

Petty Newly Confident At Rain-Soaked SPAC

By MIKE HOCHANADEL
SARATOGA SPRINGS — It always rains when Tom Petty plays the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. But it never seems to matter.

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Friday night the drenched lawn crowd waved their umbrellas in laughter as Petty frowned up at the downpour. "The farmer's friend, that's me," he quipped — in one of the few jokes that spiced the mostly serious stage patter of the newly philosophical Petty.

His previous rainy night SPAC visits generally followed the release of yet another energetic, guitar-powered album, roots-conscious records that built his reputation as a classic rocker.

Just when things had settled into a formula, Bob Dylan invited Petty and his Heartbreakers on an international tour; they played SPAC last June — in the rain, of course. The rejuvenated Petty confidently crafted "Let Me Up (I've Had Enough)" (MCA), then hand-picked the Del Fuegos (guitar-groove fundamentalists from Boston) and the Georgia Satellites (barband raunch-masters from Atlanta) aboard his "Rock 'n' Roll Caravan."

If Friday's four-hour SPAC marathon is typical, Petty's caravan is one of the hottest tours on the road this summer.

A tape of Strauss' "Zarathustra" gave the caravan a grandiose opening hilariously out of step with the unpretentious rock fundamentalism to follow, as the Del Fuegos played half an hour and the

Georgia Satellites had 40 minutes in quick-change segments.

On record — "Stand Up" (Sire) is the latest — the Del Fuegos play like New England Heartbreakers. Onstage on Friday night, the resemblance was even stronger, as their guitar grooves and three-part vocals had a southern accent whose authenticity sounded earned, more than borrowed — especially with their added sax man growling roadhouse blues between the guitar riffs.

The Satellites strolled onstage casually, then exploded "Wash My Hands in Muddy Water." They quickly proved themselves a much more powerful — and fun — band than the capable but rather dry Del Fuegos. They burned like a house-party afire, launching into a deliciously raunchy orbit through the songs from their self-named debut album (Elektra), tossing off a Chuck Berry cover and their own new "That Boy Ain't Nothin' If He Ain't Seriously Gone."

Despite frontman Dan Baird's good-ol'-boy funniness around, and the band's often-jokey lyrics, their commitment to rocking on the Chuck Berry bar-chord was absolutely sincere: they were as fierce as they were funny.

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On his last SPAC visit as a headliner, Petty added horns and singers to his Heartbreakers, but in the caravan's spirit of guitar-rock fundamentalism, he led a stripped-down four-piece group Friday night. The crowd stood together as the band opened with "Breakdown" and no one sat until Petty suggested they

relax during a ballad — much later in the set.

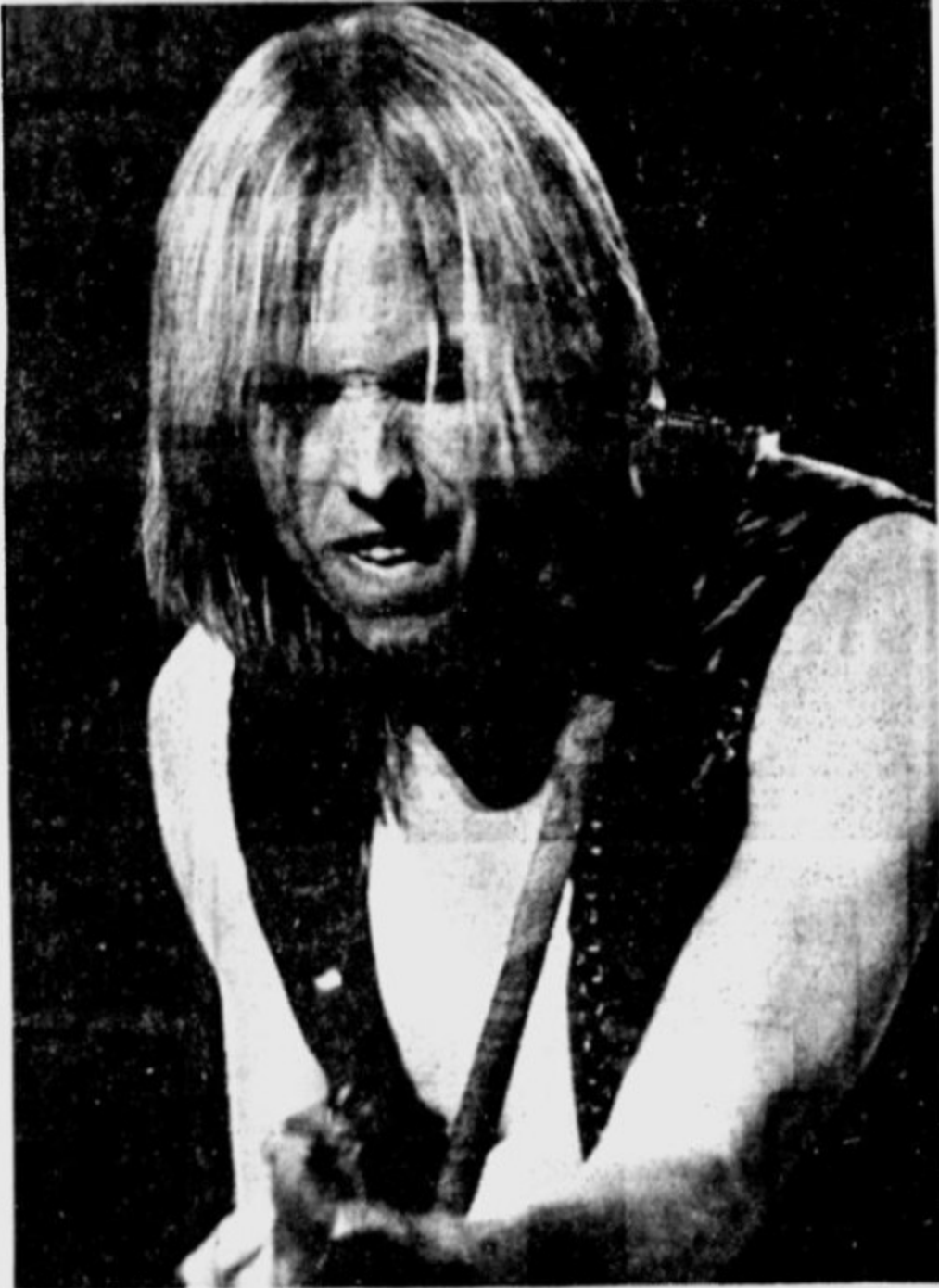
Petty mixed the "Let Me Up" songs "Think About Me," "My Life/Your World" and "Runaway Trains" with older concert staples "American Girl," "Here Comes My Girl," "Listen to Her Heart" and "The Waiting" throughout his 110-minute set. And he threw in some truly surprising covers: Buffalo Springfield's topical "For What It's Worth," Dylan's majestic "Roll, River Roll" — even the Clash bouncy punk-dance number "Train in Vain."

Even more surprising, the formerly reticent Petty spoke with plain, homespun earnestness of his concern for the homeless, failed farmers, the unemployed and the hungry. In angrier, amused tones, he attacked televangelists Jerry Falwell and Oral Roberts — who that day had claimed he could raise the dead. "We could use some of that in El Salvador," Petty observed. Though his attacks were obvious and aimed at easy targets, Petty came across as sincere and real.

Then he revved up the band again with "The Waiting" and the Heartbreakers responded with all of Petty's confidence and command. Early in the tune, Petty hushed his voice to a whisper and the crowd quieted to hear him. Then he drew the band into a four-alarm riff riot that lifted the show and the audience up to another level they held through to the end.

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Overall, the concert — like Petty's albums — was composed of individual singles.



—(Gazette Photo — Garry Brown)

ROCKIN' IN THE RAIN — Tom Petty grimaces as he plays guitar during Friday night's performance at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. Petty and his Heartbreakers played a lengthy set during a show that saw heavy rains douse the crowd on the lawn. The Del Fuegos and the Georgia Satellites were also on the "Rock 'n' Roll Caravan" bill.