

# Tom Petty shakes doldrums, rocks on

By Robert Hilburn

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**T**OM PETTY had no trouble describing his current mood. "Eager," "excited" and "renewed" were among the words he used.

Petty was equally enthusiastic about his new album, "Let Me Up (I've Had Enough)," and a long American tour that began May 26 in Tucson, Ariz., and is continuing despite a fire nine days earlier that caused an estimated \$800,000 damage to his Los Angeles mansion.

That tour, called the "Rock 'n' Roll Caravan '87" and also featuring the Georgia Satellites and the Del Fuegos, stops at the Civic Arena for a 7:30 p.m. concert tomorrow.

It begins a busy week of concerts here. At 8 p.m. Wednesday, the Beach Boys perform at the arena in the first of the Civic Arena Corp.'s five-show Skyline Series; there is no opening act. Thursday night, three hard-rocking bands that enjoyed their greatest success in the '70s — Foghat, Molly Hatchet and the Outlaws — take the Syria Mosque stage beginning at 7:30. Tickets are available for all three concerts.

Petty said he and the Heartbreakers are looking ahead to more dates with Bob Dylan, whose 1986 shows with the quintet were among the year's highlights in rock.

But it was not as easy for the singer-songwriter to find the right word to summarize his mental condition during the time he was making "Southern Accents," a 1985 work he now describes as eccentric. He had discarded the words "disoriented," "bored" and "disillusioned" before settling on "cloudy."

"Yeah, 'cloudy' sums it up pretty well. A lot of things were happening at once, and they all seemed to collide."

Part of Petty's problem was musical, and he spoke about that frankly and at length, but he appeared uneasy touching on some personal problems from that time. He is tired, he said, of rock stars who talk about their problems in public, and he did not want to contribute yet another confession about the perils of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

"Let's just say I was living a strange lifestyle: up at night, sleeping in the day. I had built a studio at home, which completely changed everything. It was like running the best bar in LA, people always around."

"It started out innocently enough, but it got to be something that I never thought would happen to me. You could just look at us in those days to see we were confused . . . those little (psychedelic) glasses I started wearing."

"But that's been over for a long time now," he said, shifting attention back away from his personal life. "Besides, it's not the lifestyle that's important but the music."

The 34-year-old Florida native who has lived in Los Angeles for the past decade said he started questioning the band's direction around the time of 1983's "Long After Dark" LP. He and the group had established a winning formula in "Damn the Torpedoes," their 1979 best-seller, and were beginning to stick to it.

Referring to "Long After Dark," he said, "I didn't even want to make that album. I liked a lot of the songs, but we seemed to be going for the same sound. I was worried that we were beginning to pander to the audience for the first time. I can see now that some of the passion was gone, and I don't think we really got it back until we went on the road with Bob (Dylan)."

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After the "Long After Dark" tour, Petty wanted to take a break from the non-stop cycle of recording and touring and the other Heartbreakers got involved in outside projects, leading to rumors the group had broken up. But that never was even discussed, Petty said. "It was just time for us all to pull back from the table a while."

He built his basement recording studio and began experimenting with new sounds and directions. Some of the songs, including "Southern Accents," turned out to be among the most personal and affecting he had written, but he ended up spending so much time in the studio he lost perspective. He felt burned out.

During this time, Petty met Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics. Stimulated by Stewart's songwriting and recording techniques, Petty asked him to produce some tracks for "Southern Accents." Stewart then combined those lighter tracks with earlier recordings that were tied to the concept of Petty's Southern roots.

"Dave records like taking Polaroids, and that was good for me. I needed to start feeling some results. He has turned out to be a very good friend and a neighbor."

"But I think it would have been smarter to stick to the 'Southern Accents' stuff," Petty added, referring to the parts of the LP that dealt with his roots, "or done an album with Dave, but not mix them. I can see why people thought it was a very quirky or eccentric album."

Petty enjoyed the "Southern Accents" tour, but he and the Heartbreakers still were not ready to begin a new album when they came off the road. The cloudiness, he suggested, still lingered. Rather than go into the studio, they bought some time by putting out a live album.

Some of the Heartbreakers had played in the studio with Dylan, and he asked the whole group to join him on-stage at last year's Farm Aid concert in Illinois. The Heartbreakers already were scheduled to perform there and invited Dylan to one of their rehearsals.

"We played for maybe four hours, every kind of song," Petty said. "It was a great time. So we had some more rehearsals, and they, too, were fantastic. We all felt comfortable immediately. One thing Bob taught us was not to dwell on one song in rehearsal."

"There were nights when I bet we played 50 or 60 songs, which keeps you fresh. I used to go away from rehearsals feeling drained because we would go through a song over and over again, but I went away from those re-

hearsals feeling invigorated. It was fun again.

"The funny thing is everybody always talks about what a great songwriter Bob is, so the thing that struck me was how very good a musician he is, too. He hears things right."

That spirit continued when Petty and the Heartbreakers joined Dylan for last year's acclaimed tour.

"By the time we got out on the tour with him in Australia, I just felt really free for some reason. Everything was clear again. I was so busy focusing on playing well that I forgot about all my problems. I was enjoying music again. I realized that I was worrying too much about pleasing other people or being accepted. I realized that the important thing is to feel good yourself about what you do, and usually if you like it, other people will, too."

The 11-year-old band had some time off before the American leg of the tour, and everyone was feeling so good they went into the studio. They had only about three songs written, but they ended up cutting more than two dozen tracks over the next four to five weeks.

"It was effortless. We came up with a song a day. I thought it must be trash since it came so easily, but as we went on we realized we were making a great album ("Let Me Up")."

"The rules of the session were when the first guy gets there you roll tape until the last guy's gone, so some of these songs were being written as the tape was running. That's why I had to fade so many songs up and out, because there weren't real beginnings and endings. It was all live tracking."

Petty's renewed enthusiasm also is reflected in the Georgia Satellites and the Del Fuegos, both of which are supporting the Heartbreakers on the first leg of this tour. They're up-and-coming groups that have been identified with the recent renaissance in basic, roots-conscious American rock.

But Petty doesn't "see it as an American thing. These are just bands that base what they do around songs, guitar and drums for the most part as opposed to a lot of groups these days that are either instrumental virtuosos or stress the fact that they are oddballs or have weird hair. I guess you just call it non-gimmick rock, which is what we've always tried to do."

(The Pittsburgh Press's Pete Bishop and UPI's John Swenson contributed to this story.)



Tom Petty is "enjoying music again"