

# Los Angeles Times

LIFESTYLE

## L.A. Affairs: How was I going to find love if I kept hanging out with my ex?



(Susan Burghart / For The Times)

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The phone rang: my ex-husband. Nine years after our divorce, we lived near each other in Santa Monica and we were still cordial. If I went out of town, he would feed and care for our 18-year-old diabetic cat. We had been in a band together in college and still played music every once in a while, and now Danny told me he had an idea: He was putting together a Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers tribute band. He was going to be Tom.

It was a tall order. It would require leadership and time I wasn't sure he had — not to mention great musicians. But a few weeks later, he called again. He'd lined up a lead guitarist, a bass player and a drummer. "You found your Mike, Howie and Stan?" I asked, ticking off the names of the real band members. Then it dawned on me: He needed a keyboard player. "Who is going to be Benmont?"

"You are," Danny said.

Danny and I met in Austin in the '80s at the University of Texas. I usually picked a person in those gargantuan lecture halls to check out each time class met to keep me entertained — a girl because I liked her style, a guy because I thought he was cute. Danny was the one I saw in an advertising class. When I overheard that he played in a band, he got way cuter.

I've always been obsessed with music. According to family lore, I used to wake up singing in my crib. I'd played piano and sung in choirs my whole life. After I skipped that advertising class to see the Grateful Dead, I asked the cute musician if I could borrow his notes to catch up, and we ended up falling for each other — hard. We married, and relocated to L.A.

Music was our shared passion. Barely a week went by that we weren't at a concert — singing along with the standing-room-only crowd to Lucinda Williams at the Troubadour or the Smithereens at the Roxy. But no band spoke to us like Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. To us, it was the perfect band: cool frontman; brilliant songwriting; impeccable lead guitarist; prominent piano parts and perfect harmonies. Anytime they were performing in L.A., we were right there.

Our own marriage, however, wasn't eliciting the same joy. About a year in, I remember seeing a saying somewhere: "Happiness is being married to your best friend." That was not what I felt. After Danny's mother died, he lost his way and lost me with it. I thought communication was key and likely pushed him further away trying to get him to talk about it. But he said he didn't know what he wanted. I can still hear my dad saying in his Oklahoma drawl: "Honey, don't beat a dead horse," so I divorced him. I was devastated. Explaining our falling apart to friends, I said it felt like Danny showed up for the wedding but not for the marriage. I remember sobbing, asking him, "Who am I going to go to Tom Petty concerts with?" He was sobbing too.

Life moved on. I worked at city magazines in jobs that I loved, I saw live music every week, and I lived near the beach in a rented cottage surrounded by 50-year-old rose bushes. Not for a lack of trying, however, I never fell in love.

When Danny called me about the tribute band, which he named Petty Theft, I was nervous to become the female knockoff of the Heartbreakers' keyboardist, Benmont Tench. Tench's unique piano style is a defining part of the Heartbreakers' sound. But I hunkered down and learned the songs, and soon the band was playing all over Southern California — pounding out "Listen to Her Heart" at a street fair in Manhattan Beach one weekend, "Free Fallin'" at a casino in the desert the next.

How much fun is it to play songs you love over and over again? A lot. Danny and I were bandmates and we were friendly, but it was all about the music.

And then, Danny started to grow into himself. He got promoted at work. He quit drinking. He quit smoking. He slowly morphed into a happier version of himself. Over time, he got cute again. And he was showing up. Like at my father's funeral in Houston or when I had foot surgery.

If Danny had family in town, I was invited to the dinner out. If I had an extra ticket to a concert and couldn't find someone to go, I knew Danny would. I noticed that when he was over, he started to stay a little longer. He was who I called when something good happened. I was who he called when something bad happened. We were both single again and fell into an almost daily groove of communication.

I could tell what I was starting to feel. But what about him?

Not once in all those years did I get the vibe that he wanted to reconcile. Not once. I also knew something else: I was never going to meet someone new if I spent so much of my free time with my ex. Danny was dropping me off after one of those family meals when I told him I needed to talk.

"I am happy when you walk into the room," I began. His lower lip jutted out, but I didn't know what that meant. "But we can't go on like this — we either have to stop hanging out, or we have to move this forward." I was convinced that this was a pivotal moment when we were going to go our separate ways again, and I didn't want that. Tears were brimming and were ready to flow. Luckily, I didn't have to wait long for him to reply: "I'd like to move this forward." I was stunned. Somehow, I managed to say, "Well, don't you think you ought to kiss me then?" And he did.

Three years later, in 2017, on the anniversary date of our first wedding we stood on a beach in Santa Barbara. Through laughter and tears, we delivered our vows. Again.

We have tried over the years to guess just how many times we have seen Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers live — it has to be close to 50. We saw them four times the year we rewed, and about a week after a show at the Hollywood Bowl we heard Petty had collapsed at his home in Malibu. Our co-workers at our respective jobs completely understood when we said we had to go home. There, Danny and I held on to each other, not knowing what else to do. Later that day, Tom Petty was gone.

It is quite surreal to cry that hard about the death of a person you don't really actually know personally.

Petty Theft kept on, until a virus shut down the world. Then Danny and I began recording a daily video of a beloved Heartbreakers song, posting these "Quarantunes" (<https://www.youtube.com/user/pettytheftlive>) on social media. The videos really seemed to help our friends too. People said they looked forward to them. In addition to being the soundtrack of our lives, these songs helped us find each other again.

It didn't surprise anyone when we posted our version of "The Waiting." It's the hardest part.

*The author is a print production director and musician who lives in Santa Monica.*

*Petty Theft just had its first band practice in over a year, and looks forward to playing again across SoCal.*