

Off the record

Jon Marlowe

Tom Petty: Emotions in the dark

It's Lady Clairol. She'll do it every time.

Male singer-songwriters who bleach their baby-fine hair blond often have a hard time being accepted as *artists*. Sure, Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers sell a lot of records, but it seems Petty is constantly overlooked when the conversation turns to blood on the tracks, standing on the ledge and playing for keeps.

The musical theory seems to be that pretty boys aren't capable of walking the high wire — it might mess up their hair. But throughout five LPs Tom Petty has amassed a magnificent song catalog detailing the love, pain and defiance felt by both the insiders and outsiders.

Oddly, Petty seems better known for his defiance in fighting his record company — he publicly battled and won to keep the list price of his "Hard Promises" LP at \$8.98 rather than \$9.98 — than the heartfelt defiance of his music: *I'm for standin' up. I'm for breakin' free/I don't want fate handed down to me.*

While Petty has always walked with the "Refugees," "Complex Kids" and anyone else who's ever been "Strangled in the Night," he's still been denounced by one of his musical mentors as a narcissistic poseur.

When Petty appeared at the "No-Nukes"



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Petty: Not just another pretty face

concert and later refused to let his performance be used in the film because he felt "it wasn't right musically," former Byrds member David Crosby said: "Tom Petty just wants to look cool all the time . . . It's all he ever thinks about . . . and he just didn't think he looked cool enough for the movie."

Petty's also taken some recent critical heat over his latest Backstreet-MCA LP, "Long After Dark." It's been snidely dismissed in many circles as "a boring holding pattern."

Very strange, considering "Long After Dark" is as great an album as Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers have made. Granted, the record doesn't go immediately to the soul the way "Damn the Torpedoes" and "Hard Promises" did.

On first listen, "Long After Dark" is simply good ol' T.P. and The 'Breakers — jangling, Byrds' 12-string guitars, splashy cymbals, nasal-tone vocals. But beyond this familiar aural landscape, repeated plays reveal an emotional 10-song testament to men without women, men with women and the twisted things both states will do to your mind.

This is the *real* Book of Love.

In "Deliver Me," Petty sings: *Sometimes I*

wonder if this is worth the trouble/Sometimes I wonder if this is worth the fight/I never have made my mind up about it/I've just decided to let it all ride.

Petty soon discovers he can't just let it all ride. There are too many emotions in motion. He's had enough of all this hard-core loneliness. Even the losers get lucky sometimes — and Tom Petty is lookin' to get lucky.

One minute he feels he and his paramour really "Stand a Chance," while the next Petty and his lover are headed "Straight into Darkness:" *There was a moment when I really loved her/Then one day the feeling just died.*

But even as the blackness closes in, Petty can't give it — or her — up: *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.*

"Long After Dark" finds Petty trying to carry on, to make good on all those "Hard Promises," but suddenly realizing that somebody's raised the ante in 1983 — and he doesn't know who the hell it is.

With his intense fascination with mid-'60s fashion and vintage Rickenbacker guitars and Vox amplifiers and, of course, that bottle of Lady Clairol, it may appear all Tom Petty really wants is to look like he stepped off the cover of the Byrds' "Turn, Turn, Turn" album.

But listen to his heart as Petty closes "Long After Dark" with the inspirational "A Wasted Life:" *They give it you to from the time you're born/You keep trying to make one more score/Baby, it's alright/You gotta stand and fight.*

That's what Tom Petty, The Heartbreakers and all of great rock 'n' roll have always been about. The Stand. The Fight. Petty is a pretty face, but he's also someone who paces the floors "Long After Dark," making his stand and fighting with some of the most powerful, passionate music being delivered today.

● Jon Marlowe writes Off the Record every Wednesday in the Lifestyle section of The Miami News.