



PETTY PASSION.—Rock singer Tom Petty drew a tumultuous response at Santa Cruz Civic during his

"lawsuit tour" that ends Saturday and Sunday with sold-out appearances at Universal Amphitheater.

Times photo by George Rose

Petty Courts Fans on 'Lawsuit Tour'

BY ROBERT HILBURN
Times Pop Music Critic

SANTA CRUZ—This picturesque beach-front town of 39,000 has lots of attractions to lure young people into making the 75-mile drive south from San Francisco.

The Chamber of Commerce boasts of this being one of the state's premier surfing spots and claims that the local board-walk roller coaster is ranked among the 10 best in the world. More than 23 million

people have ridden on the half-mile track since it was built in 1924 for \$50,000. (Inflation statistic: it cost \$80,000 last year just to *paint* the coaster.)

The three informally dressed people in their early 20s looked like candidates for either the beach or the roller coaster as they walked through the town's downtown mall. But something else had brought them from San Raphael, north of San Francisco: rock star Tom Petty.

"We met him just after his first album

came out in 1977," said Valerie Silba, 21. "He came to the record store where we worked to autograph his album. He was real nice and I loved his music right away. There was something different about it—something fresh, the kind of sound that everyone now is calling new wave. He was like a pioneer."

Silba and her friends had driven here because it was the closest Petty was coming to San Francisco on a brief California

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Petty Courts Fans on 'Lawsuit Tour'

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tour that ends Saturday and Sunday with sold-out concerts at the Universal Amphitheater.

The tour—Petty's first of 1979—has been dubbed the "lawsuit tour" by the slender rock singer and his Heartbreakers band. That slogan even appears on the back of the souvenir T-shirts sold at the concert. Like Bruce



TOM PETTY
... on "Lawsuit Tour."

Times photo by George Rose

Springsteen two years ago, Petty is battling in the courts for what he feels is control of his career. The disagreement began in March when ABC Records, which released Petty's first two albums, was sold to MCA Records. Petty maintains that his ABC contract was nontransferable and balked at being shuttled to a new label. MCA insists the contract with Petty is valid. The conflict has resulted in Petty's third album—originally due in May—being held up.

To compound matters, Petty went into debt trying to finance the new album and has filed a Chapter XI bankrupt-

cy proceeding. If the hearing next month is favorable, he might be free of all contractual bindings, thus able to sign with another label. Several companies are reportedly dangling million-dollar pacts at Petty, whose classic rock sound is in commercial demand now.

The irony of the Amphitheater shows this weekend is that the outdoor theater is owned by MCA.

"The issue came up whether we should cancel the dates," Petty said, sitting in his motel room here Tuesday. "People said you've got to pullout, but I wanted to play. I felt like a zombie. I hadn't been on a stage since New Year's Eve.

"But they said, 'You can't just do two shows. You've got to have some break-in dates.' So I said we'll book a tour. Then they said you can't tour without a new album. How would we promote it? But I knew the kids would be waiting. Besides, we could promote the lawsuit. That's when we decided to call it the lawsuit tour. We'll tell the kids what's going on and why we haven't been around."

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The inside of the 2,000-capacity Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium looks like a high school multi-purpose room: a combination auditorium and basketball court. The scene each summer of the Miss California beauty pageant, the Civic has been used mostly for local social functions since it was opened in 1939.

Recently, however, the auditorium has been the site of rock concerts. Jackson Browne, Elvis Costello and Roxy Music have all appeared there. Patti Smith was also due this week. Rickie Lee Jones is scheduled to perform next month.

Because tickets for Petty's sold-out concert were nonreserved, fans began lining up outside the Civic early in the afternoon.

Few of the young, mostly female audience paid much attention to the lobby table with the anti-nuclear energy pamphlets on it, but business was so brisk at the souvenir table that vendor John White, 21, had to pause occasionally to wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

The fans gobbled up the \$6 T-shirts, \$8 jerseys and \$2

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PETTY TOUR

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lyric books. One teen-age girl was so eager for Petty material that she asked White about the cap with the red Heartbreakers logo that rested on a nearby chair.

"How much is the cap?" she wanted to know.

"No, no," he said, smiling. "That's mine. It's not for sale."

As he has shown at his local appearances, Petty has a strong appeal to women. He has a sexy prowl on stage, a yearning authenticity in his voice and writes almost exclusively about romance.

But Petty is far from just a teen sex symbol. His music combines the seductive charm of the Rolling Stones with the elegance of the Byrds and the classic accessibility of American rockers like Elvis Presley, Petty's, first rock hero. Despite their teen accessibility, the songs work on a variety of levels. It's just as easy to think beyond the romantic surface of songs like "American Girl" and "Listen to Your Heart" and view them as tales of career struggle and idealism.

Petty even has a new song—"Century City"—that is an outgrowth of his current problem, but again, he said, it's in the setting of a love song. "I wouldn't want to write a song that is just about a lawsuit," he said. "Kids don't want to go to court or even hear about courts. Besides, my favorite songs are the ones that mean more than one thing. That's what is so good about Bob Dylan songs. You can fit them into a lot of different situations."



When Petty stepped to the microphone after a brief, entertaining set by the Rebels (the L. A. rockabilly band that used to work with Ray Campi), it was hard not to feel the adrenaline flow.

The audience surged forward, hands outstretched, wanting to touch Petty or, at least, join him in the celebration on stage. The smiles on the faces of Petty and the Heartbreakers (guitarist Mike Campbell, drummer Stan Lench, keyboardist Benmont Tench and bassist Ron Blair) made it clear that they were happy to be back on stage.

By the end of the set, he and the Heartbreakers left little doubt that they are among the premier attractions in rock.

After three encores Tuesday, the audience was still stomping on the wooden auditorium floor so hard that it may result in a few erratic bounces the next time a basketball player dribbles down the court.

Petty was delighted with the response.

"I was so nervous last night at the first show (in Salinas) that I threw up in the dressing room before I went on," he said, speaking in his soft Florida drawl. "It was so strange to be back on a stage again. But it was great. The same tonight.

"It seems like the only place I've been in a long time was courtrooms and lawyers' offices. That's the last place I ever wanted—or expected—to be. I got introduced to the whole Century City scene—the lawyers, the people who really control the record business.

"I've got nothing personally against MCA—except they tried to buy me without asking. When we negotiated the deal with ABC, we put in a clause that they couldn't sell the contract without my consent. I don't think the fact that you've got \$35 million means you should be able to buy my business or my music or my life. So I decided to fight to the wall even though it's important to have another record out there now.

"There's a lot of changes in music today. When we came up in '77, we couldn't even get an agency to represent us. People thought our sound was uncommercial. But the success of 'Breakdown' and the success of bands like the Cars and Blondie and Cheap Trick shows there's a market for this kind of rock 'n' roll. I just hope I can get out there and participate in it again. The only thing I want from a record company is assurances that they believe in my music and will give it a real shot."