

Byrd-watching with Tom Petty

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TAMPA — It comes screaming right out of the top balcony of the University of South Florida's Sundome concert hall. One of those giant, thick, heavy plastic, bright yellow Frisbees. Only a NASA engineer could compute the intense speed and velocity at which this object is traveling as it zooms straight into the ground-floor seating area and crashes full force into an unsuspecting woman's left eye.

The woman is sitting next to her husband, an older man with close-cropped hair, Hawaiian shirt, Bermuda shorts and sandals. Blood begins pouring from her eye as security guards and paramedics move quickly to take her to the backstage area, where Lone Justice and Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers are tuning up. As they reach the backstage zone, they pass right by me. I feel sorry for the woman, but I'm also thinking that this guy desperately needs a new barber and tailor.

The Frisbee incident is soon forgotten as boom — out go the lights, and LA's highly-touted Lone Justice take the stage to offer a blistering set of country-rock that vindicates every word of praise this band has received in recent months.

A quick intermission, and TP and The Heartbreakers appear to deafening applause. Augmented by a



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three-piece horn section and two female singers called The Rebel-ettes, Petty and company — still one of the greatest bands in the entire musical universe — brilliantly deliver "Refugee," "Southern Accents," "The Waiting" and "Don't Come Around Here No More."

But that's enough, because this isn't really a concert review. It's a story about fate and fickle fame and a musical torch being passed on underneath this space-age-looking roof of the Sundome.

To understand it, you must realize there's more at work with Tom Petty than simply the creation of exciting, adventurous music. There's also an intense attempt to resurrect 1965 rock fashion, more specifically, to look as if he just stepped off The Byrds' "Turn, Turn, Turn" album cover. TP still thinks mousse is some kind of wild animal as he frolics on stage in flat, baby-fine, bleached-blond hair. Add to this '80s tonsorial mortal sin: TP now sports 1965 Byrds' granny glasses, a Nudie suit like the one Gram Parsons wore for "The Gilded Palace of Sin" LP and monstrous muttonchop sideburns a la Buffalo Springfield in 1966.

In 1985, Tom Petty is ironically doing double duty as an anachronism and a trend-setter. In small Orlando/Tampa nightclubs, garage bands worship The Byrds, The Burritos, Springfield and Petty. Meanwhile, today's Top 100 charts couldn't care less. It's still Duran Duran, matted-ratted hair and multi-colored scarves tied anywhere there's open flesh. This

Please see PETTY, 3C

1965 groundswell fusion of buckskin fringe, country and rock is blowing in the wind, though, and slowly but surely it's approaching gale force.

When TP returns for his second Sundome encore, he steps up to the microphone and says: "We had some other songs we were going to do for you, but I just learned there's a gentleman in the auditorium tonight that I owe a lot to. If it wasn't for him, I might not even be here. We haven't rehearsed or anything like that, but I'd still like to bring him out here and sing a few songs with him."

Three hours ago, whatever bozo threw that Frisbee and creamed that woman had no idea what kind of musical history he was setting into motion as the paramedics told Tom Petty the name of the man whose wife was injured. Tom quickly asked the guy to hang around. So out strolls that man in the close-cropped hair and Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts and sandals, and TP says: "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to . . . Roger McGuinn, formerly of The Byrds."

In that one sentence, a feverish white-line highway that winds itself back 20 long years suddenly snaps in your brain, and it all connects right here on this Sundome stage. Once upon a time, Roger McGuinn — who used to be called Jim until he claimed that space aliens visited his house one night and told him that his real

name was Roger — was in the same 12-string country-rock superstar ballpark as TP. Hanging out with The Beatles. Bob Dylan. Hot records. Hot chicks. Oh, yeah. Roger McGuinn was the deal, all right. The real big deal.

But that Route No. 1 highway somehow dead-ended. Now McGuinn has no record company, no fame, no acclaim. Just an "Eight Miles High" past and a wife who got a yellow Frisbee rammed into her left eye.

The ironies begin multiplying at warp speed: In his granny glasses, TP looks exactly like McGuinn used to look. McGuinn is using Petty's blond 12-string Rickenbacker guitar, just like the one McGuinn played when he was the top of the pops and TP was just another kid who used to stare at McGuinn's picture all day long and dream of one day owning a guitar just like that.

Petty, McGuinn and The 'Breakers launch into The Byrds' "So You Wanna Be a Rock 'n' Roll Star." They hit the final two lines:

*Don't forget what you are
You're a rock 'n' roll star*

While singing these words, McGuinn turns to Petty and passes the country-rock torch on by pointing his finger at Petty in acknowledgement of his glorious rock 'n' roll achievements.

Petty could have easily let it go at that. Taken the supreme compliment from his hero and come off as Mr. Really Really Cool. Yet,

Petty knows there's a debt to be paid, and it may as well be paid right here, right now. Petty steps back up to the microphone and sings the final two lines again:

*Don't forget what you are
You're a rock 'n' roll star*

This time Petty points his finger at McGuinn, acknowledging the fact that McGuinn will be a rock 'n' roller forever. McGuinn flashes a wide bittersweet smile, knowing that OK, so maybe 99.9 percent of the world's population has forgotten him and his immense contributions to rock 'n' roll, but that Tom Petty, The Heartbreakers — and some of us — never will.



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Petty backstage at Tampa's Sundome