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Echoes of Past and Present

MATTHEW CRIPPEN AND MATTHEW DIXON

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Most of us have been through a bad break-up, maybe even one that took far too long in coming around. What album, fired up extra loud and on constant repeat, helped you to get through it? Now that you've hopefully moved on, how often do you reach for that album? Likely never.

Tom Petty finally ended his first marriage around the time he was composing *Echo*. In interviews with biographer Warren Zanes, he described this time as a dark, despondent phase. Wounded, he fell into heroin use, his health degrading to the point that he took to using a cane; his therapist even remarked that people with his level of depression usually don't survive.

Like most people would want to do, Petty went to lengths to repress this period, avoiding videos for the album and its songs on the follow-up tour and reporting little memory of its making. The crisis Petty experienced during the writing and recording of *Echo* was arguably the worst in his life, and the thoughtfulness and self-reflection that traumatic circumstances spur pervade the album. So too does the tendency to look backwards in times of crisis, whether in hopes of finding solidity in the past or just out of an exhausted inability to cope with the present. When you have no way of knowing what lies ahead, why not settle into the dream of a long time ago?

In history, this sort of thing occurs regularly. We see cultures reverting to old gods and traditional ways during moments of great upheaval. Existentialists and psychoanalysts have noted that the same happens on an individual level, and the retrospective feel of *Echo* is one of looking to the past for

the sake of surviving the present. This is to suggest two dominant themes, albeit without reducing the album to just these: crisis and reversion.

Throughout the album Petty sings of suffering and recovery, being knocked down and rising, getting high and coming down, all different ways of expressing similar traumas, signaling the crisis. The reversion shows up in the form of recurring lyrical and musical references to bygone eras—echoes of the past, as it were, with some songs specifically gesturing at critical periods in Petty's life. This nostalgic style in fact typifies Petty's catalog. Throughout his career he made music steeped in past rock traditions, and Southern rock, which loves nothing quite as much as declaring how much better things used to be, claims him as a seminal figure.

Petty clearly associated *Echo* with personal grief, refusing to listen to it for years. As with many other examples of art, however, the album was also a way of surviving and growing beyond a clear and present trauma. It compelled him to acknowledge and confront important parts of his past, including his wife of twenty-plus years and perhaps even an abusive childhood. For Petty, clinging to fragments of the past—musical and otherwise—appears to have been a way of coping with a difficult present and the relentless march of time.

Same Sad Echoes

The experience of crisis reverberates internally throughout *Echo*, with phrases and sentiments bouncing around and reappearing in multiple songs. The album simultaneously looks outward and backward, cataloging events from Petty's life and, to some extent, the shared experiences of those living through the same periods as him.

Perhaps the most dominant theme echoing through the album is that of being up or down, high or low, and needing eagle wings to get over things, as Petty tells us in "Rhino Skin." The same song emphasizes the struggle of life—needing thick skin and elephant-sized balls if you don't want to crawl and get broken and lost. Earlier in the album in "Counting on You," he laments that somebody is going to let him down.

"Free Girl Now" has an upbeat melody and instrumentation, but is schizophrenically contrasted against a story of a

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woman pushed down, held under the thumb of her boss, sexually harassed and forced to keep her mouth shut. This is something Petty understood to some extent, insofar as any musician battling record execs like he did can be said to have suffered some kind of emotional abuse. At the same time, the song looks to an unrealized future when she will no longer be a slave, made to suffer and forced to crawl, this last sentiment exactly repeating what is said in "Rhino Skin."

"Accused of Love" has legal intimations in the title and mentions a grinning attorney, possibly in reference to Petty's divorce. Most songs contain passages about day and night, moonlight and the Sun. Although some of this is trivial, especially given their repetition, images of sinking and setting suns form a persistent trope that underscores the sorrow of the album.

The constant talk of being knocked down, let down, getting up, sinking into and rising above troubles—in addition to connoting elevated and deflated moods—points to the highs and lows of drug use. "Rhino Skin" emphasizes that you need a tough exterior or else you'll give in to needles and pins. "A Room at the Top" is a somber tune about love and refusing to come down, and its first verse speaks about drinking and forgetting what went wrong. Its pleading sentiments, which have Petty begging for someone to love him because he's not so bad, are echoed in "Lonesome Sundown," which concludes with the line: "Please believe in me."

In the title track of the album, Petty sings about the same sad echo and likewise speaks of pills and poison liquid. But he needs more validation, more safety among his fellow humans, than he could find in his drug-addled stupor in the chicken shack.

The highs and lows of trauma and drugs are difficulties people battle through, and the question of whether or not to keep fighting resounds in "I Don't Wanna Fight," "Swingin'," and "Billy the Kid." The last two of these songs exhibit nostalgia for past American icons, with protagonists going down hard like the Old West gunfighter who died at twenty-one; or going down swinging like prizefighter Sonny Liston; or again like Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, and Sammy Davis in punny references to the Swing era. Petty chose his examples from among the old-timers as opposed to a more contemporary figure like Mike

Tyson or Michael Jackson, seeming to find a balm by mostly dwelling in the past and long familiar.

Is He about to Give Out?

The song "About to Give Out," in addition to connotations of being on the brink of losing a fight, likewise tips its hat to past icons. It does so in a way, moreover, that appears to chronicle critical periods in Petty's life. Davy Crockett in a coonskin town gets repeated mention, with Roy Rogers referenced near the end of the song. Rogers was a singer and actor, particularly known for westerns, a genre obviously emphasized in songs such as "Billy the Kid" and "Swingin'," with the latter's line about silver spurs.

Rogers was extremely popular during Petty's childhood in the 1950s, just around the time Disney produced its wildly successful series about Davy Crockett and marketed coonskin caps to children around the Western world. Petty claimed to Zanes that television educated him and saved him during his early years, and TV gets an additional mention in "A Room at the Top." Zanes adds that Petty and his brother Bruce obsessively watched westerns.

These songs—and especially "About to Give Out," with its focus on TV—accordingly return to Petty's early years, and he perhaps took solace in childhood references, as many do when dealing with trauma. Something similar may hold for the biblically named Abraham and Moses, who also show up in the song, but with the latter drinking and everyone finding themselves beaten up and naked in the bushes. As it happens, Petty's father was a drinker too, and physically and emotionally abusive to his children, so this may be another reminiscence about childhood, an echo of the past brought to the fore by trauma Petty experienced while making the album.

"About to Give Out" looks to other periods in Petty's life, in this case, happier times. Petty opens the track by singing about Ricky and Dickey, names of two of his 1960s bandmates from his teen years in Florida. The state itself is brought up in the first verse, specifically with a mention of Daytona. A little later, the song moves to the next decade, referencing the 1970s hit "Delta Dawn." This tune is nostalgic—a mix between country, gospel, and folk in the vein of the traditional song "Can the

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Circle Be Unbroken?" This song, moreover, was one that was on heavy rotation during Petty's formative years, with hits recorded in 1972 and 1973 by Tanya Tucker and Helen Reddy, along with numerous others in the same period, including Waylon Jennings and Loretta Lynn.

The early 1970s was an exciting period for Petty, who arrived in Los Angeles in 1975, and he surely remembered that time nostalgically. This was just when his career was taking hold. It marked the birth of his first child, Adria. Shortly before this, his first marriage occurred, too—the relationship that finally gave out right before *Echo*.

Arriving at endings often throws the mind back to beginnings, and this is a plausible explanation for Petty's reflections on the early 1970s in "About to Give Out." At the same time, he may have simultaneously sought comfort in the good times, not just in the 1970s, but the previous two decades as well. Given that earlier decades also contained the trauma of having an abuser for a dad, the current crisis likely reminded him of that earlier one, pushing his mind back there for this reason as well. This fits with the internal echoes in the album, which clearly meditate on distressing circumstances.

Looking to a Higher Place

Being down often leads us to dwell on better times, and we see this at various points in the album. One of the high points in Petty's career came nearly fifteen years after the release of his first album, when he experienced a renaissance working with Jeff Lynne in the late Eighties and early Nineties. During this period, he produced *Full Moon Fever*, *Into the Great Wide Open*, and two albums with the super-group the Traveling Wilburys, comprised of himself, Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Jeff Lynne, and Roy Orbison. The streak continued into the post-Lynne period, with *Wildflowers* released in 1994, considered by many to be the artistic highpoint of Petty's career.

In *Echo*, the referencing to Petty's period working with Lynne is no more evident than in "Accused of Love." Shades of *Full Moon Fever* can clearly be heard in both the instrumentation and mixing of this song. Along with the blend and style of guitars, bouncing acoustic rhythms and embellishments, unpretentious drumming and non-syncopated guitar solos

without string bending, its clean, layered and airy production specifically bring to mind "Yer So Bad," co-written with Lynne. Both songs also combine uplifting yet jaded lyrics, although admittedly less jaded in "Accused of Love."

The musical homage paid to this period is further reinforced by lyrics pointing to the Heartbreakers' time as Dylan's backing band on the 1987 Temples in Flames Tour, just at the beginning of Petty's collaboration with Lynne. In "Accused of Love," Petty sings about London and Mayfair, an area near Hyde Park and in which the Beatles shared a home in the early 1960s. The final leg of the Temples in Flames tour was in London, and the Beatles reference is fitting since George Harrison and Ringo Starr showed up for it. Lynne was also there, and hence—with Dylan, Lynne, and Petty—all of the Wilburys, except for Roy Orbison.

The song also mentions driving through rain, and a borderline hurricane hit the city immediately after the last show, leaving a lasting impression on Petty, according to the Zanes biography. Taken with the musical style, the song points to the late 1980s and specifically to last stops on the Bob Dylan tour that marked the beginning of a new musical period for Petty. The production values and general tone of this song also point just beyond this period and particularly to "A Higher Place" from *Wildflowers*.

At the same time, "Accused of Love"—like so many others on the album—contains sad echoes. It does, to begin with, because Petty does not speak of being in love, but being accused of it. Moreover, it's in this period that Orbison died, shortly before he could enjoy the success of his hit "You Got It," co-written with Lynne and Petty, and on which they both performed. This early death may have been on Petty's mind because others were imminent.

It was during the recording of *Echo* that his longtime friend and Wilburys bandmate Harrison was diagnosed with the throat cancer that would take his life in 2001. The production of *Echo* also coincided with the time that the Heartbreakers' bassist and backing vocalist Howie Epstein was beginning a final descent into heroin addiction that eventually led to his death in 2003. Petty indicated that he saw this on the horizon too, and the pain of this may have been amplified by his own struggles with addiction and life in general.

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Musical Refugees

The internal and external echoes to the past are not just lyrical. While melancholically creative and hence not derivative, the album mines fragments from the musical past and to some extent the present (and even from itself), dwelling in this way on good times and bad.

The soft guitar strum, pacing, keyboards and general mood make the introduction of "Echo" nearly interchangeable with the beginning of "A Room at the Top," for example. The use of reverb, minor harmonies, the earthy keyboards and overall production qualities in "Rhino Skin" go a little further back in time and recollect "Asshole," a bleak Beck cover from Petty's previous album. "I Don't Wanna Fight"—a Heartbreakers performance composed and sung by Mike Campbell—returns to the hard-driving rock of *Damn the Torpedoes*. The straight-laced drums and layered drones of electric guitars in "Free Girl Now" go back further to "American Girl," itself influenced by psychedelic music.

The musical references continue in the sprightly mix of acoustic and electric guitars, the backing vocal harmonies and the stories of loss in songs such as "Won't Last Long," "This One's for Me," and of course "Accused of Love," which all harken to Petty's style in the late Eighties and early Nineties. Specifically, these songs bring to mind Petty's collaborations with Lynne when he made some of his best recordings, including the Wilburys albums. *Wildflowers* was another artistic high point that he often said was his best album, and this period also gets echoed in the appropriately titled song "Echo." Specifically, the soft electric guitars, sparse piano and harmonic progressions dominated by minor chords recall the composition and arrangement of *Wildflowers*' "Good to Be King."

"About to Give Out" likewise offers a musical chronicling of the past. This time buttressing what goes on in the lyrics, it points to two or three eras, and goes back much further than the Lynne period. The piano tracks simultaneously typify 1950s icons such as Jerry Lee Lewis and 1970s staples such as BTO, Billy Joel, and indeed the Heartbreakers. The guitar work could be from the late 1960s or the 1970s. All of this is lyrically reinforced by stanzas about 1950s TV shows and icons, along with references to bandmates from the Sixties and the early Seventies repeat-hit "Delta Dawn."

Petty was again probably seeking consolation in these bygone musical eras, some of them artistically formative, if not remembered fondly. At the same time, thinking back must have caused pain. His childhood was not especially happy. Returning to the 1970s when his marriage began was presumably a way of pondering its end. Even the late 1980s, while artistically defining and a time of renewed commercial success, simultaneously marked endings, with Orbison dying at the end of this period.

A little closer to home, a rupture also occurred with long-time Heartbreakers bandmate Stan Lynch. This happened during the 1987 Dylan tour when a bitter fight occurred between Lynch and Campbell, the latter being the glue that kept the former connected to Petty during their strained relationship, as Zanes documents. This ultimately pushed or pulled Lynch out of the band, who was especially resentful of Petty's projects with Lynne. Though not directly connected to Petty's divorce, it does relate to endings and the fact that new beginnings often bring them about.

Trauma Trauma Trauma Repeats

Although some scholars and especially those discussing fine arts put too much stock in psychoanalytic perspectives, it may nonetheless be as psychoanalysts say: that people suffering trauma relive the past in unacknowledged hopes of bringing about different outcomes.

Psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan have proposed that we are fated to repeat traumatic experiences. Repetition can manifest as dreams or flashbacks in which the person afflicted feels that they are reliving their trauma, and that can be sublimated into art. It can also appear in the more disturbing form of re-enactment where someone who suffered trauma, particularly during developmental phases, keeps falling into similar problematic patterns, which, however much despised, seem impossible to abandon. This occurs when we find ourselves in troubled relationships resembling those from the past, but it too can be sublimated into art.

Such perspectives seem to capture at least some of what is going on in *Echo*. But this is not because Petty was re-entering troubled relationships. It is instead because he was creating

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music almost obsessively fixated on difficult events from the past, whether in the form of his marriage or childhood. At the same time, many of the songs focus on high points and pleasurable moments, whether by turning to childhood memories of westerns or the Jeff Lynne years and other formative periods in his career.

That said, reasons for Petty's fixation on the past might be more straightforward. To begin with, making art draws on our past, good and ill, albeit not necessarily to the extent Petty explicitly relied on it in *Echo*. Some of the repetitiveness may have resulted from his suppressed capacity to generate new material because he was simply exhausted. Without criticizing the aesthetic of the album—which is somehow uplifting and somber, refined and gritty, resigned and pleading, all at the same time—there is a sparseness to the lyrics. "Counting on You" has only three two-line verses, plus a chorus. Six out of eight lines in the verses begin with the phrase "I want you to be," followed by various completions. "Won't Last Long" recapitulates phrases, many relating to being down and out, but with hopes of getting up again.

Some stanzas in fact draw attention to repetition in a self-reflexive way, as when Petty repeatedly says "over and over" and "over this ground again." Other recurring phrases in the song are: "I can't explain," "Don't let me down," "I'm down but it won't last long" and "Half my brain has gone." This last sentiment reappears in the soulful and deeply sorrowful song "One More Day, One More Night," which contains the line, "What goes on in my brain is not clear." Though composed by Petty's bandmate Mike Campbell, the song "I Don't Wanna Fight" fits this pattern too, repeating a relatively small number of stanzas and musical motifs. The sparse aesthetic continues in "No More," albeit not because lyrics repeat, but because of their sheer brevity. The instrumentation here is also simple, and on a musical level, there is a descending call and response—or echoing—throughout.

Will-to-Power Chords

The exhaustion that the album's sparseness points to indicates that Petty must have been experiencing a need to conserve depleted energy. This is along lines described by Friedrich

Nietzsche, often compared to his slightly younger contemporary Freud.

Nietzsche conceived life as will to expansion, or what he called power. Organisms grow in ways to increase their field of domain, as when moss covers more space, a cat explores new territory, or we gain greater mastery over skills like playing guitar. Though it is conceived as growth, Nietzsche also understood that endless expansion is self-destructive, as when continually taking on additional things until falling apart and suffering a breakdown.

Thus, in this scheme, conserving or preserving phases are part of healthy cycles if they allow for the next push forward, outward, or upward. On the other hand, endless self-preservation—here defined as merely maintaining yourself—is symptomatic of illness. For Nietzsche, the past is what is already settled and thus conserved, so relying exclusively on it is indicative of illness. Endless, repetitive bouncing in the present indicates the same thing. Petty of course did not *merely* rely on the past, nor *endlessly* echo the present. However, the album displays a situation of distress in Nietzsche's sense, more so if the sparseness is grasped as a conserving of energy in the face of exhaustion.

One More Album, One More Fight

Nietzsche's notion of illness is carried through the album and exemplified in its closing song, "One More Day, One More Night," a moving expression of deep anguish and hope. The song opens with laid-back folk and blues tones in the electric guitars and some mournful stanzas. Petty's voice sounds tired as he pleads to God about how he's had to fight night and day to keep his sight on what's real, and also about his fears of losing his way and touch with what he feels. Petty then repeatedly laments breaking down and being alone.

After this, the lyrics grow more hopeful, with Petty singing about a night when his eyes will reflect light and come upon something bright in the distance. At a climactic moment in the song, the meandering downward melody and instrumentation shift abruptly to numerous and forceful punctuations. At this point the language also switches to repeated imperatives to hold out for one more day and one more night. Again, merely holding on is symptomatic of illness. However, the closing verse

of the song, and in fact the album itself, becomes even more hopeful than earlier, with Petty singing that "there'll be one more night and things will be made right" and adding that he'll "soon be far away from here." The closing guitar work is more aggressive, growling and weeping.

Even while Nietzsche claimed preservation is symptomatic of illness, he also maintained that it can arise from an instinct to protect life in decline. This seeming denial of life can, as Nietzsche explained, be among the most conserving and affirming forces, and indeed a way of recovering for growth, as when we rest in anticipation of a personally expanding trial. Although Petty was likely at the lowest and darkest phase of his life, with *Echo* reflecting this, the last song and indeed entire album in many ways manifest Nietzsche's definition of health. For Nietzsche, health was not freedom from psychological and physiological malady, but the strength to go forward and expand in the face of obstacles, including those conventionally understood as illnesses.

Nietzsche also said that we possess art lest we perish of truth, the latter understood as stasis and hence antithetical to life, growth, and health. *Echo* exhibits life-affirming aspects of art specifically because Petty's crippling depression and health problems were not a barrier. Instead, these difficulties spurred him to one of his most creative and aesthetically subtle albums—an album, moreover, not myopically focused on pain, and sometimes even unapologetically upbeat, if not happy. Petty was not giving up on his fight to recover, as he expressly sums up in "Billy the Kid." And he did recover after *Echo*, kicking his heroin habit and finding love with Dana York, whom he credited for saving him and who later became his second wife.

Though focused on personal grief and survival, *Echo* simultaneously emphasizes high points in Petty's life, looking to the past for the sake of self-preservation in the present. The album manifests life-affirming impulses to expand beyond present and past traumas. Mining fragments of the past, musical and otherwise, and building creatively with them—like a painter producing a masterwork with a limited palette—may have offered ways of dealing with a challenging present and a difficult and fading past.

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