



TOM PETTY & THE HEARTBREAKERS

By BILL FLANAGAN

IT'S A RARE THING TO COMBINE MAINSTREAM SUCCESS with musical substance. To do it while fiercely standing up for personal principles – to the point of waging public war with your record company – is rarer. To do it for twenty-five years is flat-out remarkable.

A common reaction to the news that Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers are being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has been “They’re a great band, but aren’t they too young to qualify?” It’s a shock to realize that it has been twenty-five years since “Breakdown” and “American Girl.” Petty and the Heartbreakers have never stopped long enough to look back. They win new audiences with every record they make.

Standing on the side of their stage at

an outdoor concert on Long Island in 1995, I was struck by the fact that the crowd was dominated by people in their late teens and early twenties. When I mentioned it to Petty afterward, he said he wasn’t sure why that was but it sure made him feel good. As I approached a Petty show outside Boston in the summer of 2001, kids were coming out of the woods, across fields, holding up signs pleading for tickets. Going into the venue, I heard one college-age fan say, “Now that Phish is gone, I follow Petty.”

The show I saw that night was as strong, as full of life and energy, as any of the great concerts I saw the Heartbreakers play in the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties. On any night, they might pull out songs by

**Clockwise from front:
Tom Petty, Ron Blair,
Mike Campbell, Benmont
Tench, Stan Lynch, 1977**

the Byrds, Van Morrison, the Clash or whatever else they smell in the air. In Massachusetts, guitarist Mike Campbell looked up between songs and started playing the riff from the Standells' "Dirty Water." In a beat, the band fell in, all leaning toward their mikes to shout out the unison refrain, "Boston, you're my home!" After so many years together, they are telepathic – perfectly blending musicianship and spontaneity. Time has only made the Heartbreakers better.

Some facts: Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers come from northern Florida. As a child, Petty was bewitched by rock & roll in the early Sixties, when Elvis Presley came to nearby Ocala to film location scenes for the movie *Follow That Dream* and young Tom managed to get onto the set and meet the King. He traded his slingshot for a box of 45s and he was gone.

Because Gainesville was a college town, with lots of fraternities and nightclubs booking rock bands, it was a great place to form a group. The top local combo, from Daytona Beach, was the Hourglass with Duane and Gregg Allman. The cover-band scene Tom joined included two future Eagles (Don Felder and Bernie Leadon) and, briefly, Stephen Stills. In

other words, if an atomic bomb had fallen on Gainesville, California would have never had Buffalo Springfield, the Flying Burrito Brothers, CSNY, the Eagles or Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.

By the early 1970s, Tom was playing in a band called Mudcrutch with Mike Campbell and keyboard player Benmont Tench. It sometimes shared bills with the future Lynyrd Skynyrd. Having achieved local stardom (and under some pressure from the Florida authorities to stop clogging the highways with their Mudcrutch Farm Festivals), the band decided to try its luck in Los Angeles. In 1974 Mudcrutch and its extended family packed up the van, the station wagon and the equipment truck and made a caravan toward the West Coast.

The good news was that the band got a record contract as soon as it got there. The bad news was that Mudcrutch fell apart in the recording studio. It was not prepared to make the leap from bar band to recording act. After the breakup, Petty struggled to cut a solo album with session musicians, but his heart wasn't in it. Dawn came when he stopped by a demo session Benmont was leading with Mike on

Below: Petty at home, 1978;
opposite, top: Petty,
Campbell, Bob Dylan, 1986;
bottom: (from left) Howie
Epstein, Lynch, Petty,
Tench, Campbell, 1982





guitar and two other Florida pals, drummer Stan Lynch and bassist Ron Blair. They were making a lean, muscular sound. Petty jumped in. They turned a riff they were playing into "Breakdown." Petty said, Hey, I still have this record deal - let's make this the band.

The label wasn't stupid. It heard what Tom heard. The only thing it insisted on was that Tom's name be up top - it wanted to be protected in case of another Mudcrutch meltdown. No one had a problem with that. The group that Petty wanted to call the King Bees became Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. Their first album was full of short, tight rock & roll songs played with energy and attitude.

American radio was slow to pick up on it, but when the Heartbreakers got to England, they became stars. They were seen as part of a new wave that had been kicked off by the Sex Pistols and included the Clash, Elvis Costello and Nick Lowe's Rockpile. They felt right at home with the rebellious attitude and loved the stripped-down music, but as Petty said, he wasn't prepared to put on a

skinny tie and limit himself. The Heartbreakers returned to America and played clubs from the West to the East. City by city, they garnered heavy FM airplay. By 1980, songs such as "Refugee," "Don't Do Me Like That" and "Here Comes My Girl" won over AM, too.

And while the Heartbreakers had their public wars - they refused to deliver their third album, *Damn the Torpedoes*, until a contract dispute with their label was resolved, and they fought to keep down the list price of their next LP, *Hard Promises* - as well as private feuds, they kept growing as musicians and songwriters while filling the airwaves







with memorable hits: "The Waiting," "You Got Lucky," "Don't Come Around Here No More," "I Won't Back Down," "Mary Jane's Last Dance," "Into the Great Wide Open" and many more.

They gave "Stop Draggin' My Heart Around" to Stevie Nicks and backed her on it; spent a couple of years touring and recording with Bob Dylan; made an album with Johnny Cash; took part in No Nukes, Live Aid and Farm Aid; and won an MTV Video Vanguard Award for their cutting-edge videos. Petty also saw a side project, the Traveling Wilburys, become a second successful band.

Petty is not the only Heartbreaker whose extrahours projects are bigger than most musicians' main gigs. Benmont Tench is perhaps the most in-demand keyboard player in rock – he has recorded with U2, Aretha Franklin, Sheryl Crow, Roy Orbison, the Rolling Stones and dozens of others. Stan Lynch left the Heartbreakers in 1994 to concentrate on his other job – writing and producing with Don Henley (whose hit "The Boys of Summer" was written by Mike Campbell and Henley). Ron Blair got sick of touring and left the Heartbreakers in 1982, though he has lately been spotted playing around Los Angeles with Mike in a band they call the Dirty Knobs. Ron was replaced in the Heartbreakers by Howie Epstein, who has produced acclaimed records for Carlene Carter and John Prine.

The sustained strength of the Heartbreakers is rooted in their being a band of multitalented individuals who have agreed to focus their craft and attention on a single vision – Tom Petty's. Each has the freedom to go off and do other

Opposite: Petty, July 16, 1978; above: (from left) Campbell, Blair, Petty; below: Petty and Campbell

things, and each has had success and acclaim outside the group. Thirty years after Mudcrutch became the biggest band in Gainesville, Tom Petty can turn around onstage and see

buddies he came across the country with – still backing him up, still playing great, still in love with the noise they make together. ✦

