

Benmont Tench

The Melancholy Season

BY DAVID FRICKE

The title song on Benmont Tench's new album, *The Melancholy Season*—his second solo record after four decades at the keyboards in Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers—began as a poem, inspired by the autumn chill of a Southern California evening under the constellation Orion.

“At the house where I lived for many years, in the hills overlooking the San Fernando Valley, Orion was only visible in the fall and winter,” Tench explains. “I associated the constellation with that time: ‘Oh, there’s my friend.’ But that season, when it starts getting cold in California, has always been a bit melancholy to me.” That passing of warmth and time in his poem eventually led Tench back to a song he had written “years ago but never been able to complete.”

It was, he says, “about a guy looking across the backyard at his wife by the pool. She’s about to kick off her shoes. It’s cold, the pool is heated and the steam is rising off the water. The idea was the alienation between these two people”—now with the constellation overhead, bearing witness in each verse. “Orion cries out from the black,” Tench sings at the song’s end. “The melancholy season is upon us.”

With ripples of organ framing Tench’s tenderly rusted singing and



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meditative piano, the tick-tock of a drum stick on a snare rim sounding like a clock counting down the hours, “The Melancholy Season” is the spectral, gripping entrance to an intensely personal triumph that has been a long time coming: the ten-plus years since Tench’s solo debut, 2014’s *You Should Be So Lucky*, produced by British studio legend Glyn Johns; and before that, the body of work that was always quietly growing while Tench was in the Heartbreakers. Petty “was really encouraging,” Tench says, recalling that first album on his own. “Tom came and played bass on one song. But I realized that as soon as Tom was there, I was deferring to him: ‘What do you

think of this solo? Should I play this or that?’ It wasn’t as much an expression of me.”

Released by George Harrison’s Dark Horse Records, founded by the former Beatle in 1974 and now in the care of his son Dhani and wife Olivia, *The Melancholy Season* is Benmont Tench’s true arrival as a singer-songwriter, without compromise or doubt. It was produced by Jonathan Wilson—an acclaimed singer-songwriter and touring guitarist for Roger Waters who has worked on career-defining albums for Dawes, Father John Misty and Margo Price—with an attention to the space and intimacy where the best songs breathe and resonate. The shadows and urgency

in “Pledge,” the bitter warning of “I Will Not Follow You Down” and the yearning that haunts every mile in “Drivin’ Man” come with spare arrangements and subtle dynamics, played by a core band that includes Dawes’ Taylor Goldsmith on guitar and Wilson on drums, among other instruments. “You, Again” is cold goodbye with a slow-dance sway, just Sebastian Steinberg on bass under Tench’s closing-hour piano.

The heartbroken resignation in “If She Knew” is simply Tench with microphone and piano, the way he’s returned to the stage in stunning club and concert dates since the end of the Heartbreakers (after Petty’s death in 2017). “We cut ‘If She Knew’ with a band,” he says, “and it was good. But I kept coming back to the demo I had done a year before” recorded at the Steinway piano in Village Recorder, the fabled Los Angeles studio seen (as Tench notes) in the back-cover photo of Steely Dan’s 1973 LP, *Countdown to Ecstasy*. “I sang it well, and it gets the point across,” Tench says of that performance. That’s the one on *The Melancholy Season*.

“I don’t like crowded records,” Tench insists, pointing to the minimalist shock of Bob Dylan’s 1967 album *John Wesley Harding* and 1970’s *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* as seminal inspirations. “I wanted that kind of space on this record. I want the words to be heard. And I wanted a certain groove. I thought, ‘Who has an understanding of recording to tape? And produces singer-songwriters? And plays drums?’ Jonathan was all of them.

“And,” Tench adds fondly, “he’s a friend of mine.”

“I always wanted to be a songwriter,” Tench says, recalling a streetcar ride in New Orleans in the early Seventies, while he was a student at Tulane

University. “I was trying to come up with words to a tune I had. It was very frustrating,” he concedes, laughing.

That drive went all the way back to Gainesville, Florida, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers’ hometown, where Tench was born (two years after Petty) and raised on his family’s eclectic record library: Chopin and Beethoven; the master jazz pianist Art Tatum; classic Broadway-show tunes. Tench played classical piano as a child but remembers his parents listening to “a lot of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Lowe. And I fell for the words, the combination of words and melody.” The Beatles and the Rolling Stones did the rest.

In 1972, Petty and Tench—friends since adolescence, after they met in a Gainesville music store—became bandmates after Petty, a veteran of local garage combos, asked the pianist to join his latest venture, Mudcrutch, with a guitarist from Jacksonville, Mike Campbell. By 1976, the three were the founding core of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. “Mike and Tom were a natural thing” as writers, Tench observes. “Mike has this gift where he can give you a song that is beautiful and complete, and Tom could write a story to it.

“My sensibility was different,” Tench contends. “If something knocks on the door, then I have to open the door and let the song show up. Either it completes itself in the time that it takes to play it, or you follow it for the next six months, finding out what it says. And that kind of song comes up because there is something you need to express.”

Tench kept writing, at his own pace, over the Heartbreakers’ lifetime. “Never Be You,” co-written with Petty, was recorded with the Heartbreakers but never released. It did go to Number One, however, in 1985 on *Billboard’s* Hot Country Chart via a cover

by Roseanne Cash. And Tench contributed originals to each of Mudcrutch’s reunion albums in 2008 and 2016.

Two songs on *The Melancholy Season* have remarkably long histories. “Under the Starlight,” a reflection on loss and renewal wreathed in smokey guitar and Hammond organ, began 20 years ago as a collaboration in Nashville with Grammy-winning composer Don Henry, eventually finished by Tench with two new verses and, he says, “the knowledge I’d gained about living since Don and I started writing it.” And Tench has recorded a new version of the French Quarter-piano romp “Wobbles,” an instrumental on *You Should Be So Lucky*, as he had intended it, with the lyrics he wrote right after the original tracking session with Glyn Johns.

“The next day,” Tench recalls, “I came in and said, ‘Glyn, you won’t believe it. On the way home last night, I wrote the lyrics. They just showed up!’ He said, ‘That’s nice. It’s an instrumental.’” A snapshot of desire and delight caught as “the dawn’s light kisses the river” in the Crescent City, “Wobbles” is, at last, served in full.

“The great wordsmiths had an enormous impact on me,” Tench says of his songwriting, running down a handful of names: Bob Dylan, Jackson Browne, John Prine, Randy Newman, Warren Zevon and Joni Mitchell. Tench has played with most of those and many more—Stevie Nicks, Don Henley, Johnny Cash and The Rolling Stones, to cite a few more—as one of rock’s most prolific and in-demand session musicians. The lessons struck deep. “Getting to play ‘Every Grain of Sand’ [on Dylan’s 1981 album *Shot of Love*] while Bob sang it—drinking that in opens you up,” Tench says, still with wonder.

He first recorded with Jonathan Wilson, aptly enough, as a sideman: on keyboards for Dawes' 2011 album, *Nothing Is Wrong*, produced by Wilson. They met, Tench figures, "at a party somewhere. I was having these acoustic music nights at my house, pool parties with people playing songs—quiet enough so the neighbors wouldn't complain." Guests included Fiona Apple, Sean and Sara Watkins of Nickel Creek and Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, friends from the commune of singers and writers at the L.A. club Largo where Tench first started playing his own songs in public.

Wilson, meanwhile, "was doing the same thing, electric, at the house he had in Laurel Canyon at the time," Tench says. "So I'd go there. And we became friends." In 2012, Wilson opened shows in Europe for Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers—with Tench sitting in "once in a while."

Originally from North Carolina, Wilson has been a prime mover in the revival of the L.A. Seventies-songwriter aesthetic, working with icons and devotees alike. Tench was among the guests on Wilson's 2013 album *Fanfare* with David Crosby, Graham Nash and members of Wilco and Beachwood Sparks. But Tench was struck by Wilson's drumming when they worked together on a 2017 album by singer Karen Elson, *Double Roses*. "He played like Al Jackson [of Booker

T. and the MG's]," Tench raves. "And he could do the rock & roll stuff too." On *The Melancholy Season*, Wilson keeps jubilant, rockabilly time in "Rattle" and is the frantic-waltz backbone in "Not Enough," the latter featuring Tench on a Hohner Pianet, best known as

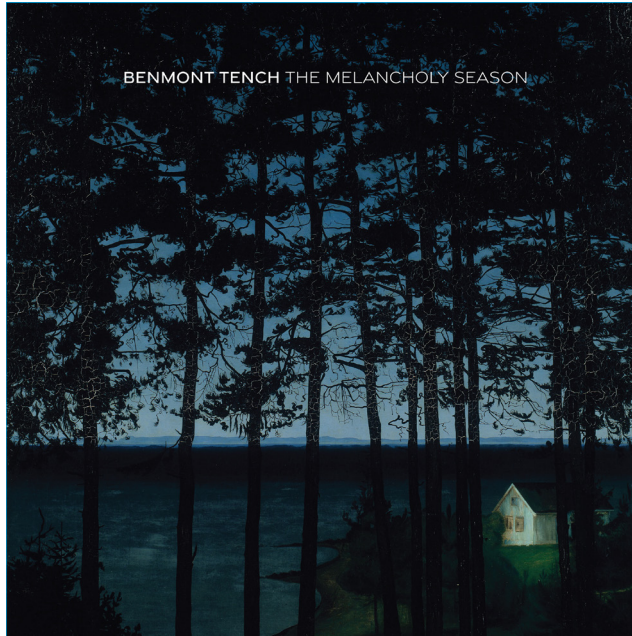
lot of freedom in the dynamics, the choices I can make," like the Joy Division and Grateful Dead covers he did at one New York show in 2019, then finishing the set with a delicate-ballad reading of Petty's "American Girl."

"We put a lot of thought into this record," Tench says, but he gratefully credits the help that came along the way. Jackson Browne "was really gracious with his studio," Groove Masters, where the album was mixed. It was Glyn Johns' idea to start "I Will Not Follow You Down" with nothing but a beat on a drum after Tench performed the song for him a few years ago. "When I finished, he said, 'If I was producing it, I would start with a drum doing what you were doing with your foot.'"

And Tench "couldn't be happier" about finding a home for *The Melancholy Season* at Dark Horse Records, "an emotionally resonant

label for me" through Petty's close friendship with George Harrison. "I met George maybe three times. But I have that connection through Dhani to his dad, through Tom to George. And they have George's music, Cat Stevens, Joe Strummer—these are writers. To be in that company, it's perfect."

The Melancholy Season is upon us. But on this record, in these songs, there is plenty of room for joy—and a lot to celebrate.



album artwork

the signature keyboard sound on the Zombies' 1964 hits "She's Not There" and "Tell Her No."

Singer-guitarist Jenny O., who has made two albums produced by Wilson, sings and plays guitar on *The Melancholy Season*. And Sara Watkins brings the Largo vibe with her guest vocal in the closing song, "Dallas." But Tench plans to take his new songs on the road "with just the piano. It's the basis of these songs. It also gives me a

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