

Losing everything to fire

BY GREELEY WELLS

In the 1979 Laurel Canyon Fire in Los Angeles, I lost everything—the house in which my children were born, my car, my wallet, almost all my artwork, and all my possessions.

The Santa Ana winds were blowing hard as I was outside sweeping and cleaning and moving a pile of firewood. I saw that a tiny fire at the bottom of my hill—a quarter-mile of dry chaparral—was going to be at my house in moments. But it took me three times to properly dial the fire department number that was on the wall near my rotary phone, and what I finally got was an untrained girl (pre-911) who never seemed to fathom the information I was trying to give her. Ultimately, I said to the girl, “It’s here at my house!” and threw the phone down. I ran to the neighbor’s above my house where I had sent my two young girls and jumped in the back of their car with them. As we sped down the steep hill in reverse, I got one last look at my house: the flames came up the hill and swirled by the roof overhang, rose 30 or more feet into the air, and swept across the roof. The house was doomed, and so were 23 other houses that afternoon. Mine was the first.

At the Canyon Country Store at the bottom of my hill, I got out of my neighbor’s car with my two little girls, holding each by the hand. There we stood, after escaping with our lives. I was wearing speedos and a pair of flip-flops, sweat was pouring down me, and fear was probably in my eyes. I phoned my ex, Cathleen, and my girlfriend, Laurie. They both showed up—the girls went to their mother’s house, and I stayed with Laurie for a time. The next day my home’s ashes and chimney made the front page of the *LA Times*.

The next six months were spent talking about almost nothing else and replacing necessary items: checks, driver’s license, etc.

But that stuff is just details. What I was really feeling was the loss of my identity as a person and an artist. How could I be an artist if I had no work? Without a driver’s license, who was I? At least I still had a job and was recognized there, even in borrowed clothes. When I sat at my desk, I could still work on animation. So my identity slowly began to come back, even if I was homeless.

Generous friends and acquaintances came forth with all sorts of gifts—household items, clothing, and other thoughtful stuff. The insurance company immediately sent me a check to see me through this initial period. But the most difficult thing I had to do for the insurance company was list every single one of my possessions,



Like Greeley’s house, this is all that remains of a neighboring house after the devastating 1979 Laurel Canyon Fire. (Photo: LA Times.)

room by room. It was terribly hard; I cried during the process. All that was gone was still in my memory, and it was deeply sad to be forced to think about every object I once had and to put a price on it.

The rollercoaster continued for about six months. I got a small apartment on Venice Beach and a VW bus and began to feel whole again. Slowly, things began to fall into place. My identity returned. After all, I *am* an artist, with or without any art.

Surprisingly, within two years I had about as much stuff and art as I’d had before the fire and had to move to a bigger place. That’s when I started to realize that I wasn’t defined by my possessions; I was a complete person who simply *had* possessions. My being has nothing to do with the objects in my life; I am fully and completely myself.

How else could I learn a lesson like that? So many other insights and growths continued to appear that the overall “good” of the situation began to outweigh the “bad.” By a long shot. A certain confidence and strength became mine. I was remade. I could talk about plenty else after that six-month period.

This summer, after almost 40 years, I faced fire again. I was put on Level 1 evacuation notice due to three fires in the Miller Complex, each about 1-1/2 miles from my home of 27 years on Carberry Creek Road. This time my mind played with the possibility of loss again, but, luckily, in a sort of slow motion and with knowledge and experience. Having lost all of my worldly possessions and learning first-hand that it is not the end of the world allowed me to relax this time around and simply prepare to evacuate. Luckily, we didn’t have to.

I’m hoping that my story may have some meaning to my Applegate neighbors, who may have been facing some of what I’ve already been through. There is a tomorrow. All *will* be all right. Life comes back in all its wonderful ways with some new learnings, insights, and growth that you can have no idea about at the time.

Let’s all thank the firefighters who got us through this. In Laurel Canyon I never even *saw* a firefighter; it was all over for me before they could respond. Here they worked tirelessly for months and, finally, our skies are clear.

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Note: If any of our readers have gripping experiences like Greeley’s that you would like to share, please submit them for publication to gater@applegater.org.

BOOK REVIEW

Petty, the Biography

Warren Zanes

I’ve read quite a few biographies about musicians over the years because, as I told my ninth-grade school counselor, I was going to be a rock star, so who needs school? My counselor pointed out to me that you still need to know math, English, etc. I responded with “I’ll be rich enough to hire folks who know all this BS.” I didn’t learn much, but I finished school and became the “unknown rock star.” Hey, if you can’t dream big, why dream at all? Tom Petty always dreamed big, and Warren Zanes, an accomplished musician himself, captured Petty’s dreams, successes, and failures beautifully in what’s become one of my favorite biographies.

A few days after I told our editor, Barbara, that this was the book I was going to review for this issue, she called and said, “Did you hear? Tom Petty died of a heart attack.” I hadn’t heard that dreadful news yet. When I did, I needed an adult beverage or two.

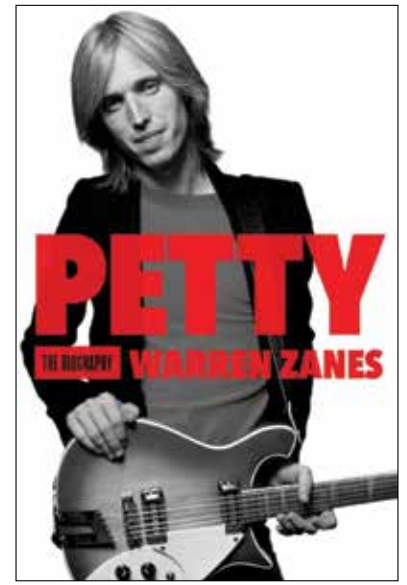
Tom Petty was born in 1950 in Gainesville, Florida, to Earl and Katherine Petty. He was the first of two sons. Earl was half Cherokee, making Tom a quarter Cherokee. This never bothered Katherine, but in America at that time, 99 percent of the population favored laws banning interracial marriages. There has never been any shortage of screwy laws, has there?

Petty’s father had a horrendously bad temper, was very abusive (subjected Tom to severe beatings with a belt), and had a taste for the bottle. His mother was the nurturing parent.

Like for most kids at that time, life in the Petty home was nothing like “Father Knows Best” or “Leave it to Beaver,” which was one of my favorite shows as a kid (Eddie Haskell was my favorite character). Like Petty, a lot of kids I knew sat at the dinner table with lunatics.

At the age of ten, Petty’s Aunt Evelyn took him to meet Elvis Presley, who was starring in the film, *Follow that Dream*, which Tom’s uncle was involved with. A few days after shaking the King’s hand, Petty traded his slingshot for a box of 45 records. A few years later, after seeing the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show, Tom, like many of us, knew what his calling was. Music!

Petty started out playing six- and twelve-string guitars with his first band, the Sundowners. As Petty came up through the ranks, there were a lot of soon-to-be-famous guys playing in the music scene in Gainesville, Florida. He made music with



some of them—David Mason (Utopia and Jackson Browne’s touring band), Dan Felder (The Eagles), Bernie Leadon (Flying Burrito Brothers and The Eagles), Stephen Stills (Buffalo Springfield and Crosby, Stills, and Nash), and Duane and Gregg Allman (Allman Joys and The Allman Brothers). Those guys all became power hitters in their own right.

From Gainesville to Los Angeles to the top of the music charts, Petty had a wild ride. A lot of his hit songs are classics, like “Breakdown,” “American Girl,” “Refugee,” “Free Falling,” “Mary Jane’s Last Dance,” and “I Won’t Back Down.” The list goes on.

Bob Dylan had Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers backing him for an 18-month-long world tour. They also backed Johnny Cash on one of his best recordings, *Unchained*, that won a Grammy for Best Country Album. Petty was also one of The Traveling Wilburys, a supergroup that included Bob Dylan, Roy Orbison, Jeff Lynne, and George Harrison.

I love this part: Petty was the first musician to successfully challenge his record label in court after he realized just how bad his contract was and how the label had screwed him out of his publishing royalties. Then, when the Heartbreakers record *Hard Promises* was ready for release, MCA Records decided to raise the customary price for a record from \$8.98 to \$9.98. Petty told the label he wouldn’t release the record unless they lowered the price back down to \$8.98. The war was on and MCA finally gave in. Most artists never win a major battle with their record label. Tom won two!

From the dream (rock star) to the dark (depression and heroin) and back, *Petty the Biography* is an excellent read about one of America’s great artists. Tom Petty will be greatly missed.

J.D. Rogers • 541-846-7736

POETRY CORNER

Winter Solstice

by David C. Shiah

Sun returns, sheds light but no warmth
Mighty Orion commands the pure night sky
Moon rides low, quiet
Life giving rains nourish the land
While streams swell and forests rest
Timid deer and hoot owls hunker down
Siskiyou peaks don their snowy blankets
as woodstoves devour their offerings
Season of inner contemplation, renewal
Ahhh, welcome winter’s tranquility



Christmas tree permits available



For many families, venturing out onto public lands to cut a Christmas tree is an annual holiday tradition, but be sure to obtain your permit first!

Required permits are available at locations across southwest Oregon, including the US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and multiple local vendors. Permits, which allow the cutting of personal-use trees for Christmas and other holiday events, are \$5 per tree and are nonrefundable. There is a limit of five tree permits per household, and the permits may be used only on those lands open to Christmas tree harvesting that are administered by the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest and BLM.

For more information about permits, visit Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest at fs.usda.gov/detail/rogue-siskiyou/about-forest/offices or call the Medford District BLM at 541-618-2200.