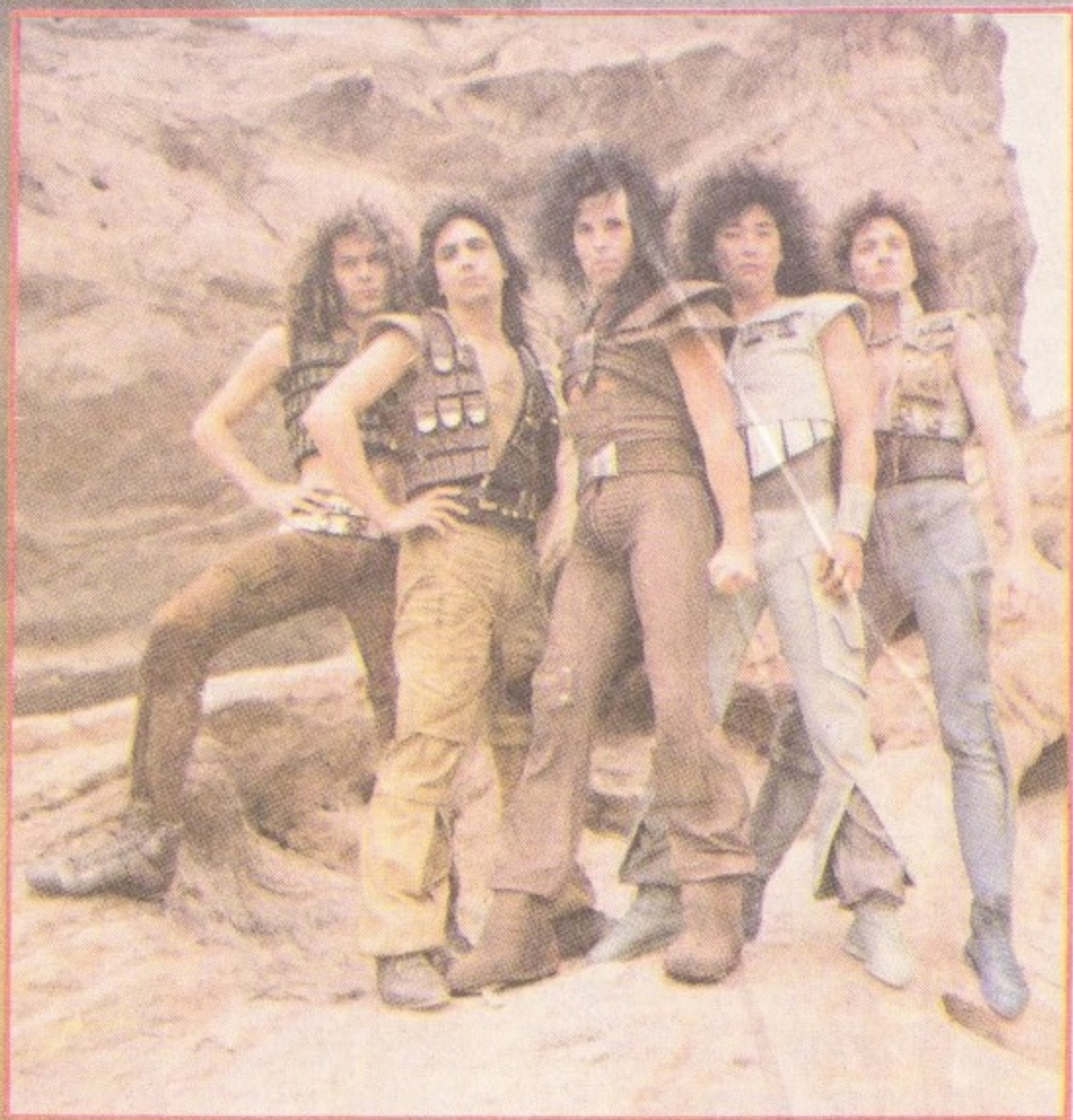


MADNESS, U2 FESTS ● WOMAD LINE-UP ● REO, BON JOVI DATES

SOUNDS

SOUTHERN MAN

Tom Petty rises again

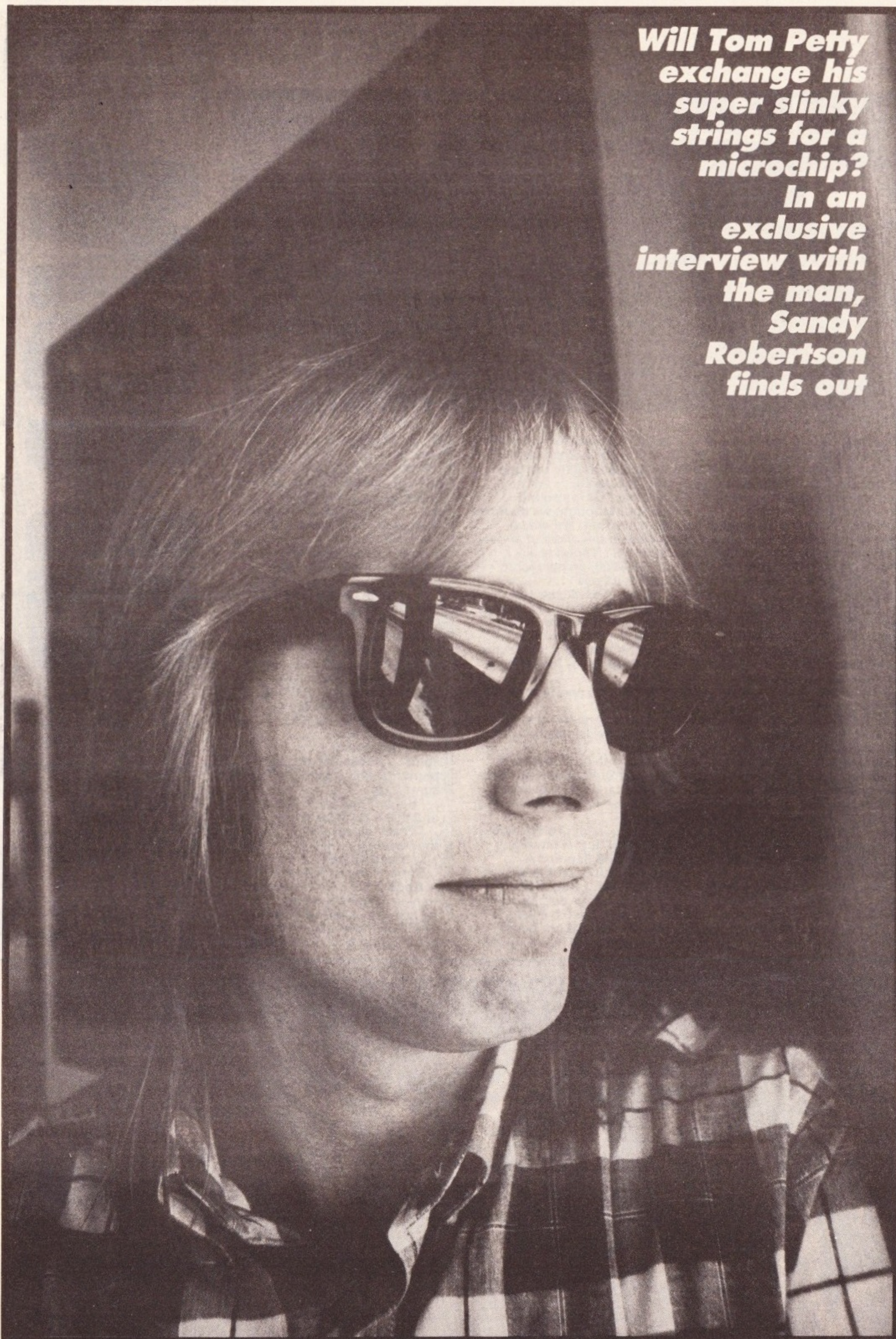


WARRIOR

THE SOUND

THE SMITHS

9-PAGE ROCK TECH EXTRA!



**Will Tom Petty
exchange his
super slinky
strings for a
microchip?
In an
exclusive
interview with
the man,
Sandy
Robertson
finds out**

TOM PETTY: a shady character?

Pix: Tony Mottram

YOU CAN'T take the myth out of Tom Petty. Like the one (which even MCA, his label in the UK, believed) about how his sister was the beautiful blonde in his new video. He doesn't even have a sister. And yet, just to confuse matters, sometimes truth is stranger than bitchin' where Tom Petty And The Heartbreakers are concerned. Hear the one about him deliberately smashing up his guitar hand? Or the tale of good old boy TP working with a trendy synth-rock band? Or about footage of him eating cake being censored as obscene? Or even...

We're in the offices of Lookout on Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles. It's the kind of rock gaff they used to call 'funky' in the Seventies: small, comfy, platinum-lined, calmly busy since another client has just arrived back from an Australian tour. He is tall, silent, in fringed buckskin and black hat. He is Neil Young. Lookout put Yes back together and keep The Cars turning over. They also handle Tom Petty. Gently.

TP is sitting in a little room, sporting shades and a tablecloth check shirt. Smiling, he's pulled a new twist on success! Tom Petty And The Heartbreakers' honest southern class was an antidote to the slobbishness of the likes of Molly Hatchet. Anthems like 'American Girl', with that neo-McGuinn guitar jag, made them a household name at the tail-end of the last decade. Just when it looked as though they might succumb to over-indulgence in believing their own publicity came a legal battle which, though it was a disaster at the time, provided the raw edge that good art thrives on. Painful delays between court dates and studio bookings plus the process of extrication from one label and hitching up with another threw up a fine opener for the Eighties in 'Damn The Torpedoes', all sinew and squeaky-clean nasal passages. It looked as though Tom would be the Marilyn Monroe-version of Bruce Springsteen, the one Yankees would really buy. And, for a time, he was.

Still, familiarity breeds contentment whichever side of the counter you're on and now, while Springsteen is making a bad job of being Marlon Brando in 'serious' videos, we find Tom Petty... Well, he's done all right, but without *real* battles to fight, his last couple of albums have been fair but hardly fiery. It seems that success is a problem in itself, but just when you thought you knew what to expect from TP...

He takes on a wall, one-to-one! Huh?

"Well, I didn't punch it *tryin'* to do my hand in," he drawls, "I just slapped the wall with the back of it while I was walkin' upstairs. I was probably mad about a lot of things. I haven't talked about it much because I didn't know what to say, I didn't know exactly what incident triggered it. I was in the studio, rushing to get the album out. It was one of those days!"

The buzz in the biz was that Petty might never play again. Happily, that isn't the case. He's paid for his impulsiveness, though.

"It's been a long, hard ordeal. A lot of therapy on my hand every other hour for months. In a way it made a better record because I had time to go back and re-do some mixes, do some things I wouldn't otherwise have done."

AND INDEED, the 'Southern Accents' album is full of things Tom Petty wouldn't have dreamed of doing a few years ago. His busted hand has little to do with that overall stance, though.

"I took a year off before I even started this one, really," he sighs. "I did it at home, in my studio. I wanted to do it in a different manner to just going down and renting the Record Plant. I wanted to experiment, the usual story where I wrote a lot more songs than I needed. There's pros and cons to it, I've found. Sometimes it might've been nice to have a little of that pressure of having to finish on time. I dunno, I got immersed in this album more than any I've done."

Actually, another biz rumour is that TP got so immersed that Jack Nitzsche was called in to 'bail him out', as one insider put it. (Nice turn of phrase, since probationee Jack was on bail himself a while ago! But that's another story.) Whatever the facts, it would seem that turmoil has created another smash: hear Nitzsche's string arrangement swell up under the title song's paean to southern ways, and smile. Like the broad grin.

With his Gone Gator One home studio in his LA domicile, TP has overcome (or at least come to terms with) his aversion to the City of the Angels. At least you meet interesting people here. Lioke—who would've believed a combination of Eurythmics fuzzball eccentric Dave Stewart with the trad rock ethics of Tom Petty? But there's Stewart all over 'Southern Accents', notably on the fabulously resonating and sinister 'Don't Come Around Here No More' with its sitar drone. What could've been merely a good tune is now a great record.

"I met him when they came here and played last summer, they had a break of about a month. I met him at Sunset Sound with Jimmy Iovine, who was working there. Dave

PETTY

PRIME

asked if we could write a song, and I thought he meant in a week. He meant *now*! So we had some fun. He's a good instigator," recalls Petty, chortling at some personal memory.

The LP abounds with names like producer Iovine (who worked on the disc with Petty, guitarist Mike Campbell, Stewart and even Band-man Robbie Robertson pushing some buttons), Garth Hudson and Jim Keltner. But the one most people would find incongruous would be that of Stewart, no?

"Yeah? I think that's why we both hit it off! I just always liked their songs," says TP. "When I first heard those singles I thought, 'Boy, these are good songs!' It turns out now we know each other really well that we were both into soul music, r'n'b, that's the mutual ground. They were really just r'n'b songs we were trying to write, basically."

"It was a good thing for the band, too, having new people around after all these years of the same five faces. Having somebody new there sparks everybody. It was almost like a vacation, he brought that vibe into the studio."

A lot of fans don't want anything new, though. I recall seeing a great Neil Young show starting out to be all-new material and being gradually ruined as he had to accede to the yells for 'Old Man' and 'Harvest'. They want you to give them more of the same.

"I just can't do that, that was part of the reason I had to push my chair away from the table. Everyone says it's the old artist's ploy, but it's true. It just got like, if we've got to keep doing this then I don't wanna do it. I'm really excited that this record seems to be starting out big, because that means they like us for us rather than just a certain thing."

"All I'm trying to do is get my pass from the audience so that we can experiment a little more, because I think there's a lot that we can do that we haven't done. I thought this record might, especially in America, give 'em a good shock in a way, and it did but they like it! The basic ground rule I always stuck to is that if this is a good song then it'll stand up to whatever I wanna do to it. It took me a while to get up the songs, but they stand up."

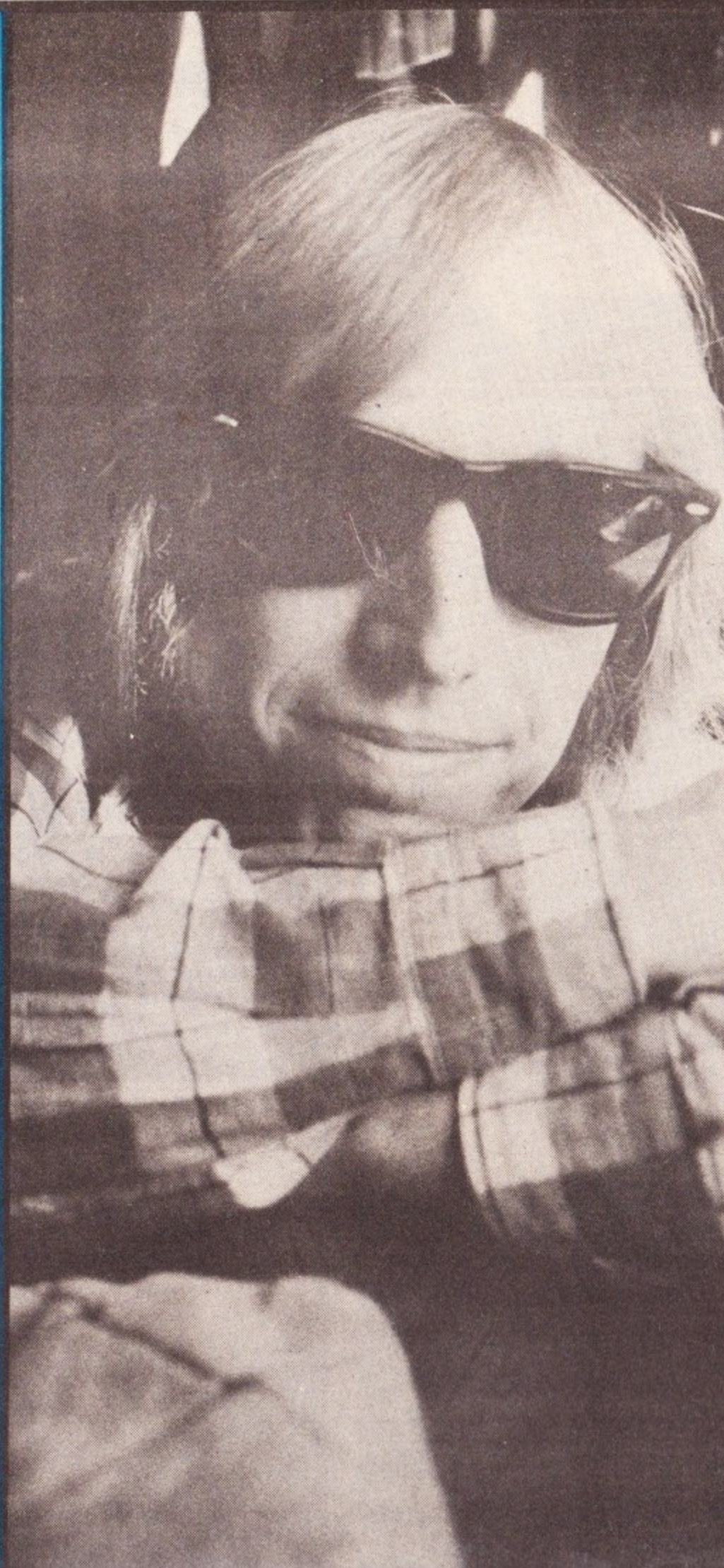
PETTY'S ONLY regret is what had to be left out as the boys got carried away amid the 'hey - let's call a cellist!' anything-goes vibe of the sessions. But can this stuff translate to a live setting?

"Yeah! Most of it was played live anyway, so I don't think it'll present any difficulties. But then I haven't played live in years, so even standing up for an hour and a half may be difficult!"

Perhaps the lack of live TP has been the cause of all these Petty-to-split-with-Heartbreakers stories which have been bubbling under in the USA?

"I guess it started that way. There was a period where the guys had gone on a couple different tours, and I went to England, so people thought I had left them! It took us all getting together in one place and saying 'well, do we break up?' and no-one wanted to. There's no point in breaking up, there's enough time to do what you want anyway. If you wanted to play Las Vegas on your own, you could!"

Tom Petty and his Heartbreakers even have time for strange video outings. Genuinely streets ahead of the usual MTV crud, the footage for 'Don't Come Around Here No More' is a delightfully warped Alice-In-Wonderland acid trip with TP as the Mad Hatter, everything changing size with alarming rapidity (one minute Alice is drinking a cup of tea,



the next she's swimming in it as TP bombards her with sugar cubes and a donut), an Alice-into-pig transformation and a strangely disturbing scene where the ensemble cut the gal's body into slices and eat it as cake! Perverted, I call it.

"The director and I came up with it all, slowly. Dave Stewart had a hand in it too. One night he said he'd like to be sitting on a giant mushroom playing the song, so that's what we did in the video with our demented minds. I just wanted to do something a *little* different than the normal MTV fare, with the fellow dancing through dry-ice fog. There's always some message there, but I'm never sure what it is. I wanted something off-the-track. I liked the lunacy of it, and it's done with a sense of humour."

"They made us cut a few scenes out of the cake sequence, which really amused me. They thought it was too gruesome. All we were doing was cutting a cake. I think that says a lot about TV violence, I think it had a lot to say about how even though you know it's not going on, this thing can make you *believe* it is going on!"

So Dave got to be a hookah-smoking caterpillar for a day and TP had fun enacting his Lewis Carroll fan-fantasies. LA is like life in the rabbit-hole anyway. At this point, cryptically emphasising all the weirdness, manager Elliot Roberts (who runs Lookout with partner Tony Dimitriadis) cranes his neck round the door.

"Is this shaky?" he asks. TP shrugs: "It's shaky." Elliot exits: "Nah. Looks honest to me." I'm confused.

WOULD THERE be room for someone like Tom Petty in the music world if they were starting out now? The do-what-I-want, damn-the-torpedoes blond twangin' rocker, y'know? Probably, but only because we've already got one and copying well is today's replacement for originality.

"When you go see a band in a bar nowadays they're already tailor-making themselves for a slot. This record we put out really broke a mould. I didn't notice it over the years, being away from it, but I knew it was different. They're so excited out there but it's so simple..."

"Somehow the music business always looks the same to me. I been gone all this time and it doesn't look like anything went on at all, come out of the cupboard and it's the same shit. I see people now who are imitating records we made five years ago and I say, 'Damn, we can't do *that*!' y'know?"

Petty still has, ahem, roots consciousness as we say in the biz. 'Southern Accents' is still *him*. "It's kind of a psychedelic country record! It's pure in a lot of senses..."

And yes - they will tour. Does that seem a daunting prospect? "I wanna do it more than I don't wanna do it... This feels like our first album, in a way. If I'm not working I get fidgety and disoriented. Now with the record over I want to get out and travel, it's kinda like bein' a sailor, you always wanna get on the boat one more time. It's not hard finding the impetus, but I don't want to spend three-quarters of the year touring and then roll in and have to write ten songs. We had enough years of doing that..."

"It's important that we break some ground with these records, especially if this one's well received. I'm much more interested in just kinda seeing what kind of things I can create, y'know? Sounds really noble, I guess, but it's true. We're just gonna take it like that, one step at a time."

"But we have to go back and play, it's too good a group *not* to! Better than most, for sure."

And then some.

TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS



A masterpiece on album & cassette

Southern Accents

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