

HEART

Heart provided an example for women who wanted to rock aggressively without sacrificing their femininity.

By Parke Puterbaugh

The story of Heart would make a terrific film. Like many hugely successful rock groups, theirs is a classic tale of talent, struggle, perseverance, adversity, and triumph. The twist that makes Heart's biography unique is the fact that this band is fronted by a pair of beautiful, determined sisters. At their point of entry in the mid-seventies, Ann and Nancy Wilson found themselves swimming against the current of a male-dominated music business that was rife with bias and sexism.

Through it all, the Wilson sisters never made an issue of their gender, or exploited it as some kind of novelty. Instead, they focused on Heart's music, a beguiling play of light and shadows, power and delicacy, and acoustic and electric (or *Dog & Butterfly*, to cite the title of a Heart album that explicitly played on that duality). At its core are Ann's soaring, powerful lead voice and Nancy's unique, inventive guitar work, with the sisters also combining strengths as songwriters and harmony singers. The group's remarkable success — twenty Top Forty hits, fourteen gold or platinum albums, and thirty-five million albums sold — helped kick down doors for female rock & rollers. Heart provided an example for women who wanted to rock aggressively without sacrificing their femininity or being held back because of gender. It wasn't an easy struggle: In the beginning, the sisters were condescendingly asked, "Are your guitars really plugged in?" That was often the least of it.

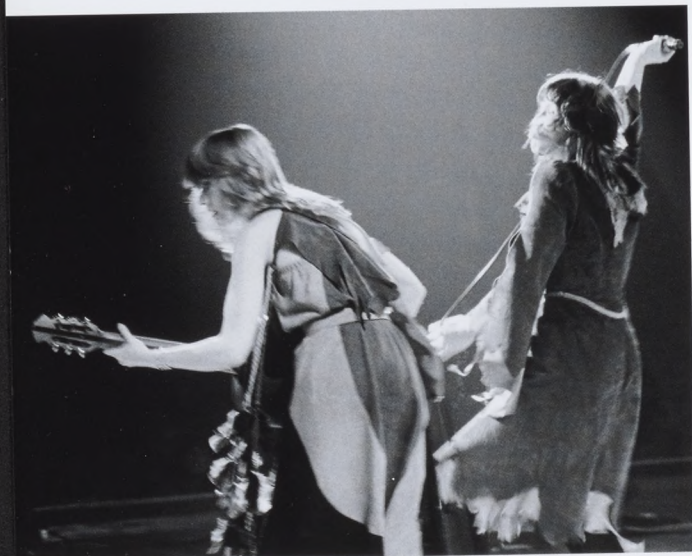
"There were roadblocks because of being women, and not being taken very seriously for our instincts, opinions, and leadership of the band," said Nancy Wilson. Ann Wilson elaborated: "At first, we were just trying to get past sexual stereotypes, take the sexual designation off it. That's not easy in rock & roll! It was invented from a male perspective. Men invented it to get girls. To a large degree, the first half of our career was about building an alternate

Heart at the start: Steve Fossen, Howard Leese, Roger Fisher, Michael DeRosier, Nancy Wilson, and Ann Wilson (clockwise from left)



“If you really want to talk about the origins of Heart, it’s me and Ann in our bedrooms with guitars.”

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP:
Ann and Nancy in 1956;
in 1966; Ann in 1977;
Wilson sisters onstage
in Cleveland.



parallel universe to the world of men in rock. A lot of people tried to discredit the voice we were in as women as being hysterical or silly or irrelevant – too ‘girly’ to be totally heavy and rock. We spent a lot of time going, ‘Don’t pay attention to that, just listen to what we’re saying.’ The fact we’re still here after forty years is a sign that there’s been a sea change in rock culture.”

Though fronted by women, Heart has always been a coed band. In addition to the Wilson sisters, the group’s definitive seventies lineup – responsible for such Heart classics as “Magic Man,” “Crazy on You,” “Barracuda,” and “Straight On” – included guitarist Roger Fisher, bassist Steve Fossen, drummer Michael DeRosier, and keyboardist/guitarist Howard Leese. The four men were crucial to the success of Heart, and are rightly inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame alongside the Wilsons.

The seeds for Heart were sown in the late 1960s, when members of the Seattle bar band A Boy and His Dog (including Ann Wilson on vocals) joined local scene veterans Roger Fisher and Steve Fossen to form a new group. Fisher and Fossen had an earlier band called White Heart, a name they shortened to Heart. After calling the new lineup Hocus Pocus for a spell, they reclaimed “Heart” – one simple word that evoked a world of emotion.

The band moved to Vancouver, B.C., where Michael Fisher – Roger’s brother and Ann’s love interest – took on managerial duties. The early goal was to become Vancouver’s biggest club band, and countless hours were spent on local stages over the next three years. Musically, Heart drew from shared roots in the Beatles’ tuneful songcraft, Seattle’s potent garage-rock scene, and Led Zeppelin’s marriage of pulverizing rock and ethereal folk. The band was even nicknamed “Little Led Zeppelin” for its blazing renditions of the British group’s repertoire.

Along the way, Michael DeRosier became the band’s drummer, and Nancy Wilson dropped out of college – to bring her more acoustic orientation to this all-electric entity. Howard Leese, a studio staffer who engineered and played on *Dreamboat Annie*, Heart’s 1976 debut album, then joined on keyboards and guitar. This solidified a lineup that stayed nearly intact (save for Roger Fisher’s 1979 departure) until 1982. Leese would ultimately log twenty-four years in Heart, the longest tenure of anyone besides the Wilsons.

Nancy noted, “If you really want to talk about the origins of Heart, it’s me and Ann in our bedrooms with guitars.” Inspired by the Beatles, the sisters had formed their first group, the Viewpoints, in the mid-sixties, when Nancy was not yet a teenager. A subsequent group, bearing the hippie-era name Daybreak, actually cut two singles. You can also include the oldest Wilson sister, Lynn (who’s sung with Heart in the studio and handled wardrobe on tour), and longtime best friend Sue Ennis (cowriter of numerous Heart songs, and member of the Wilsons’ Lovemongers side project), as part of the family.

This is what Ann and Nancy Wilson mean when they make reference to “blood harmony,” explaining, “It’s a family thing.” They grew up in a military household, moving from base to base in the United States and abroad, wherever their father’s career in the Marines took them (John B. Wilson Jr. eventually rose to the rank of major). This transient existence meant that the sisters, the only constants in each other’s lives, were well prepared for the rigors of touring, and forged a strong, soulful bond that helps explain the band’s longevity.

“Nancy and I have dodged some big bullets by being unified, and having the common vision to stay true to ourselves,” said Ann. “Our songwriting, singing, and playing come directly from the heart – not to make a pun! The whole idea of staying true to something that primary is probably how we’ve been able to keep it together all this time.”

After their stint as a club band, Heart signed to Mushroom Records, a Canadian label, and released *Dreamboat Annie*. In a scene so cinematically perfect that it almost sounds made-up, fate smiled just as Heart appeared to be on its last legs. Near the end of a two-week gig at a dive called Lucifer’s, the band was fired after locking horns with the owner. Then came the proverbial career-changing phone call, informing the group that its debut record was a hit in Montreal, and Heart very soon found itself onstage at a Montreal arena, opening for Rod Stewart. Nearly overnight, the band went from scuffling to stardom. “It was this magical, amazing moment,” marveled Ann. “We felt like we’d been saved by the bell.”



Heart on the road in 1976





“It became challenging to try and live up to an MTV image in real life.”

In the latter 1970s, Heart soared to hard-rocking heights. Ann’s sinuous, autobiographical “Magic Man,” from *Dreamboat Annie*, became the band’s first Top Ten hit. Switching labels to Portrait, Heart built on this success with the albums and singles that followed, notably 1977’s *Little Queen* (which included the blistering “Barracuda”), 1978’s *Dog & Butterfly* (“Straight On”), and 1980’s *Bébé le Strange* (“Even It Up”). The recordings captured Heart’s compelling eclecticism, which ranged from furiously driven, sexually charged hard rock to gently idealistic, mystically infused ballads. Heart tapped into the fanciful, baroque approach of the late sixties and the musical expertise and complexity of seventies progressive rock. In so doing, it became one of the premier bands of the classic-rock era.

Selected Discography



Dreamboat Annie
Mushroom, 1976



Heart
Capitol, 1985



Little Queen
Portrait, 1977



The Road Home
Capitol, 1995



Dog & Butterfly
Portrait, 1978



Red Velvet Car
Sony/Legacy, 2010

In the early eighties – due to a combination of label indifference, lineup changes, problems with producers, and shifting musical tastes – the band lost momentum. The long-time rhythm section of Fossen and DeRosier was replaced by Spirit bassist Mark Andes and drummer Denny Carmassi. The albums released during this period of transition, 1982’s *Private Audition* and 1983’s *Passionworks*, did not generate hits, airplay, or sales on the scale of Heart’s prior work. But in the middle of the decade, when the band signed with Capitol, it experienced one of the greatest resurgences this side of Aerosmith.

The group’s label debut, *Heart* (1985), became its first Number One album and ultimately sold five million copies. Moreover, “These Dreams,” a moving power ballad sung by Nancy (with lyrics by Bernie Taupin), became the group’s first Number One single. The album yielded three more Top Ten hits – “What About Love,” “Never,” and “Nothin’ at All” – that epitomized the sound of Heart in the eighties: lavishly produced midtempo ballads, crafted as vehicles for the Wilson sisters’ exquisite voices.

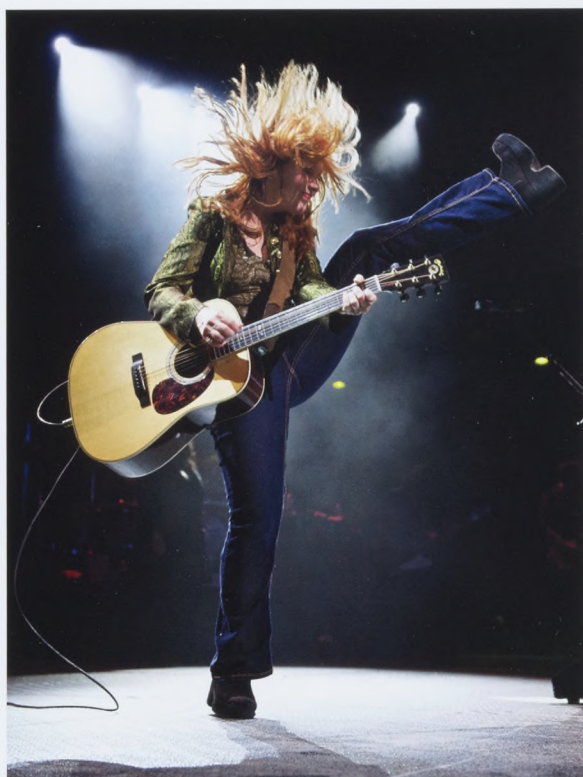
The band followed *Heart* with two more multiplatinum albums: *Bad Animals* (which generated their second chart-topper, “Alone”), in 1987, and *Brigade*, in 1990. A fixture on MTV and the world’s largest concert stages, Heart had become even more popular in the eighties than it was in the seventies. To facilitate this comeback, the sisters willingly

surrendered a certain amount of creative control to others outside the band, including record executives, producers, songwriters, videographers, and stylists. The strategy paid off, reestablishing Heart as a major force in popular music. Although the group's recordings from that period may reflect a heavy use of synthesizers and occasional overproduction, much stands the test of time. But the Wilsons were relieved when the inflated excesses that marked the era began to subside.

"It was an interesting time of glut," reflected Nancy. "Everything was too expensive. The hair was too big. The egos were out of control. We thought we were being put into a box we didn't fit into." Ann agreed: "Commercially, it was huge, but we had to struggle for balance as people. It became challenging to try and live up to an MTV image in real life. In the nineties, you could tell we were pulling away from that and looking for our feet again."

Indeed, the Wilson sisters bonded with musicians of the budding grunge-rock scene in their hometown of Seattle. The grunge kids respected them as hard-rock trailblazers. The group rediscovered its sense of adventure on albums like the far-ranging *Desire Walks On* (recorded at its Bad Animals studio), the live acoustic document *The Road Home* (with arrangements by Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones), and the uncompromising *Jupiter's Darling* (produced by Nancy Wilson). Refusing to rest on its laurels, Heart recently released two albums – *Red Velvet Car* (2010) and *Fanatic* (2012) – that prove the Wilsons have lost none of their inventiveness, assertiveness, or hunger.

Regarding Heart's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Ann Wilson said, "We're just really happy to be



Heart attack: Nancy, live in 2010

acknowledged, because it's been so much work and life experience." Added Nancy, "We appreciate being honored after four decades of committed, soul-bending sacrifice and work. It feels nothing but good." 🎸



The Wilson sisters, 2011