

Tom Petty Reunites Mudcrutch

Pre-Heartbreakers band cuts killer comeback album and tours California
By Gavin Edwards

IT SEEMED LIKE SUCH A crazy idea that I figured something good would come out of it," says Tom Petty. He's talking about the reunion of his old band Mudcrutch — which broke up back in 1975. Two of Mudcrutch's members, guitarist Mike Campbell and keyboardist Benmont Tench, went on to be linchpins of the Heartbreakers; the other two, guitarist Tom Leadon and drummer Randall Marsh, had been out of the business for decades. "I just really wanted to hang out with these guys," Petty says.

Today, he's doing exactly that. The five men of Mudcrutch are milling around Petty's rehearsal space in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, gearing up for a minitour of California. On the outside, the room is an anonymous white cinder block, but inside, the walls are lined with dozens and dozens of guitars of every variety, and the room is decorated with oriental rugs and pictures of musicians from Robert Johnson to Foghat.

As teenagers in Gainesville, Florida, Petty and Leadon were the best of friends; Petty's dad called the duo "Tom Tom." Leadon recalls, "When he had a girlfriend, which he usually did — I was so shy I hardly ever had one — he took me on all his dates. The three of us would go to the movies."

They were partners in the band the Epics, which turned into Mudcrutch. "When we started out, we wanted to be the biggest band in Gainesville," Leadon says. Having achieved that, Mudcrutch moved to Hollywood in 1974 to get a record deal — but the recording sessions for their first album were a disaster. The record company wanted to focus on Petty, so he quit in favor of a solo deal.

After being stranded by Petty, Marsh formed the band Code Blue, then moved to Ojai, California, where he gave drum lessons and grabbed any work he could find — that ranged from playing on Campbell's demos to drumming for a children's-theater production of *Winnie the Pooh*. Leadon, meanwhile, had played with Linda Ronstadt, started a group with Motown bassist James Jamerson and written a song for



THE SECOND COMING OF MUDCRUTCH Tom Petty has re-formed his Gainesville, Florida, band. From left: Petty (returning to the bass), guitarist Tom Leadon, keyboardist Benmont Tench, drummer Randall Marsh and guitarist Mike Campbell. The band is touring California promoting a new disc.

the Eagles (his brother Bernie was a founding member). He went back to school to get his electrical-engineering degree, and he has been teaching guitar at the Jan Williams School in Brentwood, Tennessee, for seventeen years.

In recent years, Petty and Leadon had grown apart. Leadon says he didn't want to pester Petty. "There got to be a protective layer around him, which was necessary," Leadon says. "We weren't talking very often — I'd see him every couple of years."

Last year's documentary on Petty and the Heartbreakers, *Runnin' Down a Dream*, spurred Petty's interest in Mudcrutch. Using director Peter Bogdanovich as his messenger, he let Leadon and Marsh know that he wanted to get the band back together. "It was like a bolt of lightning shot through me," Leadon says. So last August, the quintet gathered in this Valley rehearsal space. They plugged in, with Petty resuming bass duties for the first time in over thirty years, nervous it might feel like a bad high school

reunion. "From the first note, it felt really easy and natural," says Tench. "The last time I had that much fun making a record was in my parents' living room" — that would have been back in 1973, when Mudcrutch recorded their first demos. "It's some of the best music I've been involved with in years and years," says Petty.

Mudcrutch contains fourteen songs recorded over ten days in this room. There's a selection of covers the band used to do — the Byrds' "Lover of the Bayou," the bluegrass instrumental "June Apple" — and original songs from everybody in the band except Marsh. Petty spent every night of the sessions writing new material. "Go home at ten and work till three," he says. "I'd get in here, the ink wasn't dry. We didn't really know how the chorus went. And then we'd cut it." Says Tench, "Usually the first time we got the chords right was the take."

The album has a relaxed country-rock sound, hearkening back to Mudcrutch's early influences: the Flying Burrito Brothers and the Allman Brothers. Improbably, that feels like what you want to hear from Tom Petty in 2008. The dreamy, laid-back "Crystal River" clocks in at over nine minutes,

making it the longest track Petty has ever put on record. "That was the only take," Petty says. "We just couldn't bring ourselves to cut anything out."

This version of Mudcrutch never really existed before — Tench was originally Leadon's

"It's some of the best music I've made in years," says Petty.

replacement in the band. But they have all known each other for decades, and they're clearly enjoying renewing their friendship. They have an easy camaraderie, especially when they start reminiscing. They trade stories about the time an audience member pulled a hunting knife on Petty and threatened to give him a haircut, or gigs at topless bars and rehearsals at the band's backwoods Gainesville house, Mudcrutch Farm.

"My transportation was not what it should've been," Petty

says. "I had to wake up every day and figure out how to get to Mudcrutch Farm. I hitchhiked, I rode on a bicycle. I had this terrible little Ford Cortina that I could strap together with coat hangers — sometimes it would make it."

"Randall's the only one that had a car," remembers Tench. "We'd all get in the car to go somewhere, and we'd get about halfway down the road, and he'd pull over. 'OK, everybody give me a quarter for gas.' And some of us didn't have a quarter. 'Well, get out.'"

"Nobody ever volunteered any money," Marsh complains. "I got a little overamped."

After plugging in their instruments and dealing with some nasty feedback, the five men run through their set. When they rehearse "Topanga Cowgirl," a sun-dappled California version of the blues that's a highlight of the album, Campbell plays an effortlessly elegant solo. At the end, he raises his eyebrows, as if he's surprised by what just came out of his fingers. The end of the song is sloppy, though — the group lurches to an uncertain conclusion. Petty lights a Camel and instructs his bandmates, "If we get into one of those things there, nobody stop until I do."

Check out more Mudcrutch and hear "Scare Easy" from their new album at rollingstone.com/mudcrutch