

## **Why I Love Tom Petty: A Short Essay Written by Sean Murawski**

A lot can be said about the great songwriters of the American musical lexicon. The carousel of names can go round and round for ages: Dylan, Springsteen, Simon, Prine— the list goes on. However, of all the names thrown into that ring, there is probably only *one* whose songs can be sung loud, word-for-word by almost any American citizen who is old enough to speak— that man is Thomas Earl Petty.

I do not remember the first time I heard Tom's music, and that's probably because he was always there. More than anything, Tom Petty is a shining example of cultural indelibility. His songs are fixtures in everyday American life— at barbecues, at sporting events, at the supermarket, on the radio. His songs are so timeless and classic that my kids' kids will be running down the highway to "American Girl", searching for whatever it is they need to make their heart beat a little faster.

I have an exceptionally innocent and teenage connection to one of my favorite Tom Petty songs, "Even the Losers." I was in college, and I had been crushing on this girl from my hometown for a while. I had been working up the nerve to ask her out for months leading up to summertime, stumbling over what I was going to say in my mind. I was never the coolest kid, especially around girls. So this was a big deal to me. I finally worked up the nerve to talk to her, and lo and behold, this girl is insane enough in the head to agree to hang out with me. We hung out for a grand old two weeks together. For her, it was surely nothing significant. But for me, for *me*, it was my Tom Petty moment. "Baby, even the losers get lucky sometimes," I would sing in my car. That was me, the loser, the one Tom was singing about. Even after it was over, when it felt like my dreamland had crashed back down into reality, I would think of that one line before the chorus, the one I felt the most connected with: "It couldn't have been that easy to forget about me." Tom Petty's music gave me hope when I didn't have much, and it gave me wisdom I didn't know I needed. I held onto the one notion, that this loser was a little hard to forget.

When we talk about Tom Petty decades from now, we are going to be talking about his songcraft. He was a rock and roll architect with a specialty in pop melody genius. He was never going to sell out— he had come too far to do that— but he knew how to make a hit. He knew how to make songs *memorable* and hooky. He knew how to stick a song in your head, pour cement over it, and keep it playing again and again and again, until *you* are the one who's "free fallin'." Tom Petty was the master of the lyrical hooks that mean nothing and everything at the same time. It's the "Hey, baby!" in "I Won't Back Down"; it's the "Yeah, yeah!" call-and-response refrain from "The Waiting"; and of course, maybe the greatest chorus of all time, from rock and roll's most enduring and timeless anthem: "Oh yeah, alright, take it easy baby, make it last all night," from "American Girl." This is a man who worked tirelessly at making his songs perfect; he knew what his songs needed, but more importantly, he knew that *we* needed his songs.

Tom Petty is my hero of all heroes. He had a rock and roll ethos that will never be replicated. He didn't care if there were five people watching or 5,000 people watching: he was going to play rock and roll music, and he was going to do it with passion.

Tom Petty's *Greatest Hits* album is where everybody should start with his music, because chances are, the hits are already engraved in your brain, memorized after decades of Tom decorating American music's rich history. With the possible exception of The Beatles red and blue albums, this is the only greatest hits album that you'll know every word to without even trying. His songs are that classic, they're that memorable— Tom Petty is *that* good.

He gave these songs to us; he gifted us these hits. The only thing an artist can ask for is for their songs to last, to stand the test of time. It's only right we keep them alive.