

Tom Petty echoes the past

By STEVE MORSE
The Boston Globe

With ticket prices skyrocketing for big-name rock acts, it's refreshing to see Tom Petty keeping his tickets under \$50 for his summer tour.

"I don't want to wind up just playing to the elite," says Petty. "I see some people that don't mind that, but I don't think my fans would appreciate it too much."

"I think sometimes we're fools for not going for the dough, but I don't want to feel that we're taking advantage of people," adds Petty, a Gainesville native who now lives in Los Angeles. "We're not at the point where we're trying to cash in and retire or anything."

Petty, whose new album, "Echo," reaffirms his role as one of rock's great songwriters, is so adamant on the ticket issue that he also dismisses the "golden circle" seating concept that has been fashionable in recent years.

"I won't go for golden circle seating," Petty says of those higher-priced seats. "I always resisted that and have had huge arguments with promoters about it. I just don't think that one part of the audience ought to be treated better than the other."

Petty recently played a week of dates at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco -- and loved it because his fans had equal access at getting up front. "If you wanted to get up front, you just had to kind of work your way up there. Nobody was paying more to get there," says Petty, who used the shows to debut tracks from his new CD, as well as range into cover songs by everyone from Bo Diddley to Chuck Berry.

A similar exuberance marks "Echo." It's filled with high-energy rock 'n' roll and suggests a return to Petty's early, Byrds-and-British Invasion-influenced sound. It's a departure from the Heartbreakers' last hit disc, "Wildflowers," which was milder and more deliberate (and also sold 3 million copies).

"We set out to make a rock 'n' roll record this time," says Petty. "We purposely wouldn't write any slow songs until the very end of the record, because sometimes ballads creep in and you get a whole load of them. It's like, 'Gosh, we've got to get a few uptempo things in here.'"

"I just felt like I had done a lot of stuff based around the acoustic guitar, so with this album, I set it up as more of an electric thing," he says. "We have such a good little rock 'n' roll band, and I wanted to get them on record doing what they do best."

Petty released the album's first single, "Free Girl Now," over the Internet via the MP3 format, which allows consumers to download it for free. His record company (Warner Bros.) was not happy about it and

asked him to withdraw the free song, which he eventually did.

"My feeling was that singles have just become promotional tools anyway and no one really makes any money on them," says Petty. "If the technology is there, why not let the fans have this one? It will be a good way to promote the record. But of course, life isn't that simple. I think we had hundreds of thousands downloaded in a day. We didn't really ask anybody at the

label when we did it. But I must say that Warner Bros. has been pretty cool about it. They could have been really pissed."

His foray into the computer world, however, was done by associates, not by himself. Petty does not profess to be a computer expert. Far from it.

"I can't even turn one on," he says with a laugh. "My girlfriend can work one, but I don't want to sit for hours in front of a computer. I'd rather play the guitar."



Gainesville's own Tom Petty.

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