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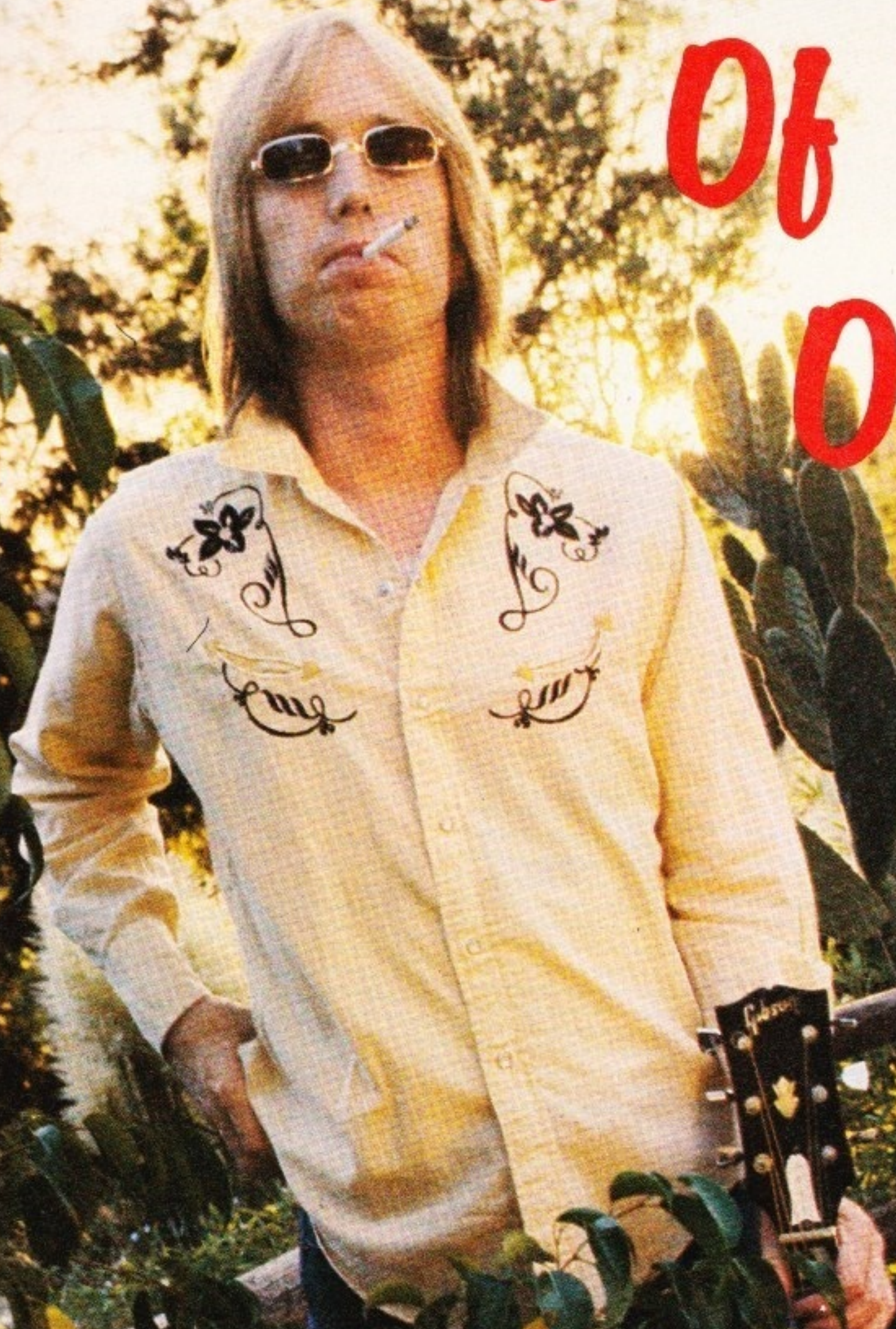
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PAUL YOUNG

Tom Petty's New Tales Of The Old South



by Gary Graff

First there's The Hand Story, or how Tom Petty learned that—as Johnny Mercer once wrote—when an irresistible force meets an old unmovable object, something's gotta give.

He learned the hard way. What gave in this case were several bones in Petty's left hand.

It was one night last October, and the 33-year-old Petty was in the studio of his Los Angeles home working double-time with two engineers, humping to finish the mix on his new *Southern Accents* album to maybe have a release by Christmas—meaning it would be his first record in two years.

Things were running late and Petty was getting a bit edgy. He rubbed his temples, took a deep breath and decided maybe a bit of fresh air might help.

"I was going up the stairwell from the studio to my house," he remembered. "I was frustrated or something, so I just slapped my hand against the wall. I wasn't trying to hurt myself."

That he did, though. He broke several bones in the hand he uses to make chords on his guitar and was rushed to Cedars-Sinai hospital for a long night of X-rays and, eventually, an operation to insert several tiny metal pins in the hand to hold it together. The album was put on indefinite hold and, more important, his career was in danger. Doctors said he might never be able to play guitar again.

And it didn't take long for members of his group, the Heartbreakers, to start referring to Petty as the "L.S."—lead singer.

Petty surprised 'em all, though. Through several months of intense therapy and electroshock treatments, he regained almost full use of his hand. He still can't lift much weight, he said, but by the time he started the *Southern Accents* tour in June, Petty was playing his guitar up to three hours a day, and his doctors felt that was doing him as much good as the treatments they'd prescribed.

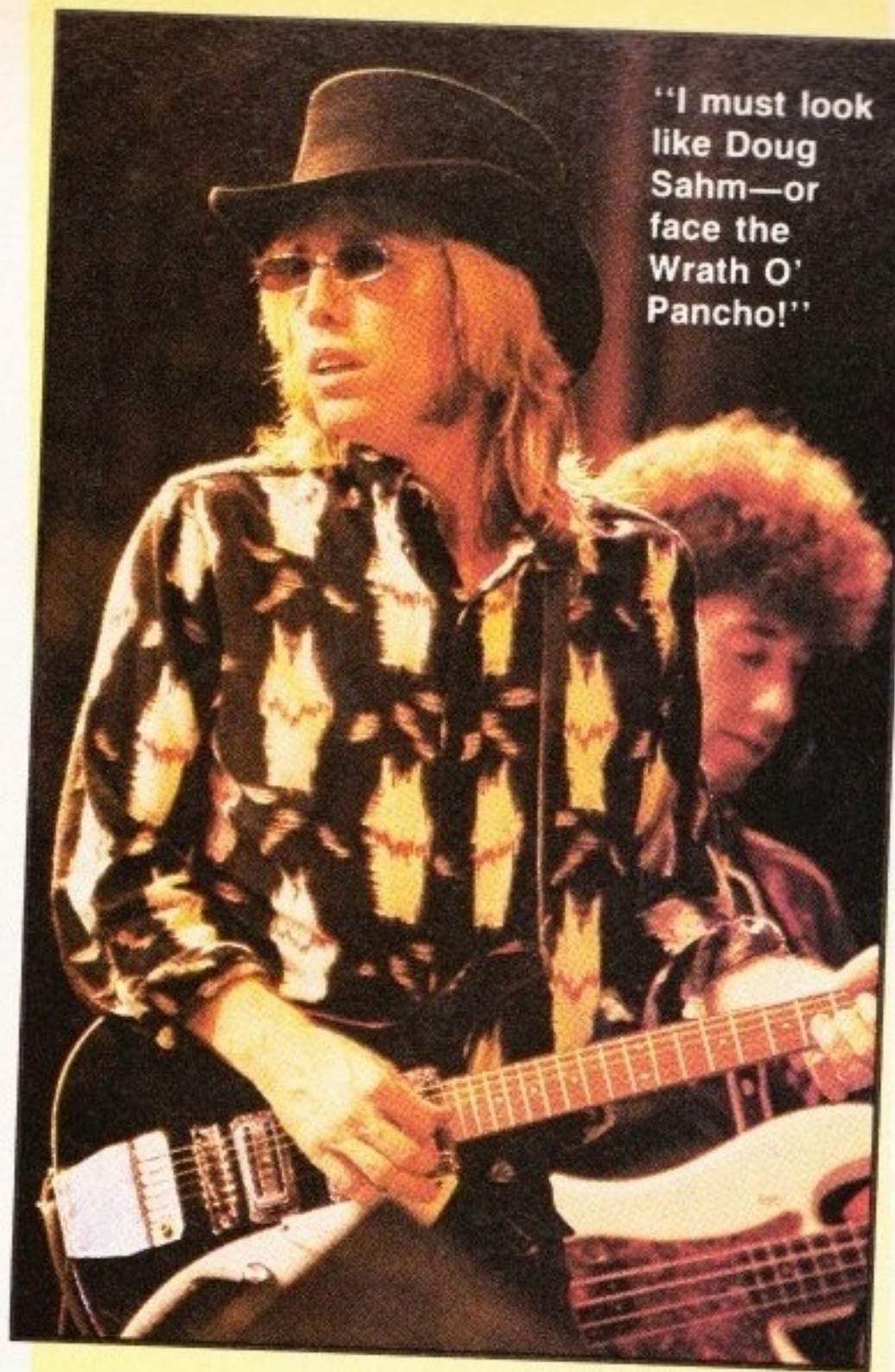
And, the pop star added, the whole incident taught him to be a lot calmer about life's little hassles.

"It's taken that temperament right outta me, let me tell you," he said.

☆☆☆

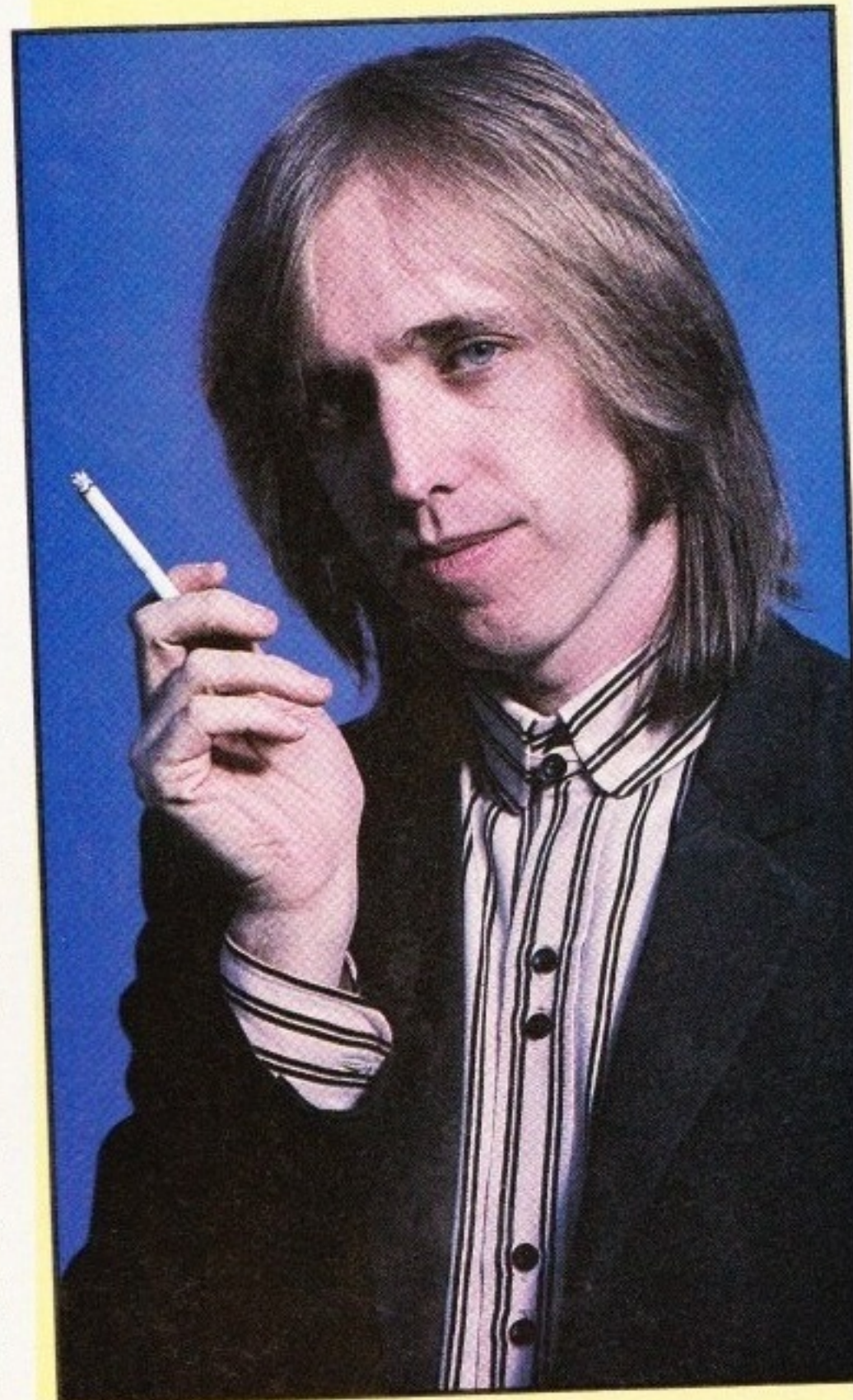
You can say that with Tom Petty, it always has to be *something*. A broken hand before *Southern Accents* just seemed to fit the long line of turmoil that's preceded Petty's best albums.

Before his 1980 breakthrough album, *Damn The Torpedoes*, he fired a few shots at his record company. In 1979, MCA bought out ABC-Dunhill Records, the parent company of Shelter Records, which had released the first two albums by Petty and the Heartbreakers—formed in 1973 as Mudcrutch in their Gainesville,



"I must look like Doug Sahm—or face the Wrath O' Pancho!"

"I think I started to take it all too seriously. I really wanted to part the Red Sea every night."



"Oh no—the long-planned invasion of Earth by large frankfurter buns is occurring too early!"

Fla. hometown. Petty didn't like the idea that his contract was blindly transferred to a new company, so he asked to be let out.

MCA took him to court for breach of contract, and when the smoke cleared, Petty emerged victorious, signed to Elliot Roberts's high-powered Lookout Management (which he shares with Yes and Neil Young) and Backstreet Records, which is distributed by MCA.

His next album, 1981's *Hard Promises*, brought a new set of tribulations. MCA wanted to put it out with a \$9.98 list price, then unprecedented in the record industry (talk about the good ol' days, huh?). Petty's "no way"—he even threatened to title the album *Eight Ninety Eight*—resounded throughout the music press, causing MCA to be swamped with letters.

"The \$9.98 thing, I really didn't know what I could do," he said in an interview two years ago. "I just hung in there. The public and the press and those millions of letters really did the job. (The company) will never tell me why they really dropped the price."

"All that controversy is really a pain in the ass," he explained. "I don't like to fight any more than anyone else. It's never anything I did for attention; it's probably something everybody goes through but doesn't face up to."

"Lately the record company and I seem to understand each other. They seem to understand me a lot better after all this."

Oddly enough, *Long After Dark*—the one Petty album that came out sans any pre-release tension—was the closest thing to a failure he's had. It didn't sell nearly as well as *Damn The Torpedoes* or *Hard Promises*, and critics (even Petty himself) felt the album was a bit same-sounding and lacked the dynamic, jugular approach of those records.

So now comes *Southern Accents*, following a physical trauma by making it into the Top 10 and making Petty hot property again. Is he thinking about what needs to go wrong before he releases his next album?

"We do have a knack for some strange things happening to us," Petty admitted with a laugh. "I'm not looking for them, let me tell ya. I hope people don't expect me to go through some huge trauma before every album."

☆☆☆

The key in The Hand Story, however, is that it became the focus for people's attention, glossing over perhaps the most disturbing problem Petty has ever encountered in his 15-year musical career.

Two years ago, when Petty came off the road from the *Long After Dark* tour, he was suffering a distinct lack of enthusiasm for his career. He was tired of it all—weary of touring, drained by the various business hassles and, most

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manager recently from taking up parachute-jumping.

So is Paul Young, Best British Male Vocalist, going to stay around a while, or is he just another English sports model speeding down pop history's highway and blowing a gasket two miles down the road?

"I'd like to grow old gracefully, be a Tony Bennett or something like that, where you're a singer, you can still get up there, but you don't have to run around the stage and keep doing the splits for the rest of your life. But you can still choose songs and write the occasional good song and be known as a singer; and that way you can keep your career going in the same way that songwriters can."

CONSUMER GUIDE

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silly at all—"Cryin' But My Tears Are Far Away," in which Doe not only writes and sings (and how) a classic country ballad, but creates a paradigm of urban alienation at the same time. Unfortunately, the bad stuff can be revoltingly cute, beatnik romanticism's soft folkie underbelly, as in the Old McDonald intro to "Rock Island Line" or the speeded-up tag to "Walkin' Cane," which seems designed to convince alienated urbans that you can get rock 'n' roll out of this hick stuff. **B**

MEAT PUPPETS "Up On The Sun"

(SST)

Furious negativist then, goofy nature mystic now, Curt Kirkwood is the David Thomas of endearing sloppiness. The tunes unfold loosely and sweetly, with Curt's guitars not so much chiming as chattering in a nonchalantly unstylish take on neofolk lyricism. But the music's charms are a little too flaccid to hold up the most unabashedly lysergic worldview yet to emerge from postpunk. Address: Box 1, Lawndale, CA 90260. **B+**

BILLY OCEAN "Suddenly"

(Jive)

Jimmy Cliff he ain't, and Jimmy Cliff ain't all that much. But platinum-plus he is, and it's my belated guess that we'll be hearing more lilting, faintly West Indian tenors, the closest England comes to soul. My guess is belated because I figured him for a one-hit wonder, and liked him better that way. **C+**

PRINCE AND THE REVOLUTION "Around The World In A Day"

(Warner Bros.)

It's pretty strange, given that he was hailed as a visionary not long ago. But this arrested adolescent obviously don't know nuthin about nuthin—except maybe his own life, which for all practical purposes ended in his adolescence, since even for a pop star he does his damndest to keep the world out. So while his sexual fantasies are outrageous only in their callous predictability and his ballads compelling only as shows of technique, they sure beat his reflexive antinomianism and dim politics. Which suggests why the solid if decidedly unpsychedelic musical pleasures our young craftsman makes available here don't wash. Only the crass "Raspberry Beret" and maybe the crooning "Condition Of The Heart" are worth your time. **B-**

NILE RODGERS "B-Movie Matinee"

(Warner Bros.)

Since it's all, or mostly, in the groove, I can only guess at an explanation. New producer Tommy Jymy? New drummer Jimmy Bralower? Nile's hot romance with the Synclavier? Luck? Whatever, Rodgers hasn't made such a jumping record since the underrated *Take It Off* or such a substantial one since the underrated *Real People*. Some may miss that reassuring Bernard Edwards substratum, but I'll take my rhythms rising to the top and out on the edge of Plan 9. **A-**

THE SCENE IS NOW "Burn All Your Records"

(Lost)

Admirers of Red Crayola's *Kangaroo?*, the only album in history based on Marxist art criticism, will find this hauntingly familiar, not just in its often arcane leftism but in its apparent indifference to musical niceties like vocal pitch. Its pleasures are manifold, and its variety not of the obvious sort you might expect from four guys who play 28 instruments. They combine awkwardness and grace, comedy and admonition, intellect and grunge in politically enlightening proportions. And borrow their pithiest lyric from Mao Tse-Tung. Address: 361 Canal Street, NYC 10013. **B+**

TALKING HEADS "Little Creatures"

(Sire)

As I assume you've figured out, this return isn't exactly *Talking Heads '77*. What the relatively straight and spare approach signifies is that their expansive '80s humanism doesn't necessarily require pluralistic backup or polyrhythmic underpinnings. It affirms that compassionate grownups can rock 'n' roll. The music is rich in hidden treasures the way their punk-era stuff never was, and though the lyrics aren't always crystalline, their mysteries seem more like poetry than obscurantism this time. Anyway, most of the time their resolute happiness and honest anger are right there, and in "Stay Up Late" they come up with a baby song that surpasses even "Willie And The Hand Jive," not least because it acknowledges that the love of grownups needn't always be merely compassionate. **A**

THE THREE JOHNS "Atom Drum Bop"

(Abstract import)

I know I have a weakness for demented three-chord rant, but so should you. Don't you wish you knew some Americans who could cop snatches of Jimmie Rodgers and the Golden Gate Singers and "Don't You Start Me Talking" and "The Night Has A Thousand Eyes" without imitating any of them? These are guys who not only consider it their mission to keep rock 'n' roll "The Devil's Music" for as long as the world goes to hell, but who also don't want the world to go to hell. They're my favorite new Brits in years. Their album was manufactured in France. **B+**

'TIL TUESDAY "Voices Carry"

(Epic)

In the great tradition of Kansas and Starcastle (and also, let's be real, Berlin and Scandal), these social climbers infuse a Brit idea of dubious truth value with a shot of marketable American vulgarity—not only do they roll out

synth-pop hooks like vintage A Flock Of Seagulls, but Aimee Mann's throaty warble sounds almost human. And while the generalization level of her aggressively banal lyrics signals product, not expression, every one lands square on a recognizable romantic cliché. **B-**

UTFO "UTFO"

(Select)

For years rappers boasted that they were in it for the money, which given the amounts of money involved proved how close to the streets they still were. These days you can't be so sure. The new guys on the block are street professionals—if they don't use a rhyming dictionary, then they'll probably market one. And Full Force come up with the one great hook they needed. **B**

LUTHER VANDROSS "The Night I Fell In Love"

(Epic)

Though Vandross's devotion to pure singing will always be too pure to admit much content, his material has come around—Marcus Miller makes the fast ones hop to, and the ballads retain their shape no matter how far Luther stretches them. Only on the ridiculously well-named "My Sensitivity (Gets In The Way)" does he sink into the ho-hum emoting that made his last album such a dud, and on "It's Over Now" Mr. Nice Guy even orders his treat-him-bad woman to "hit the road"—although it is his femme backups who utter the actual words. **B+**

SUZANNE VEGA "Suzanne Vega"

(A&M)

If I walked into a folk club and came upon this woman strumming her songs, I'd be impressed too—she picks her words with evident care and conversationalizes her chosen vocal tradition with evident savvy. But that's not good enough; great lyricists either dazzle you utterly or sneak the imagery on by, and no folk-based vocal tradition ought to require conversationalizing. Despite her considerable talent, Vega is self-consciously artistic like so many folkies before her, which means that while a rock 'n' roll production might power her over her affectations, more likely it just wouldn't mesh—the slightly prissy precision of these arrangements is precisely what the songs demand. As for that ersatz medieval ballad (which ain't bad, actually)—it's no anomaly. **B-**

TOM PETTY

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damaging of all, afraid that his creative juices might have spent too much time in the same pitcher.

First of all, he agreed with detractors of the *Long After Dark* album, critics and fans who thought that the record, unlike his previous releases, didn't "say anything" the way his other material had. "It's funny," he said, "When I hear *Long After Dark* now, I say, 'This is great. Why was I so down on it?'"

"It's just a record of pop songs, but I was feeling pressure, people saying that, 'You didn't send us a message!' Well, I didn't have any message to send. That's a hard expectation to live with; it's flattering in one way, but

I've never been able to look at myself well in that light. I get too self-conscious...

"It's hard to complain—what you're really striving for is to inspire someone. But it does seem in the last few years there's a certain great expectation of us, and that can cause a certain amount of pressure."

The pressure started to split the seams of the Heartbreakers even during the *Hard Promises* tour. "I think I started to take it all too seriously," he admitted. "I really wanted to part the Red Sea every night. I felt I had to."

That attitude caused some infighting and cost the band original bassist Ron Blair, who decided to chuck the group and open a bikini store with his wife in Florida. And when Petty's bid for a straight pop album with *Long After Dark* wasn't greeted with much enthusiasm, things started to get grim in the ol' Heartbreakers camp.

"We'd been out there for seven years and had fallen into a routine," Petty said. "Just the routine of it wore us down. I was bored with what we were doing; I couldn't get behind it anymore. We said, 'This ain't why we started this band.' I didn't even intend to do any more shows when I stopped that (1983) tour. I planned to quit the road. I needed a few years to get out of it."

The other Heartbreakers seemed to concur with Petty's sentiment. Guitarist Mike Campbell stretched out to work with Don Henley, while keyboardist Benmont Tench recorded and toured with Stevie Nicks, then produced Lone Justice. Drummer Stan Lynch and bassist Howie Epstein joined that pair to do some recording with Bob Dylan and the Eurythmics—all with the boss's blessings.

"I thought it was great they were doing it," he said. "I didn't realize they had played on so many records. They don't consider themselves session players—they usually don't even ask for money."

"And this way, I know we're welcome in most dressing rooms around the world."

Petty, meanwhile, slowly found a way to get excited about music again. He looked to the South.

☆☆☆

It's hard to remember that Petty is a Southern boy. Born in Florida, he spent 23 years in that region, drinking moonshine whiskey, playing in bands and making trouble. But with only a slight drawl remaining after 10 years of living in Los Angeles, his beach-blond looks are distinctively Californian and his music has more in common with the Byrds and mid-'60s British pop than the twang-drenched boogie of Southern rockers like the Allman Brothers or Lynyrd Skynyrd.

But he described himself as "about 65 percent Southern" and 35 percent whatever else. He still speaks with lots of Southern expressions—"let me tell ya," for instance, or "Don't Come Around Here No More," the title of the first single from *Southern Accents*—and he still likes to visit his father and brothers in Florida with his wife and two daughters.

"It's hard to beat it all out of someone," he said. "When I'm down there, in a minute I feel real comfortable and at home. It's a romantic place; any place with a culture that strong is pretty interesting. There's some bad aspects to it, too, but there are good people down there, really friendly and polite."

"I'm glad we've had a chance to make people understand that we are Southern," he explained. "I spent more than 20 years down there. The music was formed there. I like it

mainly 'cause there is so much music down there, from the old hillbilly stuff to the Stax stuff from Memphis."

Petty started writing about the South during the *Long After Dark* tour in Atlanta, and he continued from his home after the tour ended. He began drawing from his own experiences, crafting stories about good ol' boys, strong-willed women and rebels with "one foot in the grave/and one foot on the pedal." "It was a nice change," Petty said. "I could assume characters instead of going into it saying, 'Here's what Tom Petty has to say this time. Here's what's on his mind.'"

"The funny thing, of course, is when you're playing characters, it's pretty revealing about yourself in the end, I'm afraid."

There was a musical direction to ponder as well. He knew he wanted to change from the straight rock style he'd pursued for 15 years, particularly after he heard Robbie Robertson's down-homey production on a song Petty had written called "The Best Of Everything." "I said, 'Wow, there's a lot more we can be doing,' Petty recalled. "All of a sudden, I was interested again."

Initially, he wanted to keep with the spirit of the songs, so in its first incarnation *Southern Accents* was full of literal Southern styles. But then he decided that could be a bit much to ask of his listeners.

Enter David Stewart.

Petty met the musical leader of Eurythmics through producer and close friend Jimmy Iovine, also friends with Stewart. Petty professed his admiration of Eurythmics—"those guys are so good, better than all the English groups that go bop-de-bop"—and one night in Los Angeles Iovine introduced the two of them.

The normally shy Petty and the wacky Stewart—he who once jumped onstage with Simple Minds saying his body had been taken over by a "cerebral orgasm"—hit it off at once. Within minutes of meeting, Petty showed Stewart a song he had been working on. Stewart made a few suggestions, like using a sitar. In 20 minutes they had written "Don't Come Around Here No More."

They spent the rest of the night finishing that song and finding out they had a lot in common. Like being obsessed with their home studios. Or loving old rhythm 'n' blues music, reflected in the second single they wrote for *Southern Accents*, "Make It Better (Forget About Me)." "The best thing that came out of it," Petty said, "was I got a really good friend out of the deal."

And he also got plenty of musical inspiration. "Being with different people and in different surroundings, the temptation to experiment was even greater. I didn't worry about how far we went."

HOWARD JONES

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common: mostly when people write, they mention the lyrics. So, as far as I'm concerned, I'm pleased—because that's the main reason for me doing this."

Howard's passion for his lyrics is rivaled, perhaps, only by his disenchantment with the way people are taught in school and his disgust at the slaughter of animals for human consumption. First things first: education. "I'm not a big fan of the system," he said. "I think it tries to push everyone through the same mold." (Jones says he did "pretty well" in

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