

January 17, 2017 - Cindy Wilson is a vocalist and founding member of the B-52s, a rock band from Athens, Georgia that have sold over 20 million albums. She recently released her first solo EP, *Sunrise*, which will be followed by a full-length solo record later this year. Her brother and former B-52s bandmate, Ricky Wilson, passed away due to complications from AIDS in 1985. He is now considered one of the most influential rock guitarists of all-time.



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3106 words.

Tags: Music, Beginnings, Anxiety, Collaboration.

Cindy Wilson on creating the world you want to be in

You are about to release your first solo record. Why did you wait so long?

You know, the B-52's have been so busy for years now and I have a family. That's the simple answer. But to be honest, I didn't really have a lot of confidence. I have played with other people at various points over the years, but this new band came about at just the right time. Everyone is younger than I am, so it brings more of a freshness to the approach than what I would have probably done on my own. Different ideas.

I actually met Ryan Monahan first and we hired him to play my son's birthday party. He was in a Beatles cover band back in Georgia and played parties. They were shockingly good. They were beyond any kid's band kind of thing. We hired him a couple more times and then we started going to see his other bands. You could just tell he was a natural musician, really amazing. Then a friend asked me to do a couple shows in Athens and I needed someone to play with me. My first thought was Ryan. He's one of the best musicians I've met in Athens, so I asked him to go in with me and start learning these cover songs. They were garage-band type songs. Though he was too young to remember a lot of the actual songs I chose, he could nail everything I threw at him. It was a great pairing. We did really well. So we just kept doing things together. As an experiment we went into the studio to see what might happen. That was the beginning of this new sound. We've just kind of taken it to a different place.

It's so interesting to hear you say you didn't feel confident enough to do a solo project. Anyone who has ever seen or heard the B-52s would likely be shocked by that.

Well, I am brave. I mean, I think I am brave, but it's about working with the right people. That's the most important part. With the B-52s I just really lucked out. When you have that experience once it's almost like lightning striking, you know? It just seems unlikely that it could ever work that well with other people. And as you get older you wonder, does anyone really want to hear this from me right now? Is anyone interested?

There's something, too, about being in a band. It's sort of like being in a gang. It feels safe.

Oh absolutely. Yeah, I get spoiled with everybody. It's a lot of fun. In the B-52s we have to pinch ourselves because we're still getting phone calls to come out and play. It just keeps going and we do well. That's a huge thing for all of us and you don't want to jeopardize that. Doing a solo thing is really taking a chance. In doing this I've learned a lot about myself and where I am in the whole scheme of things.

Like what?

It's like reintroducing myself to the world. I was in this big band that's gone through the ages, but I was really always the quiet one. I'm having to start over again. I have a little bit of pull sometimes but for the most part, it's starting over—playing small rooms, doing interviews. But it's fun because I have to earn it. I don't mind earning it.

The B-52s are always referred to as "the world's greatest party band" but people take for granted what a complicated history the band has, and what a complicated body of work. You guys were pioneers, playing alongside the Talking Heads and Blondie. David Bowie was coming to your shows.

I'm so glad that you want people to know that, because it is definitely true. We started from a very original place. A very naive place, maybe. There was nothing like what we were doing. There was a kind of serendipity about how we came together and everyone really brought their own special thing to it. Keith and Fred were amazing, Ricky was this incredible guitar player. Kate and I could do these experimental vocals and harmonies that came more from the upper mountains in South Carolina than anywhere else. There was a looseness to what we were doing. We were really just interested in having a good time.

It's great to hear Ricky get mentioned so much as an influence now. So many young bands reference his guitar playing.

I know. I've got two kids and they never got to meet Ricky, but they just get so psyched to hear about him. I've told them stories and and I've got a couple of Ricky's guitars. They're just totally, "Oh wow, he's cool." And for me... I'm just so proud of him. And proud that his name keeps coming up. You see lists of the greatest guitar players and he's on there, which is fantastic. I'm so glad.

How does it feel to perform this solo material?

I love it. I'm really just so grateful that I have such high quality musicians with me. They're easy going, fun to work with, and they like putting the rehearsal and the work into it. That's what it takes. That's what the B-52's, we've always done. You have to be rehearsed. It looks easy—it looks like we're just up there having a party—but it's not. Some of the songs are very complicated. For my solo shows we have this whole thing designed to go along with it, which is more like an art piece. It's just one long continuous flow until you reach the end. It includes a film that's playing along behind me, very hypnotic.

It feels very much like a new world to me. The music business has changed so much since when we started, it's just really hard for bands to make a living now. What I'm trying to do is keep myself inspired, you know? Keep my creative fires burning, keep myself working, see how much I can grow this little thing that I'm doing just for myself. Being able to do this at all is the whole payback for me. I get asked a lot by young musicians, *what do I do? How do I do this?* All I can say is that you have to be dedicated to it. You have to put the work into it. There is no shortcut. Even with the B-52s, when it may have looked like what we were doing was just silly, it was still work. Something can be really fun and still be hard work—those things don't always cancel each other out. Being a musician these days, you have to be prepared to be away from home, you have to be willing to play lots of shows anywhere you can. You have to love it. It's got to be worth it, not just for me but for the people in my band as well.

At the height of the B-52s fame, you took a break and stepped away from the band for a while. Did people think you were crazy?

Yeah. A lot of people. You just didn't do that, you know? But it was important. It was right after Ricky died. We made the big *Cosmic Thing* album and it was a huge success. We really didn't see it coming, but it was amazing. We actually made money and we ended up touring for almost three years straight. This is the weird thing about success. You work hard to achieve it, but it's when you become successful that you really work hard. It becomes this thing that you have to maintain and there is this feeling that you can't stop. It was very exhausting. And to tell you the truth, I was still mourning Ricky's loss and not having him in the band. Even though I love everybody in the band and we were in the middle of this huge success, it was different with Ricky not being there. It was just scary. It was scary for me. That being said, I'm grateful for the experience of *Cosmic Thing*. It was amazing. It changed our lives.

I don't think most people can conceive of what that would be like—to be in a band with your sibling and then have them pass away. To continue this creative project in their absence, this thing that you had built together, must have been so hard.

He was my big brother, you know? I was always like, "Oh, my big brother." It made me feel safe. I feel like the band are my family too, but it's not the same thing. To me, it lost a lot of pleasure after Ricky died. But like I said, I was also so grateful for the success and we did great, which is what Ricky would have wanted for us. Still, I knew at a certain point that I needed to stop. My clock was ticking—loudly!—and I was living in New York City. I just felt like it was time to head back to Georgia and get to know my family again and start having some kids. My husband and I have been together since I was 20 years old and I basically dragged him out of NYC kicking and screaming. Still, we got to have a life back home and, eventually, two kids. We also got to spend time with our families and that was all time well spent. It needed to happen. I think maybe that's another piece of advice I can offer—know when to take care of yourself. If you feel like you need to stop, then stop. If you don't take care yourself in your personal life, your real life, you won't be any good to anyone else.

Eventually the band asked me if I wanted to come back. It was after I'd had my little girl and they wanted to know if I'd come back and just do a few shows. It always starts with a few shows. (*laughs*) Eventually those few shows led to going back on tour. We'd always figure out a way to make it work though. I'd bring my baby and a nurse and my husband, we'd have a family bus. We would go through phases of just playing the occasional corporate gig, which was enough to sort of keep the B-52 machine going. That's another thing, you have the band and the crew and all of these people working for you, so you have to keep that going. All of these people depend on it. At a certain point Fred and I thought it was time to retire... but that only lasted about a year. I think it's so cool that I got to do both things—I got to take a break and be with my babies and have a life, but then I got to come back.

You were a kid when the B-52s started. Had the band not happened for some reason, do you think you still would have been a musician?

What would I have done? I was a baby when it started. I was 19. I really didn't know what would have happened. I was more of an artist type, I painted. I would have done that, probably. A lot of my friends who stayed in Athens ended up going to school to be a nurse or something like that. I might have learned some kind of trade. You didn't really need much money to live in Athens, so I'm sure it probably would have worked out.

It's funny to think about those days. There weren't the same kind of resources for being creative back then. Ricky taught himself guitar, but I remember that there was this great program on the educational channel. It was this kind of hippie girl that taught you how to play guitar and Ricky watched that and followed her. He got a lot of that from his guitar style I think, and he loved Joni Mitchell. We would sing to Joni and Captain Beefheart around the house. Our plan in those days was that Keith, Ricky, and I were going to learn some songs and then go to Europe to be street musicians. Keith and Ricky had already been to Europe a couple of times and Ricky was really good at saving money, he was a genius that way. So we were all gonna run away to Europe... and then the B-52s happened. (laughs)

It's funny to think about. If Ricky had lived, maybe I wouldn't have waited so long to make a solo record. He thought I was hilarious. He thought I had a good voice.

Um, you do! One of the best.

(laughs) You know, Ricky thought I was funny. He would use me as his muse a lot. Because of that I got to learn how to do my own creative thing and add to it and make that grow. Because of the band, I really learned how to work with people. I am a team player. I love that. I love people's talents bouncing off of each other and becoming something else. It's beautiful. Making something out of nothing, it's really magical. I love that about artists. That's another thing I always suggest to people—don't be afraid to collaborate. If you can find the right people work with and you are open to it, collaboration can really bring the best out in everyone.

What else do you tell people that come to you for creative advice?

Actually, talking to the people in my solo band, I'm aware that now it's very hard to launch a career in music. It's shocking, actually. But I'm also amazed by how many people are playing in bands now. Technology really makes it so that everyone can do it much more easily, which wasn't true back when we started. You can record things on your own so much more easily now and that's wonderful. You want that. To a lot of people who are my age, who may have stopped making music or being creative or just lost their spark somehow, I say, "Get the guitar back out! It's good for you. You need to keep making things and being creative because it's good for your brain. It's good for your soul. It's never time to just stop." And for younger people I think you just have to figure out specifically what it is you are good at rather than copy someone else. You want to stand out from everyone but not because of gimmicks, but because you are an original. Oh, and be realistic about what your talents are and be true to them, whatever they are. I think that's a great thing to tell people.

When you've amassed this huge body of work—songs that you have to sing otherwise people will flip out—how do you keep it interesting for yourself? How do you keep it so that it's not, "Oh god, we have to go sing 'Love Shack' one more time."

Well, for me personally, you just have to be living in the moment. It's like doing cartwheels. Maybe the next cartwheel you do is even better than the last cartwheel you did. Also, doing cartwheels is fun. There are way worse things you could be doing than cartwheels. That's not to say that sometimes "Rock Lobster" comes up in the set and I say, "Oh Rock Lobster again." Then some nights you look at the crowd and you see the joy in everybody's faces and I look across the stage and I see Kate doing fish sounds and Fred doing his thing and it is undeniably really joyful. It's very joyful. I think that's a big part of why we've been able to do this for so long—these are songs about celebration and joy. If we were a band that made more serious music, it would be a lot harder to do that over and over again, living in that darker space all the time. That would be hard for me. You create the world you actually want to be in, you know? I'm so grateful to have been a part of this thing and to hopefully see it through to the end. In 2017 we'll celebrate having been together for forty years. Can you believe that?

When you make it your creative project to make songs that are really about release and happiness and freedom, performing them over and over again must help keep you connected to those feelings.

It does. I think you made a good point there. It is definitely is a rehearsal for your heart. When you perform this material, you can't help but sort of fall back into that state, even if you're sick as a dog. If you've got the flu or something, and you're kind of pretending, which, as a touring musician, is something that happens all the time, the material kind of lifts you up. Then by the next gig you're back out in that space and you really are welled up with this emotion and you just dance and let it all go. In my regular life I don't dance that much, but onstage I get to dance all the time and do this crazy stuff. I really can't believe it sometimes. As for the solo stuff, I'm just taking it one day at a time. Again, I didn't really expect anything to happen, so it's been really wonderful to have people tell me that they like what I'm doing. One person wrote me, "It's like meeting an old friend that you haven't seen for many years at the airport!" I love that.

Cindy Wilson recommends these minerals:

Rhodochrosite



Tourmaline



Purple Topaz



Amethyst



Rose Quartz



Name

Cindy Wilson

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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