

## TOM PETTY AND THE HEARTBREAKERS: SOUTHERN CROSS-UP

**H**ard times have taken their toll on Tom Petty's hard promises. His first record label went south on him, and even "Breakdown" couldn't break him out. His new *Southern Accents* (MCA) suffered a long delay after Petty threw a punch, in frustration, at a rough mix of the album and shattered his right hand. The Heartbreakers' debut swaggered, and their middle LPs (particularly *Damn the Torpedoes*) were defiant; *Southern Accents* is steeped in the sadness of lost opportunities.

Take the album's love songs — or rather its lack-of-love songs. *Southern Accents* begins with a girl walking out on a guy who's "too drunk to follow" ("Rebels") and ends with an "I wonder where she is tonight?" elegy for a woman long gone ("The Best of Everything"). If there were good times in between, they've rolled too far away for Petty to see them. "Don't Come Around Here No More," the single and one of three songs cowritten with Eurythmics' David Stewart, is surely one of the most curious numbers Petty's ever done. It's built around a water-torture rat-atat drum riff (the credits don't list a drum machine, but this certainly sounds like one) and Stewart's sitar drone. Sung in a tight-jaw slur that makes you think Petty's been shot with Novocain, it's one long hallucination. (This must have also been obvious to the deliriously inventive chaps who concocted the video — a trippy take on *Alice in Wonderland* with Petty as the Hatter and Stewart as the Caterpillar. Each time the shot changes, the size relationships alter: Petty's hat, glasses, suit, etc., all grow far too large or small, and Alice eventually winds up in a giant teacup dodging crate-sized sugar cubes. In an ending that's either black-comic or misogynistic, she's transformed into a giant cake, sliced open, and eaten. Curiouser and curiouser.) "Don't Come Around Here No More" features catchy, if overelaborate, touches



like a cello solo and a ghostly wail from a female back-up singer (shades of Annie Lennox), which make the song more appealing for airplay but no less bizarre. It's a brushoff from someone too stoned to give the rejection any force. Unfortunately, Petty is a raspy, limited singer who until now has been getting by on fervor. There's none of that here.

What's maddening about *Southern Accents* is that it wants to convey the many aspects of Southerners but comes across as merely unfocused. There are four lighthearted throwaways ("It Ain't Nothin' to Me," "Make It Better (Forget About Me)," "Spike," "Mary's New Car") spotted among the dour songs of pain and loss Southern-style ("Rebels," "Southern Accents," "Dogs on the Run," "The Best of Everything"). "Make It Better," flirts with that South American rhythm Stewart used in Eurythmics' "Right by Your Side" last year; it's also the song that sounds the least like Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. This is disturbing on an album that's trying to ride on a single theme; Petty stretches the definition of "South" when he includes Brazil.

Petty's American South is more "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" than "Sweet Home Alabama," and I believe he wanted *Southern Accents* to be a successor to *The Band*: able to bear losses with dignity and earthy humor, noble yet down-home crazy, too. The contributions of Robbie Robertson, Richard Manuel, and Garth Hudson on the stately closer, "The Best of Everything," point that way. But *The Band* succeeded because it was unified — one voice, both happy and sad. Petty's packed a lot of different characters into this album, but *Southern Accents* never decides which voice to use.

— M. Howell