

## In Review/Music

# Tom Petty shows he has limitations

By Greg Kot  
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**TOM PETTY**  
"Into the Great Wide Open"  
MCA

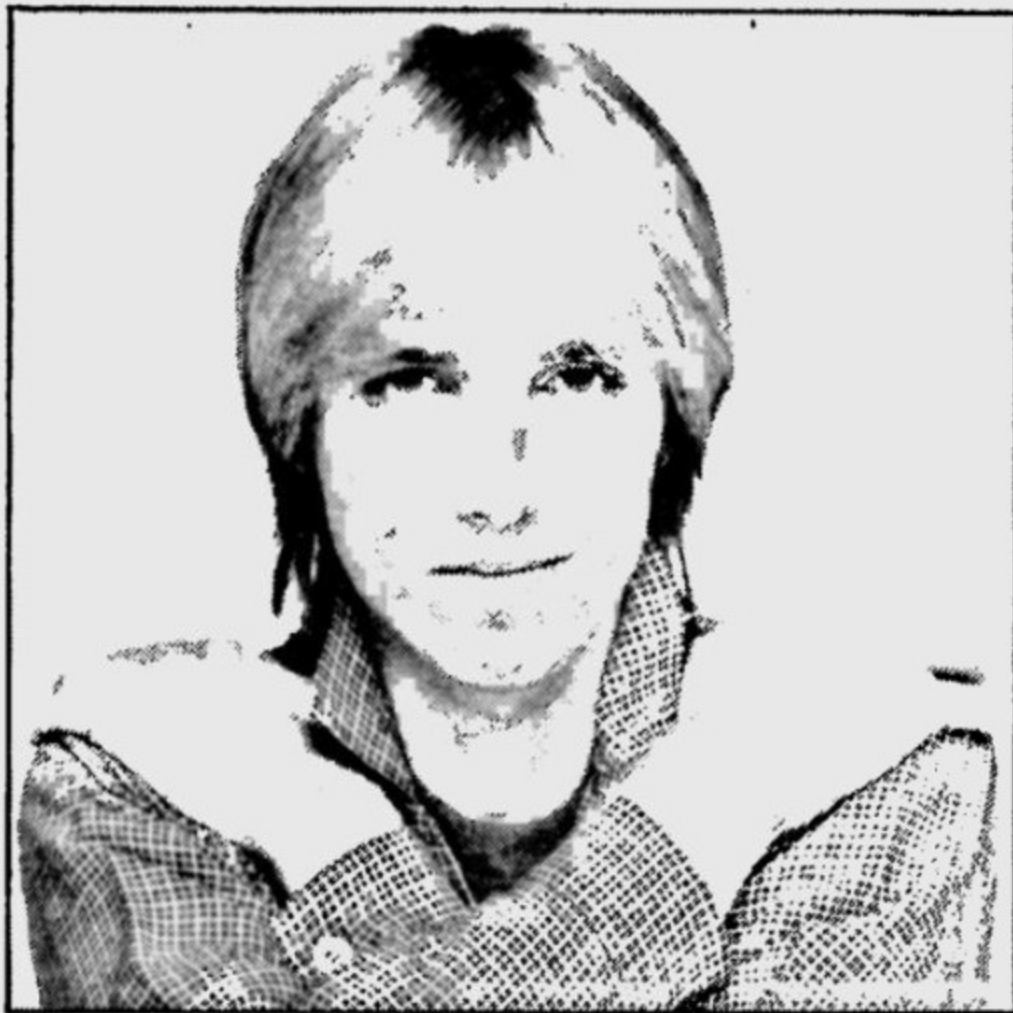
Tom Petty sells a lot of records, gets his songs played on the radio, stands up for all the noblest of left-wing causes (No Nukes, Greenpeace, etc.), enjoys a solid critical reputation, and yet ...

The greatness that seems within his grasp continues to elude him.

His latest album, "Into the Great Wide Open," will do little to alter that perception. Nor will it disappoint his millions of fans. It's meat and potatoes rock, a record that, like most of Petty's 10 albums, is proudly, unapologetically, aimed at the mainstream listener.

Like Bruce Springsteen, Bob Seger and John Mellencamp, he works within the bounds of the familiar, at times more imaginatively than many of his contemporaries.

Petty's lyrical flights of fancy would be anathema to a literalist such as Mellencamp. His growth as a wordsmith was



Tom Petty eludes greatness.

especially apparent on "Full Moon Fever," his 1989 multimillion-selling collaboration with Jeff Lynne and his first album without his longtime band, the Heartbreakers.

The fiendish, almost misanthropic lyrical curves and punch lines in "Free Fallin'" and "Yer So Bad" gave those songs — two of the best of Petty's career — added resonance.

Lynne is once again the producer on "Into the Great Wide Open," and the Heartbreakers are back on board. That gives the album a comfortable feel — perhaps too comfortable.

The clichéd song titles and ideas — "All or Nothing," "Too Good to Be True," "Built to Last," "Out in the Cold" — are abundant, and that's unforgivable for a rocker of Petty's caliber and experience.

The songs themselves are laced with well-worn lines: "What goes up must come down," "A rebel without a clue" (a direct swipe from the Replacements), "The sky was the limit," and on and on.

Fortunately, Petty's simplicity isn't always simplistic. For the listener who wants to dig deeper, he has begun to write in a more open-ended style, in which mystery and ambivalence supersede big payoffs and tidy conclusions.

For example, two songs on the new album — the Dylanish narrative "Two Gunslingers" and the bitter "All the Wrong Reasons" — describe scenarios that reverberate with wider meaning: Why do the gunsling-

ers call off their showdown and why aren't they heard from again after riding from town? What kind of "act of treason" put a family out of its home in "All the Wrong Reasons"?

Then there's the woman in "Too Good to Be True," who finds herself "sitting in the traffic alone" chasing some unseen rainbow: "Everything she'd dared to dream/Suddenly was outside her door."

By offering only hints about what that dream could be, what this woman's life could be like, Petty fully engages the listener's imagination.

Of course, lyrics wouldn't mean a thing if the songs didn't have that zing, and Petty's Heartbreakers are among the better bar bands to graduate to arenas in recent decades.

When the band charges ahead, as on "Out in the Cold" and the throwaway "Makin' Some Noise," it sounds like a recycled version of itself, circa "I Need to Know" from 1978. But give this quintet the type of mid-tempo groove that chugs through most of "Into the Great Wide Open," and the Heartbreakers can't be faulted.