
TOM PETTY'S

*'Southern Accents' was the album that would bring together all that Tom Petty had learned over 10 years as a recording artist and all the deep-rooted experiential stuff that had been gathering force inside him. He was going for the whole ball of wax this time...*

## YEAR (OR TWO) OF

# LIVING DANGEROUSLY

*Crackin' up / I'm gettin' ready to go*
*Had enough / I can't take anymore . . .*
*I'd run, but I'd find no face*
*I'd laugh, but it's wreckin' me, wreckin' me*
*It make a shiver / It make a shake / It make a monster/Just like an earthquake*
*Everybody havin' fun / I don't know how they can carry on*
*'Cause I don't think it's funny no more . . .*

—from "Crackin' Up"
by Nick Lowe (as recorded by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers)

For Tom Petty, obsessive rock artist, the construction of the *Southern Accents* album was an experience that spun wildly between agony and ecstacy. Granted, a record album isn't the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but *Southern Accents* wasn't just any ol' record to Petty—it was The Biggie, the album that would bring together all he'd learned over ten years as a recording artist and all the deep-rooted experiential stuff that had been gathering force inside him. He was going for the whole ball of wax this time or be damned. The thing he was creating consumed him, particularly since, like Dr. Frankenstein's project, it was coming to life right below him in the basement of his house (in a Tarzana, CA neighborhood known to its tight-knit residents as "Gainesville West"). Petty had installed a recording studio down there—a grand one—and, for a time, it completely took over his life. He'd stay up for days on end, unable to get away from the work-in-(prolonged)-process, pale, frayed, anxious and overwhelmed—a virtual Munster version of Tom Petty. "When you build a studio at home," he says now, "you go *wild*." What he was working on was a four-sided monster that was to be Petty's *Exile on Main Street* . . .

Leading the Heartbreakers, a three-piece horn section, and pair of female vocalists through a barrage of pre-tour rehearsals in a Universal Studios soundstage, a fully revived and patched Tom Petty is all smiles and animation. And, yes, he is indeed playing guitar—with both hands. During a break in the run-throughs, Petty describes his ordeal between bites of drummer Stan Lynch's bosom-shaped birthday cake: "I did a lot of tracks for this album. There's closets full of tape left over. I went all into bluegrass and country and that stuff. We even did three hard-core country tunes with (original producer) Denny Cordell. It's real good stuff—I hope it comes out. But in the end, I decided it was way too dense when it was two albums—I think we'd still be wadin' through it *now*. It was the most ambitious record I'd ever attempted, definitely. And it was hard to explain that to people, especially when you're into the *second* year of work on the album. It had been a personal crusade of mine that, at times, the band and I disagreed on—I think everyone around me disagreed at times about what I was doing. In the group it was real hard, because they were wanting to tour and be a *group*, you know, and all the things that go with it. And I was pleading for more patience.

"It was a real nice album in the sense that I felt some incredible highs, because I thought, Wow, I'm finally hittin' some

DENNIS KEELEY

## BY BUD SCOPPA

new ground here," Petty recalls. "And then there'd be nights that were *awful,* because when you'd think, Oh, no, it was all an illusion!" He's laughing now, but it's clear that it wasn't funny at the time. "You start to wonder, like, Why am I devoting this much of my life to a record album? Is *this* rock? Is this what I *meant* to be doing?"

Such was the situation on the fateful Night of the Hand.

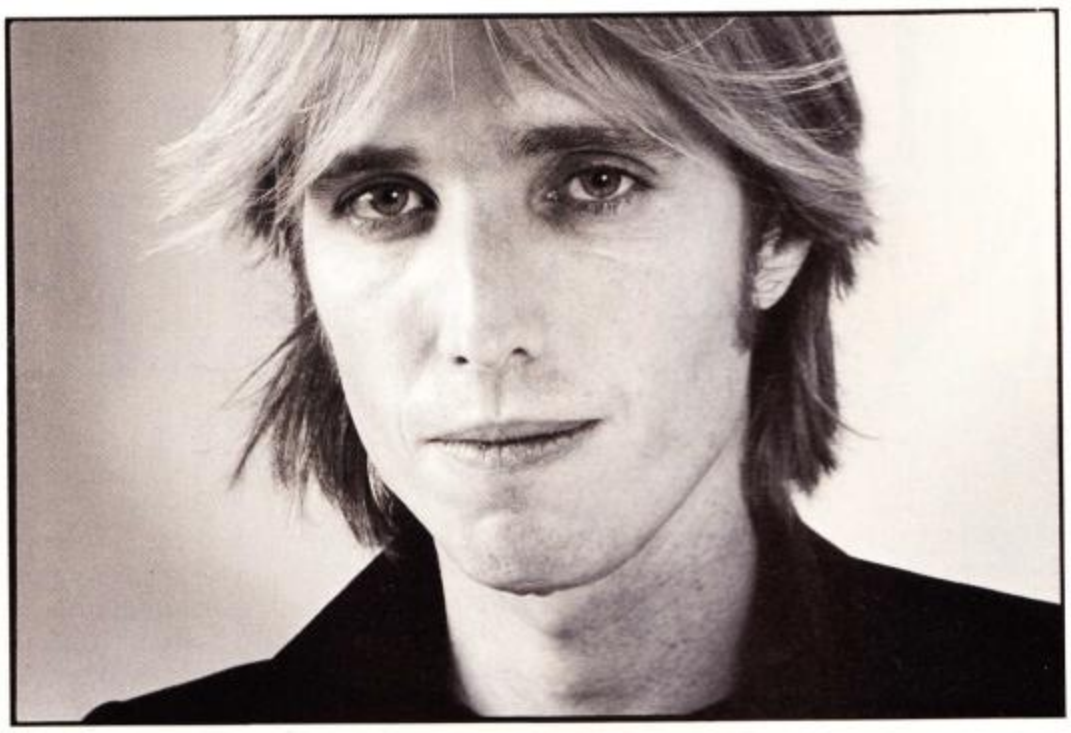
"When I broke my hand, I mean . . . it was just . . . it's hard to explain . . . I don't really *know* exactly why I broke my hand. I know I was very frustrated at the time with the record. I'd finished recording," he remembers, "and I'd been over to the record company and played 'em some stuff. They weren't pushing me, but they were saying, 'Can we have it by the end of the year?' I said, 'Yeah, all I gotta do is mix it. I'm not gonna do a double—I'm gonna pare it down.' So then, tying up the ends was another six-month job, which I wasn't prepared to accept; I thought it was a six-*week* job to go in and mix it. And the day I broke my hand, I think we'd been in there around the clock for a week with two teams of engineers and I was in the other room playin' the mixes on a ghetto blaster. And I'm sayin', No, this isn't what I pictured, and I was bummed. Walkin' up the stairwell back to the house, I just (*throws his arm out to the side*) hit the wall and broke my hand.

"I think the record made me so nuts that I did it," Petty says with a wry smile, then adds, "but it made a much better record. Because, after I got out of the hospital, I could hear very clearly things that I'd overlooked. (Producer Jimmy) Iovine showed up at that point, right after I broke my hand, just out of friendship and because he loved the songs so much. (After the last three) I was consciously tryin' to stay away from Jimmy on this album. I wanted to do something else. So, when Jimmy showed up, he was real fresh and I was real burnt. He helped me a lot with the mixing and added a few overdubs and some arrangement changes. Stuff I wouldn'ta heard, 'cause I was just too immersed in it. So anyway, (the accident) forced me to just calm down a little bit, basically. I think I'd been (staying up and working for days on end) for about a *year* when I broke my hand!"

Petty's conversation is speckled with short bursts of self-turned laughter. He's a shy, intermittently reclusive man who speaks slowly in a soft drawl. "I'm not real talkative," he explains. Tonight, though, Petty is anything but mute. The relief of having *Southern Accents* completed, released and accepted by the public and press alike, has loosened him up. Besides, he's getting a sustained buzz from playing onstage with his band after two-and-a-half years of virtual seclusion.

"I guess everyone says this, but I really am excited about playing," Petty states with unequivocal enthusiasm. "I didn't even want to go on tour, to be blunt; I didn't have any interest at all. But the band, they'd stay out there endlessly. I was a little tepid about committing to it. When we started rehearsing, it was just the group for a week—and *that* was exciting. Until then I hadn't realized how much I missed it.'Cause it's this great group, and I tend to take for granted how good they are. After that night, I thought, We're way too good not to be out on the road—we've *gotta* be on the road."

*'I wasn't trying to answer the Big Questions,' says Petty, 'I was just tryin' to hit some of the feel, and hopefully you can play this album and get a very Southern feel from it. . .'*



LYNN GOLDSMITH/LGI

The Heartbreakers are, in fact, a truly impressive band. With Mike Campbell and Petty blasting out the jangles and squalls on the Rickenbackers and Stratocasters through Vox amps (these guys are classicists), Benmont Tench pumping up billowing floods of Hammond, bassist Howie Epstein (the band's lone non-Floridian, he replaced Ron Blair in 1981) carving out thick, melodious lines, and marvelous drummer Stan Lynch tearing into his kit with apparent abandon and secret restraint, the Heartbreakers are fully capable of making the hair on your arms stand straight up for minutes on end. History will surely place them right up there with America's most self-defining and *musical* rock 'n' roll bands—the Band, the Byrds, the Allmans, Little Feat, the E Streeters—even if they have been largely undervalued in their own time.

Emerging out of L.A. in 1976, the band soon became cult-heroic with their resonantly hooky blend of Byrds ("American Girl," "Listen to Her Heart") and Presley (the classic "Breakdown," "Mystery Man"). "It was a convenient time to come along," Petty admits, " 'cause all of a sudden things just started to burst. At the Whiskey, we'd play with groups like Blondie and the Ramones, and all these people started showin' up. And there was this difference—people were sayin', These guys aren't *like* Fleetwood Mac, they're not thinking the same way. We also had a lot of success in England with that first album. That was when Johnny Rotten and all these guys were gettin' popular, and I think we had a little bit of a sneak preview on that. It was a really funny stigma: I had on a leather jacket on the cover (of *Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers*), and I remember them wantin' to change it! I was sayin', No, man." Some of their first album cuts wound up on international punk compilations.

But the Heartbreakers' solid cult status changed when Petty contacted Jimmy Iovine to produce the band's third album. "At the time," Petty notes, "Iovine had only done the Patti Smith record [*Easter*] as a producer. That's the reason I gave him the job—because I'd heard 'Because the Night' with those great tom-toms. The songs were pretty well written for the album when Jimmy showed up. That album was a whole rediscovery of the studio for me, because we'd had our own way of doing it, which was pretty amateur. Then (engineer) Shelley Yakus came in from New York, and these guys were really *serious* about this stuff. They'd be gettin' a drum sound for a *week*. And I'd be pullin' my hair out, goin', What is going on? We've never spent more than an *hour* with the drums, I don't understand. So it was a

real educational experience, and probably one of our better albums, really. It took a long time to make, and then it got confused with all the lawsuits that came along at that time [*a protracted contract dispute that resulted in Petty moving from Shelter Records to its distributing label, MCA—Ed.*]. But, yeah, it's still the album that's held up to me the most. Like, Well, is it *Damn the Torpedoes* or not? When I remember that time, I remember mass chaos, always."

But out of chaos came order—or, more precisely, *orders*—as MCA began selling serious tonnage on *Torpedoes*. With Iovine's production emphasizing Lynch's tom-toms and Tench's Hammond, the album came close to defining the AOR sound of the time. With the '80s came superstardom for Petty. But as his stock rose in terms of popularity, it took a nosedive with his musician peers. He was genuinely bewildered. "I think the hardest thing was, once you've sold a million records, you're a *honky*. Overnight. Once we got big in a commercial sense, I could sense this resentment, this feeling of like, You sold us out, you left the club. When all we did was make another record, really."

Another group of early supporters who turned inversely colder as the band got hotter was the critical community. This was inevitable, of course, but it hurt Petty nonetheless. When he undertook the *Southern Accents* marathon project, critical reinstatement was surely one of his motives, consciously or otherwise. And when the record finally came out, he prepared himself for the worst. But the reviews were largely positive, the primary reservation generally being that Petty had set out to make a concept album about the South, then backed off, throwing in three non-thematic tracks he'd co-written and co-produced with Eurythmics leader Dave Stewart. Did Petty in fact undertake *Southern Accents* as a concept album?

"I saw it as a theme," he answers, privately amused. "The *Rolling Stone* review was a good example; I didn't mind that review. I thought it was (approached) as if I'd written a book. But you have to listen to records—you can't just *read* them.

"I actually anticipated a little bit of criticism. The only position I can take is, look, I wasn't tryin' to answer the Big Questions, I was just tryin' to glaze over it and hit some of the feel, and hopefully, you can play this album and get a very Southern feel from it. But I didn't try to take sides on any issue or anything—I just wanted to present it. It was just a theme to work from, so that I didn't get caught up in love songs and stuff. I think that's what attracted me in the first place. I thought, Oh, wow, there's a *lot* to write about here. It's something that I'm real familiar with and that I've never written about, not very much. It's really just a record album, but it's an album that really asks something of you. You've got to hear it quite a bit to understand it."

The notion of a "theme" album dealing with Petty's home region came out of a songwriting dilemma that faced Petty between the fourth and fifth albums, *Hard Promises* and *Long After Dark*. Petty now sees *Hard Promises* as "a vastly misunderstood album, too," although he admits it "was just too moody. But by the time we finished it, I felt we'd pretty much mined that vein. And when I hit on the Southern idea, which was a coupla years ago—just after *Long After Dark*—it was so easy; there were so many characters to assume with that concept, it was a lot of fun. It might not be exactly how I feel about something, but it's a lot more fun to take on a character. I think it's pretty revealing, too, in the end."

*'The fellas that are really selling records tend to get a little bit careful. It's much more fun to sell a million records than to sell 100,000, but you need that edge. . .'*

Even before Petty began *Long After Dark*, though, Robbie Robertson, whose own visions of America are well documented, had lit the pilot light for *Southern Accents*. Petty had submitted "The Best of Everything"—the "one ballad too many" that had been dropped from *Hard Promises*—to Robertson, who was supervising the music for Martin Scorsese's film, *The King of Comedy*. The track didn't make that album, either, but Robertson did a lot of work on it, and the results of that work proved revelatory to Petty.

"I can thank Robbie for opening my eyes, really," Petty says. "I knew 'The Best of Everything' was a good song, but it just wouldn't come through. So I played it for Robbie, who liked it a lot and asked, 'What do you think if we take some liberties with it?' I said, Fine. (Later), he called and said, 'Look, I've had another idea. What do you think about a horn here and there?' I said, Sure, Robbie, whatever.

"He didn't want me to come in the studio while he as doin' the horn arrangement, which confused me at the time. Now I see why, because I probably would've backed him off. When he called me up to come hear it, I couldn't really even speak, you know. I heard it and just, Yeah-yeah-yeah, I like it. So, from hearing that, I thought, Now, there's another way to go about things that's much more interesting."

But the liberating revisionist approach Robertson had formulated got no support when Petty, the band members and Iovine entered the studio for the *Long After Dark* sessions.

"It was stomped down at the door, which was what was so frustrating about that album to me," Petty snarls, reliving the torment. "Me and Iovine would have these huge disputes. I was tryin' to get a little wacky, and everyone in the group felt like this was a time for no wackiness; they thought that I'd gotten too wacky already. They'd say, 'No, let's just do a real good *rock* album.' and I'd think, Well, yeah, but there's a lot more we could be doin'. So I went along with it and did that album. But then I had the Southern thing goin' I still hadn't put together. On the *Long After Dark* tour, I played Nick Lowe 'The Best of Everything' one night, and Nick lost his *mind*—he must've played it twenty times over and over. He's sayin', 'This is it, man—this is what is goin' on!' He thought it sounded real Southern, and I thought, It'll work then; I'll put it on this album. I didn't even remix it."

In the reconstructed "The Best of Everything," *Southern Accents* had its coda a good year before the rest of the album was even written. The track's aching sentiment, bittersweet melody, brassy crescendoes, and the dusky Southernness Nick Lowe had observed locked its future position in Petty's mind's eye. "The night I played it for Nick," he recalls, "I thought, Oh, perfect—this'll end the album. I'm gonna build up and end there. No one else had a clue what I was so excited about. So I knew I was gonna start with 'Rebels' and end with 'The Best of Everything.' What made 'Rebels' so difficult was that it *had* to open the album, and I must've worked on that song a year, changin' the arrangement—another horn arrangement, another guitar arrangement, six or seven different bass lines. It had to open it and it had to be right."

Any creator in the linear mode (any jogger, for that matter) will tell you the hardest parts of the effort are the beginning and the ending. It's common knowledge. All Petty had to do at this point was fill in the rest. But Petty's ambition and perfectionism wouldn't permit easy answers or shortcuts. Nope, too literal. Nope, too dense. Nope, too boring. Writing the songs and pulling out the duds were only the start of the problem. Then he had to work the tunes through with the band, trying things until he—and they—were satisfied with the approaches they were taking. Finally, when the Heartbreakers had the tunes nailed in rehearsal, they were ready to woo the Recording Muse.

After months of this kind of concentrated effort—it's not easy to pull seemingly spontaneous performances out of grueling

intensiveness—Petty was in need of some loosening up. For the staunchly deliberate Petty, Dave Stewart couldn't have picked a better moment to show up in town. In one evening, Stewart blew the smog right out of Petty's airless sensibility.

After a concert last May, the Eurythmics leader headed over to Sunset Sound, where Iovine was working on a Stevie Nicks album, to talk tunes with the producer. Impulsively, the pair called Petty and suggested that he get out of his basement for a while. Petty, who'd touted Stewart's "Love Is a Stranger" to Iovine, came on by to "hang out," as they say in the biz. He wasn't prepared for the ball of fire he encountered.

"Dave's real antsy, and we were drinkin' a little Jack Daniels, I think, and he says, 'You wanna write a song?' I said sure—I thought he meant in a week. But he had an idea, so we just did a little demo of 'Don't Come Around Here,' and that was it. Then, about two hours later, we wrote 'Make It Better'; we just sat at the piano and did it. I was sayin', I just can't *believe* this, 'cause it would've taken me a year to finish off a song, I was goin' so slow. And he said, 'You can't do that in L.A. You can't sit around L.A. and wait for the inspiration, because if you do, someone will invite you to a party!' And he's right," Petty admits with a soft chuckle. "He said, 'Better just *do* it. And then, by that night, you can go, Nah, piece of shit, and throw it out. Or you might *hit* somethin'.' So he's a real gambler in that sense—very instant.

"The new Eurythmics album's great; it's got the Heartbreakers on it. I told him, 'You've gotta get some guitars in there,' 'cause he had these great ideas, but he was just kind of living them out with machines—just pretty much doin' everything himself. And he's *not* a techno-guy. He can barely get a *stereo* goin'. And I thought he was a keyboard player—he's a guitar player. He's just kind of a two-fingered keyboard player. So on this album there's a lot more live playing in there. And he's really opened up on the guitar a lot, which helps."

Thoroughly inspired by Stewart's aural Polaroid approach, Petty insisted that his sudden collaborator come down to his studio and work up a song with the Heartbreakers. This, of course, was something completely different for the band; Petty figured he'd better explain the new plan of attack to the boys.

"I told them, Listen, this guy from the Eurythmics is comin' over, and they looked at me like, What? I said, Yeah, he's okay, I think you'll like him. He's just like you or me, he's okay.

"Right as I'm sayin' that, he opens the door and he's wearin' like a Kentucky general's outfit. He had on about six belts, handcuffs, these great big boots with spurs, and this great big white coat down to here with medals pinned on it—this is in the middle of summer—a hot, burnin' day—and a hat with a big plume comin' out the side. Which I thought was hilarious, you know, and I could see the looks on their faces—*He's* just like us? In an hour, everyone was comfortable, 'cause he *is* pretty much like us.

"And he'd do stuff to keep me goin'. Like when you're in a band for nine years, people start to peel off after midnight—they *know* what's gonna happen. There's not much conversation. But with 'Don't Come Around Here No More,' that was two weeks on the same song every day. And one afternoon, Dave was gettin' a little shaky. And my wife Jane came in from this cowboy store where she'd bought some cowboy things. Dave goes, 'Oh, right, yeah! We gotta have some of that shit. Let's go get some cowboy stuff.' So we got in the car and we went down and we both goth these real wild cowboy outfits, with the jewels on them and the hats and weird glasses. And so we came back and we had everyone in the studio with all this gear on. Then this guy from the L.A. Philharmonic came over to play cello, and Iovine was s'posed to send him a chart, send him the tape so the guy could chart it out. He opens the door and walks in my house, and at the same time there must've been twenty-odd weirdos hangin' around, and everyone's wearin' jeweled cowboy suits. We said, 'Have you got the chart?' Nothin'. Iovine hadn't called him. So Dave and I go over to him and say, 'Look, we're gonna play you this song, and we just want you to play what you hear.' This guy says, 'What? I've never done that in my life.' I said, 'You've never played just to play?' and he said, 'No, I read what I play.' And Dave says, 'Well, you're gonna have a real good time!' By the time he left, he had on a cowboy hat, and I think he did have a good time—he hung out till three in the morning. Good mixer, Dave Stewart."

With *Southern Accents*, Petty and the Heartbreakers seem to have reclaimed their rightful place in the scheme of things. Petty's thrilled, but he has no delusions of grandeur: "I'm not gonna go into movies, you'll be happy to hear." It's fitting that this downhome auteur's most explicitly American work should appear at a time when the legacy of American rock 'n' roll has reinvigorated the contemporary scene. But Petty voices a note of caution about the situation: "All that American rock stuff they keep talkin' about, it's funny to me. There are some good groups—Los Lobos is real good, and Fogerty—I just hope it doesn't mean nostalgia. I think they've gotta be careful that American rock doesn't mean Chuck Berry, or as long as there's no synthesizer, it's American. I think the new Prince record is *very* American, but I don't know if they'd describe it that way. He's fantastic, and he's so essential, because he's not afraid to do *anything*, which we've needed for a long time. I've always felt like the fellas that are really sellin' the records and have the influence tend to get a little bit careful. Because they like that, and I don't blame them—it's much more fun to sell a million records than to sell 100,000. But you need that edge. Bein' old enough to remember the '60s, I just remember that the people I looked up to were liable to do anything at any given time musically, which made it interesting.

"But I even love the way people complain about Prince's act, his remoteness. I just *love* seein' twelve motorcycles around that limo—to me, that is rock."

Armed with insights provided by an antsy English techno-klutz and a self-inflicted orthopedic nightmare, Tom Petty may now be free of the prolonged solitary anguish that haunted him through the making of *Southern Accents*. He knows, at least, that old dogs *can* learn new tricks. But now is not the time to ponder all that. Now is the time to get up on that stage with that great band, stick that Marlboro behind the nut of his Rickenbacker and start chuggin'. It's the time for Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers to honk. No doubt about it now—*this* is rock! ○

FABIO NOSOTTI/LGI