

# The Original Heartbreakers

Tom Petty's first band reunites for a country-rock instant classic



**Mudcrutch**  
★★★★

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Warner Bros.

EVEN A DUDE WITH A TRACK RECORD AS GOLDEN AS Tom Petty's needs to reflect on paths not taken. Mudcrutch, Petty's pre-Heartbreakers band, released a single and little else in the mid-Seventies. And that's too bad, since they reunite here for a hot country-rock set that clearly aspires to, and gets within spitting distance of, genre classics like *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, *The Gilded Palace of Sin* and *American Beauty*. If the Heartbreakers had never happened, this band would have worked out just fine.

Mudcrutch has more jammy, expansive guitar work than any Petty record ever. Yet the leader doesn't play a lick, shelving his Rickenbacker to play bass, as he did back in the day. The twin-guitar front is Heartbreaker Mike Campbell and Tom Leadon, a dazzling player who found less fame than his brother Bernie (Eagles, Flying Burrito Brothers). The pair duel on the hot-pickin' traditional tune "June Apple," run Allman Brothers tandems on the boogie-rock "Bootleg Flyer" and space-waltz Dead-style on the organ-swathed, nine-minute "Crystal River." Heartbreaker keyboard whiz Benmont Tench and journeyman drummer Randall Marsh complete the original lineup; everyone's back, and better for it.

The songs are mythic Americana: With help from his bandmates, Petty creates a vivid cast of road dogs, strippers and junkies that conjures Gram Parsons' Bible-haunted Southerners and Robert Hunter's cosmic Westerners. And his weathered harmonies with Leadon make them flesh; though his voice is frayed, Petty's never sounded more real. Two country-rock covers nearly match their models: The Byrds' "Lover of the Bayou" and "Six Days on the Road," a Burritos fave. If they fall a tad short, that's appropriate: Mudcrutch's ragged enthusiasm is the sound of a hungry gang getting its first taste, just a few decades late. **WILL HERMES**



BACK WITH A VENGEANCE Tench, Marsh, Campbell, Petty and Leadon (from left)

an uninspired Kanye West cameo) is one of a handful of tracks with bells and whistles – the classic disco "toot-toot, beep-beep" – traceable to two of Madonna's touchstones: Chic, whose Nile Rodgers helped steer her early career, and Donna Summer.

Like *Confessions*, *Hard Candy* celebrates dance as salvation, but even the euphorically groovy "Heartbeat" and "Dance 2night" strike wistful notes. Although the uptempo set features no ballads, the dominant lyrical themes – regret, yearning, distrust – are far from upbeat. Morphing from a syncopated shuffle into a lathery, orgasmic hysteria, Pharrell's "Incredible" is a challenging song about longing for a relationship's idyllic beginning. There's a melancholy pining in Timbaland-Timberlake's lush "Miles Away," which implies that all is not peachy in the house of Richie. "You always have the biggest heart when we're 6,000 miles apart," Madonna sings. International pop megastars – they're just like us!

The album's weakest moment is its most emotionally vapid. Madonna dips into *Español* for the painfully literal "Spanish Lesson." She has said the music was inspired by a Baltimore dance called the Percolator but seems more indebted to Timberlake's fast-strummed "Like I Love You." Fortunately, there's also the bass-popping retro-boogie "She's Not Me," where Madonna imagines her lovers feeling buyers' remorse for being seduced by a copycat who "doesn't have my name." The offender who's "reading my books and stealing my looks and lingerie" could be any young pop starlet. But it also seems like an oddly timed barb at Madonna's now-fallen successor, Britney Spears, who has teamed up with many of the guys on *Hard Candy* – Pharrell, Danja and (ahem) Timberlake – and Madonna herself.

Madonna can still scoff at wanna-be's half her age because she's stayed so flexible with her sound. (She's performed a similar feat with her body, devoting herself to a yoga regimen that's made her impossibly elastic – name another near-fifty-year-old who can still rock a hot crotch shot on her album cover.) Even when she wrestles with Pharrell's abrupt stylistic changes or lets herself get absorbed in a Timberlake melody, Madonna still finds her way back on top. The atmospheric closing track, "Voices," poses the question "Who is the master, who is the slave?" before its operatic wind-down ends in a dramatic bell toll. The answer to both questions is still Madonna.

**Portishead** ★★★½

Third Mercury/Island

English trip-hop act returns with gorgeously layered reasons to be sad



IT'S BEEN TEN YEARS since the world last heard from Portishead, the U.K. trip-hop trio, and they do not sound like they've spent the past decade

going to therapy, listening to new music or making friends. Actually, they sound like they spent it locked in a tea cupboard underwater off the coast of Bristol, with a piped-in orchestral soundtrack from Dario Argento horror movies. Is this a problem?

No way – nobody ever listened to Portishead for their sparkling personalities or musical variety. What they're brilliant at is obsessively textured studio dread, and *Third* is an unexpected yet totally impressive return. Beth Gibbons still has her high-pitched trill ("Wounded and afraid/ Inside my head," she sings in the opener, "Silence" – big surprise), but she's just another sound effect in the audio creep show of Geoff Barrow and Adrian Utley. "We Carry On" is a smashing claustrophobic two-note electro riff, with heavy echoes of the Silver Apples' "Oscillations." In highlights like "The Rip," "Small" and "Machine Gun," Portishead mix up dub, break beats, cathedral organ, Moroccan drones and even surf rock into a headphone album for sour times. **ROB SHEFFIELD**

**Robyn** ★★★½

Robyn Konichiwa/Interscope

Can a teen-pop confection remake herself as an edgy art star? She just did



LOOKING LIKE DAVID Bowie's little sister, Swedish starlet Robyn entered the arena in 1997 with "Show Me Love," a generic dance-pop smash

co-produced by hitmaker/Britney Spears sculptor Max Martin. But sensing a future of head-shaving and *How I Met Your Mother* cameos, Robyn jumped ship to start her own label and work with some of her edgier homeys: electro-goth oddballs the Knife and freaky club fusionist Teddybears.

The result, released in Sweden in 2005 and now available in a virtually identical version here, is a shiny mainstream pop record with enough wit and weirdness to impress even jaded bloggers. YouTube fave "Konichiwa Bitches" nods to Missy Elliott, Eminem and a classic *Chappelle's Show* skit over hand claps and Eighties-style synth drums; it's such nasty fun that her dubious rap skills don't detract a bit. "Bionic Woman" quotes art-pop grand dame Laurie Anderson, while "Crash and Burn Girl" bites Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" over fat party beats. Sexy without being pandering, arty without being pretentious, Robyn is a public service: a record that can make indie-minded geeks dance without shame. **W.H.**

## Key Tracks

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**Madonna**  
"Give It 2 Me"

Pharrell provides the siren synths, and Madonna brings the fierceness on a bouncy dance tune that's just as demanding as its title.

**Mudcrutch**  
"Crystal River"

Think Tom Petty isn't really a jam-band guy? This sprawling, organ-laden, Grateful Dead-style groove will prove you wrong.

**Santogold**  
"Creator"

Santi White howls over alien-sounding keyboards and heavy dancehall rhythms in the best new tribal anthem not written by M.I.A.

**Portishead**  
"Machine Gun"

With a trip-hop beat and angel-choir vocals, this ballad proves that Beth Gibbons does the "bummed-out" thing better than anyone.

**Robyn**  
"Crash and Burn Girl"

This Swedish pop starlet stomps through an airy disco sample with all the attitude of a punk-rock cheerleader.