



Tom Petty gives his all at the Orpheum.

(Globe photo by David Rodgers)

REVIEW / MUSIC

Tom Petty has rock 'n' roll in his veins

TOM PETTY & THE HEARTBREAKERS — In concert at the Orpheum on Monday.

By Steve Morse
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Under the shadowed lights, his face was gaunt and pale though his blond shag looked as bright as a headlight in the darkness. Tom Petty, specter-thin and confessing he was "high on antibiotics," had come at last to Boston, ending a chain of postponements that had dragged on for more than a week.

"I called my mother on the phone today," Petty told the jammed, SRO Orpheum crowd. "And she said, where are you? I said, 'Boston — Rock City, USA.' And she said, it's about time."

The saga of the date-that-almost-wasn't found a humorous outlet in the back of a T-shirt worn by drummer Stan Lynch. Two dates were stenciled on the shirt but crossed out (Nov. 9 when Petty canceled to do "Saturday Night Live" and Nov. 14 when he canceled due to a sore throat that still nags him slightly), but finally one that was not, Nov. 19. Both the promoter and Petty — who had to scramble back from a show in Toronto only to race to Cincinnati the next night — lost money on this evening, but both, to their credit, were hell-bent on staging it.

If ever there has been a date worth the tribulation, this was it. Petty and his Floridian cohorts, the Heartbreakers, were immense. Needing to recoup from a tattered image, they played like gangbusters during an extra-long set lasting just under two hours. Petty may have still been hucking a virus, but there was no stopping him. You only wondered what a *truly* healthy Petty might have done.

This was sweatbath rock 'n' roll, all right, but that doesn't begin to tell the story. The Heartbreakers have always parlayed a blistering, high-energy attack (even when they played their first Boston gig in 1975 opening for Al Kooper before a sedate audience, they didn't hold back), but this time their unbridled energy and pluck was matched by a similarly high-developed professionalism. They lived up to every dot and dash of the hyperbole surrounding their advance billing.

Their lighting, the most noticeable improvement, was of a no-expense-spared standard — rich with magentas, criss-crossing off-whites and deeply striking reds, blues and golds — while their tightly stitched songs were presented with the panache of a hit musical revue, right down to the Broadway arm-in-arm bowing at the end.

Updating the '60s, in my mind, far better than either Blondie or the Knack have been able to do, Petty mingled his bluntly penetrating, Byrds-like originals with a joyous choice of cover songs such as the gospel soul of Solomon Burke's "Cry to Me," the Southside Johnny exuberance of the old Isley Brothers tune, "Shout," the near-brimstone hail of the Stones' "It's All Right" and the dis-

arming, cleansing zing of the Animals' "Don't Bring Me Down." The last two came during an encore period as feverish as any in memory.

Starting with songs from the new album, "Damn the Torpedoes," the Heartbreakers just kept accelerating through older Petty stingers like "I Need to Know," "Listen to Her Heart" (with slicing Rickenbacker guitar from Mike Campbell, who has become one of the foremost axemen out on the road these days) and "American Girl." About the only respite was the bedeviling journey through "Breakdown," in which Petty's nasal, Roger McGuinn-type voice took on a skittish, deliberately discombobulated flavor enhanced by a melting light show.

Any fear of this being an antiemetic night because of the prior postponements was groundless. Petty — in spite of the antibiotics and the skewered travel plans — spilled his guts and gave his all. The man, like Springsteen, has rock 'n' roll in his veins. He convinced me he could well be the Buddy Holly of his generation.