

# *Crawling Back to You*

*A critical  
and personal  
breakdown  
of Tom Petty's  
masterpiece,  
"Wildflowers"*

by **Nick Tavares**  
*Static and Feedback*  
editor



Looking at the spine of the CD, it's clear that the color has mutated a bit through the years, trapped in sunbeams by windows and faded from its brown paper bag origins to a pale bluish grey. The CD case itself is in excellent shape save for a few scratches, spared the cracks and malfunctioning hinges so many other jewel boxes have suffered through drops, moves and general carelessness. All in all, the disc holds up rather well.

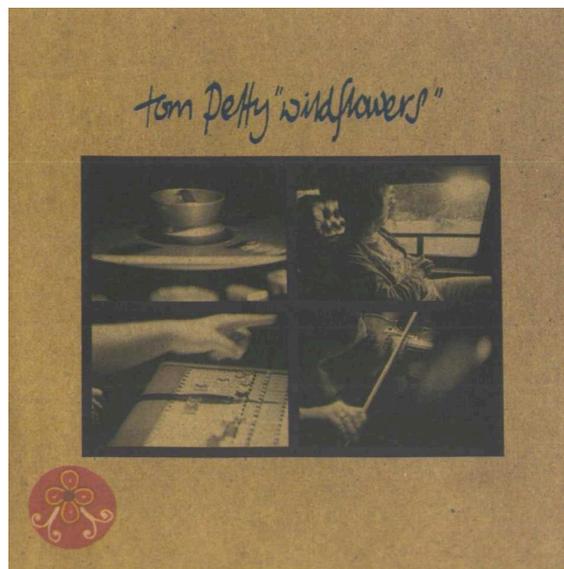
More often than not, however, it sits on the shelf, tucked below a greatest hits collection and above a later album. Thanks to technology, the more frequent method of play is the simple mp3, broadcasting out of a speaker the size of the head of a pencil's eraser mounted above the computer's keyboard, or in a more intimate setting, through headphones plugged into a small jack near the base of the laptop's casing.

Perhaps I'm mobile, and that's when I'll have those same headphones, tightly snug against my ears, plugged into an iPod with the record's 15 songs carrying me on a subway car to my destination while I try desperately not to accidentally make body contact with any of the dozens of strangers packed alongside. Or, those headphones and that iPod are helping me focus as I tap keys and zip a mouse arrow across a screen while ensconced within the walls of my cubicle at the office, as varying tempos and chords pace my serviceable output at work.

I can also take that same iPod and plug it into my car's stereo system via an auxiliary jack, transferring cold zeros and ones into analog messages pulsed up the winding wire from the cup holder where the device now rests up to the main face of the stereo component. From there, it's me, the highway and the band as I wind my way to and from home, traveling long distances, often at night, often with few other cars on the road. It's a solitary exercise, commuting the miles of Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System without a soul but the ones captured in the bits of music transmitted from speakers mounted in the doors of the vehicle.

But none are quite as solitary as sitting at home, lights dimmed, shades drawn, needle dropping on the copy pressed to vinyl, finding the groove and settling into that first song. Now, I'm in my bed, or my couch, or splayed out on the floor, eyes closed as the first notes begin to emanate from my speakers while side one of the record patiently spins on the turntable.

It was lying out on the bed with a boombox perched above the headboard of



## CREDITS

**Tom Petty**  
*Wildflowers*

Warner Bros. 1994

Producers: Rick Rubin, with Tom Petty  
and Mike Campbell

### Tracklist:

1. Wildflowers
2. You Don't Know How it Feels
3. Time to Move On
4. You Wreck Me ☼
5. It's Good To Be King
6. Only a Broken Heart
7. Honey Bee
8. Don't Fade on Me ☼
9. Hard on Me
10. Cabin Down Below
11. To Find a Friend
12. A Higher Place
13. House in the Woods
14. Crawling Back to You
15. Wake Up Time

All words and music by Tom Petty,  
except ☼ by Tom Petty and Mike Campbell

my bed that I first heard this album, though. Coming home from a trip to the mall with the CD in my hand, I carefully removed the plastic and peeled off the nagging Soundscan barcode sticker across the top. I took the disc, thumb on the outside edge and index finger in the center plastic hole, placed it in the spindle of the player and pressed the lid of the portable system down, instantly triggering the digital information to spin rapidly and display a crooked number on its LCD screen out front.

I had a method for starting any CD in my teenage years. I came to rest horizontally on my bed, my back below me, and I'd blindly reach up for the "play" button, always waiting where I'd left it. The spinning

would resume, the music would begin, and I'd lie with my head on my pillow and my hands over my stomach, eyes closed. Sometimes, I'd be more alert and reading the liner notes tucked away in the CD's booklet in an effort to take in as much information about this seemingly magic art form as possible.

The first time I listened to *Wildflowers*, I was in high school, in bed, laying out straight, reading along with the lyrics, inspecting the credits, the thanks and the photographs included with this Tom Petty solo record. One hour, two minutes and 41 seconds later, I felt an overwhelming rush, a warmth that covered my entire body from head to toe and reached back within my skull to fill my insides. I reached back up, hit "play" once again, and listened to every one of the 15 songs again, in sequence, without moving.

I was never the same. Though modest, as the album played, I first recognized how much I was enjoying the songs. When it ended, I was floored by an amazing sense of satisfaction, a high that has never been topped. I had been swallowed whole by what was, I realized then as now, the most beautiful piece of music I'd yet encountered. These 15 songs spoke to me in a way no others had, and they had done it together, in harmony and in order.

I hadn't expected it, but *Wildflowers* changed me.



*Wildflowers* came at something of a time of flux for Petty. Making a solo album instead of a traditional rock record with the Heartbreakers, Petty drafted in Rick Rubin to help capture a more natural, organic sound; Petty told *Newsweek* in 1994 that he had been immersed in demos of the Beach Boys recording their landmark *Pet Sounds* record, listening for hours as Brian Wilson and company crafted each track.

The last few records by Petty, with and without his trusty Heartbreakers, had seen growing use of synthesizers and studio desk tricks. *Southern Accents*, despite being originally conceived as rustic ode to his Southern roots, has layers and layers of synthesizers and computerized drums, in keeping with its 1985 setting. 1987's *Let Me Up (I've Had Enough)* has its share of slick production, and his next two albums, 1989's *Full Moon Fever* and 1991's *Into the Great Wide Open*, saw Petty recording his music with Jeff Lynne from the ground up, recording each piece track-by-track and building the songs in the studio later.

It's not as if Petty had been unsuccessful, creatively or commercially, in these efforts, but from the first notes of the opening title track, "Wildflowers," it's clear that this approach has been abandoned. It opens with the bright strum of Petty on acoustic guitar with only the natural reverb of the room to accompany him.

Eventually, though, he's joined by friends. Benmont Tench, the musical professor of the Heartbreakers, chimes in on the piano. Mike Campbell, partner-in-crime for every musical adventure Petty's ever had, provides the bottom end of the song on bass. New friend Steve Ferrone provides light percussion alongside Lenny Castro. Michael Kaman expertly conducts the strings that add texture to the entire affair. Engineer George Drakoulias, the liner notes state, "must have played something."

Before the record is over, Heartbreakers bassist Howie Epstein will provide some soaring vocal harmonies. Campbell will man his traditional spot on lead guitar and add some searing solos and delicate acoustic playing. Tench will play some of the most beautiful piano of his life. All the Heartbreakers will back Petty on this record, billed solo or not.

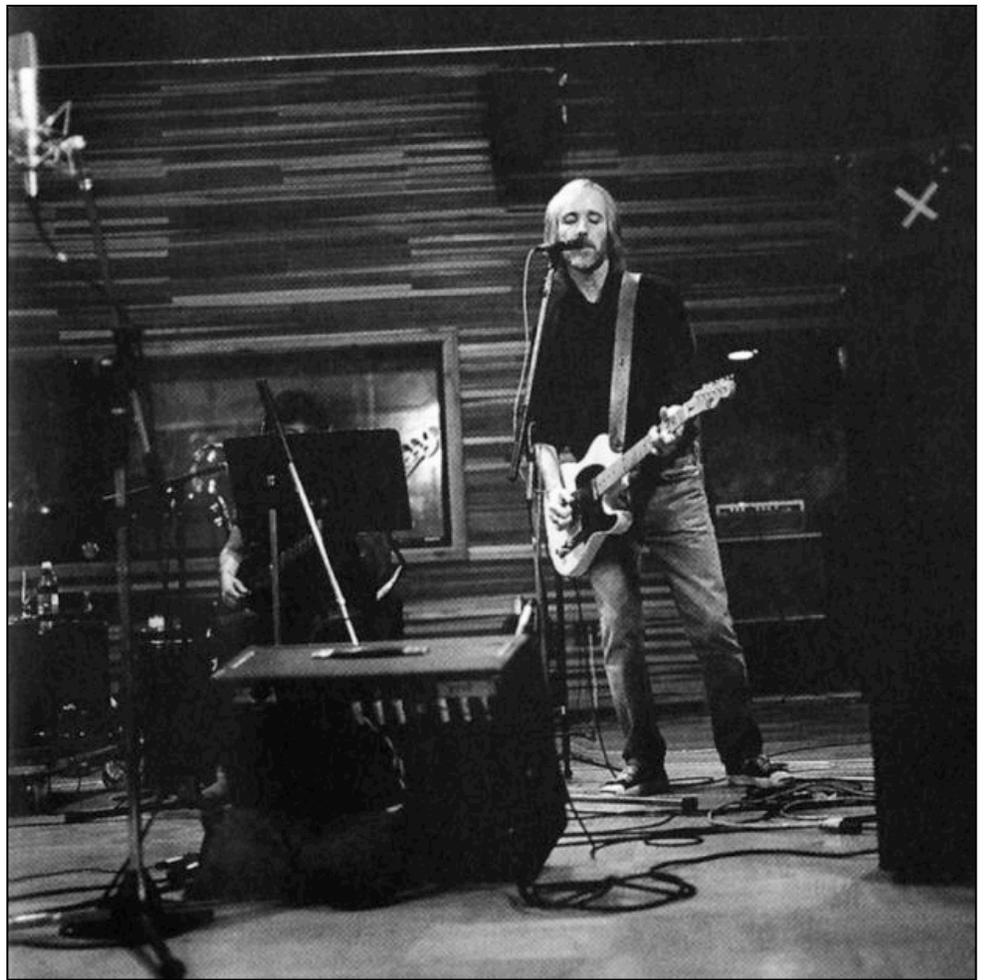
All except for Stan Lynch, drummer since 1976 when the Heartbreakers came together in the wake of Petty, Campbell and Tench's previous band, Mudcrutch. He was having his own issues with Petty, and Petty with him. But rare is the great piece of art that comes without loss.



**With this album, there is no skipping** around. There is no jumping past tracks or programming songs out of their predetermined order. Whether or not it was meant to be, this is one complete thought, a cycle composed of myriad emotions, tempos and tones that come together to tell one story. That story is a mystery.

This is essentially how I've treated this album since that first introduction in the boom box that sat above my bed all through high school. While I don't finish it on all listens (things happen sometimes in the course of an hour), I finish it with most. And I always, to a fault, start at the start with "Wildflowers," a lilting acoustic number that tells the tale, as I've heard it, of a beautiful soul who may have left the narrator, but has blossomed regardless.

There is a hint of sadness in Petty's voice as he sings this. "Sail away, kill off the hours," he tells her, "you belong somewhere you feel free." I've read that Petty wrote this



Robert Sebree | Wildflowers booklet

*Most of Wildflowers was recorded at Sound City in Los Angeles, California.*

song for his daughter, to accompany her as she grew up and went off to experience all the treasures and pitfalls that life has to offer.

But this story is a self-indulgent one, and until I'd come across that explanation, I'd never heard this opening song quite this way. Instead, I took this for a long-lost love, one that came to the singer at a young age and left an indelible mark. At the time of the split, there was likely confusion and anger, a common attempt to understand why this incredible girl was no longer by his side.

That was in his youth, though. Here, the singer is older, the experiences have piled up and there now exists a deeper understanding of the world. And with that, he realizes that he has not a single ill thought of his long-gone love. Without romanticizing too greatly, he remembers a wonderful girl who lived life to the fullest, who collected friends like bits of treasure, who appreciated every four-leaf clover that ever crossed her path; they seemed to constantly.

But it ended, and as he went deeper within himself, he lost contact with her. It

was confusing and upsetting, that all that seemed so perfect and storybook could all come undone so quickly. Again, that was then. Now, all resentment has long since taken its leave, and what's left is a mature, grateful understanding of the experience.

There is no jumping back, no looking ahead. There is only this life, and we live it as it comes. Sometimes, there's greatness, and sometimes, there isn't. Everything moves on, but if it means something, a piece stays behind as the rest continues the search. It takes a strong composition to understand and live with that reality, and it's not one I necessarily believe that I have ever had. It's something to strive to, and at its base, it's really just the act of buying into the fact that everyone deserves to be happy and fulfilled.

*"You belong somewhere you feel free."*



**After my initial discovery of Petty via the Heartbreakers' *Greatest Hits* collection, I was drawn to this album by three songs: "You Don't Know How It Feels," "You Wreck Me" and "It's Good to Be King," the three**

singles that floated off the album between 1994 and '95. Congratulations to everyone at Warner Bros.' marketing department for successfully promoting your record and converting a casual listener into another sale and a repeat customer.

Along the lines of marketing, the video for "You Don't Know How it Feels" aired on MTV constantly, albeit with the word "joint" transplanted for the inverse "tnioj," which in practice sounded more like "neecowj" than anything else. But the image of him singing into the camera, without cuts, his tale of feeling alone, in need of a friend or two, reluctantly comfortable with his standing in the world, all struck me with indelible force.

The *Greatest Hits* record covered everything up to *Wildflowers*, so the love of that compilation coupled by my intrigue of the singles made the next purchase an easy one. I was 16 years old, out at the mall with my dad and sister when, strolling through the now-defunct Strawberries, I spotted *Wildflowers*, inspected its paper-bag cover, the songs on the back, year of release and reprised its three singles in my head. CDs at the mall were always overpriced, but I felt confident enough to plunk my \$15 on this disc, money hard-earned scoring baseball games and working as a paid intern at a local newspaper.

I went home with the disc, and through the first, second and third listens, I was sure that I had one for the ages. "You Don't Know How it Feels" sounded so much better coming through my boombox and, at night, through my headphones, than it had ever sounded on my TV or radio. It said everything that I hadn't been savvy enough to say for myself.

As a 16-year-old desperate to find a place and some sort of identity, "You Don't Know How it Feels" hit on a gut level. I didn't smoke and I didn't live alone, obviously. I wouldn't have known how to "roll another joint" or "head on down the road" without the requisite knowledge of drugs or driving. But I didn't have a girlfriend. I played sports, but I wasn't very good at them. I had fun at the school newspaper, but that was a rather dorky enterprise by nature and, stupidly, it didn't always make me feel better about myself. I didn't go to a lot of parties. So what's left?

The singer's sentiment, flawed or not, felt perfect. "No, you don't know how it feels to be me." It didn't say that he was the saddest guy in the world, or the loneliest, or the unluckiest. It's certainly not a positive statement, but it doesn't drift totally into negativity, either. It's so simple as to be

profound. Clearly and obviously, you don't know how it feels to be me. You never will.

My trouble at the time was that I wasn't completely sure how I was supposed to feel, even if I was the only one able to feel it.



**Stan Lynch, by all accounts, is a head-strong, fun-loving guy with deep opinions on how the drums should sound and the chops to back up any boasts. Lynch, too, had been an integral part of the Heartbreakers since the beginning. As the band recalls in Peter Bodanovich's 2007 film *Runnin' Down a Dream*, Lynch was a needed soul on the road in the early days, keeping the band loose as they traveled from club to club in an effort to get radio recognition in America.**

He provided harmony vocals in the days before Epstein replaced Ron Blair on bass, and on the drums, few could argue his

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influence or his might. Petty himself cites Lynch as helping change the drum sound of pop music in 1979, and one listen to the mighty thwack of the kit on his single "Refugee" should be enough to confirm that. Lynch was a strong personality and a stronger percussionist. He was one of the ingredients that helped turn the Heartbreakers into arguably America's best rock and roll band.

The divide, though, began to grow as Petty pursued his options outside of the band. Though the Heartbreakers, apart from Campbell, weren't amused as Petty recorded *Full Moon Fever* with Lynne and other famous friends, only Lynch wound up completely absent from the record. He was also, in private and later publicly, not impressed with a number of the songs on the album, and told confidants that playing the songs live made him feel like being in a cover band.

As Petty notes in *Runnin' Down a Dream*, Lynne's piece-by-piece style wore on the

band in the recording of *Into the Great Wide Open* as well. Though it's hard to argue with the results — some of Petty's best songs live on that album — the process put a further strain on a band who had been used to cutting tracks live and feeling that magical moment of musical conception together.

The strain was enough that when Petty set out to record *Wildflowers*, he brought in Rubin to guide the process. Rubin, himself, had made his name in hip-hop early, but was branching into rock and roll and, with him, bringing a credo of natural sounds and organic performances captured to tape. He'd later have some of his greatest success reviving Johnny Cash's career, putting the iconic country singer in stripped-down settings and letting his voice carry the music.

"I just hoped we could have songs as good as *Full Moon*," Rubin told Rolling Stone in 1995, "but with more rock and roll, more personal approach, as opposed to a pop presentation."

In this setting, it's easy to imagine that Lynch could have thrived in the open spaces of Rubin's world. But Petty left him out. He'd probably seen enough. Ferrone had already made an impression in the sessions, and in keeping with Petty's vision of the Heartbreakers as a band and not a collection of hired guns, Ferrone fit with the program, on *Wildflowers* and in the long-term. 18 years later, Ferrone is still in the Heartbreakers; Lynch would be gone before its 1994 release. It was time to move on.



**All through high school, college, early adulthood and even now, I've never felt totally comfortable. Without quite feeling that I need to leave my current situation in an effort to better myself, though that existed, I have yet to experience that very American of feelings, the one where everything is where it should be, where my career and personal life and home are just how I want it, where all aspects have colluded to that point of being "just right." How quaint.**

No, the reality has always been much more stark and, ultimately, annoying. School has ended, so it's time to find a new school. After that, it's time to find a new job. Beyond that, it's a new city, and a better apartment, a better job, and another city. Let's not forget new possessions and markers of status along the way, mind you. It never seems to end.

That long, unending cycle of want and need usually seems to give just short of its breaking point, however. Circumstances

change, jobs give way to new opportunities, relationships begin and end, leases are broken. Whether or not it's obvious, those inescapable markers on the road present themselves with relative familiarity. It's always easy to know when it's time to go.

"Time To Move On," then, exquisitely sums up the experience of knowing that it's time to carry along without comfortably knowing that whatever is next will live up to what came before. Petty sings of this, however, and is cognizant of the at-once unfamiliar and unmistakable signs that it is indeed time to carry on to the next phase of life.

"Broken skyline, which way to love land/which way to something better/which way to forgiveness/which way do I go?" In typically cool fashion, Petty captures the unsettled dissonance of every day life within a stanza that contains no obvious subject, no clear conflict and no immediate resolution. The singer, as the listener, is at the whim of circumstance.

It's a situation that has felt as relevant as any in my life, at least since I was old enough to sit up and pay attention to the fact that I was in control of relatively little. Whether or not I could admit that, it's the truth. It's up to us to work as hard as possible, to be as good as possible to those around us, to make as many solid choices as we can. The rest, like tornadoes and car accidents and explosions and layoffs and sickness, are out of our hands, yet ours to entertain and absolve.

"It's time to move on, it's time to get going/what lies ahead I have no way of knowing." Neither do any of us. But we still plow ahead regardless, uncomfortably settled in the fact that we can never know. What else could we do? We have to move on or be trapped in a present that is too soon to turn into a horrifying past. That is always worse than any present reality could construct. It is always time to move on.



**"I was writing this song one day and I was working on it,"** Petty tells the audience at a taping of Vh-1's "Storytellers" in 1999, "and I was calling the song, 'You Rock Me, Baby.' And, you know, you can't really say that anymore, because it was pointed out to me. The band just kind of held its head and said, 'you can't sing You Rock Me in a song.' Which, I suppose, made sense.

"This went on over two years of making this album *Wildflowers*, and I was asked every day if I had this song and I didn't have it, and one night it hit me: it's

'wreck me.' And all I did was change 'rock' for 'wreck,' and we had, 'You Wreck Me, baby.'"

Beyond being a great songwriter and one of my favorite performers, Tom Petty has always struck me as being a very funny, affable dude. He's self-deprecating when necessary, can crack a joke on stage or in an interview with the best of them and, generally, seems to appreciate the amazing

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lifestyle that being a rock and roll star has afforded him.

I saw Petty live for the first time in 2005, and beyond the stunning string of singalong hits that emanated from the stage to suck in the audience, what drew me in was Petty's attitude. I was 23 years old and I'd seen plenty of concerts at that point, in small clubs and big venues, with tiny bands and Rock and Roll Hall of Famers alike. And I'd never heard any singer say "thank you" as much as Petty did that night. In between nearly every song, Petty thanked the audience, breaking out into, "Aw, it's such a pleasure to be able to play these songs for you guys," or later, "the biggest thrill in the world for us is to be able to play for you, and we're gonna play some good songs tonight and have a good time."

Along with carrying the knowledge that his music has made his life better, as well as the lives of many others, Petty always seems to be conscious of that mystical good time. People don't go to outdoor rock concerts in the summer to think about mounting bills and the tenuous grasp they may or may not have on their jobs. They come to escape, to live in the moment and let the music wash over them.

As full-on, good-time, release songs go, "You Wreck Me" is hard to top. "Tonight we ride, right or wrong/Tonight we sail on a radio song," the story begins, blaring out after three semi-quiet cuts to break the tension of an at-that-point tense-yet-beautiful song cycle. The guitars and drums drive, with Campbell cutting a wicked solo in the break that rivals anything the Rolling Stones committed to tape in their 50 years of recording. In three chords, Petty sums up everything that rock and roll means in the

context of youth. It is the anthem of any 17-year-old who ever fell in love with Led Zeppelin and a girl at the same time. It speaks to anyone in their twenties, thirties and beyond who remembers how it felt to be young and still longs to be alive.

And it speaks to how crazy it is to be in love. When that rare moment of falling head over tea kettle for someone occurs, it's a life changing experience. Regardless of how it ends, whether in damage or in bliss or in regretful departing, that moment when love is realized is unlike anything else. It comes along a few of times in a lifetime if one's lucky. I've been in love enough times to count on one hand in my life with a finger to spare, and it's nothing to be trifled with.

The girls that "rock" you, you'll eventually forget. You might remember their face or how they wore their hair, but they'll eventually fade in your mind along with so many other memories competing for space. Not unlike a song, the few that "wreck" you have the capability to change everything.

It's no question as to which is the better experience. Whenever possible, trade "rock" for "wreck."



**More than many of his peers, Petty has** always seemed comfortable in front of a camera, specifically those that will later turn his images into fodder for MTV. Even before the once-music network launched in 1981, Petty had been busy making promo clips for his singles, including "Refugee" and "Here Comes My Girl." When MTV finally launched, Petty became a frequent face on the channel thanks to a relatively heavy catalog of commercials in the can.

In describing the video for his 1982 single, "You Got Lucky," in the *Runnin' Down a Dream* documentary, Petty notes the immediate power that these short films seemed to have.

"It was a huge MTV track," Petty recalled. "So the next thing we know, everywhere we go, people recognize all of us. Not just me, but everybody starts being recognized. And I started to realize that, 'man, a lot of people are seeing this.' All of a sudden the biggest radio station their was, was the TV."

Flash forward a decade or so, and while I was certainly listening to the radio early and often, I was still tuned in to MTV, watching videos in the last gasp of their days when videos were still heavily programmed. The college stations I listened to early in high school didn't play much Tom

Petty, nor did the Top 40 stations that seemed to swarm like a plague. But MTV, even in the mid-to-late 1990s, was still a Heartbreaker-friendly venue.

The image of Petty in the video for “It’s Good To Be King” is one that has stuck with me longer than it honestly has any right to have. There he is in his blue shirt, jeans and week-old beard, singing as images in over-exposed colors and pigments of so many music videos of the 1990s go about their dreary, stylish lives. He sings with a detached presence among this overly colorful cast of characters as they walk through beaches, bedrooms and chapels. There they are, notelessly playing along with Campbell’s guitar solo, blankly staring into the camera as their partner enters the room, strolling along in a daze as the life they so tenuously know collapses around them. In this way, it’s a startlingly effective use of the music video format. For better or worse, they are the kings of their insignificant little worlds.

It’s not hard to see that that was the point Petty was trying to make with this song. In art, aspirations of glory are as common a motif as any. The trick here was to paint that within the context of a sympathetic character trapped by mostly harmless thoughts of grandeur as the low din of real life slowly slides by and sinks further and further into the recesses of age.

With the video, Petty gives a number of faces to his many kings, both foreign and domestic and at various rungs of the economic ladder. Some of his kings are kings of their home, others kings within their minds. The level of delusion to the fact, whether it’s the guy sitting up in bed wearing a crown while a girl puts her pants on, or the Elvis Presley impersonator later, rests on the viewer. And in and out appears Petty, tapping along in his Chuck Taylor sneakers and giving a mischievous smile to the camera between lines.

Between the folks gliding in and out of the video and Petty’s own everyman visage anchoring the film, he succeeds in bringing a visual component to the song that doesn’t necessarily betray any image the listener may have had for his protagonist. By showing so many folks from so many situations, he avoids the pitfall of so many music videos.

The character I always envision singing this song is, perhaps stereotypically, a guy in a bar, gently spinning on a stool while he twists the neck of a beer bottle between his thumb and forefinger, alternating between



Michael Kaman, bottom left corner, readies the musicians.

finding patterns in the woodgrain of the bar and absentmindedly watching a hockey game on TV. Dressed in a blue shirt, he’s not the vision of sin or some kind of derelict. He’s just, for lack of a more appropriate term, a guy, alone in the tavern with plenty on his mind and trying to relax for a couple of hours and feel like he has some company.

This is the guy who won’t necessarily talk to you right away, the kind that looks to engage whoever sits next to him in small talk, but if you get him going, he’ll go. Opinions on beer come first, followed by the game, women, specifically the cute little brunette at the end of the bar. What’s that, you have a girlfriend? Good for you, man, I bet she’s a fun little number. I tell you what, I’d like a girl like that, I bet she’d treat me right. It’s been a while, it feels like. Shit, I’m rambling now, you take it easy man.

*“Excuse me if I have some place in my mind/Where I go time to time.”*

Along the way, Petty incorporates Kaman’s symphony to induce lush strings and stirring notes to the song’s breaks and coda. The strings, hanging back in the mix for much of the song, begin to take center stage just before the 4:00 mark as the piano-led refrain gives way to the majestic orchestration. The strings are soon augmented by light touches of the brass and winds, lifting the song from a daydream into truly regal territory. The final notes are of the violins stretching out the high note until it dies a natural death, the remaining sounds hanging in the air, then fading.

As lasting as the thought of Petty strumming along with his band of misfits

may be, the sound of Kaman’s musicians adding their melancholy progression to the words is what wins out over the listener. This song is a work in contradictions, a meeting of spare and reserved with the full and lush. That kind of music compromise and vision is certainly rare in the pop realm, and it may ultimately serve as the high water mark of not just this humble little record, but Petty’s career as a singer, songwriter, musician and troubadour.

*“It’s good to be king, whatever it pays.”*



**I had my heart broken for the first time** in January 2003. There had been minor failures before then, but that was the first time I experienced love ending. Of course, it doesn’t really end; two people are left trying to figure out where to go now that the shared experience they knew have ended.

I didn’t deal with it very well. The idea that I shouldn’t be afraid, that “it’s only a broken heart,” seemed condescending at worst or, more likely, just detached. Unrealistic. If I wasn’t supposed to be afraid of this, of being alone and being without the person for whom I cared more than anything, what is there to fear? Monsters?

In high school, “It’s Only a Broken Heart” was a nice companion when things were down, even if I didn’t understand the emotional heft of the subject. At that age, it seemed like a sleepy lullaby with an interesting guitar break at the end that

sounded somewhere between the worlds of acoustic guitar and sitar.

“What would I give to start all over again?” Petty sings in the break after another chorus assuring the subject that everything will eventually be okay. “To clean up my mistakes?”

It’s a mature statement that could only come from a seasoned artist familiar with years of falling short in emotional endeavors. Of course it’s never only a broken heart, but it is. Unless someone takes the ultimate escape, life always moves on. There are always bills to pay, mouths to feed and work to be done. What happens in the margins of our lives becomes mileposts of experience as we look back. The true work, sadly, comes in what we accumulate and what we accomplish. The emotional turmoil serves as footnotes to the primary article.

In the years after that first traumatic breakup, there were a couple more heartbreaks that certainly rivaled it. But none had quite the same, singular impact, thanks to the simple fact that age and years had piled on experience and other challenges. By 2009, I went through a real whirlwind that left me 3,000 miles from where I started and right back where I began. I had a lot ahead of me, which included changing nearly every facet of my life.

I bore down with blind, cold intensity. I had a few tasks: finding a new job, new apartment, new car, new dishes for the kitchen, new bed, new guitar, new life. I detached emotionally, as I thought the singer had when I was 16. I plowed forward in an attempt to show that I could make it on my own.

For those first few months, I put emotions aside. I couldn’t let them stop me. It was only a broken heart.



**Though seemingly settled into an** identity of an unflinching, heartfelt rock star with a distinctly American feel, Tom Petty went through quite a few labels at the outset of his career. Early on with Mudcrutch, he seemed to be channelling the roots of Southern rock, a la Lynyrd Skynyrd



The mixing board at Sound City.

or, to a lesser extent, the Allman Brothers Band. By the time of the Heartbreakers’ debut album, the sound of “Rockin’ Around (With You) and “American Girl” had him pegged as a Byrds-style revivalist, a musician intent on bringing the jangly sound of harmony friendly music back to the pop charts.

That was all before he was actually discovered as a radio-hit maker, so by 1977 and ’78, he found himself lumped in with the New Wave, listed alongside Elvis Costello and Talking Heads, not to mention The Clash and The Buzzcocks. Though the styles of those four bands didn’t totally mesh with what Petty was doing with the Heartbreakers, there was a common motif in having songs rule over style. All those bands, and several others, felt no allegiance to the over-bloated tendencies of rock radio’s biggest bands at the time, bands like Boston and Foreigner who were more interested in slick perfection over capturing a pure moment. The Talking Heads went weird. Costello was a singer-songwriter with a jagged edge. The Buzzcocks were power pop princes. The Clash had a righteous agenda. Petty had great songs and played them with a great rock and roll band. None were too far removed from the next.

As the years went on, the shows got bigger and the records grew more popular, Petty arguably became a better songwriter, one more comfortable within the craft and more willing to explore the studio space rather than cut a take live and move on. For those that survive the years and decades

with their reputation and spirit intact, it’s not uncommon. Reaching that point is, however, and it’s a move that should be celebrated when it’s made with integrity.

Most of *Wildflowers* reflects that maturity and growth. There are lush textures and raw touches balancing each other out as Petty and Rubin searched for the correct sounds and treatment for the record. But Petty and the Heartbreakers never ceased to enjoy breaking out and ripping. Their live shows, in the early days, in the 1990s and now, show as much. And that sound would be represented on this album as well.

No where is it as jagged and edgy, however, than on “Honey Bee.” For a band that has always, at its core, been a garage band in love with blues, rock and the 1960s, “Honey Bee” is an anthem declaring their love of the kind of raunchy rock that litters the *Nuggets* garage-punk collections. It’s the singer trying to tempt the woman, declaring his authority and strutting his stuff. There is no more hidden meaning here than when Robert Johnson, and later Robert Plant, asked his baby to squeeze his lemon ‘til the juice ran down his leg. “Come on now, gimme some sugar/Gimme some sugar, little Honey Bee.”

Landing right around the middle of an extremely introspective and heartfelt album, “Honey Bee” blasts out of the speakers, a wall of distorted guitars and crashing symbols with Petty’s gravelly croon poking through the noise. The drums are key, and while Ferrone shows he can play delicate as

well as tough, another drummer got a chance to make his mark on the song after the sessions let out.

With Lynch out of the band and Ferrone unavailable in the intermediary, Petty recruited former Nirvana drummer Dave Grohl to sit in with the band for an appearance on Saturday Night Live. With Grohl, the Heartbreakers performed “You Don’t Know How it Feels” and “Honey Bee,” and the unglued rocker was one that Grohl was all too happy to perform.

“I was really excited to play both songs, but mostly ‘Honey Bee,’ because ‘Honey Bee’s’ such a rocker,” Grohl said in the *Runnin’ Down a Dream* film. “It’s like the kind of thing a bunch of 16-year-olds would play in their garage to get off. It’s good, it’s killer, it’s a barn burner.”

It’s fun to look back at footage of the young Grohl sitting in with the band. The first thing I noticed in re-watching the clip was just how hard Grohl was hitting the drums. Grohl, to his credit, is possibly the best drummer of his era. He’s a monster who channels John Bonham in every kit he pounds with his extra-large sticks, and he was in full force here, head banging and limbs flying as he supported the Heartbreakers. To see someone playing with such force and aggression behind Petty was, if nothing else, fun. It certainly made me laugh.

What made that appearance work, though, was that it didn’t feel out of place. One look at the rest of the band revealed Petty in jeans and a corduroy jacket and Campbell in a t-shirt, outsized sweater and Converse sneakers. Everyone’s hair seemed a little unkempt and ratty. Everyone looked to be smiling. They weren’t much different than the 16-year-olds that Grohl referenced.

Simply, they were still just a rock and roll band cutting loose and playing a great song. Petty’s vision for the Heartbreakers was still on the original course he’d set 20 years earlier, clearing all retro-fitted labels along the way.



**If “Honey Bee” is Petty’s call to a group of 16-year-olds romping in the garage, “Cabin Down Below” is his version of the Chicago blues, an adult-themed rocker recorded to make his grown-up friends laugh and get off.**

Like “Honey Bee,” “Cabin Down Below” opens with a single distorted guitar ringing out a heavy, downstroke riff, followed quickly by a smack of the drums and the band kicking into a higher gear.

And like “Honey Bee,” it provides a necessary break in the tempo, moving from reserved, acoustic-based music back into the kind of rock and roll Petty, Campbell and Tench started playing as teenagers.

But beyond that and the volume in the room, the similarities end there. Because “Cabin Down Below” finds Petty in a deeper voice that turns much more sinister than he typically treads. As the singer calls for the girl to go with him “to the cabin down below,” he could be asking and

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*“It’s like the kind of thing a bunch of 16-year-olds would play in their garage to get off. It’s good, it’s killer, it’s a barn burner.”*

---

courting as much as he could be threatening. Even the final line of the song, “Baby let’s love in the cabin down below,” while clearly stating the intentions, don’t necessary give away the tenor of the conversation. They could be kids flirting clumsily behind the bleachers at a football game. They could be adults meeting at the lounge of the ski resort. They could be in a dive or an airport bar. He could have her locked up, or worse.

Because of all that, it serves as a standout song in Petty’s career, not just on *Wildflowers*. While I don’t think he intended to record that evil a song or send that type of message, the fact that their is a question makes this number unique in the Petty catalog. It’s the kind of song that, perhaps, would have sounded out of place on a Heartbreakers billed record. Here, though it’s the band behind him, it’s a solo Petty episode. There’s a bit more freedom to explore new territory, even if it’s with his usual cast of supporters.

As we’ve seen and will see, “Cabin Down Below” is not the only time Petty veers into ambiguous adult territory on *Wildflowers*, but he certainly sounds like he’s having more fun here than on any other point on the record.

Perhaps that, really, is the entire message. It’s not just the 16-year-olds that know how to have fun. The old guys can make just as much of a racket with some guitars and amps. They’ve just seem a bit more and know some darker stories than the kids.



**Being a kid at heart, I have a feeling that**

Petty is no stranger to the beautiful art of the mix tape. From countless interviews and articles, he seems too in-tune to all of the details and idioms of the lifestyle of the diehard music fan. The diehards memorize where the guitar solo starts in the groove of the 45. The diehard knows by heart how many seconds to count after hitting “fast forward” on a cassette before hitting “stop” to land right before the desired song. The diehard understands that there’s always between 30 seconds and a minute of buffer time on each side of a 90-minute tape beyond 45. The diehard gets that the mix tape is art.

Despite its lofty status in my being, when constructing mix tapes, mix CDs and playlists, I’m not likely to pull a song off of *Wildflowers*. It feels a bit off, as previously stated, to break up the flow of the story by singling out selections. Anything I pull would feel random and unfair.

But I have made exceptions. I’ve included “Time to Move On” on collections I’ve made for friends and well-wishers. “Honey Bee” has earned the cut occasionally. And in 2010, I took part in an experiment with a friend we called our “Audiobiography,” creating a playlist that summed up our introduction and subsequent immersion in music and how it had fueled each of us in the process.

This was as fun and challenging a project as I’ve ever had, right down to creating artwork and packaging for the entire product. I started at the beginning, as I had in life, with the Beatles’ “Paperback Writer,” and slid up through middle school and high school with classic rock, onto punk in college and then some of the great artists of the 2000s I’d seen grow up from clubs to arenas. The playlist spanned the likes of Oasis, Pearl Jam, Radiohead, the Ramones, Pixies, Wilco, Spoon and Queens of the Stone Age. Retracing my growth as a fan directly paralleled my growth as a person.

And to be sure, I had to include something from *Wildflowers*. Despite my preconceived aversion to splitting up the holy playlist, I couldn’t leave such an influential piece unrepresented in the very collection that was supposed to, above all, represent me.

So, why did I pick “Don’t Fade On Me?” There are a few reasons. For one, since it would be Petty’s only spot on the CD, I wanted something that wasn’t

necessarily a huge hit, a song that hadn't been screaming out of radios and movies for 20 years. I wanted a song that best captured the spirit of the album, something that had all of the key elements of the record. Namely, open spaces, beautiful instrumentation, interesting lyrics and that Petty touch that doesn't quite exist anywhere else.

I wound up choosing a song that doesn't quite sound like anything else in Petty's catalog. With just Petty and Campbell on guitar, it's an acoustic number

Like all the great songs, it will likely forever remain a mystery, along with Petty's motivation for writing the lyric and the tune. And like every great Petty song, it has the ability to resonate in myriad ways for listeners, replacing the subject with the one person in their lives that couldn't ever be served by substitution.

And, with all that, it's one of the more striking songs in Petty's catalog. I was sharing this playlist with another person who wasn't necessarily in tune with his work beyond the handful of singles that have

where he isn't singing from his own point of view, "To Find a Friend" and "Wake Up Time," Petty serves as an all-knowing storyteller relaying the details of what has happened to the song's subjects. In "To Find a Friend," he channels a dreamily sad voice that calls back to his role in an earlier hit, "Into the Great Wide Open." In "Wake Up Time," he serves as something of a conscience to the object of the song's direction.

Songs like "Hard on Me" indirectly give Petty the credibility to comment on the



Screen capture from *Furthur* - Down a Dream

Petty records his vocals.

with one foot in the blues and the other in heartbreak. The singer is pleading with a love or a longtime friend to not bail out and surrender, to not give in, to hang in there. This person is needed. There's no true replacement to be found.

Despite not sounding quite like anything else Petty has written, there are a few hallmarks of the man's career, notably the ambiguity that exists in the song. Who is he singing about? Is he pleading for someone to stay by his side in the face of a painful breakup? Is he begging a friend to stay out of the horrid pitfalls of hopeless drug abuse? Is he singing to Stan Lynch, his estranged drummer?

filled the air since the late 1970s, and as such, I saw myself as something of an ambassador for his music. *Beyond "Free Fallin'" and "Mary Jane's Last Dance," do you really know Tom Petty? Well, have you heard "Don't Fade On Me?" Well, try this out, let me know what you think.*

And with that, the aura of the mix tape lives on, the diehard sees another day.



**On "Hard on Me," as on a whopping 13** out of 15 songs on this record, Petty sings in the first person, another confessional that stops short of specifics but leans heavy on allusion and inference. In the two songs

lives and actions of the other beings whose worlds he has created. Even though he typically stops short on casting judgement on their actions, he words would certainly carry credence if he ever decided to do so.

With "Hard on Me," Petty is recounting the personal struggles he has endured in attempting to keep a relationship intact. Here, he runs through, again vaguely, all the actions he's taken and all that has been thrown back in his face as he struggle to maintain normalcy through this emotional divide. He's even a bit incredulous here, unnerved that, after all he's gone through, "you want to make it hard on me." The couplet in the bridge speaks loudest to the song's point of view

as Petty, either out of options or sick of them, asks, “Maybe if I tried I could turn the other cheek/Maybe, but how big do I have to be?”

He rides the line between inward reflection and outward accusation, calling out his partner and wondering what else he has to do to maintain the relationship. Of course, even those self-directed questions are really just outwardly aimed and disguised as a moment of self review in order to further inflict guilt. Who, in their lesser moments, is innocent of that little trick?

True, Petty sings in the first person more often than not, and that’s a tally that isn’t close. But, despite the repeated use of I, me, mine, he’s a skilled-enough songwriter to find new devices and new ways to express what he’s trying to express. Here, he’s not as sympathetic as his listeners might believe. His patience is wearing thin. He’s done all he can, and she still wants to make it hard on him.

While not being as immediately relatable as “You Don’t Know How it Feels,” at least on the surface, Petty takes another approach to conveying near-universal feelings without actually addressing any specific issue or conflict. Instead, he opts to channel the notion of feeling frustration at the hands of another, using a bitter voice that borders on condescension.

Perhaps, over time, he can look back at the situation with a little less baggage and see what went wrong. And, perhaps, he’ll decide to take that lesson and apply it to another third-party situation, like Eddie running off to Hollywood or his friends splitting into the uncomfortable, unspoken world of divorce.



**Paralleling the idea of found literature** or found poems, the concept of found songs, those that have been familiar for years yet somehow spin back into new relevancy much later, should be a legitimate one. “To Find A Friend” is one of those that lived on as a simply pleasant tune for years, a welcome addition to a collection that, without outshining the rest, merely complemented the set.

“To Find a Friend,” though, propelled by acoustic guitars and the easy shuffle of



Rick Rubin and Tom Petty.

Ringo Starr’s drums, is a truly heartbreaking tale of divorce breaking up a family and leaving the former partners searching desperately for a new way. The man moves on, moves out and changes nearly every aspect of his life in search of an identity that makes sense. The woman finds his replacement in an uncomfortable attempt to maintain the status quo, creating an uncomfortable situation in which everyone is trying not to speak too loudly.

A few years ago, I was thrown into the unsettling world of divorce, though 15 or 20 years before reaching what’s normally considered middle age. Even so, the confusion and hurt was unlike anything I’d ever been through, and I hope to never have to experience anything like it again. One calamity came after the other in the coming weeks, culminating in my sitting on a plane flying over New Mexico heading for a connecting flight in Chicago, merely left to wonder what went wrong for the next few months.

The idea of spinning that into this breezy acoustic tale seems so bizarre and practically pathological. But that refrain that repeats, that “the days went by like paper in the wind/everything changed, then changed again” is frighteningly true. Before long, I had a new car, a new apartment, new friends and a new life in an old city. The changes came fast and furious. She moved on, then I moved on. The effort required to bridge the gap between “amicable” and “friends” is a bigger one than I realized, certainly.

Now I try not to think about it. Which is a shame, but it’s the truth. But the heartbreak didn’t end there. Moving across the country to escape problems didn’t truly ease any problems. There are still myriad pitfalls and moral dilemmas.

I don’t believe Petty was singing autobiographically when he wrote this song. He’s not quite this direct when singing from a personal perspective, and true to form, he addressed his own divorce a few years later in a beautiful and restrained way on his 1999 album *Echo*. There, he dealt more in feelings than in details and outlines, relaying emotions in his trademark universal style, albeit a slightly veiled version of it.

But he was in his 40s by the time he wrote this, and I’m sure he’d suffered his own pitfalls, as well as friends going through this traumatic life change. “To Find a Friend,” then, serves as a hypothetical roadmap, a step-by-step way we all try to avoid the bigger issue while it stares us in the face. We’re all fallible, and we all want to be loved. It’s hard to know when to zig and when to zag. It’s hard to know when someone honestly and completely cares, and when someone is just confused and conflicted. It’s hard to do the right thing. It’s hard to get by alone in this world.

It’s hard to find a friend.



**So, lyrics are funny. They are there to** provide the bones of pop music as we know it. They are propped up and

considered as poetry, whether warranted or not. Lyrics are plastered across notebooks and t-shirts, read at weddings and funerals and shouted along with in cars and bars across the world. And, often enough, the fans singing along have no idea what the singer is saying.

I haven't been guilty of some of the more famous mondegreens of rock music, like "I was on the Muppets" in place of "I was up above it" in Nine Inch Nails' "Down In It," or "Can't find the butter, man" in lieu of Pearl Jam's "Better Man." But I occasionally have my struggles. I still can't decide if Jimi Hendrix is asking me to "hurry up and rescue me" or "execute me" in "I Don't Live Today." Every time I look it up, I seem to forget, too.

For much of my life, I never thought there were any ambiguous lines in *Wildflowers*. The lyrics are printed in the CD booklet and on the vinyl insert; it's not as if Petty has ever shrouded his songs in mystery the way Michael Stipe used to in R.E.M.'s albums. He wrote them, he sings them, and they're all laid bare for the consuming masses to see.

So the lyrics were there, and I've scanned them from time to time. But sometimes, staring at the lyrics is an unintentionally passive exercise, though I might feel like I'm studiously staring. Even with such lyric-heavy artists as Bob Dylan and Ryan Adams, the music has always come first for me. And appropriately, that's where my eyes go in the liner notes. *Wildflowers* is notable for having a rotating cast of characters bouncing between instruments. Campbell eschews his guitar for bass and even harpsichord on this album. Petty spends some time on the piano. Everyone seems to play the maracas. Each song, while blending in nicely with its trackmates, maintains its own personality in part because of this.

"A Higher Place," a song about retreating with a partner before resuming the real work, seemingly has the basic crew on board. Campbell and Petty man the guitars and bass, respectively. Tench

plays keyboards of all shapes and sizes, leading to some interesting, high-pitched textures in the final break. Ferrone is back on drums, with Castro again helping out on percussion. In place of the Heartbreakers, this is the core *Wildflowers* band.

The song jangles and rolls, with Petty's voice high above a mix of acoustic guitars and gently rolling symbols. The refrain of "find somebody can help somebody, might nobody no more" is one of the more memorable ones on the entire record, and it's one that has lodged itself in my brain rather permanently, from one of those first listens to today.

And it's not the only great line in the song, either. Going into the main break, Petty sings a rising line that reaches a crescendo as he declares, "We gotta get to a higher place/If we want to survive the



Mike Campbell and Benmont Tench.

Screen capture from *Rumin' Down a Dream*

wait," with the word "wait" stretched out over several beats before the drums slam back down into the rhythm. I'd always loved that sentiment, the idea of being on the run and needing to hide out if the two were to have any hope of surviving the perils of the wait. Looking back, it serves as a nice call back to his 1981 hit "The Waiting," a song that sums up the dangers and mental torment of having to sit patiently before the object of desire is reached. Take it on faith and to the heart, the waiting is absolutely the hardest part. If, in 1994, they'd want to survive the wait, they'd need to duck for cover.

Except, that's not the line.

For at least 13 of the 14 years that I've known and loved this album, I'd assumed

that Petty was hoping to "survive the wait." At some point in the past few months, I noticed Petty's voice curling a bit as he came down on the "aaaaayyt..." of the extended "wait," before the music kicked back in. I was in my car, and when it ended, I sent the song back to the beginning and listened again. And when it was over, I did again, waiting for the spot.

"I can't believe this," I thought to myself, or possibly said out loud to myself since I was driving and I'm prone to ridiculous imaginary arguments as I wind up and down highways alone. "I think he's saying, 'weather?'"

Sure enough, when I got home I looked at the lyrics. "We gotta get to a higher place/If we want to survive the *weather*." Damn.

Like most people with pride and any sense of stubbornness, I don't like admitting when I'm wrong. On the grand scale of things to be wrong about, this is certainly a minor one. But I'd spent practically my entire adult life with an incorrect notion about a song I'd listened to so much. And how had I noticed Tench playing the harmonium in the liner notes but not the clearly printed type of the word, "weather?" In life, even when we're paying close attention, we all have the ability to scan and pick out half-truths in spite of hard evidence

of the latter. We choose the bits that are pleasing, the ones that help us feel better and get us through the day. We invent realities where reality doesn't live. This can sometimes manifest itself in cruel, disruptive ways, leading to paranoia and breakdowns of trust between people, shattering lives and relationships in the process. Picking and choosing what registers, even subconsciously, can be dangerous.

But, many times, it's just funny. Some people can't find the butter. Others are waiting to see Trent Reznor on the Muppets. For years, I had to get to a higher place to survive the wait. And sometimes, I still do.



With *Wildflowers*, Petty wanted to explore the studio space and push the limitations of recording tape in an effort to get something that went beyond five guys banging around on a stage. He brings in different people, searches for new textures and experiments with his sound enough that *Wildflowers* wound up sounding at once completely his, but fresh and new.

Of course, he did record with most of the Heartbreakers, and on “House in the Woods,” Petty lets them stretch out within this new context and really give the record a heavy, sobbing punch. The song’s message is a simple one, calling for an escape from a hectic life with a girl in one arm and a guitar in the other, and Petty sings it passionately.

What takes the song from rote to brilliant, however, is simply the beautiful musicianship of the band. Here, the Heartbreakers jump into the song almost immediately, giving Petty a tight, loud canvas to paint his lyrics. Epstein harmonizes with Petty on the chorus as well as he ever has. And the band alternately jumps and lurches, jamming in conjunction with Kaman’s orchestra for a sound that is so clearly theirs, but given new life.

The song’s coda plays like an upbeat variation on the Beatles’ “I Want You (She’s So Heavy),” trading the doom and tension for a rolling battle of guitars over a bed of horns. And the interplay of Petty with most of the Heartbreakers is typically telepathic and, in the right context, breathtaking. Campbell navigates the space of the augmented band and relays some amazing sections of guitar that are uniquely his. He has always had an interesting tone, soft yet biting, and a signature phrasing where his solos sound like Yardbirds rave-ups run backwards through the turntable. It’s all in full effect as the band vamps towards the hanging note at the song’s conclusion, feeling more inevitable than imminent.

For a record that’s eminently repeatable, “House in the Woods” fits in so well with the rest of the album in keeping the songs fresh, interesting and always moving forward, albeit in something of a circle. Unlike the rest of the songs on *Wildflowers*, though, this is the only song that could be put on repeat and played endlessly, a score to whatever project might need a soundtrack.

But this isn’t a mix tape or, even more generically, a playlist. This is an album, and aside from having to stand alone as a piece of work, each song needs to play by the

rules of the album and set up the next track. And all those guitars and horns romping towards the finish line and ending on that hanging sound give way to a subtle, serene chapter.

“House in the Woods” is an excellent song and a team player, one that fits Petty and the Heartbreakers’ mission statement as well as any. But it quickly cedes center stage for a masterwork.



**Of all those common themes that have** been attached to Petty — Southern charm, heartland appreciation, love songs, American rock and roll, take your pick — one constant is his ability to write to all groups. Again, he doesn’t write in specifics and he’s also not purposefully abstract or difficult. He simply has the innate ability to put his listeners inside of his songs no matter his subject or intention. It’s the key ingredient that has turned so many of his

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## *What takes the song from rote to brilliant, however, is simply the beautiful musicianship of the band.*

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songs into huge radio and TV hits. Who is the girl in “You Got Lucky?” What is the subtext of “Learning to Fly?” Really, what is he singing about on “Free Fallin’?”

That touch of ambiguity is at its finest and most beautiful on “Crawling Back to You,” the penultimate song on this record you’ve already read so much about. This is a song where staring at the lyrics for weeks or years could yield few solid answers, if any, and myriad possibilities.

“Waiting by the side of the road/for day to break so we could go,” begins the song, and it seems innocuous enough as it starts to roll into what appears at first to be a couple’s travel monologue. But the story begins to twist and evolve. Soon, a ranger and a chamber maid are in a hotel room. It soon turns to a cowboy and a sidekick in a saloon shootout, fending off shots from an errant Indian. Are these separate episodes from the same character’s life, or are they glimpses into different lives?

In either case, the narrative is tied up nicely in the final verse. Whether they’re the

words of the collective or simply solitary thoughts from someone who has had quite the adventurous life, they sum up those classic themes of longing and regret.

*“I’m so tired of being tired  
Sure as night will follow day  
Most things I worry about  
Never happen anyway.”*

And with that, the story is essentially over. Tired of being tired, the singer is just looking to be back where he belongs. He belongs with his love on his arm. He belongs where he feels free. Calling back to the first track, after that long and winding road of sentiment and separation, no matter where he is, he keeps crawling back. It’s a forlorn, beautiful thought. And whether it’s the thoughts of one person or those of Petty’s cast in this play-within-a-song, it works.

But why does it work? Simply, that refrain. In Petty’s entire catalog, there is not another moment that seems so crystalized in helpless love, in an emotion draped in sadness and powerlessness. It’s two voices — Petty on lead, and then Petty again with Epstein harmonizing — and floating over a clean, quiet electric guitar, it is without peer. The rest of the song, whatever it may be, serves to bring the song to this moment. If that was the exclusive point of the verses, then they would have been justified, their job one well done.

The fact that they’re still so mysterious pushes the song to another plane. Countless bands in this never-ending rock and roll era have admitted as much, that their lyrics aren’t poetry so much as a way to give the song’s instrumentation a proper bed or, regrettably, to get the song back to a poppy hook that guarantees chart positions and record sales.

“Crawling Back to You,” then, becomes a special feather in Petty’s top hat. More than any other song he’s written, before or since, he navigates the great spaces possible in songwriting, and most importantly, he nails it all together with a chorus so good as to render the entire song nearly beyond analysis. All that’s left, after lyrics, instruments, chords and charts, is music, pure and infinite. That mystical combination that so many musicians are after, Petty finds.



**Nearly any song that attempted to** follow such a masterful piece as “Crawling Back to You” would feel like a letdown.

Petty, it has been shown, is something of a realist and understands the difficulties with making a great album and maintaining momentum from start to finish. So, with the final song on a record that was so long in the making, he accepts the challenge of coming down from a great song with grace. “Wake Up Time,” a summation of many of the emotions and themes of a wonderfully varied album, then, captures the spirit of *Wildflowers*, albeit with a sound that is unlike any on the record.

Here, Petty mans the piano, a first on this album which has seen him and the others bounce around so many instruments. Campbell lays down the rhythm on bass with Ferrone on drums, and Kaman orchestrates the rest. Petty moves from a high, soft voice, and I imagine him singing to his many narrators from the record’s first 14 songs.

“You’re just a poor boy a long way from home,” he sings before moving into a speaking voice, telling his subject that it’s wake up time, time to open up your eyes. It’s essentially a lullaby to all the tired souls who have put themselves through so much, for all the tortured creations of his muse. It must be eventually taxing to keep creating these imaginary lives so full of longing and regret. Writers get attached to their creations, and I imagine that Petty was no different.

The overriding theme of the album, the simple love of a boy and a girl, is addressed at the start of the third verse, and for an artist so groomed on that motif from years of rock and roll singles, from Elvis to the Beatles to Springsteen, with the blues and soul mixed in for good measure, Petty more or less captures the struggle in one line: “Well, if he gets lucky, a boy finds a girl/To help him to shoulder the pain in this world.”

That’s all it is, really. And, understanding poetic license, it could obviously be a boy and a boy or a woman and a woman, however the binary dynamic happens to play out. The point of the song, of the record, of the music, of life, is that no one wants to go through all this alone. There’s so much daily nonsense that can drag a vital soul into the gutter, so much mental clutter to poison the positive mind. As time goes on and age sets in, it becomes harder and harder to maintain optimism in the face of all the ugliness the world has to offer. If any of us are lucky, we won’t have to face every challenge and every hurtful, hateful life event alone.

Keeping that all in mind at all times is exhausting, of course. And that’s why this

song is here. It’s going to take time, he says, and it’ll be all right. But it’s a battle that can’t be won in one day. So, here it is, dawn is breaking late in the record, and it’s time to resume the slow, arduous fight against ills of the world. It’s also a new day, and the challenges might be easier to overcome than they had been.

It happens every day. It’s wake up time. Every day, if we’re lucky, we make decisions that bring us to the next moment in our lives, the next morning. The fight never ends until it’s too late. Until then, it’s time to face the world again.

*“It’s time to open up your eyes/ And rise, and shine.”*



**In compiling my thoughts on this** record, such an obvious landmark in my life, I went searching through some old crates of pictures, CDs and tapes and came across a blank cassette of this album, an obvious essential in the days when driving around in my dark green Saturn meant recording my favorite discs and songs to tape to make portable, not to mention a walkman that was a constant companion in high school and even the earliest days of college.

That cassette still plays fine, with three quarters of the album on the first side of a 90-minute tape and the final four songs on the other. It’s one where I did my best to match my handwriting on the spine to the scrawl on the record’s brown cover, and then on the front of the j-card, the songs are printed neatly with a rolling-ball pen.

For whatever reason, I didn’t note what I used as filler on the second side — thanks to the limitations of the medium and annoyances of rewinding, filler tracks were necessary — but on listening, it sounds like I took my favorite bits of *Echo*, the 1999 album Petty recorded with the Heartbreakers that I had been given for my 17th birthday shortly after its release. As has been stated ad nauseam, Petty is a master songwriter, and the songs I included — “Room at the Top,” “Swingin’,” “Echo” — reside among my favorites. I loved that album when it came out, and I still love it now.

But it was painfully obvious that I hadn’t recorded *Echo* to a blank tape in full and filled in the back-end with four or five songs from *Wildflowers*. That would have been patently ridiculous, then or now. *Echo* is a very good album that will never completely leave my vast rotation. *Wildflowers* is a statement, a milepost in my life, a constant companion and, when

surveying his entire catalog, Petty’s masterpiece.

Commercially, the album was a tremendous success. Coming on the heels of the *Greatest Hits* album and the hit single “Mary Jane’s Last Dance,” *Wildflowers* made it to no. 8 on Billboard’s US albums chart, selling more than five million copies in North America. The band was all over television for more than a year, played sold out shows and served as a mid-career peak for Petty. But artistically, nothing in his back catalog could touch it.

Tying in delusions of grandeur, heartbreak, melancholy, childish romp, packaged in one very earthly collection, bound by an unassuming cover and a singer looking off in the distance as a bus brings him to his next destination, his next night’s work, *Wildflowers* is the moment that rock and roll artists dream of. In its own way, it contains nearly all of the elements of any great American novel, disregarding the unifying narrative in favor of syncopated themes that thread and fly through the songs, dropping in and diving back as needed.

The great novels are not excerpted often; they are classified as required reading and devoured whole. Fans of literature may discuss their favorite passages and chapters, but the idea of breaking a chapter out of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* or Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* is absurd.

On *Wildflowers*, Petty crafted a complete statement, one that would not stand for being split up. At least not to these ears, anyway. Other songs may join the party if they wish, but only if the original record has said all that it set out to say.

Like any great piece of art, *Wildflowers* has the ability to change its subject forever if circumstances are right. Obviously, dominos were in line for me and I have never been quite the same. Even if it’s impossible to know how it feels to be me, know that I come crawling back. I always come crawling back. 🌀

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