

Petty Gets His Message Across

By ROBERT HILBURN
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HOLLYWOOD - Tom Petty's new "Long After Dark" album is a textbook example of how to have your cake in rock and eat it, too.

Due this week from Backstreet Records, the LP underscores Petty's ability to weave meaningful themes into a highly commercial framework.

The secret is putting your message into the popular or accepted language of rock so that passive, mainstream fans can enjoy the music on a casual level, while other, more active fans can appreciate it on a deeper level.

Though most of the collection's lively, engaging songs deal with the search for romance, it is more rewarding to view the lyrics as statements about maintaining integrity in the pursuit of your dreams, whether they involve career or relationships.

The album's central song, "Straight Into Darkness," not only illustrates the twin appeal of Petty's music, but also demonstrates why this album is his most fully satisfying work.

"Straight Into Darkness" is on the surface a melancholy song about falling in and out of love, but it also is a pledge to rally against disillusion-



Tom Petty

ment. That is an especially relevant theme during a period of such economic hard times.

Early in the song, Petty equates the darkness observed late at night from the window of a 747 with the anxious uncertainty that many now feel when assessing the state of the American Dream.

But Petty rejects the temptation to temper his own dreams:

I don't believe the good times are over

I don't believe the thrill is all gone

Real love is a man's salvation

The weak ones fall, the strong carry on
Straight into darkness
Out over the line

Idealism is not new to Petty's music, but there is a deeper, more convincing ring to that message in this album.

"American Girl" and "Listen to Her Heart," the most arresting tracks from Petty's first two albums with the Heartbreakers, were endearing statements of faith that aligned Petty with the innocence of '50s American rock.

The advances in "Long After Dark" are reflected in the increased sophistication of his lyrics. It is clear that the same spirit is behind "Listen to Your Heart" and "Straight Into Darkness," but there is a darker, more penetrating edge to the latter song that the younger Petty probably was not capable of four years ago.

In some ways, "Long After Dark" compresses Petty's key themes into a single album. Without denying the place "American Girl" holds in the Heartbreakers' repertoire, "One Story Town," the opening tune this time, is a searing rocker that speaks about the restless ambition of anyone who wants to challenge the "fate handed down to me."

"You Got Lucky," which

has just been released as a single, is a slow, moody track about the protective shield of arrogance that is sometimes employed to ward off self-doubts.

Though it seems apart from the rest of the album's material, the sarcastic "Same Old You" is perhaps the rowdiest song Petty has ever recorded.

In the nastiest put-down tradition of the Stones, the song starts off as a glorious jab at rock 'n' roll trendiness.

Hey, I remember you back in '72

With your David Bowie hair and your platform shoes...

But it teasingly switches tone to eventually toast the fun of associating yourself with rock's youthful junk-food ties, where the volume and the bravado are the only things you can call your own:

We could buy a '62 Cadillac
Put a Fender amplifier in the back

Drive straight into the heart of America

Turn up to 10, let that sucker blast

Petty's ability to move from the primitive rock celebration of "Same Old You" to the haunting philosophical refinement of "Straight Into Darkness" enables him to operate on rock's two most powerful plains. He does not exhibit in "Long After Dark" the bold sociocultural redirection of Springsteen's "Nebraska." The core of this album, however, suggests a parallel passion.

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