

Petty and 'Breakers keep 'Hard Promises'

Two years ago, Tom Petty was standing in a Los Angeles courtroom.

"Bankrupt," the judge said.

The jury agreed.

After two classic albums and a few so-so concert tours, the pretty boy from Jacksonville with the baby-fine blonde hair and vintage guitar collection was at the end of the line. Just another pretty face wasted, devastated, chewed up and spit out by the grinding rock 'n' roll machinery.



Marlowe

Petty went through some soul searching times following his quick decline, clocking in lots of pacing, sleepless nights. Sometimes that's what it takes to make great rock 'n' roll music.

Just when Petty and his Heartbreakers were being counted down and out, they came back with a classic LP, "Damn The Torpedoes." The title said it all: Full speed ahead . . . Petty wasn't going for broke anymore. He was already that. Now the kid was going for everything.

"Damn the Torpedoes" was acclaimed both here and in Europe as one of rock's finest LPs, a scorching vinyl testament not only to superb rock 'n' roll songwriting, infectious melodies, pop hooks, jangling guitars, downbeat drums . . . but also to guts.

The record sold millions, but there was one problem: Petty had been out of live action so long he just couldn't cut it on stage anymore. He yanked himself and the Heartbreakers out of the "No Nukes" concert film for that reason. Recent reports claim Petty has overcome his stage deficiencies.

A good thing, because T.P. and the 'Breakers are now undertaking a massive U.S. tour (no Miami date yet) in support of their newest MCA/Backstreet LP, "Hard Promises," which opens with these words:

The waiting is the hardest part.

Every day you see one more card

You take it on faith

You take it to the heart

The waiting is the hardest part

Petty knows about waiting; he also knows about making great rock 'n' roll music. Out of 10 songs here, there is really only one clinker, the rather plodding "Nightwatchman."

The rest of "Hard Promises" is a killer, finding Petty altering much of his previous Byrds-Searchers-Stones influences. This time around, the emphasis is all on Petty's nasal (but interesting) voice, which is miked way up front. The Heartbreakers' ace musical work (guitars, drums, bass, organ, accordion) is minimal, but efficient.

Petty's style of songwriting has also undergone a drastic change here. He isn't writing "Thunder Road" epics, but he is telling more of a complete story. In the Dylan-esque "Something Big," we get the tale of Speedball, a man who knew, "It wasn't no way to carry on/It wasn't no way to live/But he could put up with it for a little while/He was working on something big."

The album's masterpiece, though, is a gorgeous ballad called "The Insider," with Petty dueting with Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks. The song was originally written by Petty for Nicks' forthcoming solo LP, but Petty (no fool no more) asked for it back when he heard how great the final version was.

Reversing the universal principal that it's always the outsider who feels the pain, Petty beautifully inverts this theory so it's now the insider "left in the dust/left to rust."

"The Insider" is a searing tale of love and life gone wrong; a complete Martin Scorsese movie in T.P.'s own definitive musical terms. It might also be the tale of Tom Petty at one time — but like all great songs, you don't need to know one damn thing about the kid's life to feel all that fire . . . and all that pain.



Tom Petty (center) and the Heartbreakers are about to tour behind their new LP, 'Hard Promises,' but no Miami date has been announced