

Tom Petty delivers new songs with a southern accent

By BILL DeYOUNG
Sun Music Writer

You can take the boy out of the South, but apparently you can't take the South out of the boy. "Southern Accents," the sixth album from long-gone Gainesvillian Tom Petty and his rocking Heartbreakers, tackles a wide range of subjects — alienation, loneliness and the human condition the foremost — and gives almost every one a southern angle; indeed, its own southern accent, the way Petty accents everything best. It enters the *Billboard* chart this week at 36 with a bullet.

The LP's opening cut, "Rebels," follows roughly the same pattern as Petty's earlier "A One Story Town": the narrator has left his southern digs in the dust for a more exciting life (as in the previous lyric, perhaps a veiled look back at Gainesville). Petty sings

*"I was born a rebel, down in Dixie
On a Sunday morning
With one foot in the grave,
And one foot on the pedal,
I was born a rebel"*

as if he's trying to explain why he turned out the way he did. It may be significant that "Rebels" was the only new song Petty chose to sing at The Islands last year during his brief, impromptu acoustic set.

In the title song, a sweeping ballad, Petty says that he can't get away from his southern roots, and in fact lets on that he's rather proud. His vocal on the song is the most emotional he's ever recorded, and Jack Nitzche's string arrangement is a perfect underscoring.

In "Spike," Petty is part of a group of good ol' boys, sitting on the front porch, chiding the local punks as they walk by:

*"Here's another misfit, another Jimmy Dean
Bet he's got a motorbike
What'a y'all think?
Bet if we be good we'll get a ride on it"
But then he lets slip:
"If he ain't too mad about the future
Maybe we oughta help him see
The future ain't what it used to be."*

In a chilling bit of foreshadowing, the old folks let Spike know his future will probably be he same as theirs.

They call him "Spike" because he's wearing a dog collar around his neck, but the song ends with the sound of a dog panting. This leads directly to "Dogs on the Run," co-written by Heartbreaker Mike Campbell, and one of the strongest tracks on "Southern Accents." Again, the theme is transition, the old south to the new, the young Florida musicians picking up and fleeing to the big city. In the song, the narrator can't explain his restlessness:

*"I woke up feeling hungry
Lookin' straight into the sun
And left a cold night on the ground
Like a dog on the run."*



T.P. AND THE HEARTBREAKERS (l-r): STAN LYNCH, TOM PETTY, BENMONT TENCH, HOWIE EPSTEIN, MIKE CAMPBELL

"Mary's New Car" is a pure, simple pop song, and "Make it Better (Forget About Me)" is an exercise in Memphis soul. "It Ain't Nothin' To Me," a rollicking dance track complete with "heart attack horn" and a repetitive "rap" chorus, is the only number that flat out doesn't work.

"It Ain't Nothing To Me" is one of Petty's collaborations with Eurythmic Dave Stewart, who supposedly added the horns and chorus vocals after the songs were recorded. "Don't Come Around Here No More," which rings of Stewart's influence, sounds so totally out of place on a Petty album (it literally sounds like the Byrds doing "Green Tamborine") that one wonders if Stewart's input was counterproductive. However, the video for "Don't Come Around," in which Petty plays the Mad Hatter at a hallucinogenic tea party, really helps to explain the song. After the video, the song works, in whatever context it's in. It sounds great on the radio, anyway.

The final track on "Southern Accents," a vintage Petty composition called "The Best of Everything," features production by Petty and Robbie Robertson, and aid from two of Robertson's former Band-mates, Garth Hudson and Richard Manuel. Ron Blair, who hasn't been a Heartbreaker for four years, is credited with bass. All the evidence points to this recording being made a while back, and one wonders why Petty took so long to release it. It's a beautiful song, if a bit overproduced (the dirgelike horns sound like "All Things Must Pass," of all things), and brings the album to an impassioned close. "The Best of Everything," like most of the other tracks, looks back wistfully on the years gone by.

*"Yeah and it's over before you know it
It all goes by so fast
The bad nights take forever
and the good nights don't ever seem to last."*

As always, the Heartbreakers' playing is magnificent. Benmont Tench's keyboard work, in particular, has taken a deserved place in the front of the mix. Drummer Stan Lynch gets better all the time, and Mike Campbell's guitar licks are ever-tasteful. New bassist Howie Epstein sings harmony on the title cut. Petty's vocals, which venture further into Dylan territory than ever before, are strong and confident. He sounds less like a hurt little boy.

"Southern Accents" finds Tom Petty looking back, with the benefit of all the polish and grace he's acquired over his professional years. At times oblique, and rather far afield from his rock 'n' roll anthems of albums previous, the songs on "Southern Accents" are nevertheless some of the most compelling he's put on vinyl.

You can take the boy out of the south, but odds are he'll never really lose his southern accent.