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# FIGHT TO BE FREE

**TOM PETTY | 1950–2017**

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A real musical hero, remembered by  
**STEPHEN DEUSNER** and his admiring peers.  
Plus: **BUD SCOPPA** recalls his long relationship  
with the head Heartbreaker...  
“I just like music done well, pretty much.”

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Photoby **RICHARDE AARON**

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Tom Petty  
in New  
York, 1976



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OM Petty made his finest album under incredible duress. During the sessions for 1979's *Damn The Torpedoes*, he was suing Shelter Records and his friend/mentor/producer Denny Cordell to secure a better contract and to obtain publishing rights to his own songs. Some days he was in the studio with the Heartbreakers, laying down vocal tracks; other days he was in the courtroom with his lawyers, testifying to the conditions of his record deal.

In a strategic measure, he and the other band members declared bankruptcy, as it was decided the meagre proceeds from their previous two albums — 1976's self-titled debut and 1977's *You're Gonna Get It!* — could not cover the expenses for their third. And it wasn't far from the truth: Petty, his wife and their young daughter were living in a rented house in Sherman Oaks, which was barely furnished, and he had only just traded in his old jalopy Opel GT for a brand-new Camaro. As sessions for *Damn The*

*Torpedoes* were underway, producer Jimmy Iovine bought Petty a new hi-fi stereo system, including turntable, speakers, and reel-to-reel, so he would have a way to play back his own recordings.

Despite having a gold record and some buzz around Los Angeles, the Heartbreakers were on the verge of splintering. Drummer Stan Lynch was fired and rehired multiple times, and Donald 'Duck' Dunn, of Booker T & The MG's fame, played on several tracks in the absence of the band's full-time bassist, Ron Blair. After 70 takes of "Refugee", guitarist and co-songwriter Mike Campbell walked out of the sessions. On the other side of the country, back in his hometown of Gainesville, Florida, Petty's mother Kitty, sickly for most of his life, had taken a turn for the worse. He would visit her once while on tour, and three

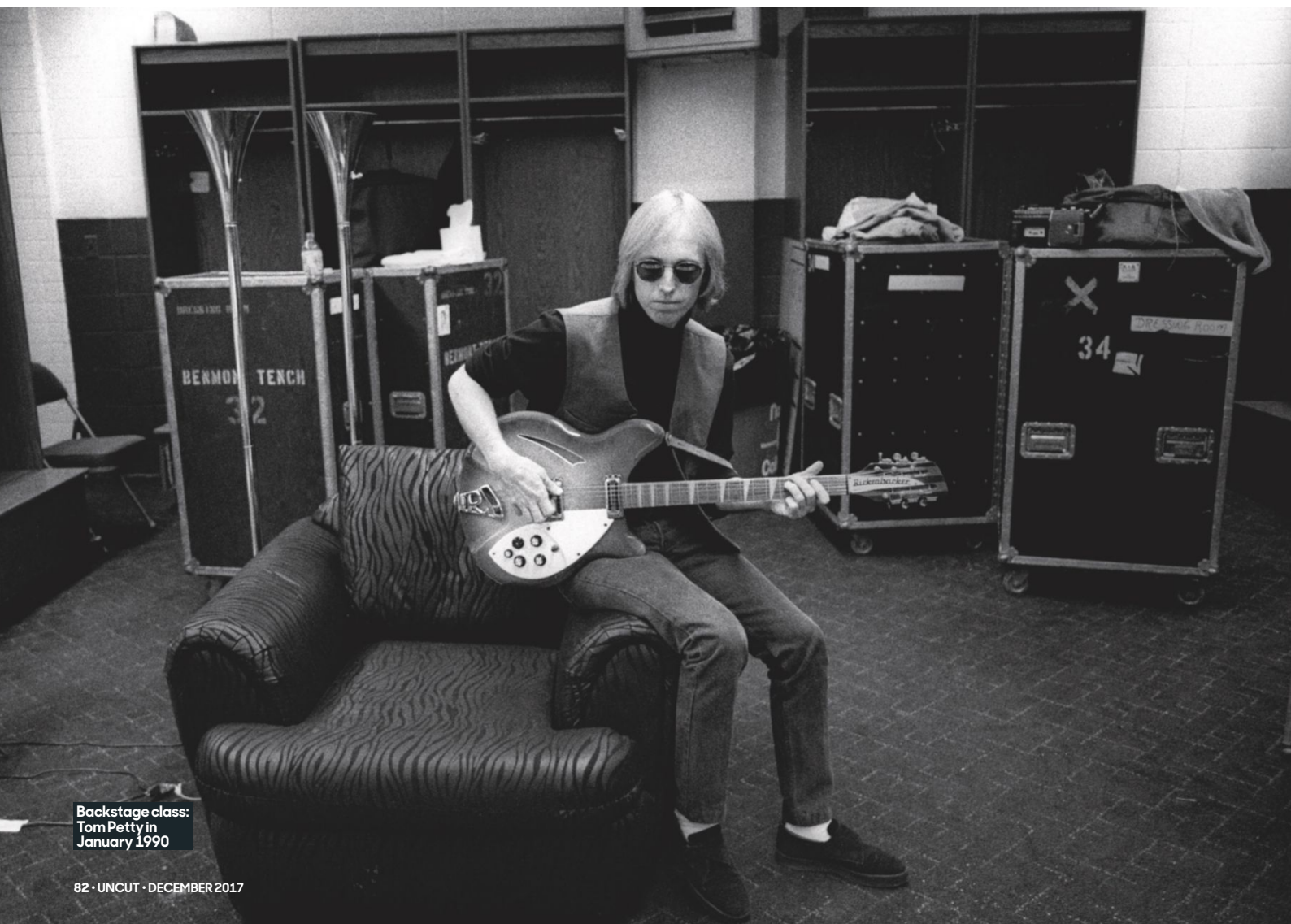
months later she would be dead. Petty did not attend her funeral.

Somehow, despite all these distractions, the Heartbreakers managed to distill their sound down to its leanest, meanest elements. *Damn The Torpedoes* tightened up their attack, pushed their strongest traits to the forefront, made fine use of Campbell's guitar and Benmont Tench's organ. "Refugee" sharpened Petty's songwriting. "Here Comes My Girl" featured what are still some of his most soulful vocal performances. "Even The Losers" gave the band a rousing rock'n'roll anthem. And those are the first three songs. Drawing from the energy of punk and the tautness of new wave, the album is streamlined, compact and succinct — except for the odd sound collages that preface one or two songs and that were meant to recall the studio experiments of The Beatles. (One of which features Campbell's wife Marcie remarking on the clothes dryer: "It's just the normal noises in here!")

For years, the Heartbreakers had struggled to get anywhere in the music business. Their 1976 debut had been out more than a year and a half before "Breakdown" finally invaded the Top 40; "American Girl" would have been a follow-up single if they didn't have a new LP lined up. Gradually, the band had managed to build up some mystery and therefore some hype in Los Angeles. *Damn The Torpedoes* was their breakout moment, giving the band their first Top 10 single ("Don't Do Me Like That") and sending them on their first US headlining tour. It stayed at No 2 on the albums chart for several weeks, blocked from the top spot by Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. After so much scrapping, the album's success signalled a clear victory for the band.

ON October 2, 2017, Tom Petty was found at his Malibu home in full cardiac arrest. He was rushed to UCLA Santa Monica Hospital, where doctors detected a pulse but no brain activity. When doctors took him off life support, they did not expect him to live long. As fans began to mourn on social media, posting tributes and memorials, Petty clung to life for hours longer than anyone could

EBET ROBERTS/REDUXINS



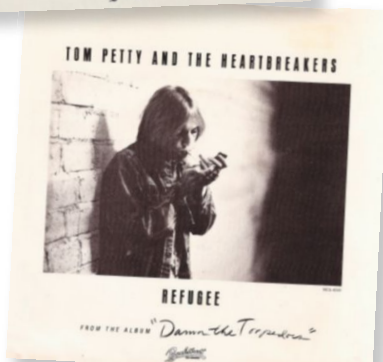
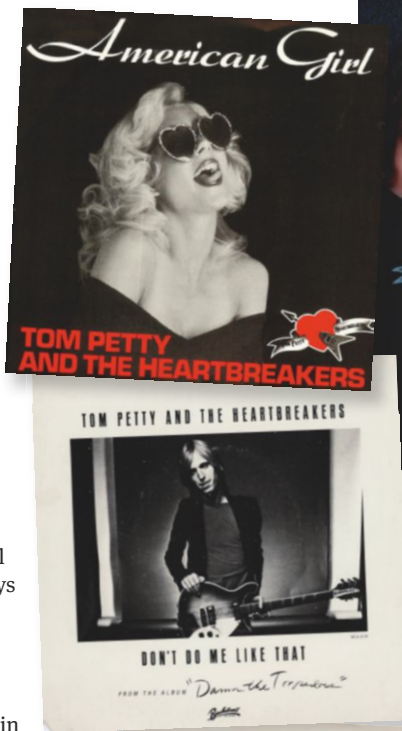
Backstage class:  
Tom Petty in  
January 1990

have expected, stubbornly refusing to surrender this last fight. As Neko Case posted on Twitter, “I hope Tom Petty is not actually dead and makes a full recovery to see all the kind, sweet things you are are [sic] saying about him. What a life.” He was pronounced dead at 8.40pm Eastern Standard Time.

Recounting that timeline might seem morbid, but it signals something essential about Petty and perhaps speaks to his ability to attract so many lifelong fans from so many different generations. Tom Petty was a fighter. Despite his hippie demeanour – the scarves, the top hat, the beard, the joints, the inscrutable grin, the look in his eyes that let you know he was still grooving on being a rock star – he was always pushing against someone or something, up to and including death. For someone who grew into what appeared to be a supremely laidback hippie demeanour, he seemed to thrive under pressure, a protagonist always in search of an antagonist.

There was always someone to push against for Petty, always someone who represented an authority to which he found himself opposed. And like his peers, that rebellion would not only fuel individual songs but would inform a staunch belief in rock’n’roll as the ultimate weapon in that fight. Nothing disarmed his nemesis more effectively than a solid hook or a fierce riff or a perfect rhyme. “Well, I know what’s right, I got just one life,” he sang on one of his most popular tunes, “I Won’t Back Down”. “In a world that keeps on pushin’ me around/I’ll stand my ground.”

The world keeps pushing. The fight hardens the fighter. For Petty it always seemed a tragedy how emotionally calloused you had to be just to live in the world, just to survive. “If you listen long enough, you can hear my skin grow tough,” he sang on “Rhino Skin”, off 1999’s underrated *Echo*. “Love is painful to the touch, must be made of stronger stuff.” That unending struggle may be the great theme of his massive catalogue, as well as of the great rock’n’roll canon to which so many of his songs aspired and truly belonged. It’s essential to the medium and its mythologies, and it’s what he shared with so many of his heroes, his peers and his followers.



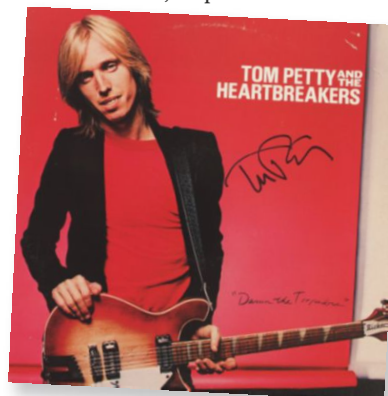
Tom Petty And The Heartbreakers in LA, August 1977: (l-r) Stan Lynch, Mike Campbell, Petty, Ron Blair, Benmont Tench

## There was always someone to push against for Petty

PETTY’S first real antagonist was his father, Earl, who did little to disguise his disappointment in his elder son. Tom was besotted with pop culture – television and rock’n’roll, in particular. He grew his hair long. He rejected the traditionally masculine pursuits embraced his father and so many others in central Florida: Tom Petty didn’t hunt, for one thing. Wasn’t too interested in fishing, either. Earl’s abuse often turned violent, which only reinforced Petty’s rebellious streak and strengthened his resolve to play rock music.

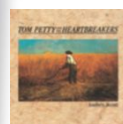
As Warren Zanes points out in his 2015 biography, simply titled *Petty*, rock’n’roll bands became a substitute for fathers and mothers and brothers. “He was ready for a new family even before The Beatles arrived. But through The Beatles’ example, he was shown how to start one. The Sundowners would just be the first. From that point on, nothing was ever going to mean more to him than the band he was in.” That didn’t change even when he started his own family.

As a teenager he was already a professional musician, gigging around the region first in The Sundowners and later in The Epics. It was the era when rock bands wore suits as uniforms, got matching haircuts, and learned choreographed dance moves, and Petty cut his teeth on covers of songs by James Brown, The Animals, Paul Revere & The Raiders. He couldn’t have known at the time that subsequent generations would serve their rock’n’roll



### DAMN THE TORPEDOES (1979)

The Heartbreakers’ hard-won victory: a rock album of startling invention and vitality that finally made them rock stars. It only produced three singles, but almost every song here would be a hit retroactively, peppering classic rock playlists for decades. **9/10**



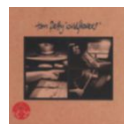
### SOUTHERN ACCENTS (1985)

Petty’s statement about his Southern roots, co-produced with Dave Stewart. The single “Don’t Come Around Here No More”, one of the band’s weirder creations with its accompanying *Alice In Wonderland*-themed video, may have been inspired by their ambivalence about the American South, but the title track is a poignant country-soul ballad celebrating the region’s twang and drawl, later covered by Johnny Cash. **8/10**



### FULL MOON FEVER (1989)

His first solo album without the Heartbreakers, a wry look back on the ‘80s and a weary look ahead at the ‘90s. “Free Fallin’” was his ultimate ode to California, but “Yer So Bad” is a clever parody of post-hippie, post-yuppie, pre-who-knows-what America. **9/10**



### WILDFLOWERS (1994)

Petty considered this his best album – and it might be, too, if it were just a little more concise. The best

songs here, like “It’s Good To Be King” and “You Don’t Know How It Feels”, aren’t meditations on fame, but ruminations on the midlife crises Petty was enduring. **8/10**



### HYPNOTIC EYE (2014)

Petty’s swansong finds fresh inspiration in the grimy, gritty sounds that first motivated him to pick up a guitar in the 1960s. Balancing the nostalgia is the band’s loud, rowdy performances, especially on the single “American Dream Plan B”: “I got a dream, I’m gonna fight till I get it!” **8/10**

## Anything rock’n’roll’s fine...

How to buy... [Tom Petty](#)

MAJOR TOM





Friends for life: live in 1981 with Stevie Nicks



Live at the Civic Auditorium, Santa Cruz, CA, 1980

apprenticeships covering his songs.

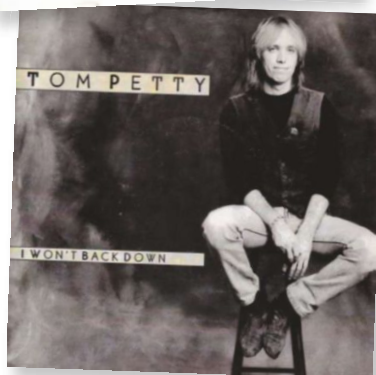
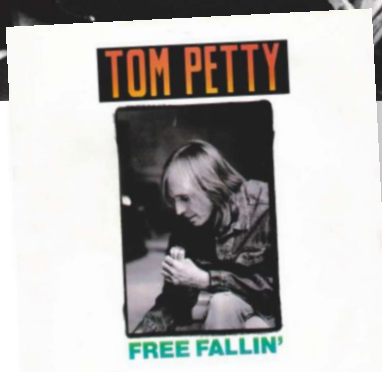
The teenage Petty's general distrust of adults shifted into the twentysomething Petty's suspicion of suits. Mudcrutch, his third band, signed with Shelter Records, the label founded by Cordell (a producer known for his work with The Moody Blues, Procol Harum, and Joe Cocker) and Leon Russell, still considered in the mid-1970s a towering rock star. The outfit lasted for only one single, a reggae song called "Depot Street" that Petty dismissed as a novelty foisted on the band. Mudcrutch disintegrated and re-formed as the Heartbreakers, and they would eventually settle out of court with Cordell and Shelter, a major triumph that allowed Petty to re-sign a more equitable deal with Backstreet, an imprint of MCA.

It only gave him a new set of antagonists against which to kick. Most labels at the time had a policy called "superstar pricing", which meant they would add another dollar or so to the retail price of a record by a proven star. *Damn The Torpedoes* had sold for \$8.98, and MCA intended to sell '81's *Hard Promises* for \$9.98. Bristling at the exploitative practice, Petty said he'd retitle the new record *The \$8.98 Album*. The label backed down.

But these battles took a heavy toll on Petty and made him paranoid. When Stevie Nicks first expressed interest in working with the Heartbreakers, even saying she would join the band if asked, Petty was initially sceptical, believing she wanted to exploit the success they had worked so hard to achieve. Their collaboration, however,

resulted not only in 1981's "Stop Draggin' My Heart Around" (the band's biggest hit at the time), but in a lifelong friendship between Nicks and Petty. The two performed together for the last time in July 2017, when the Heartbreakers played in Hyde Park. She joined the band for their signature duet and told the crowd, "You know that Tom Petty is my favourite rock star!"

If there's a word that appears in Petty's songwriting more frequently than "fight", it's probably "free". That was the prize, the purse, the promise of rock'n'roll. Freedom. For Petty, it was a post-hippie dream of freedom: not national freedom (he was political but his music was not) nor social freedom, but personal freedom from the cloistered world of Gainesville, from the poverty of his childhood, from the abuse of his father, from the clauses in his contracts, from the exploitation of the label, from the demands of the journalists. Petty spent the first 25 years of his life believing he could achieve that freedom if he became a rock star, but the demands of that lifestyle only compounded his



## FRIENDS UNITED

# "This is unbearable..."

**Tom Petty remembered by his fellow musicians**

### BOB DYLAN

"It's shocking, crushing news. I thought the world of Tom. He was a great performer, full of the light, a friend, and I'll never forget him."

### BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

"Down here on E Street, we're devastated and heartbroken over the death of Tom Petty. Our hearts go out to his family and bandmates. I've always felt a deep kinship with his music. A great songwriter and performer, whenever we saw each other

it was like running into a long-lost brother."

### BRIAN WILSON

"I'm heartbroken to hear about Tom Petty. Tom was a hell of a songwriter and record-maker. He will be missed by everyone who loves music."

### RYAN ADAMS

"Thank you for giving so much, a lifetime of inspiration and love. Your music has changed this world for the better... Safe passage to

the summerlands, brother."

### ALICE COOPER

"It is so rare to find someone who commands such universal respect in this business. He was a rock'n'-roll lifer with music in his blood. This man delivered a wealth of great songs to his fans and to the world, and that is something to celebrate. He was an honest renegade, a rebel, and a true original."

### SHERYL CROW

"This is unbearable. Vegas and now a great music hero has passed. You brought us so much joy... I feel like today, the music truly died. Can't go see/hear music and be safe, and one of the greats just passed."

### JEFF LYNNE

"Tom Petty was the coolest guy I ever knew."

### BETTE MIDLER

"The death of the great Tom Petty has come as yet another body blow. A wonderful, American voice; his music gave comfort and joy to millions."

### NEKO CASE

"At a Tom Petty show in Austin, walking a full three-quarters of a mile to the stage, every single person was singing every word. That's the kinda powerful love you don't see everyday, but the kind we all long for when we think about our society and togetherness."

problems. He moved from one prison to another.

Perhaps that's why he was able to enjoy so much success in the late '80s and well into the '90s, especially when his peers stumbled. The fights he launched and the fights he sang about made him relatable to a new generation of record-buyers – the first American generation that would not live better than the previous. This was a generation being told it would have to fight just to maintain, which added resonance to songs like "Free Fallin'" and "I Won't Back Down", both from his first solo record, 1989's *Full Moon Fever*.

Even at the height of his popularity, even after the release of the album Petty long considered his best work – 1994's *Wildflowers*, produced with Rick Rubin – Petty was still in the throes of heroin addiction and saw his family fall apart. He divorced his first wife in 1996, ending their 20-year marriage. As he told Zanes for his biography, "Using heroin went against my grain. I didn't want to be enslaved to anything. So I was always trying to figure out how to do less, and then that wouldn't work. Tried to go cold turkey, and that wouldn't work. It's an ugly fucking thing."

Remarkably, he didn't grow bitter – unless you count 2002's *The Last DJ*, a curmudgeonly take on the changing industry. He credited his turnaround to his second wife, Dana York, who helped him get clean and reconcile with his family. As he did, he released two wise late-career LPs and began to reassess his notions of freedom as something that couldn't be sustained. It wasn't a rock star's life free of worry; rather, it was the freedom found in the smaller moments: the kick of a catchy melody, the raw power of an earworm hook, the boundless possibilities of a guitar solo. That came through the 40th anniversary of the Heartbreakers' debut and found him locating new joy in old songs.

In the end, it wasn't his own music that allowed him that freedom. It was the music made by his heroes and his peers, by people like The Byrds and The Beatles, by Elvis and James Brown, by Dylan and Springsteen. It wasn't necessarily about creating, but playing in every sense of the word, about living in the moment of the song, in the measure and in the note. Being a lifelong rock'n'roll fan granted him immensely more freedom than being a rock star ever did. And that's why his death seemed so unfair, so untimely: there was still a lot of fight left in him. **Q**

## EYEWITNESS!

# "I just hit the wall, and broke my hand!"

Hanging out with Petty in the West Valley

**I** GOT to know Tom Petty when he was deep in his mid-'80s trough. He'd begin his return to form in 1988 with the formation of The Traveling Wilburys, followed a few months later by the release of *Full Moon Fever*. But the hits were no longer coming with great frequency when I talked to him during tour rehearsals with the reunited Heartbreakers in mid-'85, coming up for air on the heels of the arduous, interminable *Southern Accents* sessions. The Heartbreakers had spent two years in limbo while Petty was holed up in the basement studio he'd installed in his rambling one-storey house at 4626 Encino Ave, perched on a hillside south of Ventura Blvd. "When you build a studio at home, you go wild," he told me with a self-effacing laugh. *Southern Accents* was the product of much angst and all-consuming sessions, which finally took their toll on Petty. "The day it happened, we'd been in there around the clock for a week with two teams of engineers, and I was in the other room playin' the mixes on a ghetto blaster. And I'm sayin', 'No, this isn't what I pictured,' and I was bummed. Walkin' up the stairwell, I just [*throws his arm out to the side*] hit the wall and broke my hand. But it forced me to calm down a little bit."

Greeting me at the front door of his house nearly two years later, in the spring of 1987, Petty was tanned and relaxed, closer in appearance to the blond rock star of the late '70s than the sallow studio rat he'd subsequently become. Petty and The Heartbreakers had been on the road with Dylan, an experience that had made the band even tighter as a unit. "Working with Bob was good for us, 'cos it gave us amazing communication

in the studio", Petty explained. "We only had to set up and look at each other." He showed me into the rec room for a listen to a freshly mastered test pressing of *Let Me Up (I've Had Enough)*. "I love playin' it for people," he said, lighting a Marlboro Red and dropping the tone arm on the rollicking Dylan co-write "Jammin' Me". The album yielded no hits and few raves, continuing the slump, but its failure would make Petty even more determined to climb back up. He pointed at the vintage jukebox in the corner of the room. "I'm always changin' the records on there," he said. "I still listen to Elvis a lot; even his later stuff is amazing. It's Now Or

Never' is one of the best-sounding records ever on a jukebox. And 'Such A Night'. I just like music done well, pretty much. My kid's got *Beatles For Sale* on CD – she plays it over and over. 'No Reply' into 'I'm A Loser' – that fucks me up. It didn't matter what they did after that."

A few weeks later, an arsonist burned the house down. But during our meeting, on a balmy afternoon in the West Valley, Petty was content with where he is in the scheme of things: "You're in your band, you know? That's the way we used to look at it when we were in Gainesville. There was the top band, and the next top band, and you gotta do better than this band. We were always glad to be one of the bands. That's all you can do."

"There were times when it was really touch-and-go; like, 'Is this band together or not?'" he admitted – and there would be another fragmentation of the band before the '80s ended. "I wanted us to stay together, for the reason that it's so rare to hear music now that has much personality – especially in the instruments. That's what I like about Fleetwood Mac – it's all those people and it makes that sound. This album we made makes this sound. We're just tryin' to hone it down – whatever it is that we are. It's not a glitzy thing. Like Phil Everly says about this job: 'At least there's no heavy lifting.'" **BUD SCOPPA**



Rad hatter:  
June 23,  
1985

**"We were always glad to be one of the bands. That's all you can do"**



The Traveling Wilburys: (l-r) Bob Dylan, Jeff Lynne, Petty, Roy Orbison, George Harrison