

Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers' new album is a rocker

By BILL DeYOUNG
Sun music writer

Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers have come full circle. They began, more than a decade ago, as a ragtag quintet of friends from North Florida playing uncluttered rock 'n' roll, and eventually came to experiment with diverse and wide-ranging sounds and ideas. With "Let Me Up ('I've Had Enough)," their seventh studio album (to be released Monday by MCA Records), Tom Petty and his group — a little less ragtag, and a little more worldly-wise — have come back to the future. It took them 12 years, but they've finally made a great uncluttered rock 'n' roll record.

Gainesville natives Benmont Tench and Stan Lynch, keyboards and drums, respectively, both agree that the last two years — much of the time spent touring with Bob Dylan — were positive for the band. Today they feel as sprightly as they did in their salad days. Over a four-week period last spring, sandwiched in between tours of the Far East and the United States with Dylan, the five musicians recorded more than 30 songs. Many of them, they only played two or three times, and were recorded to capture the spontaneity.

"Most of this record is like that," Tench says. "'The Damage You've Done,' 'Think About Me,' 'A Self-Made Man,' 'Let Me Up,' most of this record is from that month of doing live tracking. The second side is mainly that stuff, and the first side is mainly stuff that was worked on more."

Petty and guitarist Mike Campbell produced the 11-track album, and there are no musicians other than the five Heartbreakers present. Overdubbing, even by the band, was kept to a minimum. Bass player Howie Epstein laid on harmony vocals to a few of the completed songs.

Most of the numbers are straightforward rock-type songs (in 1987, "Petty-esque" is probably a good enough way to describe the band's brand of guitar-based rock) with an ensemble sound, rather than lead guitar or keyboard, prevalent. There are very few solos.

The exceptions: "It'll All Work Out" is a ballad in waltz time, with an Oriental sheen. Campbell is featured on the koto, a Japanese stringed instrument.

The score to the melancholy "Runaway Trains" is reminiscent of the synthesizer band Tangerine Dream, hypnotic and dreamlike. It's also one of Petty's most strikingly poetic lyrics (Campbell wrote the music, and Petty the basic melody. Lynch remembers that the song existed for several years without lyrics).

With its moody synthesizer and sparkling electric guitar fire, "Runaway Trains" recalls "The Boys of Summer," the song Campbell co-wrote a few years ago with Don Henley. It was a big hit for the former Eagle.

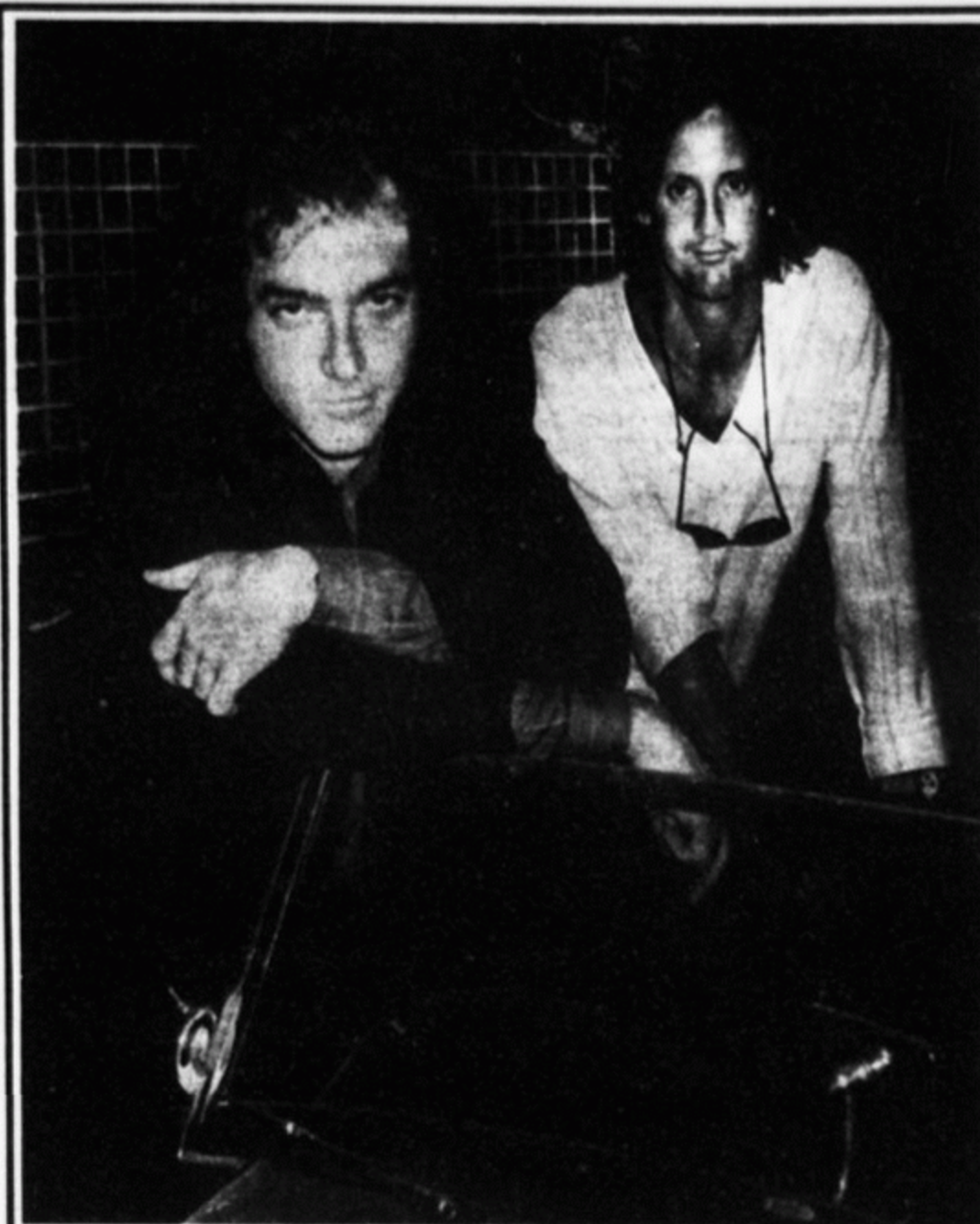
"Everything he writes now sounds a little bit like 'Boys of Summer,'" Lynch says with a snicker. Tench gives him a questioning look, then they both laugh. "Ah, print it, I don't care," Lynch says, on a roll. "Hey, why not? 'The Boys of Summer' been berry, berry good to Mike Campbell. Once a hit, always a hit."

Tench interrupts his stream of humorous observation. "'My Life/Your World' is Mike's, too, and it doesn't sound like 'The Boys of Summer.'"

"It does if you play it backwards," Lynch says.

With "My Life/Your World," Petty sings wry social commentary over a dance-club beat. The song sounds like the heir to "It Ain't Nothing to Me," from 1985's "Southern Accents" album. "I think it's a better song than 'It Ain't Nothing to Me,'" Tench says. "It's the Heartbreakers play 'Billie Jean.'"

Otherwise, "Let Me Up ('I've Had Enough)" rocks. It's not overtly literate (a good sign if one is on the lookout for genuine rock 'n' roll), but it's not without its uplifting emotional moments. For every song like the title track, an all-out screamer (literally), there's another



Sun photo by Bill DeYoung

Benmont Tench, left, was in Gainesville's legendary band Mudcrutch, with Tom Petty and Mike Campbell; Stan Lynch was the drummer for the power trio Road Turkey. They've been Heartbreakers since 1975.



like "Ain't Love Strange," that puts focused lyrics ("It can make you string barbed wire/Around your little piece of ground/For emotional protection/Oh, but it's too late now") next to an exhilarating, seemingly spontaneous arrangement.

"'Ain't Love Strange' must have meant something to Tom," Lynch theorizes. "I'm guessing, but I've seen that kind of reaction out of him, when we were doing that song 'Insider' a few years ago. Good, bad or indifferent, he made psychic communion with that song. He had made an attachment to 'Insider.' He loved it."

"And I think 'Ain't Love Strange' had that same biological reaction. There's a couple of things Tom is always unwavering on, and that was one of those songs that it didn't matter if we got a good or a bad version or not, it was going on the record."

Both Lynch and Tench say this is the first album that all the band members have been completely satisfied with before it's released. They think it's an honest record, true to Petty and Campbell's vision of an all-band effort, circa 1987. "It doesn't feel overly autobiographi-

cal to me," Lynch says. "This isn't Tom's 'Nebraska.' It's not 'Okahumpka.'"

"It's not 'Alachua,'" offers Tench.

"No," Lynch adds. "He said to me, 'It's a good rock 'n' roll record. We did our best.'"

Campbell co-wrote half of the LP's songs with Petty. Bob Dylan contributed some of the lyrics to "Jammin' Me," the album's first single, which decries the media's "information overload," according to Tench.

"I don't have any idea which parts of it Bob wrote," he adds, "but I think you can take a wild guess... 'Take back Pasadena....' The blatantly cynical and sarcastic stuff is probably Bob's."

Typical of a Heartbreakers album, there's 20-second snatch of gibberish between two songs on the second side. It's the band engaged in a brief tribal chant, complete with hand claps, ending in laughter and a quick joke. Listen closely, Lynch laughs, and it says "Satan Eats Cheeze Wiz."

"I like that stuff," Tench comments. "I think it's funny. There isn't anybody who's any good who's funny any more. Bruce is great; he's not

funny. U2's a good band; they aren't funny. The hell with 'em."

(The LP's cover, a favorite among the band members, is a composite face — screaming — made up of pieces of each of their own mugs. On the inner sleeve is a Los Angeles Herald-Examiner news photo, showing a small plane that actually went nose-down into a woman's backyard swimming pool, near the studio where the Heartbreakers were recording. Petty wrote a verse in "My Life/Your World" about it. They all think that's a great picture, too.)

Following last summer's American tour with Dylan, while Petty and Campbell were cooking up additional songs for "Let Me Up," Tench went to England for a month-long tour with Elvis Costello. He played piano in Costello's Confederates. The high point, for him, was a concert at the Royal Albert Hall in London, where Van Morrison sang a few numbers with them. A fanatic for popular music, Tench had long admired the reclusive singer.

Recently, Tench has been recording with the band X, Rosanne Cash and Ferghal Sharkey. The latter two have recorded new Tench compositions.

The Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers tour, in support of "Let Me Up," begins in late May in Arizona. Rehearsals start in two weeks.

"There's no band," Lynch says, "it's a figment of everyone's imagination unless they're together. We don't all live in the same house — it's not like we're young kids, we've all got lives, we've all got creative projects, so it (a tour) re-confirms to us that indeed, there really is a band. That's what a band does — they play live. So the question of 'Are we gonna tour?' is really 'Are we pro-band this year?'" They've decided that they are.

After seven weeks of touring (with no stops scheduled for Florida), the Heartbreakers will take a month off and then connect once again with Dylan, with whom they'll tour Canada, the southern United States, and Europe. They'll also play Israel, Egypt and several other countries in eastern Europe. Dates in the Soviet Union are still being mulled over. There's prestige in playing there, Lynch and Tench admit, but no money. And that's something to be considered.

"Nobody knows any specifics, because it changes daily," Lynch says. "Egypt and Israel are going to pay for the whole thing, so they're critical in working the tour around. The Israeli dates will pay to bring a 747 full of equipment to that continent."

"Those dates are going to coordinate with the start of the Jewish New Year, so they're critical...the other stuff is being discussed. It changes all the time." A southern American swing will reportedly bring Dylan and the Heartbreakers to two, or three, Florida cities.

A Dylan/Petty show is never the same on any two nights. Lynch says that while any one member of the Heartbreakers can be the "backbone" of a song in concert, driving it from start to finish, with Dylan "he's the backbone, the frontbone, and the whole skeleton. All we can do is embellish. He throws in all the curves."

Tench says it's a unique experience. They just hold on tight and ride wherever it goes. "Bob will reel it in and it'll be under control. It'll go in whatever direction he feels like taking it in. That's what you're doing, the guy's up there singing what he feels like singing that night, that minute, and you follow it. And this band's been together long enough that we're good at that."

That attitude of Dylan's made them remember the joy of spontaneous combustion, and its practical application to rock 'n' roll, and they were full of that joy when they went into the studio for "Let Me Up" during a lull in their tenure as his touring partners.

"Any record, whether it's good or bad, turns out to be a document of the time when it was recorded," Tench says, "of 'Here's what it was then.'"