

The Life and Death of Tom Petty: Turning Anger into Ambition

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Tom Petty, his first wife and their young daughter were eating breakfast in 1987, when their house burst into flames. Following an investigation, arson was determined its source, but the perpetrator was never found. Petty said he and his family “were shaken for years after” the disastrous fire, which destroyed the entire house except his basement studio. He decided to preserve the studio and built a new house on top of it. The experience served as inspiration for his song “Won’t Back Down.”¹

The lyrics “You can stand me up at the gates of Hell/ But I won’t back down” reference his close encounter with death but act as a source of encouragement for millions of listeners who are struggling in their own lives.¹

From every complex emotion, Petty derived a simple lyric. Rooted in personal testimony, his music created a shared experience. He once told an interviewer, “I turned anger into ambition. Any sort of injustice would outrage me. I couldn’t contain myself.”²

¹Bryanawawzenek. “The Day Tom Petty’s House Burned Down.” *Ultimate Classic Rock*, 17 May 2014.
²Pareles, Jon. “Tom Petty, a Mainstay of Rock With the Heartbreakers, Dies at 66.” *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 3 Oct. 2017.

and a battle with heroin addiction.³ What might have served as excuses throughout his life pushed him to create music which would comfort others and push them to stand their ground when faced with hardship.

For more than 40 years, Petty created some of the most relatable music in the world. Petty’s strength as an artist was rooted in his combined dedication to rock’n’roll and adaptability to trends. He maintained his original base but cultivated new fans through diversifying his approach to the genre. After headlining Bonnaroo with the Heartbreakers in 2006 and 2013, he told *Rolling Stone Magazine*, “We’re one of those old, lucky bands. Young people come to see us. It makes a difference.”²

The Heartbreakers were “one of those old, lucky bands,” and not just because they could draw young people to their concerts. With the exception of Stan Lynch, who left the band in 1994, and Ron Blair, who left in 1982 but rejoined in 2002, they stuck to-

³Chiu, Melody. “How Tom Petty Overcame an Abusive Childhood, Heartbreaking Divorce and Heroin Addiction to Find True Love.” *PEOPLE.com*, *Time Inc.*, 3 Oct. 2017.



Petty used many of his life’s injustices as fuel for his work. Besides the loss of his home, he suffered childhood abuse, a difficult divorce

gether.⁴ Their 40th anniversary tour, which ended on September 25, included four of the original band members from their 1976 debut.⁵

In Petty’s last interview with the *LA Times*, he said “The thing about the Heartbreakers is, it’s still holy to me. There’s a holiness there...We’re a real rock ‘n’ roll band — always have been. And to us, in the era we came up in, it was a religion in a way. It was more than commerce, it wasn’t about that. It was about something much greater. It was about moving people, and changing the world...It’s unique to have a band that knows each other that long and that well. I’m just trying to get the best I can get out of it, as long as it remains holy.”⁶

Just one week after finishing the 40th anniversary tour with the Heartbreakers, Petty died unexpectedly of cardiac arrest, surrounded by family, friends and his bandmates.⁷ Just as the music he created during his life evoked an emotional response, his death deeply saddened people around the world. While his life ended on October 2, his legacy will live on in his music. ■

⁴“Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 2 Oct. 2017.

⁵“Tom Petty.com Tom Petty Tour.” *TomPetty.com Official Website*, 1 Apr. 1970.

⁶Lewis, Randy. “Tom Petty’s Final Interview: There Was Supposed to Have Been so Much More.” *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Oct. 2017.

⁷“Tom Petty: 1950 - 2017 - TomPetty.com Official Blog.” *TomPetty.com Official Website*.