

TOM PETTY'S LAST DANCE

By Paul Coco

Rock music is dead. That's the common consensus on popular music at the end of the twentieth century. In today's popular music landscape of Backstreet Boys and Ricky Martin it's hard for anyone who isn't sixteen or Latin to get air-play, but that doesn't mean that rock music is dead. Sure, rock music isn't as popular as it was in the past, but there are still those dedicated few musicians giving rock 'n rollers what they crave. One of these musicians is Tom Petty, and when Petty walks on stage in his long black velvet coat and leather pants with his guitar in hand it is clear that rock 'n roll is alive and well.

I have been fortunate enough to catch up with Tom Petty and his band, the Heartbreakers (guitarist Mike Campbell, keyboardist Benmont Tench, bassist Howie Epstein, drummer Steve Ferrone and Scott Thurston) three times during their 1999 *Echo* tour, in support of their new album of the same name. The Heartbreakers opened

their set with a ferocious version of "Jammin' Me," beginning a two-and-a-half-hour, twenty-four song performance consisting of several new songs and plenty of greatest hits. After nearly three decades in the music business, Petty knows how to work a crowd, and he delivered most of the Heartbreaker's classic tunes including "Free Fallin'," "Mary Jane's Last Dance," "You Don't Know How it Feels," "Listen to Her Heart," "Breakdown," and "Refugee" just to name a few. Even more impressive than the Heartbreaker's performance was the crowd's devotion to the band. Only once, during an instrumental performance, did the crowd take their seats.

In this age of such firmly established musical genres, perhaps Petty's greatest accomplishment is creating music that spans multiple generations. When Petty invited the crowd to help him sing "I Won't Back Down," the amphitheater boomed with the voices of fifteen to fifty-year olds. Rivalled only by Springsteen for capturing the spirit of middle-class life in his music, Petty's songs relate the joy, the disappointment,

the tragedy and beauty that encompasses the American experience at any age. Petty had stiff competition from a sixteen year-old who was jumping around screaming out the lyrics to "American Girl" and pleading with his parents for a chance to look through the binoculars. For all of the awards and recognition an artist can receive during a career, I can't imagine an honor greater than watching a fan respond to a song that is older than twice his age.

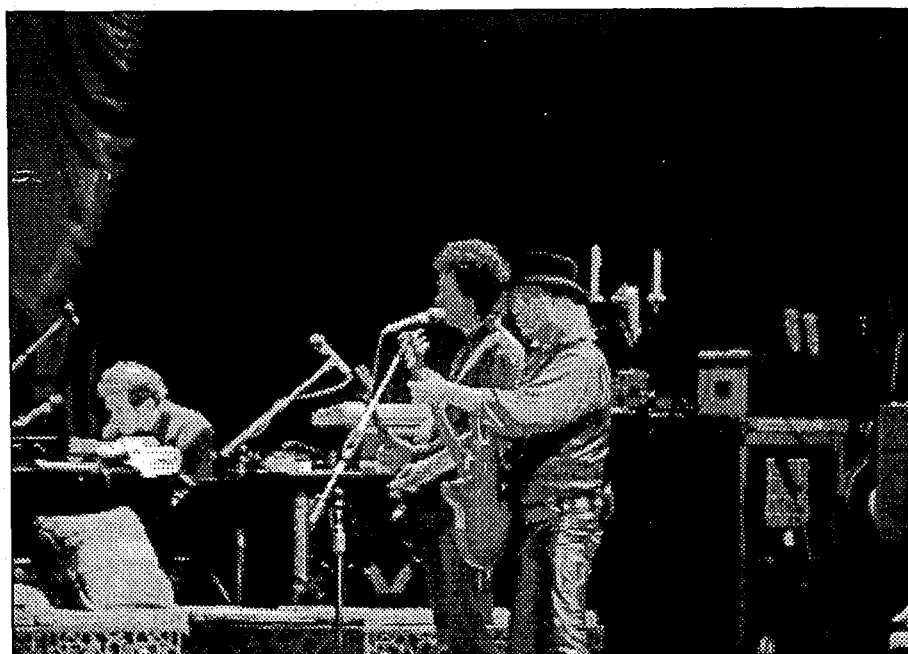
Despite the majestic guitar riffs, pounding drum beats, lush piano and harmonica playing that characterized the Heartbreaker's set, nothing was more impressive than how much fun the band was having. Petty would rip through each song like he had never played it before, and he would pause respectfully after each one, seemingly awed by the over-

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whelming display of affection from the crowd. Petty would raise his guitar in the air and extend his hands, comically acknowledging the enthusiastic applause with an "aw, shucks" grin and a slight bow. Even when Petty resorted to tried-and-true practices, like donning his trademark Mad Hatter's hat for a psychedelic interpretation of "Don't Come Around Here No More," Petty appeared as excited as the rest of the crowd.

The best moments, however, came when Petty performed stripped down versions of several songs. A eerie hush fell over the crowd when Petty did an acoustic rendering of "Walls," (from the *She's the One* soundtrack) and followed it with the haunting first single from *Echo*, the painfully beautiful "Room at the Top." During these moments, Petty presented himself not as a rock 'n roll superstar, but as a simple man looking up at the night sky, searching for meaning in the words that escaped from his lips.

It was these moments of yearning that flawlessly captured the reflective tone of the *Echo* album. The five songs Petty performed from *Echo* each presented the



Tom Petty and Band

feelings of a man unsure of his position in life. After enduring a bitter divorce five years ago, Petty has become a good deal more introspective, and the new songs capture the tumultuous experience of having his life completely altered. These songs recount tales of pain, failed relationships, and the courage that it takes to get through it all. More than any other of this previous works, *Echo* is an album that sums up Tom Petty the man, not Tom Petty the rock star. During "Room at the Top," when Petty sings "I've got a room where everyone can have a drink and forget those things that went wrong in their lives," we get a brief glimpse at the promises not kept and suppressed pain that Petty can't seem to let go.

That is not to say that *Echo* is an entirely bleak experience. Several songs on the album retain the classic Heartbreaker style, portraying the arrogance that we have come to expect and admire in true rock stars. Petty describes "Swingin'," the second single from *Echo*, as a tale about "a good girl gone bad." Just like "American Girl," "You

Got Lucky," and "Free Fallin'" before it, "Swingin'" weaves a tale of a bad boy who likes to break little girls' hearts. Unlike their predecessors, however, "Swingin'" has an optimistic streak to it. This time around, that little girl doesn't get her heart broken. Instead, she tells the guy off, heads out onto the open road and "Goes down swingin'".

The freedom of the open road has always been characteristic of Petty's songs, and a stand-out track from *Echo*, titled "Free Girl Now," celebrates the joy that comes from packing it all up and leaving for good. On *Echo*, Petty has injected more of himself into the character-driven songs he writes, suggesting that although he views life as a struggle, he's just fine with how everything's worked out. This solemnity is new to Petty's performances, and both the crowd and his fellow Heartbreakers seem to view Petty in a new, more respectful manner.

No matter what it is that changed Petty, the music still maintains its exceptional quality. Watching Petty perform live, it is clear that his motivation for making music has never been about making money. There is an appreciation Petty displays for his fans, his band, and the music itself that is missing from younger musicians. Three decades later, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers deliver one hell of a great rock concert. They just might be the last truly great American rock 'n roll band, but they still know what it takes to make a crowd go down swingin'. ■