



Tom Petty

Ledger photo

Tom Petty's 'year off' resulted in three records

By Steve Morse
Boston Globe

Tom Petty had planned to take the last year off. "I was going to find a new place to live, then relax a little. But I wound up starting a solo record, then Roy Orbison's record and the Traveling Wilburys album," he said recently from Los Angeles. "But it all happened very naturally."

Petty's sabbatical was set to occur when the "endless touring" with his band, the Heartbreakers — who had alternately toured with Bob Dylan and headlined their own shows for more than a year — finally halted in London in September 1987. But then came several incidents that changed those best-laid plans.

First came the four nights that former Beatle George Harrison and producer Jeff Lynne — two future cohorts in the Traveling Wilburys — visited backstage after Petty's week-long London dates. "Each time they came, we wound up sitting and talking into the night. We got along really well, instantly. It was one of those things where you meet someone and you feel you've known them forever," Petty adds.

Petty returned home to Los Angeles, but on Thanksgiving Day had a chance meeting with Lynne at a traffic light in town. They wound up spending the Christmas holidays together, singing and writing songs. That led to the start of Petty's first solo album, "Full Moon Fever" (MCA), a lean, guitar-cranked album that is produced by Lynne.

It also led to the Traveling Wilburys' "Traveling Wilburys" (Warners), in which friends Petty, Lynne, Dylan, Harrison and Roy Orbison convened to write breezy jam-session tunes at the LA house of another musician/friend, Dave Stewart of Eurythmics, who has a home studio where the music was recorded.

The Wilburys' album has since sold 2 million copies. Its huge success has surprised Petty, a Gainesville, Fla., native who has made five albums and had six Top Ten singles in his 13-year career.

"I'm just glad to see people embrace a record like that, because it's a very human record and we play our own instruments," he says. "I'm glad to see music like that back on top of the charts."

Petty is doubly thrilled since the music was so spontaneous.

"The Wilburys were really a good excuse to hang around together," he says casually. "If you're going to sit around and drink, you might as well make a record."

"We wrote all of the songs and laid down the tracks in just nine days. All five of us would show up in the morning and sit down and face each other and write songs until sundown. Then we'd go up and put the tracks down, have dinner, then put the vocals on at the end of the night. We kept that pattern going for nine days, then took a week off and went to England for a month and did overdubs and that kind of stuff."

One might suspect ego problems in getting five such stars together, but they were minimal, says Petty.

"It was a big job and wasn't easy all of the time, but nobody ever got cranky about it," he notes. "If something didn't sound good, then we'd have someone else sing that part. Or we'd change voices to fit a certain key. Or we'd say, 'Roy, could you take over here?' We knew each other well by that point, so no one's feelings got hurt."

Working with Orbison, who died of a heart attack last December, was a special joy. "Out of all of us in the Traveling Wilburys, we were in awe of Roy the most," says Petty. "He was the sweetest, nicest guy in the world. Any time he sang we'd sit in the control room and go wild. We'd say, 'Roy, you're probably the best singer in

WHO: Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

WHEN: July 8, Orlando Arena; July 9, Bayfront Center Arena, St. Petersburg

TICKETS: \$18.50 at TicketMaster

the world.' And he'd laugh, 'Yeah, probably.'

"We really saw him come a long way. When we started, he was a little tentative. But when we finished, he was in charge."

"But I really miss his laugh most of all. If he started laughing, he'd get everybody laughing. I remember all the Wilburys were in a car once when Roy started laughing and got everybody doing it. We went a good mile laughing at the top of our lungs."

Petty also sings on Orbison's hit, "You Got It," which is on Orbison's solo album. "It seems like yesterday we did that song. Now it's a hit and Roy's gone," Petty says.

Returning to the Wilburys, Petty adds that a followup album is unlikely. "Everything we wrote as Wilburys is on that record. There wasn't one lick that didn't get on it. And we're really not sitting around wondering about a sequel. We're very lucky to have done it once. It's not the best time to think about doing it again. We're not going to run back in and capitalize on it. Maybe in the future we'll do something like it, but maybe not."

At the moment, Petty is excited about his own album, "Full Moon Fever," which he finished after the Wilburys' project. It echoes the Wilburys' LP in that Jeff Lynne and George Harrison appear on it. (Harrison sings backup on the new single, "I Won't Back Down.") Its carefree Wilburys-like music (there are no message-laden lyrics on the album) is balanced by the hard-edged rock that is Petty's trademark. There's even a faithful, belted-out cover of the Byrds' "Feels A Whole Lot Better."

Some members of his band, the Heartbreakers, play on the LP, notably lead guitarist Mike Campbell, but most songs feature the turned-up acoustic guitars of Petty and Lynne.

"All the songs were written on 12-string or 6-string acoustic guitars," he explains. "I wanted to experiment with the art of rhythm guitar. Jeff and I feel that acoustic guitars can be rock 'n' roll instruments, not just folk instruments. You can really rock the joint with acoustics — and that's what I plan to do on tour."

Petty is mapping a summer tour with the Heartbreakers, whom he admits "weren't overjoyed when I decided to do a solo record, but they know they're the only band I want to play with on stage." And acoustic music will be part of the program, for Petty plans some solo acoustic tunes and acoustic numbers with the band.

"The only show we've done since London in September 1987 was a Bridge School benefit in San Francisco," he says, referring to an annual handicapped children's benefit organized by Neil Young's wife, Pegi. "Everyone had to play acoustically there — and we played with dobro and two guitars and acoustic bass and mandolins. We did a whole set that way — and we stumbled onto some pretty interesting ways to perform our old songs."

This next Heartbreakers' tour, however, may be the last for a while.

"I want to do more in the studio. I'm more interested in that. If you spend all year on tour, you can't make a record," he says. "And I'm tired of touring. I've always enjoyed the shows, but everything else starts wearing you down. We'll get out and tour this year, then we're going to take a long time off."