

TOM PETTY



For all he's been through, Tom Petty looks remarkably well preserved.

Physically he's about the same as his record covers, rather fragile, but smothering everything with that toothy, cocky grin. No wonder the little girls love him. The deep, drawling speaking voice is a surprise. He laughs a lot and is obviously well pleased with his present state of affairs. A sharp contrast to last year, when it seemed there was nowhere else but down.

The saga has been well documented, but bears brief repeating here. Petty and the Heartbreakers were originally signed to Denny Cordell's Shelter label. Their stablemates included Leon Russell and J.J. Cale, but the skids were already under the label financially. When the contract was re-negotiated, Petty understood there was a proviso that should Shelter go under, the Heartbreakers would be free to go where they pleased. But ABC sold the label and all that went with it to MCA, which immediately claimed Petty as its property. He didn't like that arrangement, but agreed to deliver an album, though he refused any financial ties with MCA. Financing the recording put him a million dollars in debt. On the way, he incurred one lawsuit after another, and promptly sued in return, putting himself even further in hock and finally declaring bankruptcy as the only way out.

Throat Troubles

MCA finally decided to bend a little, giving Petty his own Backstreet label but retaining

distribution rights. *Damn The Torpedoes* finally emerged and things looked rosy again until Tom's throat started to play up, forcing him to cut back a British tour and finally putting him in hospital where his tonsils were removed. The throat's OK now, a little rough with all the touring, but the show hasn't suffered. In fact it's been expanded. Tom smokes low tar fags and drinks Coke, out of respect for his vocal chords.

So back to the present. What effect did that traumatic legal period have on *Damn The Torpedoes*?

"I think there's bitterness there, but I think there's more hope for survival. That album is about standing up for your rights, the certain inalienable rights that nobody can take away from you.

"I think if I'd make an album that said 'I hate you because you sued me and I'm going to take you to court', it would have been a little bit dull after a while. I don't think people want to hear records about court cases. But when I did it, I wrote the songs so you can take them on whatever level you want, which is the way most good songs are.

"It was a very hard album to make because it was a very hard time for all of us. We were under a lot of pressure just to even stay together. Nobody would ever realise how intense those lawsuits got, there were four at once. They were trying to take me away.

War Of Minds

"The only weapon a record company has in a suit like that is to break you mentally. And they don't only try that in the courtroom, they try it in every phase of your life, to disillusion you, to break you down. And you just have to face up that they're going to do that, and it's



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just going to be a war of minds. But we had things like the marshalls coming to take the tapes and hiding the tapes (for *Torpedoes*), going to court all day and recording at night, never knowing when they were going to barge through the door. It was a real experience. It was a gamble."

So what held you all together?

"I don't know. It was the record, probably. I knew how good that record was. We knew if we could just get it to the street, it would take care of the problems. But I think it turned out to be probably the biggest artist-versus-record company suit ever."

Do you still trust people?

"I watch 'em a lot closer" (laughter).

Iovine Fan

Jimmy Iovine, who produced *Torpedoes*, will also be working on the next album, scheduled

to start recording in August.

"I was just a fan of his, and he called me and told me he would really like us to work together, so we just said 'OK' over the phone and we're now best friends.

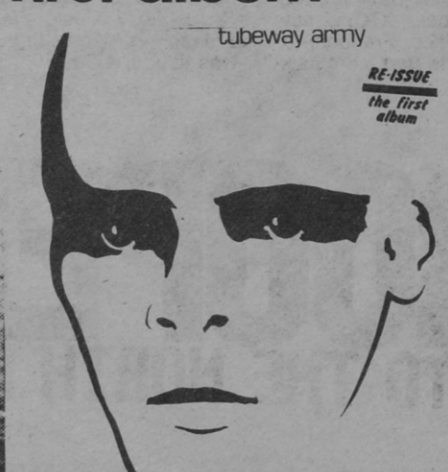
"He's just like me, he's very rhythm-oriented, and he's very good because it's hard for me to keep perspective on myself in the studio. He's very direct and he doesn't mix words. He generally says exactly what he thinks."

The conversation turns to the first two albums. Petty agrees that the first was a collection of different songs, while *You're Gonna Get It* had a strong linking theme.

"The first one is the band getting together. We hadn't played any shows at that time, the album was written and recorded very quickly. When we were recording *You're Gonna Get It*, I

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

first album



replicas



pleasure principle



look to the future of rock'n'roll
GARY NUMAN