



B-52s

by J. Van Ingen

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The B-52s are commonly known as the "World's Greatest Party Band" and the "tacky little dance band from Athens, Georgia" who created such hits as "Rock Lobster" and "Love Shack."

They dared to be different long before it became a cliché, and welcomed everyone else who did the same. Naturally, this held—and continues to hold—appeal for the glbtq community who welcome the message expressed in the song "Junebug": "Well, don't you listen to what they say. / We're a little different anyway. / Ain't it the truth, uh huh."

In addition to their ability to have a good time, the B-52s have influenced glbtq musicians such as Peaches and the Scissor Sisters, are active in glbtq, AIDS, environmental, and animal rights issues, and have collaborated with numerous musicians. Although firmly rooted in New Wave and 1960s rock and roll, they bring an eclectic sensibility and have adapted many influences, from post-punk to pop rock.

Before R.E.M. put Athens on the map, five friends--Kate Pierson (b. April 27, 1948), Fred Schneider (b. July 1, 1960), Keith Strickland (b. October 26, 1953) Cindy Wilson (b. February 28, 1957), and her brother, Ricky Wilson (b. March 19, 1953)-- formed a band. Cindy Wilson is the only heterosexual among the five.

After a night of flaming volcano drinks at a local Chinese restaurant in October of 1976, the band began their first jam, which is how many of their early songs were created.

Kate Pierson and Cindy Wilson, who made thrift-store clothes look chic and wore the towering bouffant hairdos that the band is named after, supply vocals. Fred Schneider sings/speaks and plays instruments like the glockenspiel, walkie-talkie, and a toy piano. Both Pierson and Cindy Wilson have also played guitar, especially in the early days; Cindy Wilson also plays the bongos and Pierson the keyboard on many of the band's signature songs.

Initially, Strickland played drums (and sometimes, keyboards and guitar) and Ricky Wilson played the guitar. Both Strickland and Wilson wrote the music, and all five members jammed collectively on lyrics.

The band's first official gig was at a friend's Valentine's Day party in 1977. Word spread quickly of their unique sound (which some described as kitschy and campy), and they soon began weekend road trips to New York City to play at venues such as CBGB's and Max's Kansas City. They quickly became the talk of the post-punk underworld and bonded with musicians such as Deborah Harry and Talking Heads.

The B-52s eponymous debut album was released in 1979 and sold more than 500,000 copies on the strength of their first singles, "Rock Lobster" and "52 Girls." The group began to attract fans far beyond the Lower East Side, and even toured in Australia and Japan. (Aaron Fricke's memoir *Reflections of a Rock Lobster: A Story About Growing Up Gay*, published in 1981, pays homage to the B-52s song in its title.)



The B-52s performing in Barcelona in 2008. Left to right: Keith Strickland, Cindy Wilson, Kate Pierson, and Fred Schneider. Photograph by Flickr contributor alterna2. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

After their second album, *Wild Planet*, was released in 1980, the band appeared on *Saturday Night Live* and in Paul Simon's movie, *One Trick Pony* (1980). One of the singles from this album, "Private Idaho," is mentioned by Gus Van Sant in the credits of his movie *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). The song is about living in your own little world, and makes a subtle and obscure reference to environmental pollution.

Over the next three years, the band settled into becoming one of the world's top live acts, and released a new album each year--*Party Mix* (1981) *Mesopotamia* (1982), which was produced by Talking Heads' David Byrne, and *Whammy!* (1983).

Many of the B-52s songs openly express sexual freedom and have double meanings. For example, because "Whammy Kiss" is sung by Schneider, it can be perceived as a song between two gay men. Other songs have double-entendres, as, for example, the disaster song, "Lava," about a volcano.

The band soon attracted international acclaim. In January of 1985, they performed in Brazil's "Rock in Rio" concert festival, which turned out to be Ricky Wilson's last live performance.

Tragically, Ricky Wilson died of an AIDS-related virus in October of 1985 while the band was working on *Bouncing off the Satellites*, their fifth album.

The band was devastated by the loss. "He really had a vision," Cindy Wilson says on the band's official website. "He was one of the strongest elements of the B-52s from the beginning." The band released *Bouncing off the Satellites* a year later, and dedicated the album to Ricky Wilson.

The surviving band members did not think they could continue performing without Ricky Wilson. They went into seclusion and did very little promotion for the new album. During the band's period of mourning, Strickland slowly began to write music again and switched from drums to guitar.

After a three-year hiatus, *Cosmic Thing* was released in 1989. Many songs, such as "Deadbeat Club" (the video of which featured a cameo by R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe) and "Love Shack," celebrated the group's early days and was part of the healing process for them. The album soared to the top of the *Billboard* album charts, and yielded their first top 10 hits.

After this success, the band toured exhaustively and internationally for 18 months, including an Earth Day gig before nearly 750,000 people in New York City's Central Park.

In 1990 the B-52s were nominated for four MTV Video Music Awards including Video of the Year. They won two awards, Best Group Video and Best Art Direction.

The band became more overtly political during this time as well. In 1988, the B-52s filmed a public service announcement called "Art Against AIDS" and began to publicly advocate for organizations like PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and Greenpeace. They contributed songs to albums for both organizations, and expressed their commitment to the environment in songs like "Channel Z" and "Topaz."

During the tour for *Cosmic Thing* in 1990, the Los Angeles show was an AIDS benefit in tribute to Ricky Wilson. The venue, crew, merchandisers, promoters, band members, and others agreed to donate all proceeds to 10 different AIDS charities. One of the groups chosen by the band to receive money was AIDS Athens, an advocacy organization in their hometown.

From 1995 to 2001, B-52s fans planned "Party Out of Bounds" dance benefits for AIDS Athens, and the band performed at the 1999 benefit.

Strickland did not feel that it was enough to merely play benefit concerts, however. Strickland, Schneider, and Ricky Wilson were always out in their personal lives, but Strickland felt that it was important to talk openly about being gay. To that end, he came out publicly in *Q Magazine* in 1992.

The band's *Good Stuff* album of 1992 continued its activism with songs about the environment ("Revolution Earth"), self-acceptance and fighting for political change ("Bad Influence" and "Tell It Like It T-I-Is"). The band also made a foray into the movies. In 1994, they sang several songs in Brian Levant's comedy *Meet the Flintstones*.

During this time, Cindy Wilson made an amicable departure from the band to focus on her family. *Good Stuff* is the only album where she does not appear as a vocalist.

In addition to becoming a mother, Cindy Wilson has since worked with artists like Dreams So Real and Kristen Hall, performed with her husband, Keith Bennett in the Cindy Wilson Band in 2002, and appeared with fellow Athens girl Dana Downs and the Debauchelors at a R.E.M. tribute concert in 2010. Continuing the Wilson sibling tradition, her two children are in a local band called "Already Taken."

Other members of the B-52s also kept busy with side projects.

Pierson, for example, memorably appeared with R.E.M., Iggy Pop, and Betty, and was one of the members of NiNa, a band that achieved huge success in Japan in 1999. In 2005, she opened the motel Kate's Lazy Meadow in upstate New York with her life partner, Monica Coleman.

Schneider released a book of poetry, two solo albums, made guest appearances on albums from Sleater-Kinney, and fronted the Foo Fighters cover of the B-52s hit "Planet Claire." His current side project is a comedy synthpop band called The Superions—in between B-52s gigs, they have released videos and an album of Christmas songs.

In 1998, the band released a greatest-hits album, *Time Capsule*, which included "Debbie," a tribute to Deborah Harry. In 1999, the band recorded the song "The Chosen One" for *Pokemon: The Movie 2000*. Celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary in 2002, the band released a two-disc compilation, *Nude on the Moon: The B-52s Anthology*.

Although the band never stopped touring, after 2002, they lived in different cities and it was difficult for them to produce new material. Nonetheless, Strickland started writing music using ProTools software, and the band got together in their old stomping grounds in Atlanta and Athens to create *Funplex*, which was released in 2008.

One of their songs, "Juliet of the Spirits" is inspired by the 1965 Federico Fellini movie of the same name. Both the song and the movie are about a betrayed woman who finds the courage to not be afraid anymore. As with their early work, the song is not explicitly gay, but has meaning for the glbtq community. Other songs, like "Funplex," poke fun at consumerism.

Thanks to a fierce following among fans, the band (which tours with three additional musicians) continues to perform more than 60 shows a year, and they released their first live album, *With the Wild Crowd*, in October of 2011.

Still, activism is never far from their minds. In response to the spate of suicides in September 2010 by gay youth who had been bullied or humiliated, Strickland collaborated with the gay newspaper *Washington Blade* to create an "It Gets Better" video. Strickland also sometimes appears in concerts with a rainbow sticker on his guitar.

The band also performed at music producer Nile Rodgers' We Are Family Foundation Gala in 2011, and they

continue to support other causes.

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