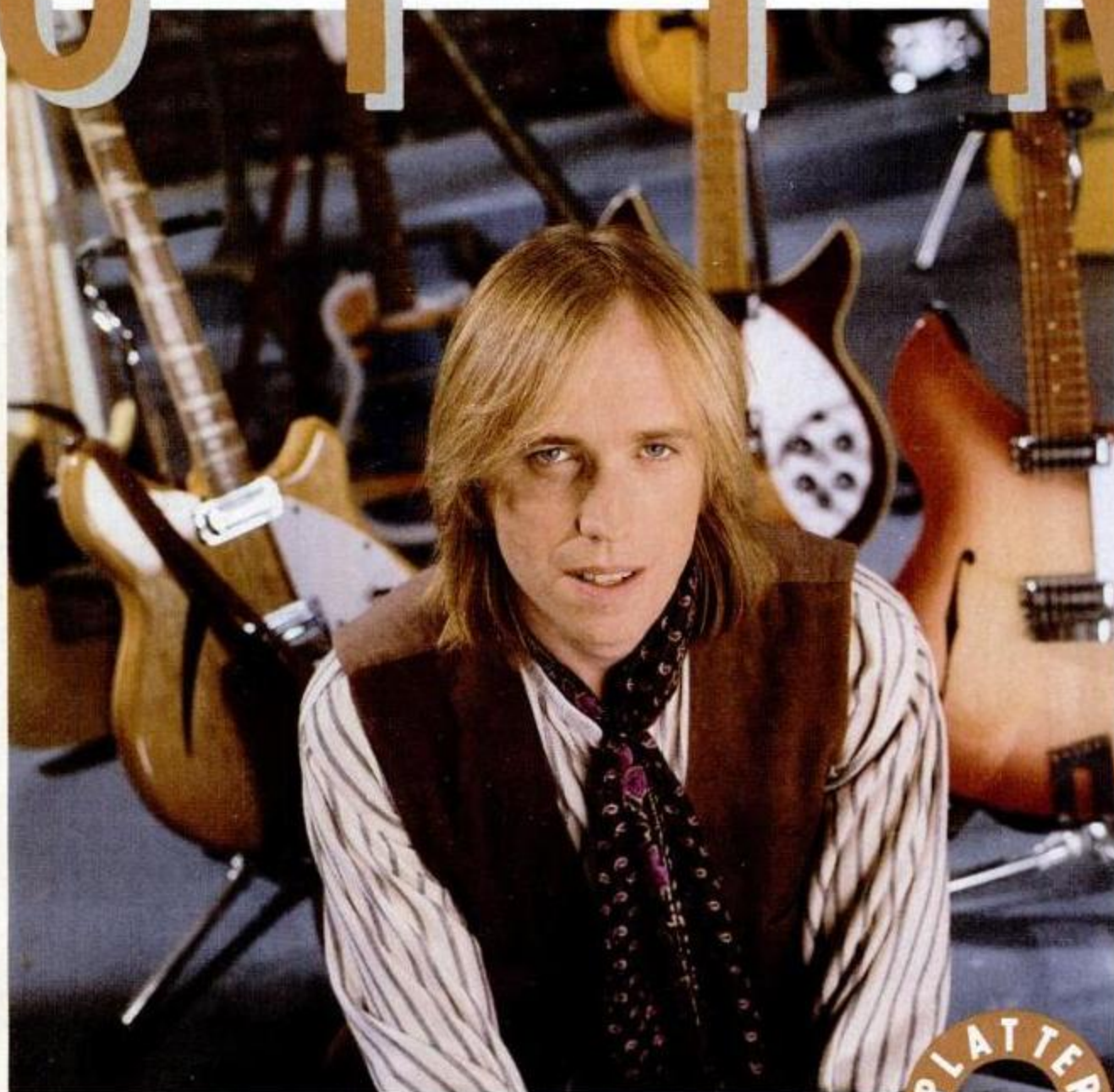


SPRINGS



Tom Petty: An American boy raised on promises becomes an angry old man.

John Cougar Mellencamp
Big Daddy
PolyGram

Tom Petty
Full Moon Fever
MCA

When Johnny Cougar changed his name back to Mellencamp in 1983, it was an act of rebellion akin to Tom Petty's 1981 refusal to raise the cover price of *Hard Promises*, or to change the word "cocaine" to "champagne" on "Listen to Her Heart" in 1978. It was the same—really the same—as Petty refusing to call Declan MacManus Elvis.

These are adult acts of adolescent rebellion: adult because Petty and Mellencamp rebel against their own choices and professions rather than a world heaped upon them from above, and because they rebel from positions of power. Adolescent because these men act like the world really is heaped upon them; they promise that inno-

Edited by Joe Levy

cence is possible, integrity just a public gesture away—that rock'n'roll can be what romantics believe it once was. The adult character of these acts makes them tolerable as more than rich kids' squawking, and their adolescent edge makes them fun (otherwise, what do we care what JCM calls himself—let's hear the guitar). Both men are old enough to recognize nihilism as irresponsible, and willful enough to flirt with it. This contradiction—ungainly, petty—is what allows them to keep on, staying rough and viable, getting better, while so many of their peers just keep on.

Along with Keith Richards, Petty and Mellencamp are rock's angry old men. They lack the musical facility and theatrical flair that have put Sting and Bono, respectively, out of reach. Even their homely efforts aren't pretty; when they try to get fancy, it's a sight. For all their hard work—and if they aren't working hard, they sure seem like it—Mellencamp isn't Springsteen and Petty isn't Dylan. When Mellencamp gets ambitious, he wreaks literary catastrophes like "Justice and Independence '85," from *Scarecrow*: "He was born on the Fourth of July/So his parents called him Independence Day/He married a girl named Justice who gave birth to a son called Nation." Tom Petty, appropriately named, has been equally unpolished. They are the white basketball players of rock'n'roll. Unintimidating, they don't seem to do anything we couldn't.

But their roughness is what makes them so exhilarating, their music so full of promise. It allows them, in 1989, to make more exciting albums than Springsteen or Dylan. They are the tortoises clumping by the hares.

I once expected Los Angeles to ruin Petty. After a series of rich albums of Southern mythology, he drank the bongwater with 1987's *Let Me Up (I've Had Enough)*, a bitchy response to ce-

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lebrity (a mantle both he and Mellencamp otherwise shun, though Johnny Cougar courted it). But *Full Moon Fever*, mostly acoustic and produced by Jeff Lynne of the Traveling Wilburys and ELO, is both his most forceful album since 1979's *Damn the Torpedoes* and his most specifically Californian. Without the Heartbreakers for the first time in nine albums, Petty throws himself on his songwriting abilities and his attitude, which were never all he thought they were. They can't, or don't, take the weight; instead, they change and conquer. The songs here are dead simple, commonplace observances from a life that isn't as pretty as it should be. It's easy to hear the town and the time in Petty's voice. "My sister got lucky," he sings on "Yer So Bad," then continues, "Married a yuppie/Took him for all he was worth." It is a moralist's take on cynicism, a contradiction—one of many—that he manages to keep from resolving itself over the course of the album. Throughout, with black humor and an observer's eye, he seeks a resting place and continues to look for trouble. Even when he sings, "I won't back down" over a swelling of guitars, it is without easy heroism. The songs twist on themselves; he sings "Depending on You" to someone who is clearly undependable, and the Byrds' falsely cheery "I'll Feel a Whole Lot Better" in response to a love hurt that will probably only get worse. Petty captures the weather, the cars, the roads, the dirt—all more irritating than menacing—that swell up to sully his light romantic themes. *Full Moon Fever* is creepy, made more so by the acoustic sounds, oblivious in their unexceptional beauty. Since his 1977 debut, Petty has done the creep thing well; this time he transfers the creepiness onto the outside world.

Mellencamp's *Big Daddy*, his 10th album, is just as much a triumph, but a mixed blessing nonetheless. As he gets better at being serious, he seems to have lost interest in anything else. A hard look at hard times, *Big Daddy* is perhaps too effective for its own good. It's his first record that isn't better than the previous one.

The themes are familiar, the causes without argument. The jolt of Mellencamp's material always comes less from the treatises than the rumbling, lanky efforts he makes to reach them: the fury with which he speaks for women, native Americans, farmers, teenagers, indigents—everybody but himself. Unlike Petty, or even Springsteen, Mellencamp really is heroic.

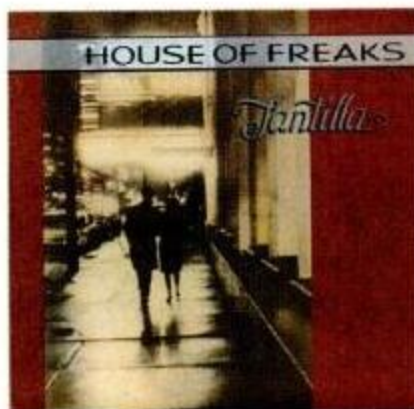
But the real pleasures of *Big Daddy*, which he produced in his own Bloomington, Indiana, studio, are aural. Still rudimentary as a songwriter, Mellencamp has become a great band-leader and an even better singer. On this album, his band surges as forcefully as

any in rock, then stretches into sliding country streams. If they could unwind into decadence, they could be the early-70s Rolling Stones. But they can't. As in the past, even going back to Cougar's "I Need a Lover," Mellencamp's music is all plundering libido; even the pretty sections seem like temporary abeyances in the violence. The dynamic absent from the lyrics is in the music, in the friction between the guitars and Lisa Germano's violin. *Big Daddy* trades tension and release like so many bubblegum cards, building a menacing schism between electric and acoustic sounds that only a believer could sustain. The album sounds ominous—wiser and more global than the hayseed Mellencamp often plays. At the same time, his rasp has found a quietness to its blunt urgency; even when he strains to full volume, he sings with the intimacy of a whisper.

Maybe *Big Daddy* really is as good as 1987's *The Lonesome Jubilee*; or maybe Mellencamp has nothing left of himself to reveal, and his surprises will never feel as much like ice water again. It was disappointing to learn that the question in "JM's Question" was, "What kind of world do we live in?," and that his main answer was, "You do it to your buddy before he does it to you." It was, however, exciting that his other answer was, "[a world] where eleven and seven equals two."

Though even this wasn't as exciting as finding out that Bryan Adams's "Summer Of '69" had nothing to do with the year.

—John Leland



House of Freaks Tantilla Rhino

There's a sign on the door of House of Freaks that reads "Authentic" in neon letters. With a band name coined off a circus poster, an album named after an old-time dance hall in Richmond, Virginia (this duo's hometown), a lineup