

# LEFT OF THE DIAL



**Tom Petty**  
*Highway Companion*  
(American Recordings/  
Warner Brothers)

It's not unheard of for a major, established bandleader like Tom Petty to release a solo record where he plays nearly every instrument himself. John Fogerty (who appears at Darien Lake Performing Arts Center this Sunday with Willie Nelson) played every instrument on his 1972 *Blue Ridge Rangers* album and again on his big comeback *Centerfield* in 1985, of which he said, "I'm a pretty good bar band." When an artist has both the vision and the skill to do it, the end result is arguably as close to the sound he had in his head as a fixed recording in a tangible medium can ever come to be. If that's the case, then *Highway Companion* (American Recordings/Warner Brothers) is proof that Petty's head is still buzzing with great music. These 12 new tunes, on which he sings, plays guitar, harmonica, some bass, keyboards—even drums and lead guitar—have a more stripped-down feel than his previous solo releases, *Wildflowers* and *Full Moon Fever*. He does get help from Heartbreaker Mike Campbell and Traveling Wilbury Jeff Lynne—who also gets primary producer credit while avoiding his glossy Electric Light Orchestra treatment. "Saving Grace" finds Petty's inimitable voice laying down this image on a riff borrowed from John Lee Hooker: "I'm passing sleeping cities/Fading by degrees/Not believing all I see to be so." Petty is a master of these trippy little ambiguous observations. Couple that with his deadly ear for a hook and you get the irresistible "Flirting With Time," a jangly meditation that builds to a chorus that's at once funny and haunting: "You're flirting with time, baby/Flirting with time, and maybe/ Time, baby/Is catching up with you." "Big Weekend," a blow-out-the-tubes road trip anthem, advances the truism: "If you don't run you rust." Nearly every song here involves travel of some kind—leaving home, returning home, searching for a home or bidding farewell. Petty's been through some stressful times in the past decade, including a difficult divorce, a flareup with corporate radio over his last CD, *The Last DJ* and the loss of close friends and collaborators George Harrison and bassist Howie Epstein, who died of a drug overdose. This album is an affirmation that life is often filled with detours and dead ends, but that, if you keep going, it's possible to arrive back at "Square One"—a tender ballad about coming full-circle to a place where your slate is clear and your future ahead feels great and wide open. On the clichéd road of life, it's still good to know you can have a companion like T. P. riding shotgun.

—buck quigley

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers play Darien Lake Performing Arts Center this Tuesday, August 15 at 7pm, with very special guest the Allman Brothers.



**Willie Nelson**  
*The Complete Atlantic Sessions*  
(Atlantic/Rhino)

One among plenty of tags to stick on one William Hugh Nelson is "survivor." At 73 years old, he's outlived most contemporaries, overcome a crippling tax debt, made hits and hard earned his American legend status. Willie's been beating the odds and surviving his whole career. Flash to the early 1970s, when Willie was closing in on two decades as a songwriter and performer. The only thing that prevented him from being a failure was a string of writing credits on songs that hit for the likes of Patsy Cline, Ray Price and Farron Young. He had been all but run out of Nashville by the Music Row establishment and returned to his native Texas. A chance Austin meeting with producer and Atlantic records bigwig Jerry Wexler found Nelson signing to the label's newly formed country division based (where else?) in Nashville. This period marked the beginning of Nelson's ascendance. The heart of *The Complete Atlantic Sessions* is a pair of albums, 1973's *Shotgun Willie* and 1974's *Phases and Stages*, two of the most important country records of that decade. Nashville saw Nelson as poison to their status quo because he refused to fit the mold. Therein lies the wonder of his two records with Atlantic: Nelson was just beginning to test the limits of his musical alchemy. He blended country's honesty and charm with the fiddle stomp of mountain music, jazz chords and progressions, R&B boogie and singer-songwriter intimacy and detail, all with rock-and-roll grit and fortitude. On *Shotgun Willie* Nelson pulls together his own compositions, as well as Bush/Stroud's "Whiskey River" and a pair of standards by Texas swing titan Bob Wills, for a loafing but spirited work of genius. Recorded in Muscle Shoals with Wexler, *Phases and Stages* was heavier in concept and in tone, exploring a dissolving marriage (something Nelson had fully and personally researched twice at that point) with "his" and "hers" sides of the album. The darkness found in the variations of the title theme as well as the grimness laid bare on "Pretend I Never Happened" are tempered by the rollicking "Bloody Mary Morning" and the whimsical axioms of "Heaven and Hell." Yet, while both of the latter have a light, good-natured air, the bleakness is never far beneath the surface. *Phases and Stages* remains a magnificent album and a classic among concept records. In addition to outtakes from both records, this package also includes a disc of live recordings from the era. The amazing thing about all of this is that Willie's brief dalliance with Atlantic is being so celebrated. At the time, these records were considered failures. In fact, Atlantic closed up its Nashville operation following their release and a disgruntled Wexler quit and turned Nelson free. Call it the healing hands of time. Further proof of the potency of this narrow but important period is that to this day much of the meat of Willie and Family's live show consists of these songs. "Whiskey River" is such an anthemic part of Willie's legacy that it often figures as the opening and closing number of the show on the same night...and it's sure good enough to drown in.

—donny kutzbach

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