

Neil Giraldo and Pat Benatar, Chicago, 1980



PERFORMERS

# PAT BENATAR AND NEIL GIRALDO

THIS ROCK & ROLL POWER  
COUPLE DELIVERED A SLEW OF  
ERA-DEFINING HITS.

BY HOLLY GLEASON



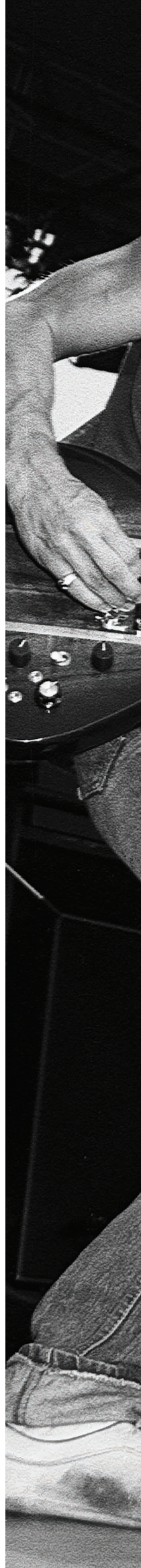
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: In the studio working on *In the Heat of the Night*, 1978; Benatar in 1980; backstage at the Capitol Theatre, Passaic, New Jersey, 1980.

**‘H**earthbreaker”: Three seconds of sixteenth notes on electric guitar, pummeling, pounding, punching the void; drummer and bass player locked in. At the fourth second, a swerving guitar chord lands, repeating at the seventh and tenth second. But it’s the eleventh second – when a serrated electric guitar lead corkscrews it all – that pins listeners to the wall. It’s the intersection point of punk and arena rock; a ramped-up rush of testosterone with musical acuity. And then, when the voice comes in – that pure, strong, swaggering *mezzo-soprano* – the seismic shift crashes hard.

Pat Benatar, Brooklyn-born and Long Island-raised, rocked with the velocity of all the best rock singers, seething with a new sexual bravado that demanded you give as good as you get. Pouring out of America’s car radios in the fall of 1979, here was a woman serving notice that she was here. When she closed that truculent chorus, “*Don’t you mess around, no, no,*” Neil Giraldo’s gui-

tar squeal served as an exclamation point to the carnal law being laid down.

“Heartbreaker” throat-punched AOR radio, then hit the Top Forty like a hand grenade, with Benatar’s muscular, slightly sobbing voice blazing. More subtly, America was introduced to the stealth team of Benatar/Giraldo, delivering the rock charge the slight brunette woman craved from such great twosomes as Jagger/Richards and Lennon/McCartney. Never a “chick singer,” rock or otherwise, Benatar had sought a partner who could push her instrument and her feminist-first sense of song with a power-forward attack of his own: Enter Cleveland native Neil Giraldo. He’d played guitar with local combo Thrills and Company before moving to New York in 1977 to join Rick Derringer’s band. Giraldo was in Woodstock with Derringer recording his *Guitars and Women* LP when he heard about a woman who needed a musical force to realize what she heard in her head. Together, Benatar and Giraldo would go on to sell over thirty-five million albums worldwide.



Onstage at South Mountain Arena, West Orange, New Jersey, 1981





Onstage, in  
Passaic, New  
Jersey, 1980

“  
**TO SEE GIRALDO UNRAVEL A SOLO IS TO UNDERSTAND THE FRAMEWORK AROUND ONE OF ROCK’S MOST POWERFUL VOCALISTS.**  
”

Benatar’s break came at the iconic boîte Catch a Rising Star, where she caught the attention of owner Rick Newman with a 2:00 a.m. open mic rendition of Judy Garland’s “Rock-a-Bye Your Baby With a Dixie Melody.” Following a showcase at Tramps (clad in spandex), she was signed by Chrysalis head Terry Ellis. Next came discussions about her following Olivia Newton-John’s path of pleasant pop. With producer Mike Chapman enlisted for three songs, Giraldo arrived to meet the fiery, feisty

young woman with an equal intensity – and Benatar’s 1979 debut, *In the Heat of the Night*, became its own reality: Whether the little-girl hiccup of “Rated X,” the tough ennui of John Mellencamp’s “I Need a Lover,” or the rafter-scraping, Giraldo-penned “We Live for Love,” Benatar created a sensation. She was smart and sensual – a little new wave, a lot rock – and she had an undeniably remarkable, massive vocal range.

“When we started, Patricia was singing more in a head



voice,” Giraldo explained of the sound. “I remember saying, ‘We gotta get you singing more like Little Richard, that first line of “Lucille,” how that landed.’ We’d rehearse and change keys until we got that split at the top of her falsetto. *That was it!*”

Benatar, Giraldo, and band lived on the road, punching it out in clubs for a bit, then arenas as “Heartbreaker” kicked in. Promo, interviews, station visits, *American Bandstand* where a clearly awed Dick Clark proclaimed, “You’re scary.” It was a whirlwind. A year after its release, the debut LP was certified platinum.

To capitalize on the momentum, Benatar and Giraldo returned to the studio, enlisting producer Keith Olsen. Her rock vision – bolstered by Giraldo’s scalding guitarwork – was already maturing. *Crimes of Passion* dodged the sophomore jinx with another blend of femme strength and conviction. Ultimately certified quadruple platinum domestically, it produced the strutting, cocksure Top Ten challenge “Hit Me With Your Best Shot.” That alone would make the 1980 album a classic, but

Benatar’s snarling cover of the Young Rascals’ “You Better Run” became the second-ever video played on MTV. Laying down the gauntlet for women – and for guitar players – Benatar and Giraldo created a space for strength, power, and self-agency on what would be a pop culture tour de force. An avid reader, Benatar absorbed a series of articles in *The New York Times* about child abuse, then wrote the nearly boiling over “Hell Is for Children” with Giraldo and bassist Roger Capps. Suddenly, the unseen didn’t just have a voice. They had a champion.

“I was 25, 26, and raised in a bucolic town on Long Island,” Benatar reflected. “I was so shocked, the only way I could get it out was to write. Then all the anguish and pain came out in those guitars.” Though many protested, mail poured in from victims, offering thanks. It was heady to have a song connect that way, even if John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s *Double Fantasy* locked *Crimes* out of Number One on *Billboard’s* album chart. The punk-basted *Crimes* included a cover of Kate Bush’s ethereal “Wuthering Heights” and the line-in-the-sand Top

Twenty “Treat Me Right,” which garnered Benatar’s first Grammy win for Best Rock Vocal Performance, Female.

So intense was Benatar’s impact that clones in striped T-shirts, berets, and spandex dotted America’s malls. Cameron Crowe celebrated the phenomenon in his book *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, and Amy Heckerling featured three look-alikes in her film adaptation.

The rush-rush of touring, promoting, writing, and recording couldn’t stop Benatar and Giraldo – forged as a couple through their creative process and undeniable chemistry. A team, they took on stereotypes, pushed each other, and sought to keep the music, as well as Benatar’s three-and-a-half octaves, interesting, instead of merely xeroxing what had already been done.

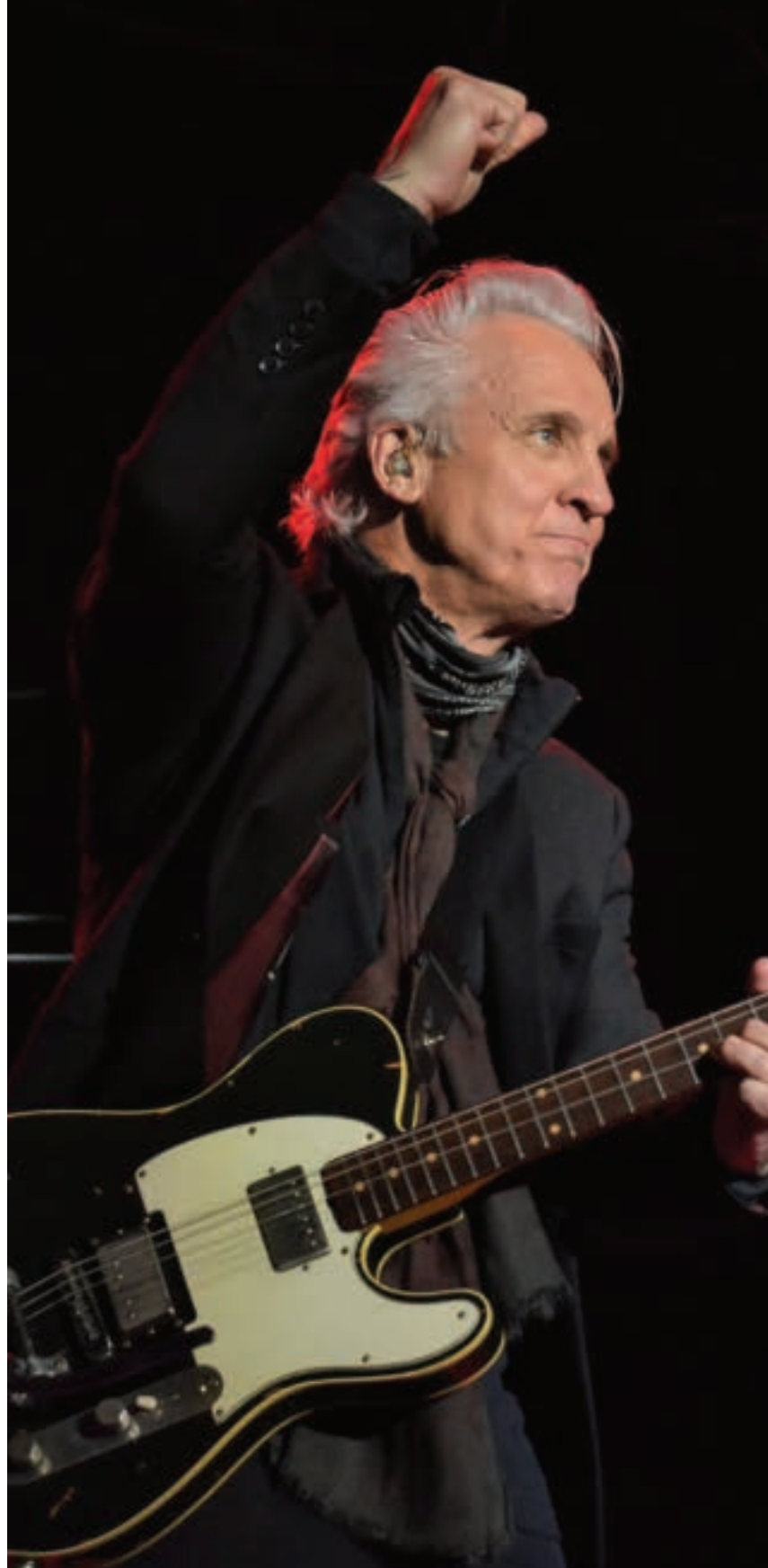
In 1981, for their third release, *Precious Time*, Giraldo was installed as coproducer with Olsen. A highlight was the Benatar-Giraldo cowrite “Promises in the Dark.” Ultimately, “Fire and Ice,” the double platinum project’s lead single, would earn Benatar her second Grammy. A squalling cover of the Beatles’ “Helter Skelter” provided good punk measure and pure attitudinal delight. And *Precious Time* topped *Billboard’s* album chart.

*Get Nervous*, like her previous albums, followed less than a year later, in 1982. With lush, doo-wop-tinged harmonies setting up “Shadows of the Night,” a broadening of what Benatar’s music could hold without surrendering the strength of her persona emerged. Dramatic pop, it came to life in a World War II-period video featuring a young Judge Reinhold and Bill Paxton – and solidified her ubiquity, as well as capturing her third consecutive Grammy.

*Live From Earth* (1983) documented a band that knew how to ignite Benatar’s biggest hits. The road-honed fury of the tight five-piece, along with Benatar’s vocals and Giraldo’s guitar, show why they were such a huge ticket draw. *Live* also contained two studio tracks: “Lipstick Lies” and the Holly Knight/Mike Chapman masterpiece “Love Is a Battlefield,” her fourth Grammy winner. After director Marty Callner captured Benatar and company’s New Haven coliseum concert for an HBO special, Benatar and Giraldo then enlisted director Bob Giraldi – fresh off Michael Jackson’s “Beat It” – for a “Battlefield” scene rebuking male exploitation through female solidarity, vis-a-vis taxi dancers rebelling against their boss.

In 1984, *Tropico* completed a brazen but brainy shift. Atmospheric, almost experimental, with an emphasis on sounds and sonics, its songs stretched what people expected. Created while Benatar was pregnant with the first of the couple’s two children, the glistening “We Belong” buoyantly celebrates love that transcends conventional romance. Ironically, “We Belong” would face her own “Invincible,” from *Seven the Hard Way* (1985), at the 1986 Grammy Awards, canceling each other out. *Seven the Hard Way* saw a bit more “rock” than its predecessor, bookending its opening “Sex as a Weapon” with the closing “The Art of Letting Go.”

Not that Giraldo or Benatar were static. Loose, raucous, fluid, they created the luxurious *Wide Awake in Dreamland*. Synth heavy, rhythmically intriguing, the



1988 album boasted the sensually charged “Cerebral Man,” the roaring shake “Let’s Stay Together,” and the Latin-tinged solidarity theme “Too Long a Soldier.”

*True Love* (1991) was a pure jump blues record with Roomful of Blues backing Benatar, Giraldo, and long-time drummer Myron Grombacher. Recorded for the sheer joy of it, “Payin’ the Cost to Be the Boss” said it all: Swanky, slinky, sassy, it illuminated that cabaret chanteuse to full advantage.

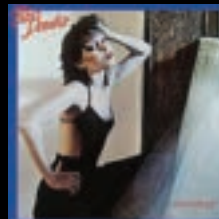
In 2010, Benatar published *Between a Heart and a Rock Place*, a pull-no-punches memoir that addressed misogyny in the music industry, corporate politics, radio realities, and her battle for control of her sound and her



life. It became a *New York Times* bestseller for its musical passion as well as full-stop candor.

Still rocking hard, as well as delivering sleek saloon songs a la *True Love*, Benatar and Giraldo continue to write and make music at a fevered clip. And the pair set the hits on fire every time they take the stage. To see Giraldo at a piano or unraveling an electric solo is to understand the framework around one of rock's most powerful vocalists. As for Benatar, live, she seems to experience sheer delight throwing those massive vocal licks around like lightning bolts. Tonight, we welcome Pat Benatar and Neil Giraldo onstage again as new members of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

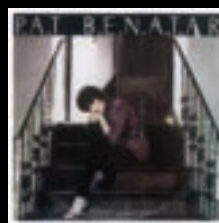
## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



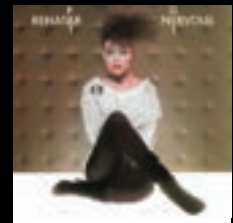
***In the Heat of  
the Night***  
1979 (Chrysalis)



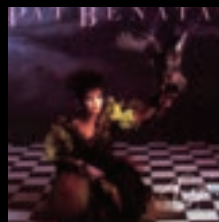
***Crimes of Passion***  
1980 (Chrysalis)



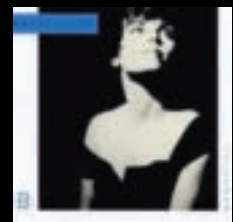
***Precious Time***  
1981 (Chrysalis)



***Get Nervous***  
1982 (Chrysalis)



***Tropico***  
1984 (Chrysalis)



***True Love***  
1991 (Chrysalis)