

Tom Petty Interview—October 23rd, 2008- By Warren Zanes

I saw Tom Petty in Los Angeles a few weeks back. In the course of casual conversation he mentioned that he'd like to do an interview for his website, something for those who might want to know the latest—being among the curious, I was quick to say yes to this chance. In the wake of the Heartbreakers' most successful tour to date and the reopening of the Mudcrutch case, there is a sense that a lot of things are in motion for Petty. Palpably aware of his connection with the Heartbreaker fan base, he expressed his desire to get some word out to them in the absence of formal media interviews. He was able to set aside some time a week later to speak on a range of topics.

If you take the long view of Tom Petty's career, it has been a thing of one peak following the next. But, somehow, each of the peaks seems to sneak up on everyone, from the band and the fans to Petty himself. The latest peak may have been the subtlest in some ways, only because it couldn't be explained with recourse to hit singles and platinum records. It was the movie, the Mudcrutch record, the Super Bowl appearance, the summer tour—all of that. But perhaps the most striking aspect of this latest peak is that the Heartbreakers are standing there, amidst it all, looking very much like a band that could have some of their best work ahead of them. In that respect, they're holding steady as the exception to the rule.

Over the summer, we saw it again, various younger bands weighing in on their lasting affection for the Heartbreakers, from Ben Harper to Vampire Weekend to Death Cab for Cutie, John Mayer and more. It was a diverse bunch, all of whom hold the Heartbreakers up as a model of what can go right in music. Petty's version of the long career is obviously something that speaks to artists who, first, love songs and real rock and roll bands, and, second, would like that same shape for their own careers. But, as the reuniting of Mudcrutch suggests, what has given Petty's career its remarkable shape and character—at least in part—is his willingness to leap off a few cliffs, take some chances, make some weird moves that don't end up looking weird at all. Petty stays loose in his thinking. And it works, again and again. Here he is:

WZ: At roughly a dozen dates the Mudcrutch tour wasn't as long as many hoped it would be, but it really registered with the people who caught the shows. What do you think made it work so well?

TP: Friendship more than anything. We were very, very excited about playing together again and had a ridiculous amount of fun. It wasn't like we had to do a lot of rehearsal or sweat the process. It came easily, naturally. For me it was kind of a busman's holiday. I love playing the bass. And I like stepping into a slightly different role in the band. I think that the people who saw the shows picked up on all of this and responded to the spirit in which it was done. But, going into it, I had no idea how the audience would take it. Here we were, doing a show that was ninety-five per cent new material with a few covers thrown in there. But no one ever called out for one of the Heartbreakers' hits. Everyone in the audience seemed to know that this was a different thing and went right with it. We took a lot of chances, and I really felt like they got it.

We're coming out with a live record next month [*Extended Play Live-see below*], and that will certainly act as a kind of evidence of what was going on. But, really, the idea of reforming a band that hadn't worked in more than thirty years—an all but unknown band-- was such a shaky, half-baked idea. (laughs) I can't figure out exactly why it went as well as it did. But it worked. So I hope we can do more shows next year.

WZ: Did it feel good to be in the smaller rooms?

TP: Well, obviously there's a greater degree of intimacy there. And I think you can also travel all around with your material, taking it to different places and improvising quite a bit, in ways that might prove harder in a big place. In the smaller clubs and theaters we never felt shy about a little exploration, letting things build, putting another solo in, or what have you. We could follow ideas that revealed themselves in the moment. And that is the right thing for Mudcrutch, for the way we've been working.

But I also think it did something to Mike. He was so lyrical, so fluid in the way he was playing. Part of that, I think, came from tying him to the one guitar, the Telecaster with a B-bender. For people who don't know what the B-bender is, it's a device that, when you exert pressure on the neck, it triggers a lever that bends the B-string. Typically it allows the player to emulate some pedal steel sounds—but Mike got very inventive with the possibilities, taking it outside of its conventional uses. He was bringing so much out of that one guitar.

Overall, I just had great fun hanging out with those guys, even had Randall [Marsh] and Tom [Leadon] living at my house for that month. It was really a ball around the clock. Everyone should be so lucky as to circuit through their past in the way we did and have it mean something in the present.

WZ: I sensed that Mike really responded to Tom Leadon's playing. In the Heartbreakers, you're always performing several duties at once, whereas Tom Leadon had time to be just a guitar player and get into it with Mike.

TP: Yeah. And when they'd go into those doubled parts, the harmony lines, or when they'd just start facing each other down, there was a lot of inspiration flying back and forth in their playing. For me it was fantastic because I could almost sit back and watch it. I had a better perspective to see it, to relax and really hear it. And Randall is just such a natural drummer. To get to play bass with him is something special to me. We all felt good continuing the musical dialogue we'd started so many years earlier.

WZ: Do you think the Campbell-Leadon interaction was something new, something that didn't show up as conspicuously in the early Mudcrutch?

TP: I think it was in evidence in the old days. They spent a lot of time playing together. This recent tour wasn't unlike old Mudcrutch shows where Mike had his style and Tom had his style but they'd get out there and meet. They always played together a lot, going out to bluegrass parties, rehearsing together—all of which they still do. Mike and Tom picked right up where they left off. When Tom showed up in Atlanta to see the Heartbreakers this summer, he and Mike spent the whole afternoon playing together, just the two of them in a hotel room. It's a natural thing between them.

WZ: It was hard not to get a contact high when you saw Tom Leadon up there. He seemed to be the happiest man in the world—could that be the case?

TP: He may well have been. (laughs) He's just great, a morale builder for all of us who are around him, so positive about everything. He'd get off the stage every night saying, "That was just the greatest time I ever had!"

WZ: Can you give me the fly-on-the-wall perspective of the after-show scene at your house?

TP: Fortunately, the shows were on the West Coast, which meant that most were in driving distance of home each night. So, we'd get home, and then Tom would cook. He's a very healthy, very careful eater. So he'd go make some meal for himself that seemed to take forever to cook. And we'd all wind up sitting in the kitchen talking about the shows, old times, and so forth. Tom has a memory like a steel trap. He really can remember

everything that ever happened to him. Sometimes he'd just take us back down memory lane—he could dive back into the sixties like it was yesterday. Randall and I were in awe. It would be like, “I forgot that guy completely.” And Tom would say, “Oh no, let me tell you . . .” It was endless fun having someone around with a memory like that. Randall and I were missing some big chunks of time that Tom gave back to us. (laughs)

WZ: It sounds to me like the early days of any band, when you're hanging out, doing everything together.

TP: It was like that in a way. We're grown up now, but it was very much the same as it was back then: a bunch of friends. And that's the atmosphere that allows you to make good, real music-- I think it's some of the best we've recorded in a long time. I would do more shows in a second. I'm already thinking about doing just that in the early part of next year. Haven't talked to them about it, but I think everybody's up for it.

WZ: When we spoke the other day on the subject of George Harrison, it struck me that George's impulse to create the Traveling Wilburys—in the very moment that his own career was hitting a peak with *Cloud Nine*—was a really pure and ultimately musical move to make, even if it was unexpected. Was your decision to reform Mudcrutch at all influenced by George's kind of thinking?

TP: Well, maybe. I hadn't thought about that until you mentioned it, but they are similar moves in a way. I think George's move—I'm sure of it really—had to do with the fact that he just didn't want to be the guy up front, no matter that he had a number one album at the time. He never wanted that. And the Wilburys gave him a way around it. He wanted another band, and this solution conveniently got him out of having to lead the George Harrison Show.

I think I often feel the same way. There are times I'd just like to step into the crowd, but I have to be responsible for standing up front and singing every song. The great thing about Mudcrutch is that these are guys who knew me long before I was successful—and they still treat me that way. There's not that kind of . . . I don't know . . . people see you differently if you're already successful and they're just meeting you. With Mudcrutch there's not much pretense. They just treat me like everybody else. That makes a difference and really allows the band thing to happen in an authentic way.

WZ: Tell me about *Extended Play Live*, the Mudcrutch release that's coming out. Was it initially the case that you were recording shows for

archival purposes but not necessarily planning to put anything out?

TP: Yes, very much. I didn't want to do a live album because I thought it would be too much of a mirror image of what we had done in the studio. But when I heard things like the 15-minute version of "Crystal River" from the Troubadour, my mind was changed. There was also material like our cover of Jerry Lee Lewis's "High School Confidential" that caught the spirit of the live show and went to places somewhat different from the album. Ryan Ulyate came out on the Heartbreakers' tour and played me some of this live stuff, and I thought, "Wow, wouldn't this make a really cool EP, a four-song, low-priced record?" In my mind it would be a nice public document of what happens live with that band.

WZ: From what I was told, the EP will be released in full dynamic range. It raises an issue that, increasingly so, seems to be on people's minds as recordings are being mastered louder and louder, often resulting in some harsh sounding CDs.

TP: It is an issue. If you want to get the full dynamic range, with the highest highs, the lowest lows, and the sweetest sounding mids, you can't master a recording as loud as is commonly done these days. You have to do your mastering at a nice even level and then instruct the listener to turn up their stereo to make the difference. Now, it's not done very much because, of course, everyone likes to hear their records sounding really loud when they come on—including me. But the sound suffers because of the sheer aggression of the mastering volume. With the Mudcrutch release, we compromised a bit with the level. We found that when we mastered it really loud a lot of the nice tones went away, and it became hard. In that case, we arrived at a happy medium, though we simultaneously released a strict high-fidelity version with the instructions that you'd need to turn it up louder. The hi-fi version was something we included with the vinyl pressing of the Mudcrutch album. I liked that package idea, so the EP will come out with a vinyl record and a hi-fi CD. This means you get a better sounding recording but have to play it a little louder.

WZ: When the Heartbreakers came through this summer, you looked like a happy, loose bunch. Did the Mudcrutch experience act as a cleansing operation?

TP: I think it did. I really do. I know Mike believes that's the case. We only took one weekend off after the Mudcrutch shows before we starting rehearsing for the Heartbreakers' summer tour. And while it became

apparent that they're very different things, I think the Mudcrutch experience brought a certain camaraderie back in some way. The Heartbreakers are pretty tight as friends right now, more, I think, than they have been in years. There's a pride in this band. They're never going to step out on stage and do less than they can do. This year the consistency from show to show was particularly incredible, which was something I really felt proud of. I don't think there are many bands that could have done it.

WZ: *Rolling Stone* reported that the Heartbreakers' tour was the summer's no. 1 grossing tour in the U.S. Are you surprised after all these years?

TP: It's something we're very proud of. And it certainly makes us appreciate the audience that comes out and supports us the way they do. I've always felt we have the best fans anywhere because those shows are just a huge release of energy coming from out there. Sometimes I'd just stand, amazed. The sheer volume they produced most nights. And to see them all show up in those kind of numbers was humbling. It's so many years down the line, and they're still coming in to see us and having such a great time, and in a moment when life is hard for a lot of people and the dollar is precious. I was moved, really.

WZ: What is it that the Heartbreakers are delivering that people are going out to get?

TP: Rock and roll. It's hard to find. But we deliver the real thing, quality rock and roll from what I think is one of the best rock and roll bands in the world.

WZ: Steve Winwood was a good fit as an opener. And it was striking that you brought him out each night to front the Heartbreakers. Had you formed a bond with him prior to this summer?

TP: It was a dream of ours to do something with Steve for a very long time, whether a tour or just some shows. I'd run into him a few times, in England, playing at a Hall of Fame event, and always said, "You've got to get out on the road with us." So we were over the moon when we heard that he was going to do it. You had to pinch yourself every time he came out. It was incredible. I'd blush when he was around, you know, (laughs) telling him, "I've bought everything you've ever recorded . . ." I think the rest of the guys share my enthusiasm. There were nights when I'd be listening to his show and really felt, "Wow, this is a great thing for the audience, too." It felt like an entire show worth seeing.

WZ: Is there any sense now, in the wake of good experiences with both the Heartbreakers and Mudcrutch that good fortune has its curse, that now you're now responsible for two bands? And as you're writing, do you have clarity as to which band you're writing for?

TP: When I know I'm going into a Heartbreakers project, it's clear that everything is focused there. And, with Mudcrutch, it's a little bit easier because, first, we're free to do covers if we want and, second, we also have Ben and Tom bringing in songs. From my side, thirty-five or forty percent of the songs I brought to the Mudcrutch sessions were written *during* the sessions. That was a new experience. I'd just come home from the studio with so much energy, then sit down and write something because I wanted to have a new song to play the next day. That turned out to be a real good approach.

One thing that's on my mind right now, though, is that I want to do the next Heartbreakers' record in that same fashion. I don't want to get into overdubbing and production as much. I just want to take them in and do the thing live, very much like we did the Mudcrutch. There's an energy and a purity you get that way. I think it will be interesting to do that with the Heartbreakers.

WZ: Benmont has always been an advocate of cutting it live, with the whole band playing. Is he enjoying an I-told-you-so moment?

TP: Probably. (laughs) Yup. That's always been his theory. I like to do both. But right now I'm firmly convinced that the records I make at this point in my life I want to be combo efforts, played live and sung live. I think you get a better vocal performance when you're cutting with a band and gearing up to get the whole thing in one go. With Mudcrutch we found that the vocal was the measure of the take—and if the vocal was good, it seemed everyone had played really good. But it also meant you couldn't go back and fix things, you know, fix a solo or some thing. But we've done a lot of production at times in the past and now I think I can get a lot more done going the live route in the studio.

WZ: You haven't toured outside North America in a long time. Why not? Do you have any plans to do so?

TP: There are plans at the moment. We're considering a full-scale European tour next summer. Nothing has been finalized, but we want to do it because finally we feel like we have the time to do it and there's nothing breathing down our necks. Usually, by the time we've finished a North American tour, we have to start recording. And, honestly, I just don't

like to stay on the road the whole year, which is the main reason we've taken so long in getting back to doing a proper European tour. But I really do want to get over there to let them hear this group. It's sounding so good that I feel guilty if I don't take it out and appear live with the band.

WZ: The last three years have almost looked like the result of a three year plan, first the 30th anniversary tour with all those special guests, then the documentary and this year the Super Bowl, followed by the most successful tour you've ever had. Was it all part of a master plan or just coincidence?

TP: I wish I could say it was all planned. There were a few lucky accidents in there. Really, if I'm against going on a tour, it's probably going to be a really successful one. And I didn't want to go on the thirtieth anniversary tour, figuring we'd just done a tour and should probably leave it alone for a while. But everyone else wanted to go, and it was, after all, our thirtieth anniversary. So I acquiesced—and that tour was a great tour for us. Right after that was the Peter Bogdanovich film, which was received far beyond our expectations. Then, as a result of the film, we got the gig at the Super Bowl. After that, we went back on the road to have the most successful tour we'd ever done. Did I plan this? Not a chance. But we're feeling pretty pleased right now.

WZ: Did Peter's documentary turn out like you expected? Would you make any changes?

TP: At first I thought, "Well, four hours may be a bit long." But when I sat and watched it with an audience, it all made sense to me. I think he did a great job—and, really, he must have, because I'm constantly stopped wherever I go by people who have seen and love that film. Now it's being released in a different version, available everywhere, that is just the film and a few bonus, vintage performances. So its life carries on at full strength, which is another pleasant surprise.

WZ: The critical response and the audience response suggest that *Runnin' Down A Dream* is the kind of movie that has a good shot at being considered for a Grammy. Have you and Peter talked about this? Do you feel that could happen?

TP: I try not to think too much about those kind of things. But I will say that I think this is the case of something turning out to be an extraordinary project. It would be really nice to see that film noticed in such a way. I haven't talked to Peter about that, but I'd love to see him singled out for

what he pulled off. We're not an easy bunch to corral, and he did it, telling the story in a way that feels true to us.

WZ: The making of that film extended over a long period. I'm guessing that the level of intimacy you hit with Peter all but made him a member of the band.

TP: Peter wasn't from the rock and roll world, which actually attracted me to him as a possible director on the project. I sensed that it could be an interesting chemical reaction if he was immersed in the life of this band. There are directors who do a lot of rock and roll movie-making—that didn't speak to me in quite the same way. And what happened is that Peter fell in love with the band and the music. He put his whole heart into the movie. I still get calls from him pretty regularly. He came out here just last Sunday. He really is a part of the family now, and probably because he went so deep in making that film.

WZ: Do you think he's meeting more girls by hanging out with rock and roll bands.

TP: I certainly hope so. (Laughs)

WZ: Thinking again of all that's happened in the past few years, there have been the big career operations like the movie, the books, the Super Bowl appearance, the tours, and, then, on the other side, you have the Mudcrutch record and now percolating thoughts of a new Heartbreakers record—how do you strike a balance between legacy work like the film and the *new* work?

TP: The way I handle it is to always be thinking about that next recording. I'll tell you something: I think it's very important now that we make a really good record with the Heartbreakers. It's been a long time. The vibe in the band is that we want to go in there and do something extraordinary, create some music that will make people sit back and take notice. We have a lot of creative juice and don't want to rest on our laurels. So that's going to be our big challenge. And like I say, if we're going to take off next summer for Europe, that means a lot of the Heartbreakers writing and recording is going to have to be done this year. As I hear myself say it, I clearly have a lot of things I want to do, including another Mudcrutch tour. But the next Heartbreakers' project is something that will get the attention it deserves, simply because as a band we have more territory to explore. And, for any band, that's a good place to find yourselves in.

WZ: In my view, artists who have “more territory to explore” tend to be the ones who don’t resist their mature voices or the themes that might arrive with those voices. Do you actively think about such matters?

TP: I only think about them in a defensive way. By this I mean, if I write something that might seem too frivolous or sound too young for us, I avoid it. I’ve never ever wanted to pander to a certain age group, and I think not doing that has served us well. I just write what’s on my mind and use the best of what I get and hope that’s gonna work. Writing in general? I think you’re better off not thinking about it much at all. You take it as it comes. When you start thinking about it you can create a lot of roadblocks for yourself. If you’re writing honestly, it will come out in the song and in the vocal performance, a certain believability will be there and affect everything. I hear songs all the time with vocals that are technically amazing—but I don’t believe the singer. It’s not the same as hearing someone who doesn’t sing that well but there heart’s in it all the way. But it begins with an honest song.

WZ: I have heard your material used by different politicians on both sides of the fence. How do you feel about your songs being used on the campaign trail?

TP: It’s very uncomfortable to hear them used when I don’t agree with what’s being said. But I recognize that those songs have entered into a bigger life, a life all their own. They belong to the audience. How they’re used isn’t always something I can control.

But I have to add that I also don’t endorse candidates at my shows. I assume it’s not much of a challenge for people to see what side of the political fence I’m on, but I feel it’s wrong to be out stumping for a candidate, simply because I don’t think my audience has asked that of me. I can be political as an artist—and I am and have always been—without aligning myself with politicians, a group of people I’ve never trusted all that much, even if some are better than others. I can get behind causes, and do, without saying, “Vote like I do.”

Right now change is certainly more necessary than it has ever been, so I do have strong feelings about an Obama victory. But I don’t go out on stage and campaign for him. I think it’s up to the individual to vote the way he or she wants. My audience has come for a night out, to enjoy themselves, and I don’t want to take up the time with political endorsements. There’s so much of that going on that I see a rock and roll show as offering some relief from it.

WZ: Shifting from politics to business, these remain hard times for the music industry. But can you also see this from another angle: is this a nothing-to-lose moment that actually liberates the artist from the heavy breathing of the marketplace and its demands?

TP: It certainly liberates me. The state of affairs in the music business is such that it gets your mind off selling records and on to making them. I think it got to be a little too much there, with records being made simply to fill a market niche and move product. That can be a stumbling block for the culture of music making as a whole. The Heartbreakers are lucky, of course, because we're in a position where we don't have to worry too much about the situation.

But I also have to say that, oddly enough, something like the Mudcrutch record was really embraced by the record company and promoted in earnest. I don't know if ten years ago it would have been. I think the record industry has been put in a position of having to look at quality, to find things that will endure rather than burn out in a month. In fact, because of that good experience with Mudcrutch on Reprise, the Heartbreakers have signed with Reprise, a label we've always admired, which has that rich history from Sinatra to the Kinks to Hendrix to Neil Young. So here we are, in the midst of a terrible time in the industry, having a great experience with our label. I'm not sure that this kind of recession in the music business hasn't improved the creativity of some of its people.

WZ: I want to ask you about the *Buried Treasure* show on XM, which is going into its 4th season. Is that the easiest job you have?

TP: I'd have to say it is. I really, really enjoy it, which I guess is the reason I've stayed with it so long. And, once again, it's the audience that makes it possible to come back for a fourth season. I get stacks of listener emails from the producer, and to see that people are just discovering some of this music is a thrill to me. Giving them a taste of something that turned my world upside down, something that they can now explore and follow up on—this is really a great joy to me. But it also keeps me in touch with listening, hours and hours of deep listening. That certainly informs what I write and what I'm thinking about musically. And I'm convinced that I like the *sound* of these records from the fifties and sixties so much better than I do most of what I'm hearing today.

WZ: I want to pick out a few artists who show up on the playlists in the upcoming season. Ray Charles is represented in a few spots, with "Unchain My Heart" and "Rainy Night In Georgia."

TP: Well, Ray Charles is probably the best R&B singer there ever was. He invented a style that was picked up by a lot of artists in the later fifties and sixties, was probably the most imitated singer ever. His Atlantic recordings are really nice sounding records. A number of them were recorded in the Atlantic offices, where they'd push the desks to the side and record right there. Tom Dowd was the engineer, and I'm always amazed at how beautiful he and the producers and players made those records sound.

I was wondering the other day if Ray Charles had sight if anything might be lost in his remarkable musical sense. When you listen to his recordings you're hearing an artist who is so intuitive, whose work rings true in every way. It leads you to question if his musical abilities might have been elevated when he lost his sight. He's as musical as they come.

WZ: The Guess Who. There's a group that doesn't always get its due, didn't go into the books as being particularly cool.

TP: Yeah, they didn't get that "cool" label. There was a period there when if you were having hit singles your credibility suffered. A number of late sixties bands met this fate. Even the Doors saw some of that. But the Guess Who had a great singer in Burton Cummings, and Randy Bachman is just a fantastic lead guitarist. I'll throw them on every now and then because they did make some great tracks.

WZ: Joe Cocker's "Hitchcock Railway" is on an upcoming show.

TP: I like the whole album that song shows up on, *Joe Cocker!* Denny Cordell, who worked with the Heartbreakers on our first two records, produced those first two Joe Cocker albums. It's a great conglomeration of musicians on them, guys like Jim Gordon, Chris Stainton, Leon Russell, even Sneaky Pete. It's an honest, enjoyable, workingman's record.

WZ: Another name I picked out is that of the late Eddie Hinton. The track was "It's All Wrong But It's All Right." He's not exactly a household name.

TP: That song is from a CD of collected songwriting demos he did. Eddie Hinton was a guy who was a figure in the Southern soul network, a songwriter, sideman, and session player. In fact, I was just reading a biography of Duane Allman that Mike Campbell gave me while we were out on the road, and Duane crosses paths with Eddie Hinton in the Muscle Shoals part of the book. There's a point where they even approach Eddie Hinton about joining the Allman Brothers, though he declined. He was a

very talented guy, and these demos are something I really like. I'm not sure if he was thinking of them as leading to a recording career, or if they were just songwriting demos, but he strikes me as one of these really talented Southern musicians who stayed close to home. That desire to stay home is something you see in a few of those Southern soul guys, but it's also something I can identify with. Sometimes I feel like, "I don't know if I want to tour the world this year—I'm kinda having fun at home."

WZ: Radiohead gets a track on an upcoming show.

TP: In my view, Radiohead is the group that is at the forefront of trying to find some new ground. There are a lot of people out there who say they are, and there are a lot of people musically masturbating, but I think Radiohead can do it and make it come through as real music. I admire them so much. From time to time I want to play something that's more current on the show to remind people that there are good things still going on. I also like Kings of Leon quite a bit. I play them every now and then. There are people out there who are really good, and I want the show to reflect that, too.

WZ: On the summer tour you hit some festivals, and, once again, there were a number of young acts that mentioned being excited to catch the Heartbreakers. Do you have any thoughts on just what you've come to represent in their eyes?

TP: Maybe its songs. If there's any lesson to learn from looking at the Heartbreakers' thing, it really has to do with songs. The material always had to pass muster if it was going to be recorded. And that's what has kept us going. The songs, combined with our dedication to stay together and grow as a band. That's what you see if you look at us. That's our legacy.

WZ: Tell me about a day-in-the-life of Tom Petty, off the road and out of the studio. What's on the itinerary?

TP: It could be any number of things. That house I have on a lake plays a big role these days. I get some books, sit around and read for awhile, then maybe go out on my boat and try to catch a few bass, come in and watch a few movies in the evening, maybe smoke one, play guitar or noodle at the piano. But this not working thing is, for me, really harder than working. (laughs)

