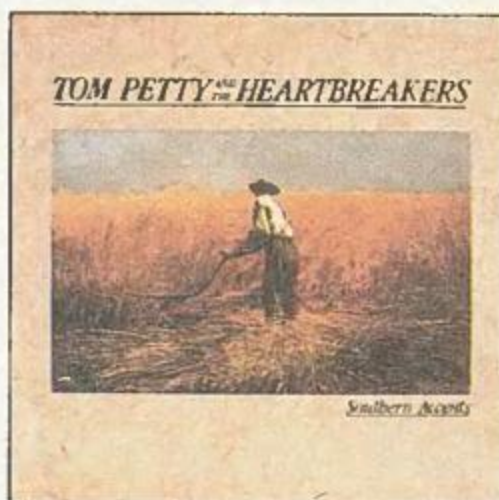


# RECORDS

## Tom Petty's rebel yell

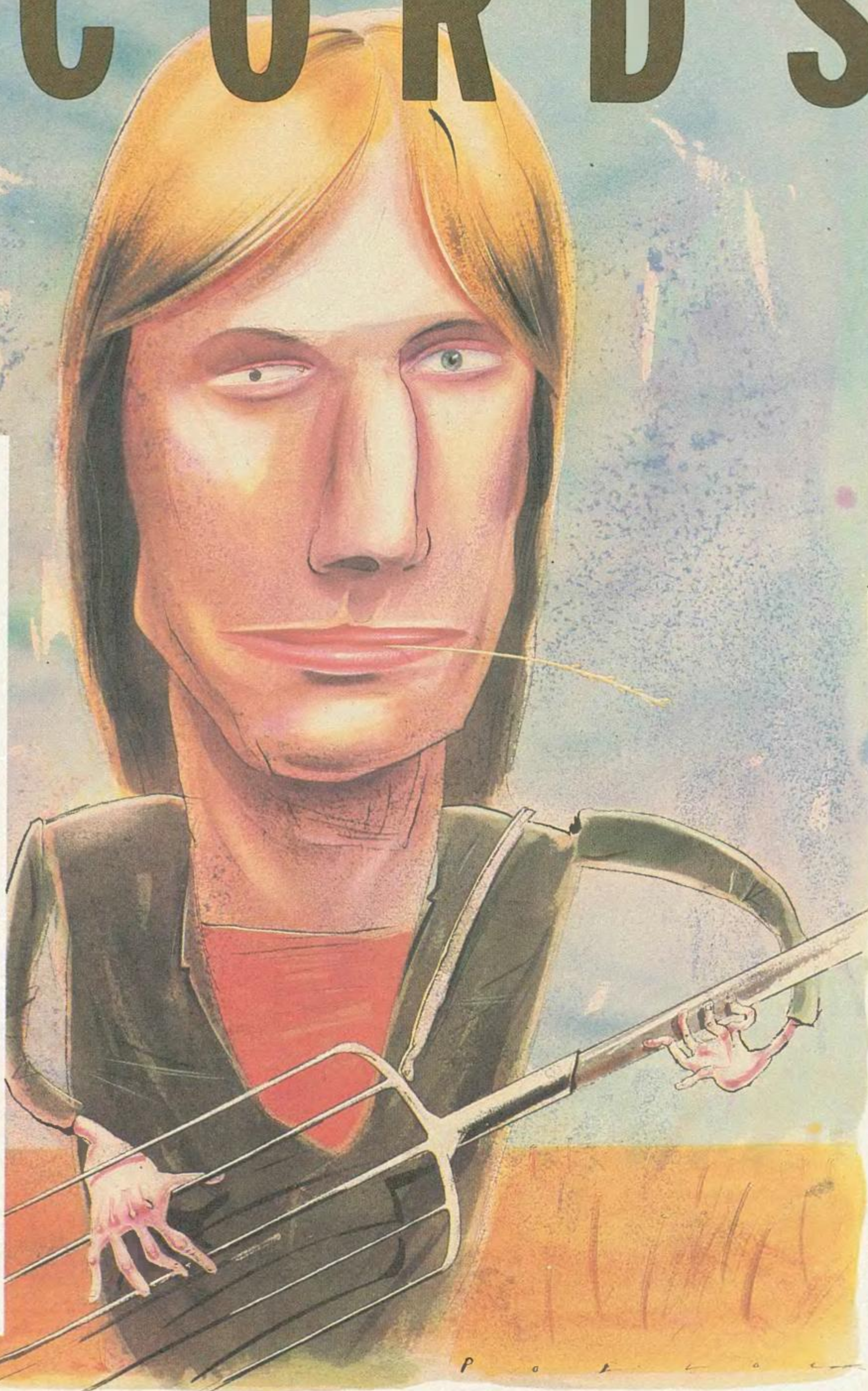


### SOUTHERN ACCENTS

TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS  
MCA

BY JOYCE MILLMAN

"THERE'S A SOUTHERN ACCENT, WHERE I come from/The young 'uns call it country/The Yankees call it dumb," sings Tom Petty on the title track of his long-awaited *Southern Accents*. The Gainesville, Florida, native knows all about stereotypes. You know, slow talking equals slow thinking, good rocking equals no thinking. This, his sixth album, is a fierce defense of his Southern roots and an ambitious fight for his cre-





## RECORDS

ative honor.

It's easy to see, though, how Petty's good-ol'-boy caginess — his reluctance to lay all his cards on the table — could be mistaken for shallowness. There isn't much lyrical heft to songs like "Even the Losers," "Don't Do Me Like That" and "You Got Lucky." His is straightforward boy-girl rock on a strictly personal level, what you get when you cross an impulse toward folk-rock introspection with an unrepentant pop-single sensibility. But Petty's voice — a live wire of raw emotion and unexpected vulnerability — is where the action is. On his most fully realized albums, *Damn the Torpedoes* and *Long after Dark*, Petty's urgent yowls and forlorn mutters tied together a string of seemingly unconnected tracks. *Damn the Torpedoes* became a heartfelt meditation on the balancing act between sudden fame and solid love, and *Long after Dark* searchingly measured the aftershocks of a romantic breakup.

It's only when you dig down into Petty's albums in search of a philosophy that you come up short. Petty's records don't tell us much about him except that he has found that it's no picnic at the top. And they tell us even less about ourselves: unlike, say, Bruce Springsteen, another working-class hero with whom he is often paired, Petty doesn't leave enough space between his lines for listeners to write their own dreams. He reveals himself in fragments — a distrust of the rich ("Listen to Her Heart"), a stubborn idealism ("The Waiting"), a faith in love-as-healer ("Here Comes My Girl"). But he has never been able to articulate his concerns on vinyl with as much sureness or dignity — or with as forceful a rallying cry to his constituency — as he has displayed in his well-publicized legal skirmishes, which are themselves the stuff of an old Jimmy Stewart movie: Mr. Petty Goes to Court, the little guy fighting his record company for a fair retail price. But, for all his good intentions, Petty remained, on record, a blueprint for a rock star; he needed fleshing out.

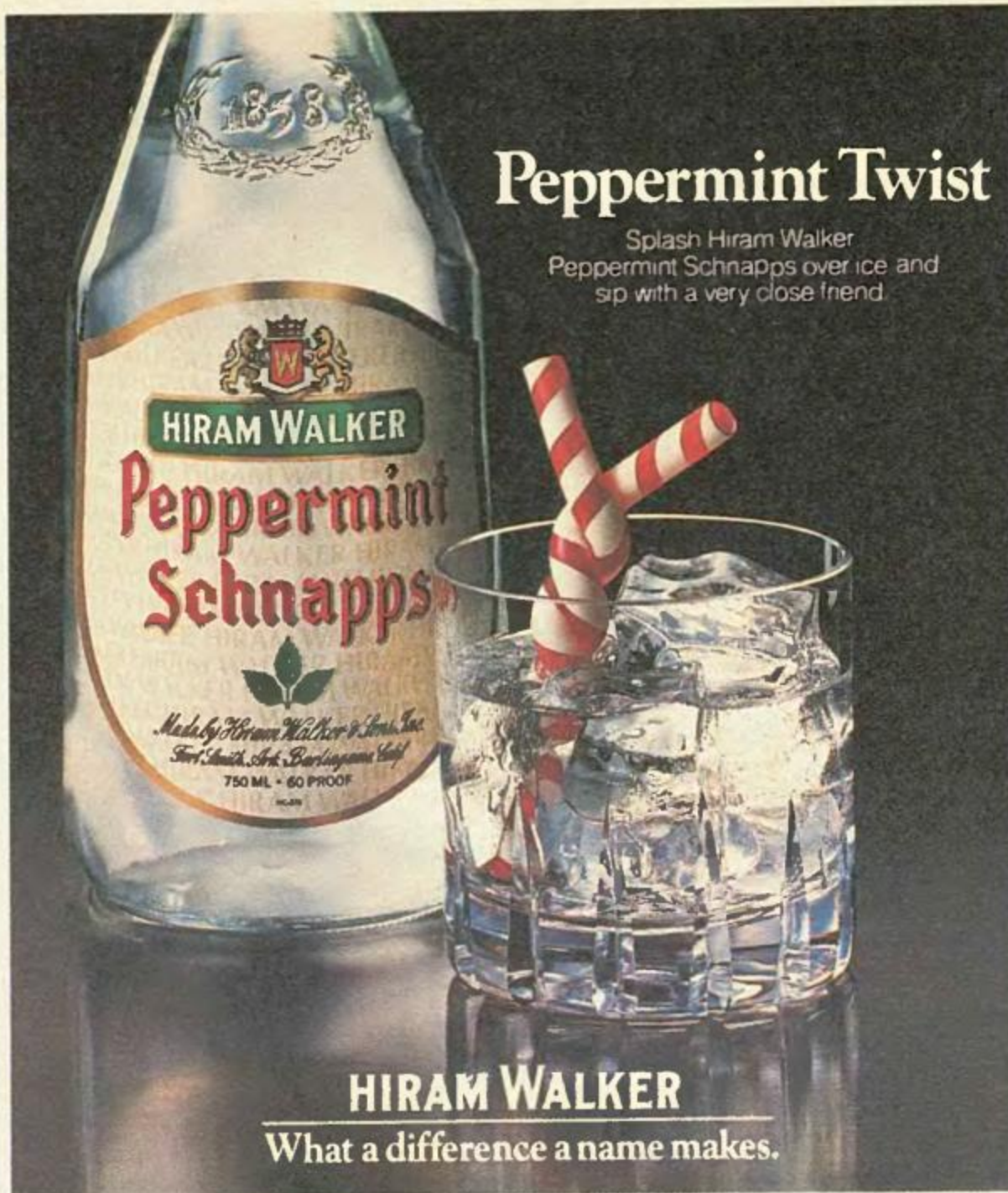
Which is why *Southern Accents* held such promise. Here is Petty at his most forthcoming, telling us how it feels to be a born-poor Southerner — an outsider in the glittery East Coast-West Coast music establishment. The album cover, after all, eschews the standard rock-star mug shot in favor of Winslow Homer's 1865 painting *The Veteran in a New Field*. And the record's stinging opener, "Rebels," sounds like a breakthrough. Its embattled-but-scrappy antihero, born "in Dixie on a Sunday morning," still smarts from years of humiliation at the hands of "those blue-bellied devils." He is both a Petty surrogate and a personification of the rural, working-class South, tenaciously hanging on to its identity as the New South remakes it-

self in the "concrete and metal" image of the North. Petty shrewdly boils cultural displacement down to a matter of pride and frustration. We have all been "faced with some things sometimes that are so hard to swallow," so we can sympathize with the character as he walks a tightrope between two worlds, trying to stay true to the convictions of one while making it according to the dictates of the other. Propelled by drummer Stan Lynch's booming beat, the song's anthemic chorus, "Hey, hey, hey/I was born a rebel" — and Petty recklessly rhymes "rebel" with "pedal," as in, Hit the gas and go — becomes Tom Petty's long-sought statement of identity.

As a vivid scene setter full of bedraggled humor, "Rebels" should have been the first chapter in a juicy story. But just as we have settled down to hear how this engaging loser survives after his girlfriend bails him out of a drunk tank and dumps him by the roadside, he disappears — and with him goes the album's cohesiveness. The Heartbreakers' sound — chiming guitars, welling organ, crackling drum — goes too, making way for a pair of keyboard-and-horn-laced experiments that Petty wrote with David A. Stewart of Eurythmics. "It Ain't Nothin' to Me" and the second-side opener, "Make It Better (Forget about Me)," aspire to the Rolling Stones' old black-and-blue dance mood, with call-and-response vocals, a jangling guitar riff, snippets of jazzy piano and pseudo-funk horns. But the songs have a calculated, secondhand feel, as if Stewart were building a scale-model soul review as a project for anthropology class. A Dixie boy like Petty ought to know better than to go searching across the ocean for what he can find in his own back yard.

Still, the Petty-Stewart collaboration yields one great song, the edgy, hypnotic single "Don't Come around Here No More," that reveals what this unlikely couple saw in each other. Eurythmics' "Who's That Girl" and "Here Comes the Rain Again" and Petty's "Breakdown" and "The Wild One, Forever" share an obsessive, desperate passion. On "Don't Come around Here No More," Lynch metes out a shuddering rhythm while Stewart's sitar is layered between a cello and the wordless exhaling of female voices to create a trancy, Eurythmics-like elegance that's slashed by Petty's tense, love-wounded cries and spun into a dizzy coda by guitarist Mike Campbell's wailing and Howie Epstein's galloping bass. This song doesn't have much of a Southern accent, but if you're going to get sidetracked, this is the way to do it.

The protagonist of "Rebels" returns for the moving title ballad. Though he's barely surviving — drifting out of an At-



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Original soundtrack album available on Capitol Records/Columbia

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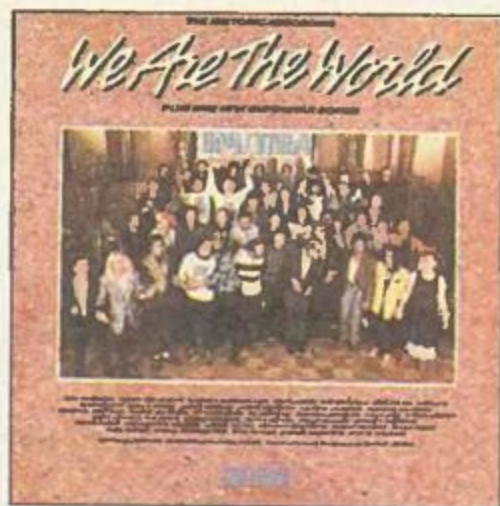
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lanta drunk tank to visions of the Orlando orange groves – he savors his independence. Then he vanishes again until midway through side two when he literally washes up on a beach in the reedy, Dylanesque rocker “Dogs on the Run.” Living by his wits, he has scavenged his way into the lap of luxury, where he feels the irony of his fate and the conflict between his impoverished past and his privileged present all around him (“The room was painted blue and gray/All my meals were served on a silver tray”). And there Petty lets the story drop. But, by this time, it doesn’t matter much: he has already forfeited continuity by repeatedly losing track of the riveting semi-autobiographical journey at the heart of the record. Nor can he quite bring off *Southern Accents* as a collage of sounds and styles arranged around a central theme, like *Sandinista!* or *Exile on Main Street*. His point of view is inconsistent, and on many songs the Southern connection is too vague or simply absent. Besides “Dogs on the Run,” only the laid-back menace of “Spike” adds any local color, Petty incarnating intolerance in the role of a nasty redneck. *Southern Accents* needs more of these pungent vignettes of Southern life. (Petty reportedly toyed with the idea of making this a double album, using the extended form to foray in bluegrass and C&W. Had he exploited the subject matter fully, he could easily have filled four sides.) When the expansive, horn-showered “The Best of Everything,” coproduced by Petty, Jimmy Iovine and Robbie Robertson, blares out of left field to end the record, it has the weight of an elegy, but it’s not clear who, or what, has died. Between the roaring setup of “Rebels” and the grandiose finality of the last cut, a vital chunk of Petty’s tale never gets told. *Southern Accents* is a muddle all right, but it’s an interesting and maybe even a noble attempt to counter regional chauvinism. As Petty tries to figure out who he is by remembering where he has been, he also gives us Yankees the chance to grow up Southern. ●



**WE ARE THE WORLD: THE ALBUM**  
**USA FOR AFRICA**  
Columbia

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN: Harry Belafonte, who had the idea for this

all-star project; Ken Kragen, who pulled it together; and the artists, male and female, who contributed their voices and talents. Their best-known collaboration, “We Are the World,” is of course the featured track on this compilation album, which also features an all-Canadian effort by Northern Lights and eight other tracks by everyone from Bruce Springsteen to Prince to Huey Lewis.

By now you’ve heard the song “We Are the World” enough times that you’re using the single for a drink coaster, and as far as the video goes, you’d like to tell Lionel Richie just what he can do with that thumb of his. Nevertheless, the solos by Ray Charles, Steve Perry and Daryl Hall retain their luster, and the trio of Huey Lewis, Kim Carnes and Cyndi Lauper never fails to call to attention the hair on the back of my neck. The song may be a little goopy, and the second verse makes almost no sense whatsoever; still, it’s an anthem for the whole family, one that people will happily join in when it’s sung at every grade-school graduation this year.

The album is still a pretty good non-altruistic buy, thanks to the efforts of Springsteen, Lewis and Turner. Lewis and the News’ live version of “Trouble in Paradise” – from the band’s first LP – is a superb showcase of their rootsy R&B sound, with John Colla’s snappy sax break, Chris Hayes’ bar-band guitar and Lewis’ soulful, confident vocal. Springsteen and the E Streeters have contributed “Trapped,” a Jimmy Cliff-Cat Stevens composition that Bruce reportedly found on a cassette he bought in the Amsterdam airport a few years back. It’s been a fave rave of mine since his ’81 tour, but the album’s recently recorded version isn’t quite as desolately moving as those earlier performances. The difference: Patti Scialfa’s light, airy background vocal instead of Steve Van Zandt’s guttural, junkyard growl. All the same, it’s a Springsteen essential.

With contributions from Kenny Rogers and Chicago next to songs by the Pointer Sisters and Steve Perry, this rampantly eclectic album doesn’t figure to get played start to finish very frequently. Canada’s *pro bono* ballad, “Tears Are Not Enough,” suffers by comparison to Band Aid’s and USA for Africa’s star power. (When was the last time you heard someone say, “Hey, is that Corey Hart?”) And the much-awaited Prince and the New Power Generation’s “4 the Tears in Your Eyes” sounds more like a stab at atonement for not showing up at the initial recording session than an especially compelling musical or spiritual statement. For my tax-deductible dollars, this LP’s best track is Tina Turner’s haunting “Total Control,” a spare, savagely emotional plea (“I would sell my soul for total control”) that she sings with barely restrained fervor.

The argument against this project

DAVID BYRNE  
Music For “The Knee Plays”  
1/4-25022



BYRNE

“In the future water will be expensive.

“In the future all material items will be free.

“In the future everyone’s house will be like a little fortress.

“In the future everyone will think about love all the time...”

DAVID BYRNE FROM MUSIC FOR “THE KNEE PLAYS”

Conceived as short connecting passages (or “joints”) between the scenes of Robert Wilson’s epic opera “The CIVIL warS,” “The Knee Plays” tell a story of their own. Inspired by American jazz, gospel hymns and New Orleans marching bands, David Byrne creates words and music for this series of brief encounters on *Music From “The Knee Plays.”*

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