

Tom Petty's old tunes still dazzle

By Charlotte Latvala
Times Correspondent

Concert Review

BURGETTSTOWN — After making rock 'n' roll records for nearly 20 years, Tom Petty is still something of an anomaly — a performer who has enjoyed both consistent chart success and the good will of critics; a '70s favorite who is still making ever-evolving music instead of doing oldies tours; a star who seems completely oblivious to the trappings of stardom.

All of which makes for an interesting, if uneven, night of live music.

Petty and his longtime bandmates, The Heartbreakers, played for well over two hours Saturday night to a sold-out crowd of 23,183 at Coca-Cola Star Lake Amphitheatre.

Petty took the stage (nearly bare except for a few lighted candles — he doesn't go in for flashy theatrics) with "Love Is a Long, Long Road," and swiftly segued into "You Don't Know How It Feels." With its sing-along chorus of "Let's get to the point, let's roll another joint," the latter had the audience hooting and waving

its arms in the air.

Wearing a loose shirt, jeans and a pair of black high-top tennis shoes, the middle-aged Petty still looks like a skinny, blond teen-ager. That's part of his appeal; he's not a big rock star, he's the slightly burned-out kid in your shop class who always had a smile on his face, a beer in his car and a Led Zeppelin cassette in his tape player. If he wasn't on stage, he'd be in his own audience.

Throughout the night, Petty mixed up the old and new, sampling from his current "Wildflowers" album while including long-time radio standards such as "Refugee" and "Breakdown."

Most of the older songs came off better — "Listen to her Heart" was a dazzling, polished pop gem — but that could be simply because in recent years Petty has wandered from bright, melodic tunes and turned to more dirgelike tempos that just don't lend themselves to exciting live performances.



TOM PETTY
Newer songs drag

His newer songs ("Learning to Fly," "Good to be King") tended to drag, a fact that wasn't helped by his annoying tendency to stretch them out with tedious guitar solos.

For some reason, Petty performed "The Waiting" as a stripped-down ballad — not a

good choice. His nasal voice, while wonderfully suited to his Byrds-like rock 'n' roll, here sounded just plain awkward, as if he was doing a bad Bob Dylan imitation.

He fared better on "Lonely Weekends," a cover of a Charlie Rich rockabilly song, and encouraged the "young people" in the audience to check out the music of the '50s. Also noteworthy was "Drivin' Down to Georgia," an unrecorded tune reminiscent of "American Girl."

The Heartbreakers, with Mike Campbell on lead guitar and Benmont Tench on keyboards, sounded just as powerful as ever. Campbell got a strong reaction to "Diamond Head," a flashy instrumental, midway through the show.

Although the evening had its dull moments, Petty brought the audience back to life toward the end, with cranked-up versions of "Refugee" and "Runnin' Down a Dream." He had the good sense to close with "American Girl," his early, rousing classic. It's a timeless, turn-it-up rock 'n' roll song, one that still sounds as fresh as it did back in the mid-70s.