

BY BUD SCOPPA

For Tom Petty, obsessive rock artist, the construction of the "Southern Accents" album was an experience that spun wildly between agony and ecstasy.

Granted, a record album isn't the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but "Southern Accents" wasn't just any ol' record to Petty. It was The Biggie, the album that would bring together all he had learned over 10 years as a recording artist and all the deep-rooted experiential stuff that had been gathering force inside him. He was going for the whole ball of wax this time or be damned.

The thing he was creating consumed him, particularly since, like Dr. Frankenstein's project, it was coming to life right below him in the basement of his house (in a Tarzana, Calif., neighborhood known to its tight-knit residents as "Gainesville West").

Petty had installed a recording studio down there — a grand one — and, for a time, it completely took over his life. He had stay up for days on end, unable to get away from the work-in-(prolonged)-process, pale, frayed, anxious and overwhelmed — a virtual Munster version of Tom Petty.

Leading the Heartbreakers, a three-piece horn section, and pair of female vocalists through a barrage of pre-tour rehearsals in a Universal Studios soundstage, a fully revived and patched Tom Petty is all smiles and animation. And, yes, he is indeed playing guitar — with both hands.

During a break in the run-throughs, Petty describes his ordeal:

"I did a lot of tracks for this album. There's closets full of tape left over. I went all into bluegrass and country and that stuff. We even did three hard-core country tunes with (original producer) Denny Cordell. It's real good stuff — I hope it comes out. But in the end, I decided it was way too dense when it was two albums — I think we'd still be wadin' through it now. It was the most ambitious record I'd ever attempted, definitely.

"It was a real nice album in the sense that I felt some incredible highs, because I thought, 'Wow, I'm finally hittin' some new ground here.' And then there'd be nights that were awful, because when you'd think, 'Oh, no, it was all an illusion!'"

He is laughing now, but it's clear it wasn't funny at the time.

Such was the situation on the fateful Night of the Hand.

"When I broke my hand, I mean ... it was just ... it's hard to explain ... I don't really know exactly why I broke my hand. I know I was very frustrated at the time with the record. I'd finished recording, and I'd been over to the record company and played 'em some stuff. They weren't pushing me, but they were saying, 'Can we have it by the end of the year?'"

I said, 'Yeah, all I gotta do is mix it. I'm not gonna do a double — I'm gonna pare it down.' So then, tying up the ends was another six-month job, which, I wasn't prepared to accept; I thought it was a six-week job to go in and mix it.

"And the day I broke my hand, I think we'd been in there around the clock for a week with two teams of engineers and I was in the other room playin' the mixes on a ghetto blaster. And I'm sayin', 'No, this ain't what I pictured,' and I was bummed. Walkin' up the stairwell back to the house, I just (he throws his arm out to the side) hit the wall and broke my hand.

"I think the record made me so nuts that I did it," Petty says with a wry smile, then adds, "but it made a much better record. Because after I got out of the hospital I could hear very clearly things that I'd overlooked."

(Producer Jimmy) Iovine showed up at that point, right after I broke my hand, just out of friendship and because he loved the songs so much. (After the last three) I was consciously tryin' to stay away from Jimmy on this album. I wanted to do something else.



# TOM PETTY

## The agony and the ecstasy of an obsessive rock artist

So when Jimmy showed up, he was real fresh and I was real burnt. He helped me a lot with the mixing and added a few overdubs and some arrangement changes. Stuff I wouldn'ta heard because I was just too immersed in it.

"So anyway, (the accident) forced me to just calm down a little bit, basically. I think I'd been (staying up and working for days on end) for about a year when I broke my hand!"

Petty's conversation is speckled with short bursts of self-turned laughter. He's a shy, intermittently reclusive man who speaks slowly in a soft drawl.

"I'm not real talkative," he explains. Tonight, though, Petty is anything but mute. The relief of having "Southern Accents" completed, released and accepted by the public and press alike has loosened him up. Besides, he is getting a sustained buzz from playing onstage with his band after more than two years of virtual seclusion.

"I guess everyone says this, but I really am excited about playing," Petty states with unequivocal enthusiasm. "I didn't even want to go on tour, to be blunt; I didn't have any interest at all. But the band, they'd stay out there endlessly. I was a little tepid about committing to it. When we started rehearsing, it was just the group for a week — and that was exciting. Until then I hadn't realized how much I missed it. 'Cause it's this great group, and I tend to take for granted how good they are. After that night, I thought, we're way too good not to be out on the road — we've gotta be on the road."

The Heartbreakers are, in fact, a truly impressive band. With Mike Campbell and Petty blasting out the jangles and squalls on the Rickenbackers and Stratocasters through Vox amps (these guys are classicists), Benmont Tench pumping up billowing floods of Hammond, bassist Howie Epstein (the band's lone non-Floridian, he replaced Ron Blair in 1981) carving out thick, melodious lines, and marvelous drummer Stan Lynch tearing into his kit with apparent abandon and secret restraint, the Heartbreakers are fully capable of making the hair on your arms stand straight up for minutes on end.

History surely will place them right up there with America's most self-defining and musical rock 'n' roll bands — the Band, the Byrds, the Allmans, Little Feat, the E Streeters — even if they have been largely undervalued in their own time.

Emerging out of L.A. in 1976, the band soon became cult-heroic with their resonantly hooky blend of Byrds ("American Girl," "Listen to Her Heart") and Presley (the classic "Breakdown," "Mystery Man").

"It was a convenient time to come along," Petty admits, "because all of a sudden things just started to burst. At the Whiskey, we'd play with groups like Blondie and the Ramones, and all these people started showin' up. And there was this difference — people were sayin' these guys aren't like Fleetwood Mac, they're not thinking the same way."

"We also had a lot of success in England with that first album. That was when Johnny Rotten and all these guys were gettin'

popular, and I think we had a little bit of a sneak preview on that. It was a really funny stigma: I had on a leather jacket on the cover (of "Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers"), and I remember them wantin' to change it! I was sayin', 'No, man.'" Some of their first album cuts wound up on international punk compilations.

But the Heartbreakers' solid cult status changed when Petty contacted Jimmy Iovine to produce the band's third album.

"At the time," Petty says, "Iovine had only done the Patti Smith record ('Easter') as producer. That's the reason I gave him the job — because I'd heard 'Because the Night' with those great tom-toms. The songs were pretty well written when Jimmy showed up. That album was a whole rediscovery of the studio for me, because we'd had our own way of doing it, which was pretty amateur."

"Then (engineer) Shelly Yakus came in from New York, and these guys were really serious about this stuff. They'd be gettin' a drum sound for a week. And I'd be pullin' my hair out, goin', 'What is going on? We've never spent more than an hour with the drums, I don't understand.'"

"So it was a real educational experience, and probably one of our better albums, really. It took a long time to make, and then it got confused with all the lawsuits that came along at that time (a protracted contract dispute that resulted in Petty moving from Shelter Records to its distributing label, MCA). But, yeah, it's still the album that's held up to me the most. Like, well, is it 'Damn the Torpedoes' or not? When I remember that time, I remember mass chaos, always."

But out of chaos came order — or, more precisely, orders — as MCA began selling serious tonnage on "Torpedoes." With Iovine's production emphasizing Lynch's tom-toms and Tench's Hammond, the album came close to defining the AOR sound of the time. With the '90s came superstardom for Petty. But as his stock rose in terms of popularity, it took a nosedive with his musician peers. He was genuinely bewildered.

"I think the hardest thing was once you've sold a million records, you're a honky. Overnight. Once we got big in a commercial sense, I could sense this resentment, this feeling of like, 'You sold us out, you left the club. When all we did was make another record, really.'"

Another group of early supporters who turned inversely colder as the band got hotter was the critical community. This was inevitable, of course, but it hurt Petty nonetheless.

When he undertook the "Southern Accents" marathon project, critical reinstatement was surely one of his motives, consciously or otherwise. And when the record finally came out, he prepared himself for the worst. But the reviews were largely positive, the primary reservation generally being that Petty had set out to make a concept album about the South, then backed off, throwing in three non-thematic tracks he had co-written and co-produced with Eurhythms leader Dave Stewart.

"I actually anticipated a little bit of criticism. The only position I can take is, look, I wasn't tryin' to answer the Big Questions, I was just tryin' to glaze over it and hit some of the feel from it. But I didn't try to take sides on any issue or anything — I just wanted to present it. It was just a theme to work from, so that I didn't get caught up in love songs and stuff."

"I think that's what attracted me in the first place. I thought, 'Oh, wow, there's a lot to write about here.' It's something that I'm real familiar with and that I've never written about, not very much. It's really just a record album, but it's an album that really asks something of you. You've got to hear it quite a bit to understand it."