

PURE PETTY

The new Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers album isn't 'Full Moon Fever,' but it doesn't disappoint

INTO THE GREAT WIDE OPEN

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers (MCA)

BY TOM SINCLAIR

New York Times

Tom Petty seems the type of songwriter who could roll over in his sleep, grab a guitar and compose an instant classic.

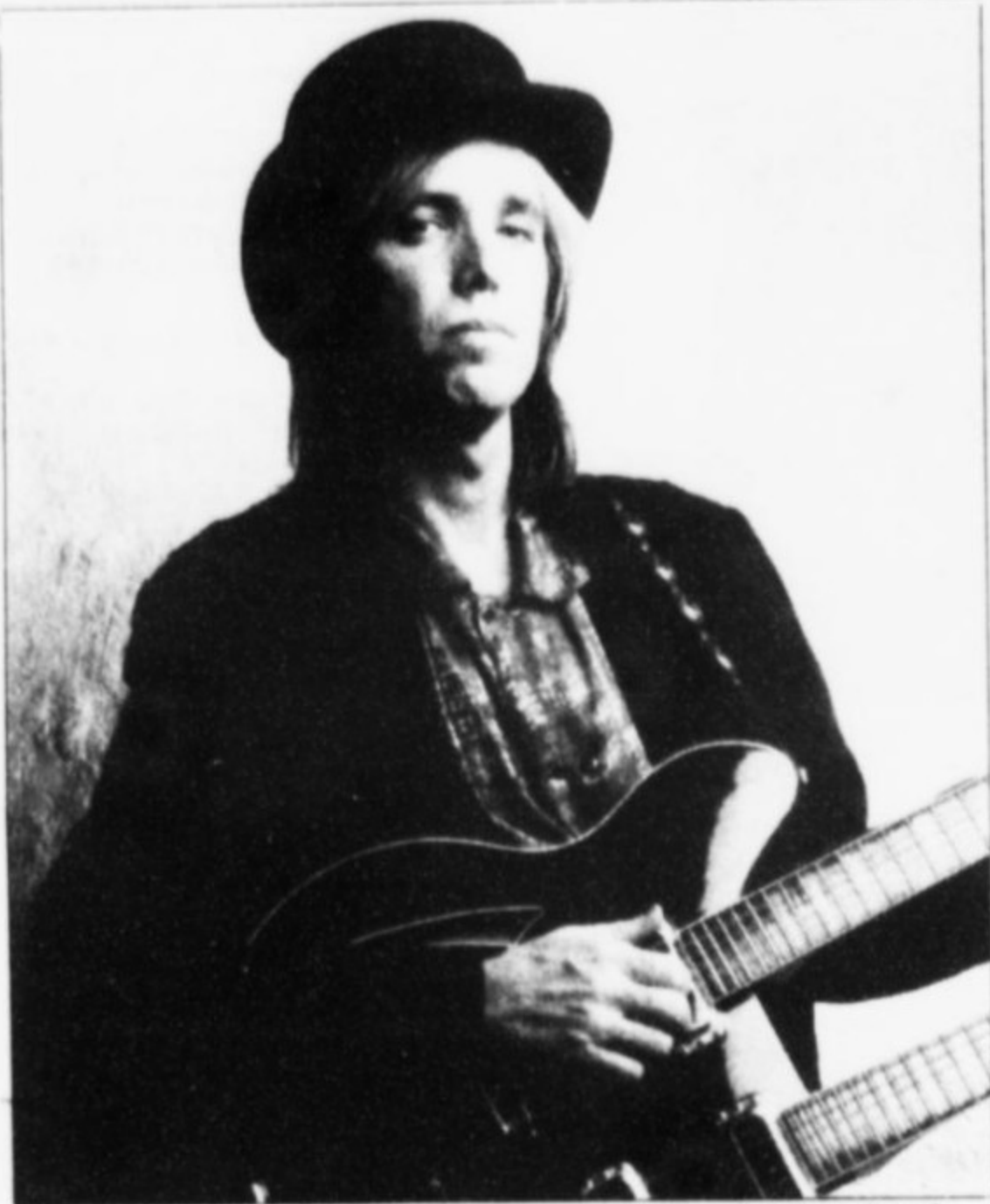
Skeptics might carp that early Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers songs like "I Need to Know," "Listen to Her Heart" and "Refugee" bordered on pastiche. But few would dispute the fact that Petty has a knack for crafting simple, memorable singles, steeped in the spirit of mid-60s rock.

While Petty has never had trouble scoring hits, he wasn't able to fill an entire album with exceptional songs until his 1989 solo effort, "Full Moon Fever."

The record's success was due in part to the assistance of producer-arranger Jeff Lynne — who along with Bob Dylan, George Harrison, the late Roy Orbison and Petty recorded one of the most popular albums of 1988, "The Traveling Wilburys, Vol. 1."

"Into the Great Wide Open" (MCA 10317; all three formats) is Petty's first album with the Heartbreakers, his longtime group, in four years; if less satisfying than "Full Moon Fever," it's still unlikely to disappoint fans. (Lynne is again on hand as co-producer and co-writer.)

Many of the songs are built on the Heartbreakers' trademark



BREAKING HEARTS AGAIN: "Into the Great Wide Open" is Tom Petty's first album in four years with the Heartbreakers.

foundation of acoustic and electric guitar, and all feature Petty's characteristically clear, laid-back singing and uncluttered playing. In contrast to the band's work in the mid-70s and early 80s — largely

romantic pop platitudes — several new songs examine life's inequities and the hard decisions people are forced to make.

"Into the Great Wide Open" works best, however, on those songs

that recycle familiar ideas. In the past, Petty has often paid homage to the musical style of Roger McGuinn, who popularized the distinctive sound of 12-string electric guitars with the Byrds, the premier '60s folk-rock group.

With the plaintive "You and I Will Meet Again," he has written another Byrds sound-alike, although it's doubtful the Byrds would have ended the song with an organ-driven rave-up, as the Heartbreakers do here. With its stark lyrics and sparkling harmonies, it is the album's most moving number.

"Learning to Fly" is a wistful ballad nudged along by strummed acoustic guitars. But Petty's been here before; the chorus echoes that of the group's 1981 hit, "The Waiting": "I'm learning to fly/But I ain't got wings/Coming down/Is the hardest thing."

And "All the Wrong Reasons," is strikingly similar to "Free Falling," from "Full Moon Fever."

When he cuts loose on a flat-out rock-and-roll number, Petty sheds his Ricky Nelson-like affability. It's a relief to hear the Heartbreakers rip into "Out in the Cold" and the rockabilly-tinged "Makin' Some Noise."

"Into the Great Wide Open" is a generally pleasant effort, but it feels like just another new product from one of rock's best-loved bands. On some level, Petty seems aware of this.

The title track relates the tale of a pair of musicians who wind up with a hit record. Petty dryly traces their rapid ascent and the attendant burdens of success: "They both met movie stars, partied and mingled/ Their A&R man said, 'I don't hear a single,'" he sings before concluding: "The future was wide open."

For this group, the future still seems wide open, but it's unlikely that "Into the Great Wide Open" will be regarded as more than a mildly diverting addition to the Petty portfolio. ●