

## ARTS

## TRACKS



PETTY: Captures emotion with words in a direct, disarming manner



# Simple yet very Petty

Reviews by  
R.S. Murthi

□ **TOM PETTY** — *Wildflowers* (Warner Bros./62:51): The first thing that hits you about Petty's second solo album is its disarming directness. Despite some subtle orchestration (by Michael Kaman) and full-blown instrumentation, the music never sounds swamped.

In lesser hands, music as elementary as this would have been bland. But Petty is no average rocker, and his is a simplicity springing from a complex artistry.

There's nothing new about the themes Petty tackles in the songs, but his ability to capture emotion with words makes almost all the pieces enthralling.

Some of the songs tell sad stories while others deal with dark themes, like life on the edge. Most of them have a folk lilt, enhanced by the use of instruments like harpsichord, harmonium and harmonica.

However, it's the chiming resonance of tunes such as *Wildflowers*, *You Wreck Me*, *Cabin Down Below* and *To Find A Friend* that has an intoxicating effect.

*Wildflowers* has its banal moments but its bittersweet touches leave a lasting impression.

Performance: ★★★½  
Sound: ★★★★★

□ **VARIOUS ARTISTS** — *The Tribute To Elvis* (Mercury/44:50): Country, pop and rock artists ranging from Travis Tritt, Tanya Tucker, Dwight Yoakam and Michael Hutchence with NRBQ to Aaron Neville, Bryan Adams and Wet Wet Wet sing Presley's most abiding songs here.

The performances are spirited for the most part, but you get that extra bit in terms of interpretive insight from people like Tritt (*Lawdy Miss Clawdy*), Yoakam (*Mystery Train*), Chris Isaak (*Blue Moon*) and good old Tony Bennett (*Love Me Tender*) who's becoming hipper than he ever was, thanks to invitations to contribute to tribute projects.

Adams' *Hound Dog*, Billy Ray Cyrus' *One Night* and Wet Wet Wet's *It's Now Or Never* border on the bathetic. But there's enough to make up for these lapses.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

□ **JAMIROQUAI** — *The Return Of The Space Cowboy* (Sony Soho Square/66:08): This British quintet has its heart in the right place and wisely stays out of the goopandering race.

While it steals most of its ideas from 70s funk and soul, the band has enough imagination to use the borrowings in a refreshing way.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

□ **TOM JONES** — *The Lead And How To Swing It* (ZTT-Interscope/52:09): From the cover photo, you can see that the grandfather of frenzied kitsch has been spending a lot of time keeping his old body trim.

And from the music, you see that his sense of taste has improved.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

□ **FRANK ZAPPA** — *Saarbrücken 1978* (Foo-Eee/73:11): Part of Zappa's "beat-the-boots" campaign, this Rhino-distributed CD captures a 1978 performance at the Saarbrücken Open Air Festival in Germany.

The audio quality is dissatisfying, but the bootleg recording has Zappa and the band really cutting loose on staples like *The Dancin' Fool*, *Easy Meat* and *San Alphonso's Pancake Breakfast*.

Besides zany Zappaisms, you get some truly blistering guitar solos that demonstrate the man's facility as a neck-wringer.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

□ **FRANK ZAPPA** — *As An Am* (Foo-Eee/43:45): This 1981 recording features such top-drawer players as Chad Wackerman, Steve Vai, Tommy Mars and Bobby Martin. There are lots of explosive moments and some of the most structured jamming you'll ever hear on a rock recording.

Among the Zappa staples that get the rip-roaring treatment are *Sharleena* and *The Torture Never Stops*.

The opener, *Just Another Story*, introduces you to the group's bouncy and often infectious music.

It's quite a driving mix, with percolating bass lines and rollicking rhythms fueling the tunes.

The songs have interesting titles — *Manifest Destiny*, *Stillness In Time*, *Mr Moon* etc — but they're not as heavy as they seem.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

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Performance: ★★★★★  
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The sound is not up to scratch but the spontaneity and energy of expression won't leave you unaffected.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

□ **JOHNNY HALLYDAY** — *Rough Town* (Phillips/58:50): Hallyday's music is redolent of Gary Moore's pop-inflected blues. He also plays guitar almost as heavy-handedly as the Irish journeyman.

But on straightforward pieces, Hallyday evinces a more original style, singing with controlled passion.

At times, the shuffles, boogies and ballads sound too familiar, but they're still listenable, despite their derivativeness.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

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And from the music, you see that his sense of taste has improved.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

The songs are very much in a dance-pop vein and they are actually quite enjoyable, thanks to the shrewdness of executive producers Jimmy Iovine and John McClain.

Jones also performs better than ever, which means he screams with a lot more muscle.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

□ **TINA ARENA** — *Don't Ask* (Columbia/45:32): A singer with an average voice and an undistinguished style, Tina Arena gives listeners varnished pap on this slick production.

The tempos and textural colours are varied but there's really nothing to stimulate the discerning listener here.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

□ **KATHY TROCCOLI** — *Kathy Troccoli* (Reunion-RCA/42:49): Troccoli also has a serviceable voice and a manner of expression that's neither here nor there.

And the songs, which are mainly in a minor mode and with a vigorous beat, are ho-hum.

Only for those who think mediocrity is a tolerable trait.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

□ **ELVIS PRESLEY** — *Amazing Grace/His Greatest Sacred Performances* (RCA/1-75:10, 2-67:15): Presley was an instinctual gospel singer and this double disc collection is a testament to his brilliant interpretive skills in the genre.

Backed by vocal groups like the Jordanaires and the Imperials, Presley pays homage to God in such glowingly rendered pieces as *I Believe In The Man In The Sky*, *Known Only To Him* and *If The Lord Wasn't Walking By My Side*.

The ardour of his expression, the precious inflections of his voice and the affecting simplicity of the arrangements make it all absorbing.

The digital remastering has given the tracks a remarkable clarity and body, and the extensive notes on Presley's gospel leanings and evocative pictures in the booklet shed new light on his wide-ranging artistry.

Anyone who claims to be a Presley fan should give this a hearing.

Performance: ★★★★★  
Sound: ★★★★★

RATINGS  
★★★★★ Excellent  
★★★★★ Very Good  
★★★★★ Good  
★★★★★ Fair  
★★★★★ Poor

