

# Petty's romantic 'Wildflower' highlights growth

By Steve Morse  
The Boston Globe

Tom Petty always borrowed from great influences — the Byrds, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Solomon Burke, Del Shannon, the Rolling Stones. Sadly, Petty went off course in recent years, sinking into a lifestyle of Los Angeles lite, while making records that had an indulgent, hobbyist feel, rather than possessing any deep connection to rock 'n' roll.

Yet that process has been radically reversed, or amended, if you will, with "Wildflowers." It's a probing new album (due out Nov. 1) that represents a heartfelt recovery and displays his keenest songwriting in years. It should revive a critical respect that has been flagging.

Petty's main influences are again front and center — Dylan, the Byrds and John Lennon, in particular — but the main difference lies in his willingness to take chances, to expand his emotional reach and explore a more raw, unadorned sound. His last two records with producer Jeff Lynne were safe, sugary and sanitized, but "Wildflowers" exudes real sweat and blood. It's the work of an artist confronting adulthood with eyes wide open, with no attempt to play games.

Petty has never before offered so broad a spectrum of sound. There are 15 songs bridging psychedelic guitar rock, jingly jangly pop, acoustic-bluegrass folk and reflective, Lennon-like ballads. It's his first record with producer Rick Rubin — and one hopes there will be more. Rubin has been on a roll, having produced the Stones' "Voodoo Lounge" and Mick Jagger's underrated solo disc, "Wandering Spirit." He gets to the soul of his clients — and Petty is no exception.

Album guests include Ringo Starr and Carl Wilson of the Beach Boys, but most of the backup is by the Heartbreakers, Petty's longtime touring band. Lead guitarist Mike Campbell weaves in and out on electric guitars, slide guitar and even



File photo

Tom Petty's latest solo album, "Wildflower," has some of his keenest songwriting in years.

sitar. And keyboardist Benmont Tench is a true Renaissance man, playing grand piano, electric piano, harmonium, organ, Mellotron, tack piano, zenon and orchestron.

A sense of restless motion guides the record. Petty opens with the fireside twang of the title track "Wildflowers," in praise of a lover: "You belong among the wildflowers ... You belong somewhere you feel free." But such carefree freedom is hard to find, as Petty tells us in the next track, "You Don't Know How It Feels." The song adapts a melody line from Steve Miller's "The Joker," with Petty declaring rather recklessly: "Let me get to the point, let's roll another joint ... Turn the radio loud, I'm too alone to be proud."

This troubadour flavor continues with "Time to Move

On" (a shuffle in the vein of Springsteen's "Tunnel of Love" album), before Petty rocks out to the booming guitar chords of "You Wreck Me." It's a look back at high school innocence: "I'll be the boy in the corduroy pants / You be the girl at the high school dance ... You wreck me, baby." It has the high-flying abandon of Petty's early hit, "Listen to Her Heart."

More playful innocence is heard in "Good To Be King" (a humorous, Beatlesque song about thinking you're king of your own destiny) and the rocking "Honey Bee," where youthful lust appears to have no consequences. Of course, it does — and the result leads to the emotional involvement of "Don't Fade on Me" (a transcendent acoustic tune with the insight: "You can lose it without knowing / You wake up

and you don't notice which way the wind is blowing").

The second half of the album really stands out. Petty adopts a deep, Nick Cave-style voice for the rockabilly-edged "Cabin Down Below," a song about seduction. Other gems are the mandolin rock of "To Find a Friend" (about a man who runs away and changes his life: "He went under another name, created a whole new game"); the Byrdsy "Higher Place," the humble "Crawling Back to You" and the climactic "Wake Up Time," about a high school youth whose innocence is later trampled by reality. "You were so cool in high school —

what happened?" Petty asks in his nasal, Dylan-like drawl. "It's wake-up time ... You spend your life dreaming, running around in a trance / You hang out forever and still miss the dance ... It's time to open your eyes."

One could argue that "Wildflowers" is a concept album about various rites of passage. There is ruthless honesty about the harshness of life, but also the hope that "if you get lucky you might find someone to help you get over the pain," he concludes. Never has Petty seemed like such a true romantic — and never has he fashioned an album of such lasting significance.

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