

# Howie Epstein

Tom Petty remembers the Heartbreakers' bassist, who died February 23rd of a suspected heroin overdose at forty-seven

By TOM PETTY



Petty and Epstein onstage, 1999

THE FIRST TIME I SAW Howie, he was in Del Shannon's band. He looked like a young pirate — this cowboy-pirate from Milwaukee. He played the bass, and that was really great, but then he sang and just knocked me out. From that moment I was forever a fan, because Howie could sing that nice, clear, high harmony. When I asked Howie to join the Heartbreakers in 1982, Del was pissed off with me. Bless Del's soul, he said, "Wow, you can't take Howie." I said, "Del, I love you, but I'm taking Howie."

Howie always fit in with the Heartbreakers. Around the time we were playing with Bob Dylan, Howie really started to blossom. He felt more a part of us by then. Yet he told me not too long ago, "You know, I've never been hired. Nobody ever said, 'You're in the band.'"

He was such a kind, gentle soul — such a sweetheart. I don't think I ever heard him raise his voice in twenty years. When we were inducted into the Hall of Fame last year, he said, "I've been the new

guy for twenty years." I was lucky to have him around. On "Mary Jane's Last Dance," that really high falsetto vocal track, that's Howie. On most of our tracks from the Eighties on, he did amazing things. I was with the band today, and there's a deep sadness, because Howie was never not a Heartbreaker. He just got to where he couldn't do it anymore.

Any stringed instrument Howie picked up, he could play great. And he had such an understanding of harmony. He knew every Byrds song — he even knew the ones you weren't supposed to know. And he was a great producer — *The Missing Years*, for John Prine, was incredible.

He had so much going on, which makes it all the more a shame.

It's so odd, but inside there was some turbulence going on. I always thought that Howie felt he was lucky to be around and that he wasn't going to be around very long. Maybe that was colored by the drug addiction. We watched him go, and we watched him go in stages. I always felt like, "Why won't you stop this?" We tried so hard, again and again. I remember we finally got him for the Tribute to Heroes thing, after he missed three flights. Then he went back to his hotel and set his room on fire when he was sleeping. He burned up all the drapes, then caught the plane back to New Mexico.

The thing is, Howie never played bad, but then he'd fall apart as soon as the show was over. It drove us crazy. You'd get angry, you'd get sad, you'd get indifferent, you'd get passionately involved,

but none of it was enough, and I don't know why.

He had a German shepherd named Dingo that he loved more than any human. They were inseparable, and I find it ironic that the dog died the day before Howie. I want people to know we did care about Howie and really tried hard to do everything we could, but heroin's just such a powerful, ugly drug that it was even bigger than us and Howie. Howie should be remembered as a kind, wonderful guy, as an extremely talented musician. He wouldn't want to be remembered as a drug addict. By the way, I'd like back my twenty-four-track machine he borrowed in 1985.

It's like you got a tree dying in the back yard. And you're kind of used to the idea that it's dying. But then you look out there one day, and they cut it down. And you just can't imagine that beautiful tree isn't there anymore.

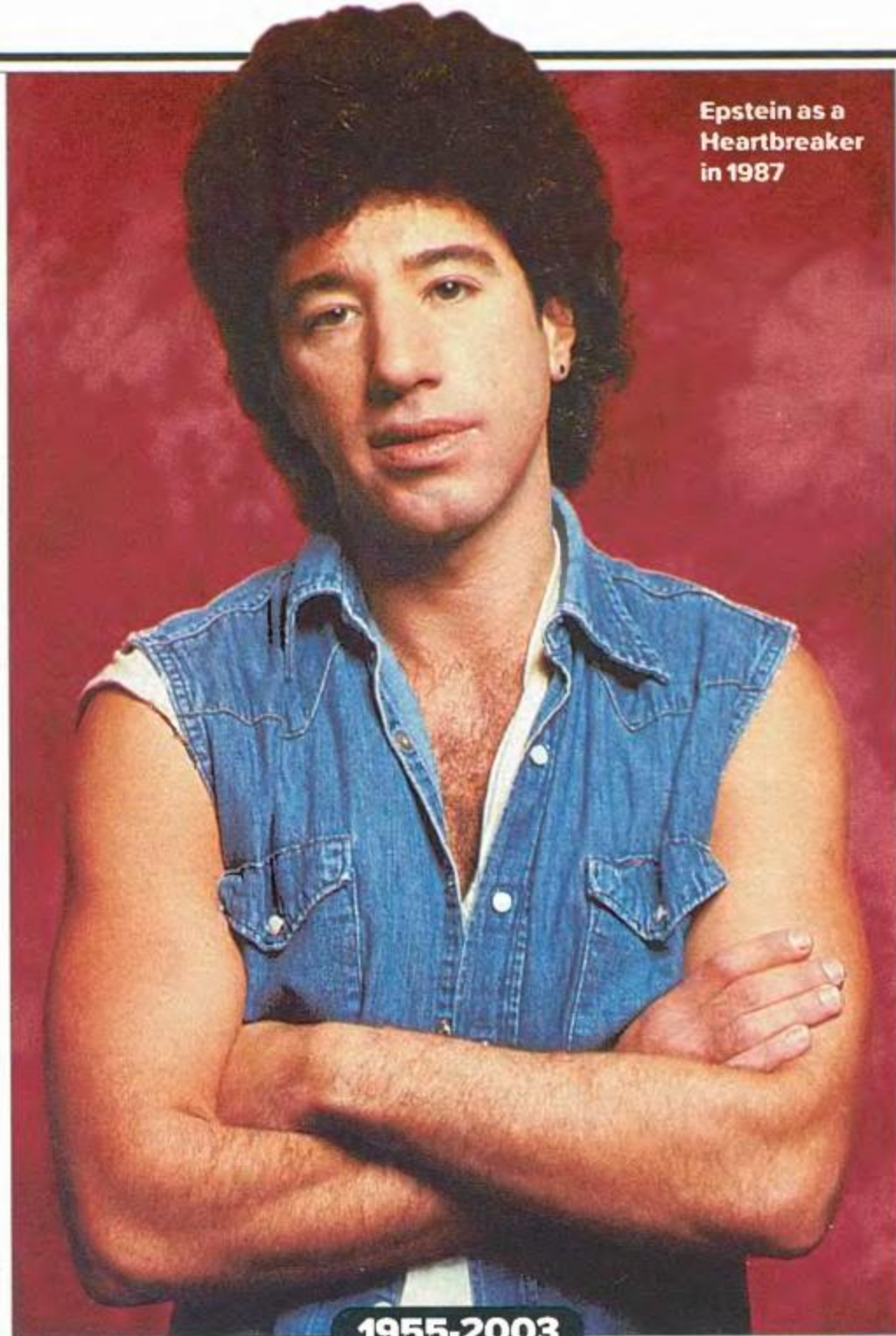
**"He once said, 'I've been the new guy for twenty years.'"**

It's like you got a tree dying in the back yard.

And you're kind of used to the idea that it's dying.

But then you look out there one day, and they cut it down.

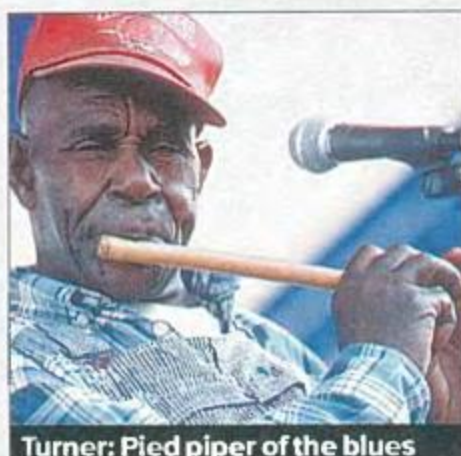
And you just can't imagine that beautiful tree isn't there anymore.



Epstein as a Heartbreaker in 1987

1955-2003

## » Obituaries



Turner: Pied piper of the blues

### Otha Turner

Otha Turner, a lifelong farmer who played the cane fife and preserved a rare form of blues dating back to slavery, died on February 27th in Gravel Springs, Mississippi. He was ninety-four. The son of sharecroppers, Turner led the Rising Star Fife and Drum Band, a family affair that performed a nineteenth-century-born style of funk combining military-band drumming with the piercing African-village whistle of the fife.

"Primitive modernism — that's what Otha played," says guitarist Luther Dickinson of the North Mississippi Allstars, who produced Turner's albums *Everybody Hollerin' Goat* (1998) and *From Senegal to Senatobia*

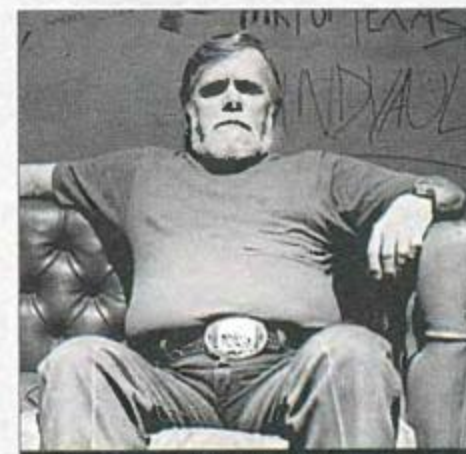
(1999). Turner first made history in the 1950s, when he told folklorist Alan Lomax how to find another local bluesman, Mississippi Fred McDowell. Turner's own fame came later. He started touring in the 1970s and won a National Heritage Fellowship in 1992. "Otha came up the hard way," Dickinson says. "But his music was a celebratory thing." DAVID FRICKE

### Hank Ballard

Fifties R&B crooner Hank Ballard, best known for writing "The Twist," died of cancer on March 2nd in Los Angeles. He was sixty-six, according to published reports. Though Ballard's own rendition of the hip-swivel anthem never hit as big as Chubby Checker's chart-topping version, the Detroit-born singer-songwriter earned notoriety in the mid-Fifties for penning some of the era's raunchiest pop tunes: songs such as "Sexy Ways" (sample lyric: "Wiggle 'til your hips get tired and weak") and "Work With Me Annie" ("Annie, please don't cheat/Give me all my meat"). Ballard and his band, the Midnighters,

Ballard: Bawdy R&B star

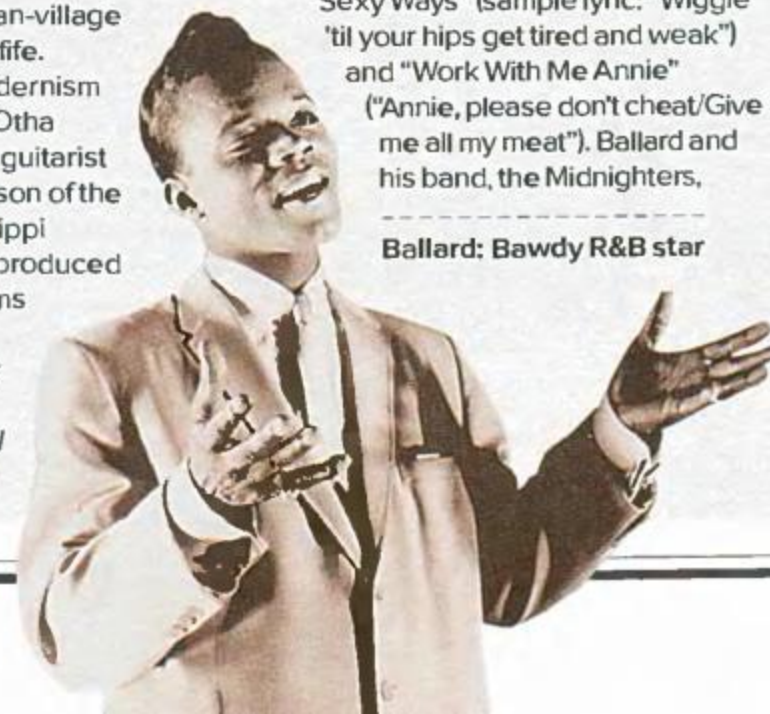
released two "Annie" sequels — "Annie Had a Baby" and "Annie's Aunt Fannie" — and legendary R&B diva Etta James had her first hit in 1955 with the "Annie" response song "Roll With Me Henry." Ballard was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1990. JENNY ELISCU



Country-music rabble-rouser

### Johnny Paycheck

Johnny Paycheck, the country singer best known for his 1977 version of "Take This Job and Shove It," died on February 19th in Nashville after a long battle with emphysema. He was sixty-four. In his five-decade career, Paycheck, whose real name was Donald Eugene Lytle, collaborated with a number of country-music stars, including George Jones and Tammy Wynette. But he found his biggest success on his own in the Seventies with a string of hit singles, including "I'm the Only Hell (My Mama Ever Raised)" and "Slide Off Your Satin Sheets." ANDREW DANSBY



## PENDERGRAST

