

Perfect Petty?

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers put on an impressive show at Star Lake

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A few Internet pranksters have been setting up Web sites over the past couple of years to inform the world that Tom Petty is, in fact, dead.

Just like the Paul-is-dead rumors that dogged the Beatles in 1969, they say Petty was actually replaced by an uncanny lookalike following his demise, and the clues can be found on album sleeves and lyrics. After all, what other logical conclusion can you draw from a line like, "people come, people go, some grow young, some grow cold" from 1994's "You Don't Know How It Feels"?

Well, whoever that guy was on stage at the Coca-Cola Star Lake Amphitheater Wednesday night, he certainly seemed lively enough, turning in a satisfying and solid 23-song set. It was polished to such a flawless sheen, in fact, that it flirted with being a marvel of mechanics rather than music.

Petty and his longtime backing band, the five-piece Heartbreakers, opened with a hard-rocking version of "Jammin' Me," the indictment of everything from slander to Vanessa Redgrave that Petty co-wrote with Bob Dylan. He and the Heartbreakers then proceeded through the hits "Runnin' Down the Dream" and "Breakdown" before tackling "Swingin'," a song off their latest album, "Echo," which featured a fluid guitar solo from Mike Campbell.

In fact, the musicianship was virtually flawless across the board. Campbell handled most of the heavy lifting on guitar, leaving Petty to crank out lean rhythm licks and utility man Scott Thurston to fill in the gaps on acoustic guitar and keyboard. Keyboardist Benmont Tench added color to the Heartbreakers' otherwise guitar-driven sound, and Steve Ferrone's drumming was as reliable as a metronome.

They also demonstrated a nice touch with the vocals - the three-part harmony between Petty, Campbell and bassist



TOM PETTY

Howie Epstein on "Walls" was reminiscent of Crosby, Stills and Nash, and Epstein added a graceful counterpoint to Petty's laid-back Southern drawl on "Mary Jane" and "I Won't Back Down."

And even if he did appear to have a pulse, Petty did have an otherworldly aura at times, with his pale, gaunt face framed by long, blonde hair that hasn't varied since he emerged from the Los Angeles club scene in the 1970s. His stage demeanor was occasionally as awkward as a teen leading a garage band, with tentative struts around the stage and myopic-looking glimpses into the audience of more than 19,000 people.

It is early in the season, but it's probably a safe bet that few other tours will be able to match the crazy-quilt set design that Petty and the Heartbreakers are using on this trip around the summer concert circuit. With colorful lamps belching dry ice hanging from the Star Lake ceiling, the musicians were surrounded by brocaded pillows, white, burning candles, antique chests and even a suit of armor that unexpectedly came to life during "Don't Come Around Here." The whole medieval lair-meets-the-Baghdad-market motif was accented by Petty's stagewear, with two different ruffled shirts and a red waistcoat.

Star Lake was the second stop of Petty and the Heartbreakers' lengthy summer sojourn, and they certainly didn't show signs of being under-rehearsed.

In fact, the concert almost seemed too well - practiced at points - they have a tuneful batch of material at their disposal, but at times the proceedings lacked a fire and spontaneity that would have lifted it from the ranks of the quite good to the truly excellent. Perhaps as the tour progresses they can strike the needed spark.

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