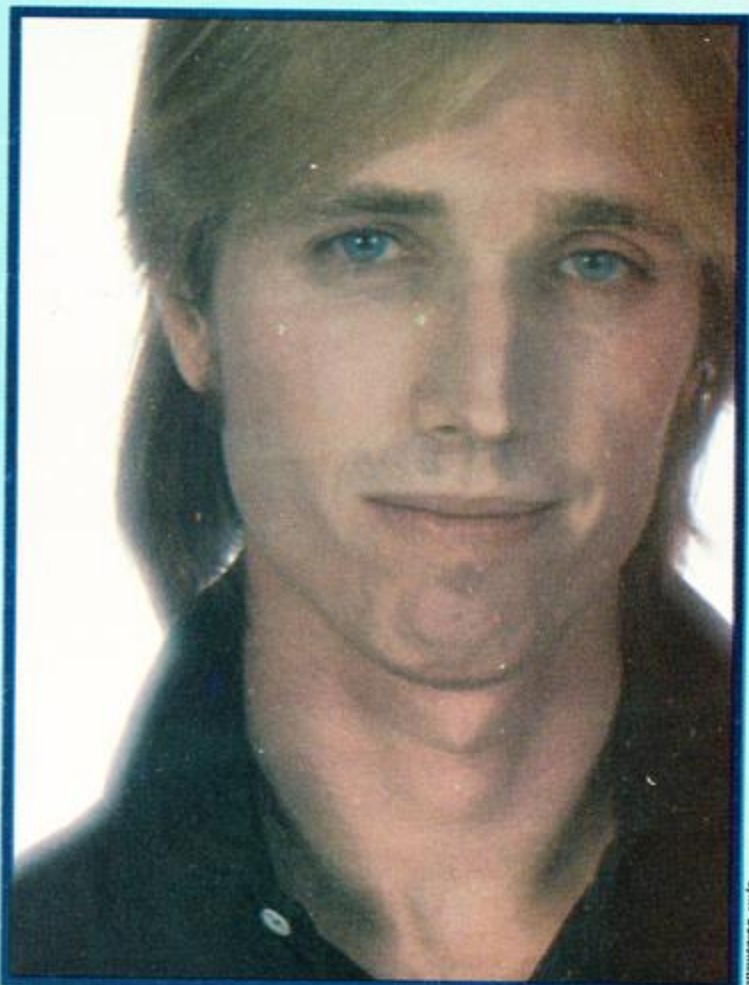
Iovine wasn't going to court with Petty, but he was instrumental in keeping the sessions going when the overwhelming urge was to give up and go home. "We were all in love with the record," Tom recalls, "and Jimmy was suffering greatly along with us. He had amazing strength — after he went through a good ten months of lawsuits and all that, we were kind of like blood brothers."

The current problems were ironed out. **Damn the Torpedoes** and the smash single, *Don't Do Me Like That*, were released to critical acclaim — but Petty wasn't out of the woods yet. His tonsils flared up in the middle of a major tour, forcing a voiceless Petty to return to L.A. Even so,

Torpedoes was a major success, and the creative partnership of Tom Petty and Jimmy Iovine was cemented.

Then came the legendary battle over the price of his next album. It has been reported that when MCA Records announced plans to raise LP prices to \$9.98 starting with his new release, Petty threatened to name the record **Eight Ninety-Eight**. "At the time that happened, I think almost every record was going to go to \$9.98," Petty recalls. "I didn't want to be the guy that brought the price up — I didn't want that hung on the Heartbreakers, because we had no part of it.

"I was really quite surprised to see that it turned into as big an issue as it did, and I never really was



Tom Petty: "If I lost creative control over my records, I wouldn't do this anymore."

Lynn Goldsmith

sure that we'd win. But I hoped we would." Petty notes that it was the public's response to his complaints that forced MCA to back down on the price issue. "We got a lot of letters, and the press also had a lot to do with it." Again, although they were distracted by outside pressures, Petty, Iovine and the band came through with **Hard Promises**, a powerful record that sold more than a million copies.

"I don't want to fight with the record company a lot," says Petty. "That really isn't my idea of a big time. I'm glad the record industry didn't raise the price. I'd even like it if they lowered the price a buck, that would be a nice thing to do all around. I don't know the economics of what's involved with that, but I think you'd sell more if you lowered the price. But who knows what goes on in the heads of the record industry?"

That last comment notwithstanding, Tom Petty maintains that he is definitely not against the music business. "I really love it, you know? And I respect it quite a bit," he insists. "I don't respect all the people in it, but there are a lot of great people that I really admire. I just get involved with the wrong ones from time to time," he adds with a laugh.

"You just have to let them come to understand you as a person and as an artist. You've got to say, 'If you do that with other artists, that's fine — but don't try it with me.' If I lost creative control over my records, I wouldn't do this any more. I would *only* do what I wanted to do, and so there's never anything else on the tape." All things considered, Petty thinks that the people who write and play the music probably have a better chance today than they've ever had before — "which still ain't much," he chuckles.

Things may have settled down between the Heartbreakers and the rest of the world after the price fiasco, but there was an internal matter yet to be settled. Bassist Ron Blair, a Florida native, like the rest of the band, and a musical associate of Petty's since school days, had been steadily losing interest in his work. Finally, he told Tom he was quitting.

"He just didn't want to tour any more," Petty explains. "He was nice about it, y'know. He called and said 'I have no grudge or anything, but I just can't get on

that bus again. I want to get out of the music business.'

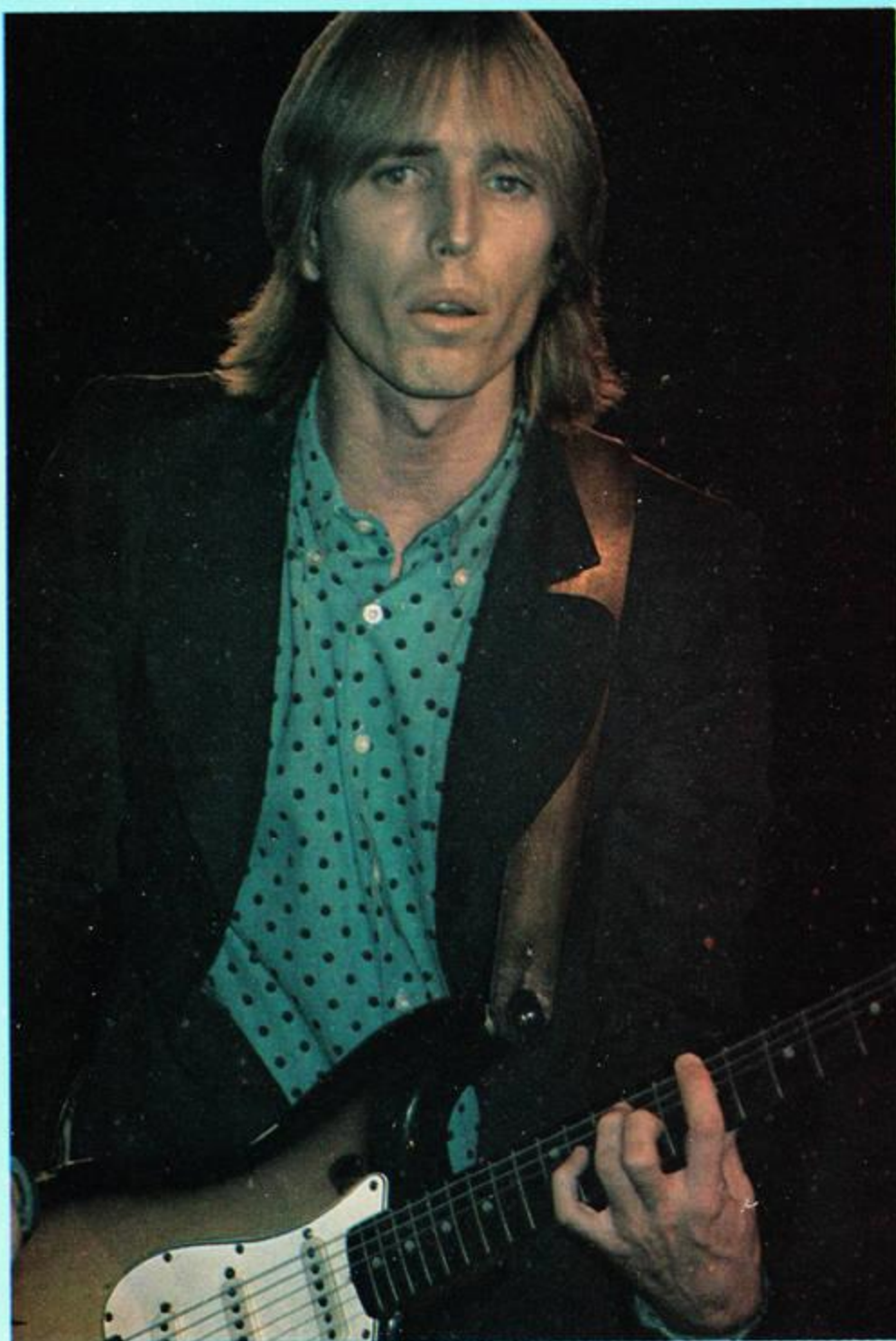
"I know everyone always says it was amicable, but in this case it really was," Petty insists. "There wasn't any argument or fight. Ron bought a clothing shop; he's living off that and working on some stuff to make a solo record.

"I don't like being off the road that much — too much civilian life."

"Emotionally it was a blow, because we all really loved him. When you're that close to somebody for a long time, it's hard to let go," Petty continues. "But musically he'd been drifting away for

so long that it wasn't a big change for the band. He'd lost interest, and Michael Campbell (the Heartbreaker's lead guitarist) or I played the bass on a lot of sessions because he wasn't around."

Blair was replaced by Howie Epstein, whose last assignment was with Del Shannon. Petty produced Shannon's album, **Drop Down and Get Me**, using the Heartbreakers as backup players, and Petty had dropped in to perform with Shannon at several gigs, so Epstein was already known to the band. "Howie's so great — he's a good bass player, that's what he is," Petty grins. "And he did beef up our harmonies a lot, because he's a good high-harmony singer."



Angie Coqueran/GET

"I wanted a progressive feel on *Long After Dark*."

It wasn't even necessary to put in a lot of long hours rehearsing, because Epstein learned the Heartbreakers' repertoire from records and tapes. "By the time we played the US Festival Howie had been with us for a year," says Petty, "playing in the studio. His roots are pretty much the same as ours, so we hit it off real well."

"He's smart, too, because he's not the kind of person who came in and tried to push his views on us. He was just kind of quiet for a while, checking us out before he opened up much. Sometimes when you meet a new group of

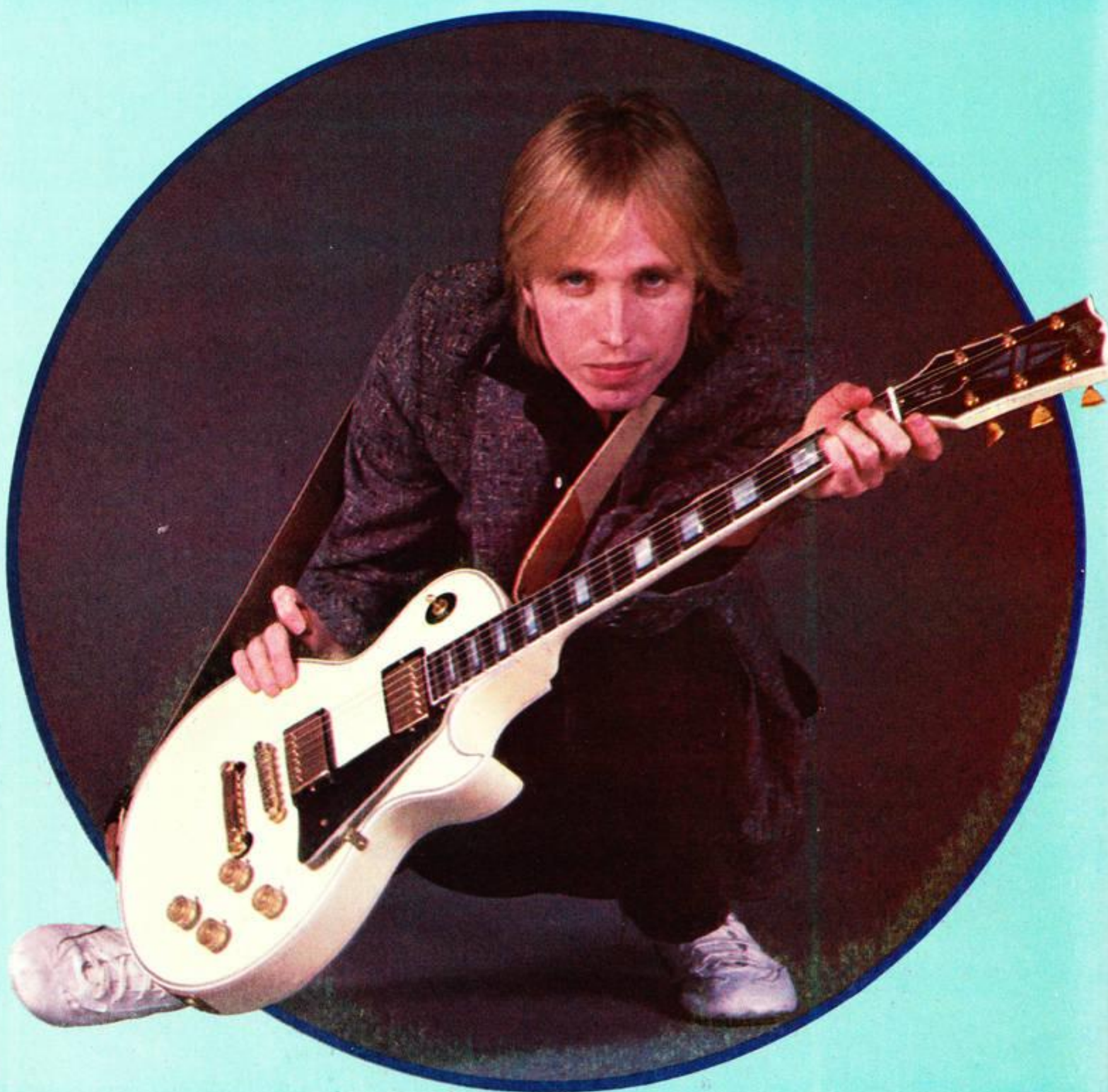
people you try to prove yourself again and again, out of insecurity. And for diving right into this mess, Howie did okay."

In addition to a new bass player, Petty and the Heartbreakers tried some new musical approaches on **Long After Dark**. "I think it's a little more modern than the other albums," Petty observes. "The pacing is a little more up — the tempos are faster, and it's probably the most energetic album we've ever done."

Although Petty characterizes the album as having a very guitar-oriented sound, synthesizers are

used quite a bit — "although you don't hear them predominantly. I try to use them to create a sound texture rather than put them out front. It's pretty prominent on *You Got Lucky*, I guess, but that's really the same sort of thing as *Breakdown* but with modern instruments."

"I didn't want to use synthesizers just because they're a neat toy. You can create a wide spectrum of textures in the music — but I don't like it when synthesizers kind of wash out the whole record," Petty continues. "I'm fascinated by the technology, all



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the new instruments that are coming out, and even though some of my purist friends think they should be avoided at all costs, I think they're the instruments of the times. One of my favorite albums of the year was Roxy Music's **Avalon**. There were things on there that just blew my mind."

Still, it's the guitar that drives a rock'n'roll band, and that's what Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers aim to be. "I wanted a pretty aggressive feel on **Long After Dark**," Petty notes. "I'm glad we did the softer things we did on

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Hard Promises, but that's out of my system now. I'm more interested in doing rock'n'roll stuff, because I'm going to go on tour and I want to have a lot of rock'n'roll songs to play."

The tour comes after a year of work on **Long After Dark** — not a solid year in the studio, but a year of recording four or five songs over a period of weeks, writing more songs and recording them, then going back over things until the whole record was just perfect. "It shouldn't take a year to make a record, I know, and I hope I can do the next one quicker," says Petty. "It's good to be back on the road, getting that feedback from the people after the one-way work in the studio. I don't like being off the road that much — too much civilian life." □



Tom with Stevie Nicks in concert, performing *Stop Draggin' My Heart Around*.