

AT HOME IN MALIBU WITH **TOM PETTY** AS THE ETERNAL SOCAL
ROCKER, NOW ON HIS 13TH ALBUM WITH THE HEARTBREAKERS,
SOUNDS OFF ON THE ONE PERCENT, THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE
CORRUPTION OF POWER: "THE GOOD THING ABOUT GETTING OLD . . .
YOU KNOW WHAT'S WORTH SPENDING TIME ON AND WHAT'S NOT"

T H I S T I M E I T ' S P E R S O N A L

BY FRED SCHRUERS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOE PUGLIESE

"When you're young,
you've got that party
period you've got to get
through," says Petty, who
was photographed in
his Malibu studio on
June 26. "If you're a
rock'n'roller, that might
last till you're 58."

The seaside community of Malibu is a retreat for wealthy hedonists for good reason — there’s rolling surf and almost inevitable blue sky and golden hills and world-class sushi. The cost of paradise, beyond the mortgage payments, lies in hazards like traffic gridlock, rock slides, mudslides — and worst of all, wildfires. The rampaging flames can destroy a home, or a neighborhood, or even a life.

Tom Petty knows this danger more keenly than most locals, because he has suffered through it — twice. In 1987, when he lived over the hill in Encino, his home burnt to cinders in an arson that may have had homicidal intent. Trapped in the house after hustling his family out a side door to the pool, he crawled through smoke to save himself.

Two decades later, after he had relocated to Malibu, Petty woke one night to the odor of smoke. After rousing his wife, Dana York, and a friend in a nearby building, he had time to grab only one item as they fled the so-called Canyon Fire. “It was a Hohner bass that I’ve used on every record, and you can’t find another one,” says Petty. “I grabbed that and I went, ‘Hell, is this going to happen to me twice in my life where everything I own is just wiped out?’ And then I thought, ‘Well, I’m OK with that.’ Because things come back, but people don’t.”

Though the house was spared, the emotions of that night seared a memory that comes to life in a track on his vibrant new album, *Hypnotic Eye*. It’s a hard-rocking pack of 11 songs laced with feisty social critiques, but it also has intensely personal moments like “All You Can

Carry,” which recollects the fear and the lessons of that traumatic night with baleful guitars and Petty’s impassioned vocals.

We’re at his Malibu studio today. Wearing denim from head to toe, Petty, 63, emerges from one of the tree-shaded walkways that criss-cross the sprawling but unpretentious compound. We head inside, where his aging and hefty Lab, Ryder, wanders in, mounts the couch and issues a dreamer’s grumbles from a slightly immodest pose as Petty details the two-year making-of saga for the album.

In short: It’s been a journey. A stanza on *Hypnotic Eye*’s “Fault Lines” illuminates the long path that Petty’s muse has taken him down.

“ON THE HIGH WIRE, ABOVE THE WILDFIRE/
AN OLD ACROBAT/
ON FAULTY CABLE, STILL HE’S ABLE/
NOT TO FALL FLAT”

The autobiographical underpinnings are clear. Part of the acrobatics involve flipping from the dulcet Dylan-esque poesy of “Red River” to the easeful bossa nova “Sins of My Youth” to the pissed-off skepticism of “Burnt Out Town.” Maybe the high wire stretches between creative innovation and commercial success in the fickle world of alternative rock. If so, one thing is certain: Petty has never fallen flat.

The comfortable anteroom where Petty sits leads to a full-scale studio (the Shoreline Recorders facility of the album credits), a space that has hosted countless late-night creative conclaves and is guarded by a scrawled sheet of paper warning, “Beware Cranky Hippie.”

He slides a door shut with a wry smile at all the chaos being transacted just a few feet away — photo and video setups, work in the studio, people peering through the glass that encloses this space — but Petty’s attention is fully engaged. “We’re professionals, right?”

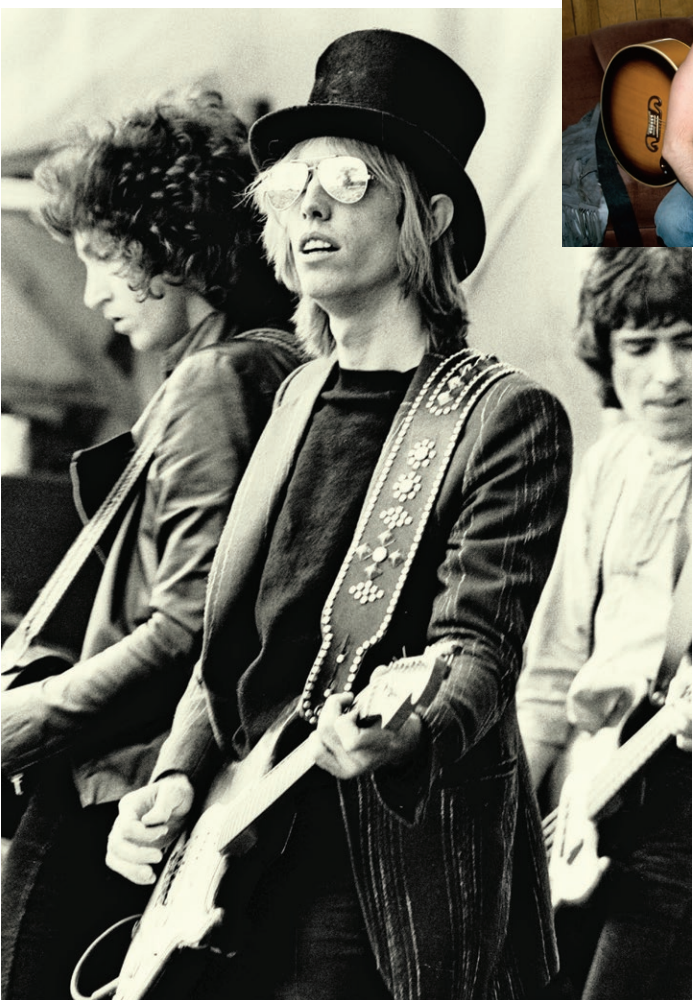
Petty and his bandmates have honed a work ethic that has yielded 13 band albums, three (more or less) solo ones and a few offshoot projects, and the phrase guarding the door hints at how the benevolent Petty dictatorship works. The songwriter churns up sketches for songs and brings them to the band in the studio, where they communally worry them into working arrangements, often in a day. Then they cut the tracks, a process that the leader’s perfectionism can elongate, at the studio. The method aspires to keep the music as “live” as possible. Petty admits that his style of creating isn’t common these days. “But,” he adds, “neither is oil painting.”

Benmont Tench, who began his musical odyssey with Petty when both were teens in Gainesville, Fla., finds it miraculous that he, Petty and Mike Campbell have survived (bassist Ron Blair returned after Howie Epstein overdosed on heroin in 2003) and thrived as a fully functioning unit for 40-odd years. “Tom’s been a vehicle for the whole group of people who like the same type of music to chime into.”

Almost all Heartbreakers albums have been a true group effort, but it was more challenging with *Hypnotic Eye*, says Petty, because the album took so long to come together. “I think there were three tours at least while we were making this record.”

As he anticipates rehearsals for a tour that will feature some new songs, Petty says: “I’ve worked hard to make an album where every song is the quality of the one in front of it, and there’s a beginning, middle and an end — and it’s a complete experience if you choose to have it.”

From the first crunching bars of opening cut “American Dream Plan B,” it’s clear



Clockwise from top: Petty (second from left) in his first band, The Epics, which played in his hometown of Gainesville, Fla.; posing in 1986 with Benyo, to whom he was married for 22 years; cover art for *Hypnotic Eye*, due out July 29; rocking his trademark top hat onstage at a 1978 concert with The Heartbreakers in Knebworth, England.



Hypnotic Eye is an album devoted to making some aggressive — if tightly focused — noise, and leaving the tender ballads for another day. From the earliest session, Heartbreaker lead guitarist and *Hypnotic Eye* co-producer Campbell told the band leader that he was singing much like the lad who busted into pop music’s consciousness with “American Girl” in 1976. “That was my first comment,” recalls Campbell, “how really urgent and committed he sounds on a song like ‘Fault Lines’ — he sounds like he did on the first and second albums.”

“It’s probably the material,” says Petty. “It was just my way of getting that character over, to bring whatever character it is to life.” Indeed, Petty’s vocal delivery is especially powerful on cuts like “American Dream Plan B” and “Forgotten Man,” where he inhabits a persona he has sketched with his trademark elegantly simple writing.

The album’s recurring Everyman is an ordinary guy in the grip of an acquisitive and manipulative culture. Many tracks convey Petty’s perception of surliness in the national ethos. “It’s a political album that’s not on either side,” he says, quoting the lyrics of “Shadow People.”

“WELL I AIN’T ON THE LEFT/
AND I AIN’T ON THE RIGHT/
I AIN’T EVEN SURE/
I GOT A DOG IN THIS FIGHT”

Petty says the subtext is “really more about morality than politics. It’s about what’s missing — why is the ‘human’ missing from humanity? I think the level of caring about other people is disappearing.”

“Pin on a badge on a man and a man begins to change,” sings Petty in “Power Drunk,” with a voice that is somewhere between a coo and a snarl. “Starts believing that there’s nothing out of his range . . . You and I are left in the wind/In the wake of a rich man’s sin . . .”

“ I DON’T WRITE AS MANY LOVE SONGS AS I USED TO. I’M NOT IN ANY LOVE CRISIS AT THE MOMENT. ”

Petty won’t take the bait when two neocons are mentioned, but adds that he’s not just talking about Washington politicians sending boys to war. “You can put whoever you want in there. There’s so many to choose from. I was happy when I got that line, because it’s very true . . . from concert security all the way up to the most powerful people in the world. It just changes them, the minute the badge goes on.”

As someone who has given the government a fair amount of money himself, Petty has begun to despair of the One Percent’s motives.

‘Catholics, Don’t Write Me’

In a new track — and a blunt conversation — Petty won’t back down when asked about a religious scandal

During his hard-fought, ascendant career, Tom Petty has often been labeled as intense. The artist wouldn’t disagree — and a corrosive new track called “Playing Dumb” won’t change anyone’s mind. Though the song didn’t make the new album — it was hard to sequence with the rest of the tracks, says Petty — it will be included as a bonus cut on the accompanying vinyl release.

Petty hitches back in his seat when asked about “Playing Dumb.” In the lyrics, he proposes lighting a candle “For every confession that wasn’t on the level/For every man of God that lives with hidden devils.”

The song mourns the victims of sex abuse at the hands of Catholic clergy, and takes aim at the controversial financial settlements the church eventually made. This is not a love song.

When asked about “Playing Dumb,” Petty arches an eyebrow at the digital recorder before him. “Catholics, don’t write me,” he says. “I’m fine with whatever religion you want

to have, but it can’t tell anybody it’s OK to kill people, and it can’t abuse children systematically for God knows how many years.”

Petty pauses, as if he’s momentarily reluctant to continue. “If I was in a club, and I found out that there had been generations of people abusing children, and then that club was covering that up, I would quit the club. And I wouldn’t give them any more money.

“I just felt that I was being asked to play dumb,” says Petty, describing how the song emerged. “That, ‘OK, well, they paid some money, so it’s all over.’ I don’t trust that.

“Religion seems to me to be at the base of all wars,” continues Petty, who was raised, unconvinced, among Southern Baptists. “I’ve nothing against defending yourself, but I don’t think, spiritually speaking, that there’s any conception of God that should be telling you to be violent. It seems to me that no one’s got Christ more wrong than the Christians.” —F.S.

GROOMING BY SUNNIE BROOK AT CELESTINE AGENCY; THE EPICS: GLASSMATES.COM; BENYO: NEAL PRISTON/CORBIS; THE HEARTBREAKERS: GUS STEWART/REX USA/GETTY IMAGES



“That’s a huge problem in the world right now — you can see these wealthy people who have made so much money that making more will not change an hour of their lives or their children’s — yet they’re consumed with the idea of making more. Once they do that long enough, that doesn’t turn them on anymore. They want power, and a great deal of money buys power. Very few people know how to handle power and once they just become completely immoral, they’re dangerous people. This attitude is what, to me, wipes out the middle class.”

Petty hunches forward with his right hand tapping the table almost inaudibly: “I’m old enough to remember an America where if you were willing to be a fairly hard worker, you could support your family. You could even maybe own a home. Everybody was happy — not this, ‘Well, I’m not succeeding if I don’t have what these phony people, these soulless shells on TV, are wearing or doing.’ People have been conditioned to think that they should be wealthy.”

Clockwise from top: The soundboard at Petty’s Malibu studio, where most of the songs on recent albums were arranged; the musician, York and Petty’s stepson, Dylan, at the 2007 world premiere of Peter Bogdanovich’s documentary *Runnin’ Down a Dream* in Burbank; Petty (center) and The Heartbreakers in front of their tour bus prior to a 1981 concert in Chicago that was part of a 28-city tour.



Mudcrutch released its only single in 1975.

The Band Before The Heartbreakers

If you excavate the history of Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers, you’ll eventually hit the story of Mudcrutch. This Gainesville, Fla., rock band emerged in 1970 from Petty’s primordial combos, The Sundowners and The Epics. And somehow, Mudcrutch is still alive.

Petty has deep connections to the players. The original lead singer, Jim Lenahan — who wore an eye patch for effect — has been doing Petty’s lighting ever since he was replaced. A newspaper want-ad brought drummer Randall Marsh to the band, as well as his

roommate, Mike Campbell. (The band name would later be lent to Mudcrutch Farm, the tin-roofed shack where Marsh and Campbell lived.) Petty still tells with great amusement how Campbell informally auditioned with a cheap Japanese guitar to play Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode.” As Petty recalled for Paul Zollo in *Conversations With Tom Petty*, “When the song ended, we said, ‘You’re in the band, man.’” Mudcrutch was rounded out by guitarist Tom Leadon, whose brother Bernie helped found the Eagles, and Benmont Tench, who Petty convinced to drop out of

college to join the band full time.

Shelter Records’ Denny Cordell lured Mudcrutch from Los Angeles to a Tulsa, Okla., studio to record an album that was never released. Discouraged, Mudcrutch disbanded, but soon Petty and Campbell were invited to play with Tench’s nascent band — and soon The Heartbreakers were born.

Mudcrutch re-formed in 2007 with Petty, Marsh, Leadon and Tench. A self-titled album, a short tour (and live EP) and a documentary arrived in 2008. Petty says a new release is coming in a few months. —**F.S.**



“Life’s a bitch,” says Petty, who turns 64 on Oct. 20. “I think it’s just about trying to gain as much wisdom as you can. That’s the only good thing about getting older.”

THE HEARTBREAKERS: GEORGE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES; FAMILY: CHUCKY GALLAV/GETTY IMAGES; MUDCRUTCH: JIM MACMURRAY/REUTERS/GETTY IMAGES