

CHAPTER 1

Searching For A Safe Place (1950–1969)

“My life was very turbulent as a child and a little scary, and music made everything seem right.”

– T.P.

No child, anywhere, should ever feel afraid in his own home. Tom Petty’s formative years were spent – like too many other kids across America – in a home with an abusive father and a caring mother who wasn’t able to throw up enough of a barricade between her sons and volatile husband.

Tom’s father, Earl, was the volcano that periodically erupted in the Petty home on NE 6th Terrace in Gainesville, Florida. Tom didn’t talk much about his father until recent years when he admitted that his dad – who passed away in December of 1999 – was “incredibly verbally abusive” and “... would give me pretty good beatings most of my life”. In fact, Tom has said that “the house could erupt into a fistfight” at any moment. “My dad was Jerry Lee Lewis with no talent,” Tom explains. “He didn’t play and sing, but he was that *wild*. That *crazy*. That *charming*. You know, how Jerry Lee has an incredible charm about him, but he still might shoot you.”

Searching For A Safe Place (1950–1969)

These revelations weren't altogether surprising considering the anger, confusion and pain that is such an integral part of so many of Tom's earliest songs ('Fooled Again', 'Hurt', 'Century City', 'Don't Do Me Like That', etc.). Throughout a storied career in which he's often challenged authority, Tom has made a point of railing against injustice. "[It] just outraged me," he says. "I just couldn't contain myself." That need to stick up for the little guy comes from years of being the underdog himself, the child who was unable to deflect his father's verbal tirades, off-base criticism and physical assaults.

The adult Tom Petty has been fairly tight-lipped about his family for much of his life. He'd readily tell reporters how he fell in love with rock'n'roll, but he rarely discussed his father, mother or younger brother, Bruce. That changed around 2000. In interviews Tom has given in the past 10 years or so, he's been considerably more open about his father (with whom he never truly reconciled), his much loved mother who died too soon, his turbulent home life and how it all shaped him as an individual and as one of America's most respected songwriters.

Why the soul-searching now? For one thing: time. Now in his early sixties, Tom has a better understanding of time – or our tenuous grasp on how much time we all have left – and he's finally at a point in his life where he can reflect on and come to terms with all the things that he wished had turned out differently.

To better understand the man himself, we have to go back to fifties Gainesville.

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The American South has always had a way of taking hold of people. It's an unspoken pull; equal parts nostalgia and a never-give-up-the-fight attitude that holds true in any adversity. The South takes care of its own and inspires daydreamers. But, for all its charms, it's also a place where the clock ticks just a bit more slowly than elsewhere in the United States, where opportunities may not be as plentiful and where some kids, like Tom Petty, grow into anxious teenagers wishing and praying that "there's a little more to life, somewhere else". The South and its traditions play an immensely important role in Tom's story, one that the

Tom Petty: Rock'n'Roll Guardian

songwriter revisits time and time again in his songs, even though he's resided in California for nearly 40 years now. The South helped shape the man Tom would become and it remains an ever-present force in his life and music.

Thomas Earl Petty – Tommy to his family and friends – was born on October 20, 1950, at Gainesville's Alachua General Hospital. He was the first child of Earl and Katherine "Kitty" Petty. The young couple – Kitty was just 23 when she gave birth to Tom – had married in 1947 and bought a modest home in the college town of Gainesville in north central Florida.

Earl and Kitty were Southerners through and through. Earl and his twin sister, Pearle, were born in Argyle, Georgia, on January 15, 1924, to William Kyler Petty and Sallie Henderson Lewis Petty. Earl also had two brothers, Wesley and Buck. Sallie was of Cherokee descent and their mixed race relationship raised the ire of many in their logging community. One night, sometime between 1924 and 1926, William got in a brawl with several men and, legend has it, killed a man. The next day the family gathered up everything they owned, packed it on their wagon and left Georgia for the greener pasture of Northern Florida. Once in the Sunshine State, the Pettys erased that ugly chapter from their lives, rarely mentioning it again. Tom himself didn't hear the story until the nineties when his father retold the tale while aboard the band's tour bus late one night after a gig.

Earl grew up in Florida and, like most men of his age, fought for his country during World War II; he was stationed in Egypt as an air force groundsman. After the war he returned to Gainesville and worked a truck route for the Eli Witt Company, a wholesale distributor of tobacco, candy and other household products. Earl named his business Petty's Wholesale Dry Goods Co. After marrying Kitty in 1947, he bought the house that year as well.

Tom recalls that his father "... did a lot of things. He drove a truck selling wholesale dry goods – anything from cigarettes to handkerchiefs on cardboard sheets." Earl's last job was selling insurance for the National Standard Life Insurance Company but at some point he also owned a retail store. "When I was growing up," says Tom, "my dad

Searching For A Safe Place (1950–1969)

had a grocery store in the black part of town. They used to put me out to play with the black kids until the store closed.

“When I was eight my mom gave me this whole rap about how black people had their own movie theatres and bathrooms, and when I asked why, she said, ‘They prefer it that way.’ And I thought, ‘I’m not buying that,’” Tom told Q’s Mike Blake in 2012. This was the beginning of Tom’s perception of social justice (or injustice, as the case may have been in the South back in the day).

Kitty Avery Petty, three years younger than Earl, had grown up in Gainesville. After getting married, she devoted herself to homemaking before Tom was born in 1950. Bruce, Tom’s younger brother, came along two years later. As the kids got older, Kitty went to work in the city’s tax collector’s office selling car registrations and license plates.

Kitty and Earl were both Sunday School teachers at Gainesville’s North Central Baptist Church but it is the way of things down south that righteousness and a healthy respect for the Lord often go hand in hand with an equally healthy proclivity for sinfulness, in Earl’s case gambling, drinking and running cars off the road. Though Kitty did everything she could to keep her two sons as happy and healthy as possible, her husband often upset the balance in the home. Outsiders probably had no idea that Tommy felt so disconnected from those closest to him.

“I remember thinking from a very early age that my parents might have been aliens and I landed in an alien family like one of those on *The Twilight Zone*,” Tom once told *Harp*’s Jaan Uhelszki. “Even when I was really young, I knew that I was not like them at all. It was probably because TV had come into the picture when I was three or four. I loved the television so much. It would go off at night and sometimes I would wait for it to come on. I knew in there was a world that was not anything like the one I was in.”

Despite Tom’s firm belief that he didn’t belong in Gainesville, it was an attractive place in which to live during the fifties and sixties and, in fact, still is today. The town blends quaint Southern charm with academia and the youthful exuberance that comes from the many students attending the University of Florida, the nation’s seventh largest campus, as well as Santa Fe College. When Tom was growing up, there

were two local music shops, Lipham Music and Lillian's Music Store, as well as aquatic events at the Glen Springs Pool, and other distractions. "I remember it fondly," says Tom. "It was just big enough that it had two movie theatres, which was great... There was a very Southern contingent there. There's kind of a farming element, and then there's the university so you have this mix of people. You could run across just about any kind of person there."

Tom spent his early years at Sidney Lanier Elementary School. When school wasn't in session, Tom was shooting sling shots, riding his bike up and down the street until dusk, visiting nearby Northeast Park and going to the movies, especially Westerns: "I was just obsessed with Westerns," he says.

After school the afternoons were spent playing with kids from the neighbourhood while his maternal grandmother, Troas F. Hale Avery, looked after Tom and Bruce. Kitty would return from work around six to make dinner and put the kids to bed. Earl Petty often didn't make an appearance until after the kids were asleep. Grandmother Avery was a calming force in an otherwise chaotic home and she grew especially close to her grandson, the only blond-haired, blue-eyed child in the family. Kitty's parents had divorced by this time, so Tom never met his grandfather, Earl Avery, but from an early age his grandmother encouraged Tom's aspirations and, as he notes now, "really tried to build up my confidence". Supportive throughout his childhood, she always told him, "You can do anything you set your mind to." Evidently, he believed her.

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When Tom was 11, his very course in life changed. Every fan has heard the stories about his early encounter with Elvis Presley and how that one moment sparked an enduring passion for rock'n'roll, but there may have been an even earlier influence that perhaps set the stage for Tom's interest in music.

Tom admits, "When I was really young, I liked cowboys who played guitar. That's why I thought the guitar was cool. The guitar just always seemed like a kind of rebellious instrument to me. And then Elvis came

Searching For A Safe Place (1950–1969)

along [and] he was kind of like a cowboy, too.” This cowboy theme – coupled with his own Cherokee Indian heritage – has cropped up in Tom’s work over and over again throughout the years. Consider some of the characters that appear in his songs. The 1999 album *Echo* mentions Billy The Kid in the song of the same name, Davy Crockett and Roy Rogers are namechecked in ‘About To Give Out’ and the character from ‘Swingin’ is dressed in “boots and silver spurs”. Let’s also not forget the “Indian who shot out the lights” in “a barroom fight” from ‘Crawling Back To You’ on the *Wildflowers* album. The cowboy and Indian theme even presents itself onstage from time to time. Remember the totem pole that graced the stage each night of 1989’s *Strange Behavior* tour or the rodeo-style artwork that touted the *Way Out West* tour of 2001?

So is it possible that country music pioneer Ernest Tubb and singer/cowboy actor Roy Rogers were Tom’s first touchstones, years before his encounter with Elvis, seeing The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and listening to early Rolling Stones albums? Perhaps.

There’s no denying, though, that Tom’s chance meeting with Elvis in the early sixties set a whole chain of events into motion – events that fueled Tom’s insatiable craving for a life devoted to rock’n’roll.

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It was a typical Saturday morning in 1961 and Tom was doing the usual: hanging around, sitting under a tree in his front yard, waiting for something exciting to happen – and it did. His Aunt Evelyn, Kitty’s sister, pulled up in the driveway and asked if he’d like to take a drive to Ocala, 65 kilometers to the south, with her and his cousins Louise, Albert and Howard. Tom’s uncle, Earl Jernigan, was a film processor – the only one in Northern Florida, in fact. When movies were shot in the area, his company – Jernigan’s Motion Picture Service – was always on call. On this particular day, a movie called *Follow That Dream* was being made, and it starred Elvis Presley, not long released from the Army but still America’s premier rock’n’roll performer. Elvis was also a good ole’ Southern boy, Tupelo-born and Memphis-bred, and he felt at home in Ocala where, as ever, he was gracious to the fans that lined up by the chain-link fence that kept the locals off the set.

Tom, his cousins and his aunt arrived on the set before Elvis that day. Every time a young man walked by, Tom would ask his aunt if that was Elvis. She told him that he'd *know* when Elvis arrived. A few minutes later, a buzz broke out along the fence line as Elvis drove up. Tom remembers that The King absolutely glowed, his larger-than-life presence leaving an indelible mark on the 14 year old.

"Elvis appeared like a vision," Tom recalls. "Elvis didn't look like the people I'd known. He had a real glow around him, like a full-body halo. He looked like a god to me. After I saw Elvis that one time, I became obsessed. I can't tell you how much rock'n'roll consumed me. It wasn't a matter of choice. It was something that came over me like a disease.

"I went home a changed man," says Tom. "When I hit the street the next day, I was trying to find some Elvis Presley records. The music just hypnotised me, and I played these records to the point my parents began to worry that something was wrong with me."

From then on, Tom was on a quest to hear as many Elvis songs as possible, whenever possible. In fact, he traded his prize possession, a WHAM-O Slingshot, for a turntable and a box of 45s, many of which were Elvis singles. At the same time, Tom made full use of his family's transistor radio. "I always liked the radio, but at that point I became consumed with it. At night we could get WLS [890 AM in Chicago]. There, you got to hear all that great R&B stuff. I had to listen to everything. I became completely obsessed. There was a record shop, and there were a couple of five-and-dimes that had really good record departments. And I loved to browse there. I became so obsessed with it that my parents were worried – really worried that it was strange that I had no other interests than that."

The groundbreaking DJs that worked at WLS – one of the first stations to play contemporary music both night and day – may have inspired a young Tom Petty to expand his horizons and listen to a variety of musical acts. Prominent DJs Jim Dunbar, Ed Grennan, Mort Crowley, Gene Taylor, Bob Hale, Sam Holman (also the station's program director) and Dick Biondi were all spinning vinyl there in the early sixties. According to the station's own "Silver Dollar Survey" of

Searching For A Safe Place (1950–1969)

September 16, 1961, WLS was playing artists like Dick & Dee Dee, Troy Shondell, Bobby Vee, Lonnie Donegan, Jan & Dean, the Highwaymen, Fats Domino, the Lettermen, Ben E. King, Roy Orbison, Elvis Presley and Ray Charles – among others. Tom appreciated hearing all sorts of music and listening to the radio and buying records became one of his topmost priorities.

“The hook was in really deep,” Tom admits of his passion for music at this time in his life. “I’m in about the fifth grade and I’m playing fifties records and it’s all I want to talk about. Even the other kids thought it was weird.”

That feeling of belonging that fans get when they first join the rock’n’roll fraternity helped fuel Tom’s compulsion. He discovered that music consoled him when matters at home got out of control. “I never felt safe as a child,” he admitted to *Harp’s* Jaan Uhelszki in 2006. “There is so much about my dad, looking back, that I like but I was so afraid of him. My father was such a loose cannon. I was never too at ease around him... I took refuge in the music – rock’n’roll was my safe place.”

For the next few years Tom devoted all his time to music, listening to everything and anything he could. WLS DJ Dick Biondi is credited with being the first American DJ to play a Beatles song, ‘Please Please Me’, on the radio in February 1963 and it’s entirely likely that Tom Petty was one of thousands of teenagers who heard the track on air. These years of listening to music on the radio coalesced into an important period in Tom’s development, a time for discovering the type of man – and musician – he would become someday.

The world was changing fast in the early sixties and the politics of the era must have had an impact on Tom, albeit on the edge of his consciousness. The 1960 presidential race pitted charismatic Democrat John F. Kennedy, a Catholic from Boston, against then Vice President, Republican Richard Nixon. In the first televised presidential debate, Kennedy appeared to mop the floor with the older Nixon who was recovering from a leg injury and looked nervous and uncomfortable. Kennedy, on the other hand, went into the debate as if it were a movie soundstage, playing his part like a Shakespearean actor. It was the first time television played a major role in how the candidates conveyed

their message to the voters. Soon, television would be the tastemaker of almost every aspect of American life.

While the changes of the day were uprooting American society, moving the country inexorably forward from the closed thinking of the fifties towards the free spiritedness that would characterise the next decade, Tom was sitting in his bedroom listening to every record he could get his hands on. "I spent the next two years, until The Beatles came, just literally listening to records every day. It never, *never* occurred to me to play or that I would sing, it was just, 'These are great!' I'd listen to 'em all day. When The Beatles came, that took over and Elvis moved to the back a little bit. Now I see, ah, you can do this. Here's a way out. Because even at 12, you gotta beat this place. Gotta get out of Gainesville.

"Elvis really did mean a lot to me as a child," Tom told *Pulse!* reporter Alan di Perna in a 1999 interview. "The whole idea that this person came from poverty, like me, and he got out and made something of himself. And that he did it by doing something pretty cool, rather than something that was devious, or being a crooked politician or any of the normal Southern ways out of things."

Changes had taken place in the world of rock'n'roll, too, where the first wave of US rockers had been largely silenced or neutered during the early, pre-Beatles sixties. Elvis had been drafted and when he emerged from the Army seemed a far less threatening proposition than when he went in; Chuck Berry had been jailed; Little Richard found God; Jerry Lee Lewis was in disgrace for marrying his 13-year-old cousin; and Buddy Holly, whom history now credits with having originated the concept of the 'rock band', had died in a plane crash. It seemed as if the music industry was clawing back control after the first wave of rock'n'roll rebels, and the charts were now the preserve of 'safer' music, though much of it, notably that which emanated from the Brill Building in New York, was certainly not lacking in quality. But it wasn't to last. On the horizon was a group from England called The Beatles and within a matter of days after their first US TV appearance America's young would see the light.

It is impossible to overemphasise the effect that The Beatles had on America's teenage population when they arrived in the country

Searching For A Safe Place (1950–1969)

in February 1964. Millions watched their first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and later that year Tom saw The Beatles' film *A Hard Day's Night*, which solidified his notion that music was his way out: "... that's obviously the way you go, you know; you've got farming over here, and on this side, The Beatles."

Tom almost got to see the band play live in concert. *Almost*. "I had a ticket to see The Beatles in Jacksonville [September 11, 1964], but two days before there was a hurricane and it was pissing with rain so my Mom said, 'There's no way you are driving to Jacksonville.' So I didn't get to see The Beatles." It wouldn't be until the following year that Tom went to his first live show. "The first concert I ever went to was headlined by The Beach Boys, but The Zombies and The Searchers were on the bill [July 24, 1965, at the Jacksonville Coliseum]," remembers Tom. "Quite a show. I really wanted to see the British bands, and The Zombies were mind-blowingly good while The Searchers had such beautiful voices, mesmerizing. And John McNally [founding member of The Searchers] played a Telecaster, the first time I'd seen one, and it had this bright, brittle sound. I remember thinking it sounds good."

As Tom became more and more infatuated with the music of the day, it wasn't long before he wanted a guitar of his own. Like a thousand teenage boys with stars in their eyes and hair that now flopped down almost to cover them, he convinced his mom to buy him a brand-new model from the Sears, Roebuck catalog. "It was one of these dollar-down, dollar-a-day jobs," he remembers. "She said, 'What songs are you going to play?' and I said we were going to write our own songs. She burst into laughter: 'You want to write songs, and you can't even play an instrument yet?' But I just thought, 'They can do it. Why can't I?'" Kitty Petty was puzzled by this notion but she loved her son and admired the persistence and tenacity he displayed while begging her to part with a few hard-earned dollars. This more than anything was what persuaded her to buy him the guitar.

To this day, Tom tells people that his mom "was a complete angel", eternally supportive of his dreams. "She was cool," said Tom. "She'd

give me Rolling Stones albums.” His brother Bruce also has incredibly fond memories of Kitty as he recounted in the *Runnin' Down A Dream* documentary: “My mother was always kind of the glue that held the family together.”

By 1965 the extraordinary success of The Beatles had convinced Tom that it was time to start a band. For Tom, the Fab Four was the spark that put his future in focus. “It wasn’t until The Beatles that there was a real bolt of lightning to the brain. You know, ‘Oh, a self-contained band.’ They had the singers and the band all in one thing. Then the kids around the neighbourhood would talk about, ‘Let’s form a group and be like The Beatles.’ And it looked to me like a really good job – they were obviously young and in charge of their own lives. And it was a good way to have friends and meet girls, and I loved music so much that I hustled up a guitar and got in a group long before I could play. We hammered it out. And I’ve been in a group now since 1965.”

Two kids from the neighbourhood – Richie Henson and Robert Crawford – actually taught Tom guitar basics, showing him the notes, chords and scales, and Tom took to the instrument quite easily. The first songs he learned and performed included ‘Wooly Bully’ by Domingo “Sam” Zamudio of Sam the Sham & The Pharaohs, Tommy Tucker’s ‘High Heel Sneakers’ and ‘Love Potion #9’ by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, a minor hit for The Clovers in 1959 but a number three hit by The Searchers in 1965. Once Tom had a guitar, he experimented and taught himself songs by ear, by trial and error. It came naturally to him, so much so that he even began writing his own tunes. The first song he wrote was called ‘Baby, I’m Leaving’.

There was a second and equally strong force that persuaded Tom that music-making was a worthwhile endeavour. It was, naturally, a girl. Even at 14 or 15 Tom was already getting a handle on male bravado and posturing for the ladies. One night he went to a dance at Gainesville High and struck up a conversation about music with an appealing young classmate and told her that he was in a band. The fib backfired when, much to his surprise, she told him she was on the school dance committee and promptly booked his “band” to play a few songs at the next event. Too embarrassed to tell her that his band was a figment of

Searching For A Safe Place (1950–1969)

his imagination, the next day Tom wasted no time in putting matters right. “I set about scouring the neighbourhood for anybody that owned instruments, that could play instruments and we just struck gold. I will never forget it. We went to my house, we all plugged into the same amplifier. We found something we all knew. *Wham!* The heavens split, like this sound was incredible! It was the biggest rush of my life. Wow, you know, we’re doing it! You know, we’re making this music.”

Wearing matching blue shirts to the dance, despite their nerves Tom and his friends pulled it off. “We started to play and we were a huge success. Everybody dug it, and we played our three songs, and everybody yelled for more, so we played them again.”

After the dance, a booker for frat-house parties in the area hired them for another gig under one condition: learn some more songs. Tom took the challenge to heart and never looked back.

Tom’s first official band was called The Sundowners and consisted of Tom, Richie Henson and Robert Crawford, all on guitars, and Dennis Lee on drums. The group didn’t have a bass player at first but Tom switched from guitar to bass soon after the band’s formation. Tom’s father stepped up and bought him a professional bass, a Gibson EB-2, and a Fender Tremolux amplifier around this time. It was an unexpected gesture of love and acceptance that meant a lot to Tom at the time and still does to this day.

The Sundowners went to work practising and learning more songs, among them ‘House Of The Rising Sun’, the traditional song that The Animals took to number one in 1964, and The Ventures’ instrumental hit ‘Walk Don’t Run’. As their repertoire grew, so did the band’s bookings at frat parties around town. They’d play songs by The Rolling Stones, The Animals and The Kinks, all of whose early albums featured cover versions of American R&B and blues songs, thus drawing Tom and his bandmates back into the American music that so inspired the first wave of British bands. Beatles songs weren’t part of their stage act yet because the band members were unable to sing harmony. That skill would come in time.

Tom found it liberating to finally connect with people his own age that shared a love of music... especially the music that The Beatles

brought to America. "I'd been a collector of old music and when I hit the age of 13 The Beatles came and it was completely contemporary and all of a sudden my friends could share in this passion I had... which was really nice because until then my friends were not interested in rock'n'roll records," Tom says. "When garage bands started, everyone had a very similar set list; everyone played the current hits and when we went into the deeper tracks, it was usually The Rolling Stones, The Animals, learning blues and R&B through those acts. I didn't know Chuck Berry except I learned those songs through The Rolling Stones. It would be a while before I understood what he was about. It was a fantastic road map The Beatles and Stones laid down if you were a fanatic like I was; I'd see their names as songwriters, and I'd go find these guys, get the records and it was a whole other revelation."

Tom's search for these fathers of R&B, soul and rock'n'roll was a veritable master class in music theory. He studied the likes of Howlin' Wolf, Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, Elmore James, Fats Domino, Otis Redding, John Lee Hooker and others. He had no way of knowing how important this knowledge base would be in the future.

When Tom was about 15 years old, his group competed in a "battle of the bands" competition. The prize was the chance to play the Moose Club dance every Friday night. The Sundowners easily trumped the competition and won the gig, which paid \$100 per dance. Now things were getting serious. Dennis Lee's mom sewed actual uniforms for The Sundowners: pink collarless jackets with white ruffled shirts and black trousers. The guys also began wearing Beatle boots with Cuban heels. The band played gigs often and was making money. "The first time we got paid," recalls Tom, "my mom really thought I had stolen the money and was really concerned that I'd taken up a life of crime." Once he explained that he'd earned the money for playing music, she was surprised but proud. That said, she immediately told Tom not to set his sights on the local bars: "Don't think you're going to be down in the bars playing," she told him. But, mothers don't always get their way.

Searching For A Safe Place (1950–1969)

The Sundowners were becoming a well-respected band in town and the gigs – all types of gigs – kept coming.

Though only a freshman in high school, Tom was treating this adventure as a profession. Nevertheless it cost him some of the experiences that other high school kids were having. At one point, his love of music lost him a girlfriend, Jackie Taylor, because he had to play another school's prom on the same night of his own. He also eventually had to miss his own high school graduation ceremony due to a gig. To Tom, these sacrifices were worthwhile if it meant the band was moving forward in the Gainesville music scene.

The problem for Tom was that not all of The Sundowners were taking the band as seriously as he was. Even as a boy, Tom took everything about music to heart. He may have been one of the youngest guys in the band but he was taking most of the responsibility. "Gainesville was a wonderful place to be doing what we were doing," says Tom now. "There were a lot of venues to play because of the college. Frat parties, which weren't our favourite, clubs, functions. We were enterprising little kids."

At this point, Tom felt the need to explore other options. On a few occasions he sat in on bass for The Epics, another popular Gainesville mainstay, and they began lobbying for him to join them on a full-time basis. He resisted jumping The Sundowners' ship until he got into a fight with Dennis Lee, then promptly quit the band and joined The Epics on his sixteenth birthday – right after he went down to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get his driver's license.

The Epics – Rodney Rucker singing lead, Ricky Rucker and Tom Leadon on guitars and Dickie Underwood on drums – were even more successful than The Sundowners. Tom would join as their bass player. The members were older than Tom, who was in tenth grade at the time. Most of The Epics were in their senior year and others had graduated the year before.

Even in this band, though, Tom took all the initiative. He had business cards made up for The Epics that included his name and phone number and he booked gigs himself. The tagline on the cards noted, "For love or money." He'd play music just for the sheer joy but he wanted to

make a living too. In 2006, Rick Rucker – now a high-school teacher in Ocala, Florida – told *Gainesville Sun* staff reporter Alice Wallace that, “We [The Epics] realized Tom was the real musician of the band.”

During his tenure as a member of The Epics, Tom took a part-time after-school job at Lipham Music. Don Felder, who would eventually join the Eagles, also worked at the store. These were important days for Tom and he was soon learning more about music than he could have ever imagined. His parents continued to worry about his single-minded obsession with music. His high school guidance counselor took him to task and asked why he wasn't interested in learning subjects at school. Tom coolly and honestly replied, “Rock is more fun.” His dad was not amused by Tom's attitude. “My father thought I had the devil in me,” he says. “I can understand him being a little concerned. I was kinda failing at school. I got this report card with all Fs, except for one D minus in crafts, and he broke all my records. What gets me is I showed up enough to get Fs instead of incompletes.

“I was a problem to society. My crafts teacher, the one who gave me the D minus, she wanted me to stop hanging out with musicians. ‘Look at Elvis Presley,’ she said. ‘If he hadn't the talent and a good manager, he wouldn't have had a job to fall back on.’ I always thought Elvis was kind of a poor example to prove her point.”

In addition to his music, Tom did find gainful employment in other areas during his high school years and beyond. They were “straight” jobs, as Tom liked to call them, but he found he wasn't particularly good at any of them and certainly didn't enjoy the time he spent working in a barbecue restaurant, at a cemetery, on a construction site and as a grounds maintenance man at the local university. He didn't see any of those opportunities taking him very far.

When high school graduation day came in June 1968, Tom breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, he could focus all of his time and attention on his music career, one that would lead him to a new life, far away from Gainesville.

Following his dream to become a rock'n'roll musician meant founding a proper band with other like-minded musicians who also longed to leave Gainesville. “I discovered the limitations of the place early on,”

Searching For A Safe Place (1950–1969)

says Tom. “There’s a lot of nice things about the town I grew up in, but I wasn’t the kind of person who would have been content to settle and stay there. There’s nothing wrong with that. Sometimes I wish I was that kind of person.”

But Tom had found his calling and there was nothing he could do to stop it. “I feel like a lucky man,” Tom concedes. “A lot of people really struggle to find out what they want to do in life, but I knew as soon as I saw Elvis Presley, when I was 11. From that point, music became my religion, my nourishment. It was also a safe haven for me. My life was very turbulent as a child and a little scary, and music made everything seem right.”