

Singer Tom Petty says old-style elements are worth keeping

By DAVID HINCKLEY
New York Daily News

Yeah, says, Tom Petty, he did shake his head a few times during the Traveling Wilburys sessions, when he was working with Jeff Lynne, George Harrison, Bob Dylan and Roy Orbison.

"You want to be of some use," he says with a laugh. "But it's hard, right after you've heard Roy Orbison sing, to tell him he oughta do another take."

On the other hand, maybe after that it was easy to finish up his own album, "Full Moon Fever," and take it on the road. That tour is his first in two years.

Nor, encouragingly for Petty, does the superb Wilburys album overshadow "Full Moon Fever," which is technically a solo album although there are contributions here and there from most of his band, the Heartbreakers. It climbed into the national top five, which isn't bad for a record Petty started two years ago from a blank slate.

"I didn't even think how it would come out," he says. "We did it one track at a time. The first time I considered where it might be going was after we'd done nine songs, when I took a break to do the Wilburys."

"But it was pretty loose. The song 'All Right for Now' happened because I just thought I'd like to do something in open tuning. We did 'I'll Feel a Whole Lot Better' after I'd seen the Byrds reunion concert. I always loved the song as a kid, and I'd just gotten a new 12-string guitar, so I



Tom Petty

decided to do it."

What's striking about much of "Full Moon Fever" is its loose, often playful quality, which is also a trademark of the Wilburys. Though Petty says one didn't really affect the other, many of the "Full Moon Fever" songs do seem more immediately accessible than some of his past

work.

"There's probably a little bit of the Wilburys there," he says. "George was around, Roy sang on one song. But if some of it sounds similar, that's probably Jeff Lynne, who produced them."

"Besides being a great producer — anyone who makes records will tell you that — Jeff's an optimist where most of the rest of us tend to be inherently cynical. I can be very cynical myself, and there he is all innocent and positive. That takes a lot of the load off my shoulders."

"It also makes the work fun. I don't mean to be glib, but this album and the Wilburys really were fun to do."

Petty even gives Lynne part of the credit for the compactness of the "Full Moon Fever" songs.

"That was about half deliberate," he says. "I wrote a lot of 'em on two acoustic guitars with Jeff. The night before the session, we'd play 'em to each other that way. If Mike (Campbell, Heartbreakers guitarist) was around, we'd all three play 'em. We did the same thing with the Wilburys album. On Roy's album, too."

"One reason that's great is that there isn't a lot of rhythm-guitar around these days. A lot of young guitarists are just into playing fast. But if you listen to a song like 'Satisfaction,' there's an acoustic guitar playing rhythm that's very important. Assuming you can hear it under the fuzztone lead, of course."

"Full Moon Fever" is hardly an exercise in nostalgia, but there are old-style elements — the acoustics, the 12-strings, the focus on songs — that Petty believes are worth keeping.

"I'm tired of computers and dance rhythms," he says. "They're not interesting. To me, you need songs. But if you think we've gotten rid of disco, you're wrong."

He has long offered an alternative to disco, though it's a battle he has fought from the side of the field. For all his platinum albums and sellout shows, there have been few radio hits

"Top-40 has never been the way we get by," he says with a figurative shrug. "Sometimes something hits and you feel great, but in general, radio is pretty irrelevant to us."

In a way, he says, the state of radio bothers him more as a listener than an artist. "I just wish there were some rock 'n' roll on the air. There are so many good things that get no exposure."

For right now, though, the 35-year-old Petty says his main ambition is to get it going again with the Heartbreakers, which is what this tour is about.

"It's great to do other things, but you play with a group for 12-13 years, and you miss 'em. First thing we were gonna do was get together and write some songs."

He laughs. "You know, have a bonding experience."

Beyond this, he's thinking about the next record, which could include a song he left off "Full Moon Fever," on which the Bangles sing. What he

doesn't have is any definite Wilburys news. Orbison's death was a blow ("although in a way, I feel he's still with us") and the rest probably depends on the same serendipity that brought them together in the first place.

"It was complete happenstance," he says. "We didn't seek it out, and it just overwhelms me, when I look back, that it happened at all. But I don't think of it the way other people do, either. By the end, these guys I had been looking at all my life as a fan were just a bunch of good friends."

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