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Heart's Ann and Nancy Wilson: Our Life in 15 Songs

From "Barracuda" to "Beautiful Broken," sisters revisit four decades of smash hits and thrilling deep cuts



It's been more than 40 years since [Heart](#) recorded *Dreamboat Annie*, the debut album that launched the hard-rock act to stardom on the strength of hits like "Magic Man" and "Crazy on You." And the Seattle-area band, still led by sisters Ann (vocals) and Nancy (guitar) Wilson, is showing no signs of slowing down. Their 16th studio album, *Beautiful Broken*, which collects newly composed songs and re-recorded deep tracks from their past, is out now, and on July 14th, the group embarks on the Rock Hall Three for All tour, headlining sheds across the U.S. with support from fellow Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees Joan Jett and the Blackhearts and Cheap Trick. And just what is it that keeps them motivated? "I like playing," Nancy says with a laugh. "Guitar ... on a loud rock stage ... with colored lights. Everything sounds better with colored lights!"

According to Ann, that passion – as well as the strong familial bond she shares with Nancy – has been instrumental to sustaining the band. "No matter what else is going on in the other parts of our lives, when we play together we always communicate just the same way we did as when we were little kids," she explains. "And now we're in our sixties – we're like grown-up women. I'm a grandmother! But we step outside of that when we play. We become children again. It's an amazing thing to be able to access that simplicity and purity with another person."

The Wilsons recently checked in with *Rolling Stone* to walk us through Heart's history, from the magical and mystical Seventies to the big-ballad and even bigger-haired Eighties and the new *Beautiful Broken*, stopping along the way to ruminate on the many ups and downs that have dotted their career. As for the common thread running through their decades of music making? "We're always after some kind of brass ring," Ann says. "And usually the brass ring is authenticity."



"Magic Man" (1975)

Ann Wilson: I was living at home, going to art college and existing in this very staid, suburban state of being. Then I met a guy [Mike Fisher, early Heart band member and later their soundman and manager] and love just took over. He was the "magic man." I totally walked out of my parents' house and away from all the safety and all the assurance and went to Canada to follow him [*Ed. note: Fisher had moved to Vancouver to avoid the draft during the Vietnam War*]. And my mom was not sure it was a real good idea. She was like, "You are so young and immature! Do you even use birth control?" Back then you didn't talk to your mother about that kind of stuff. I think I was 21 but I was young for my age.

So the song is a story about leaving home. Lines like "Come on home, girl, Mama cried on the phone," that was real. We used to have these long conversations where she would go, "You get back here! You don't know what you're doing." I can remember how upset she was. She had no idea about the reality in the Seventies of girls and boys and free love and whatever, and she just expected the worst – that I was going to end up barefoot and pregnant and would come crawling back home and all that. She was dead set against it. She was formidable. But I won in this case.

Nancy Wilson: That was the first successful single [from *Dreamboat Annie*]. With that album, there was a guy that was out in the marketplace wining and dining and, um, apparently, bribing the radio guys. [*Laughs*] Because airplay meant everything in those times. We would get into rental cars with him and drive to all the major markets and meet the radio programmers and DJs and take pictures with them all. If you've ever seen *Coal Miner's Daughter*, it was a lot like that. We just went there in person and schmoozed. And then we'd go back to the car and wherever the guy was going after

that we'd say, "OK, we'll meet you back here later!" We didn't ask. We didn't want to know.



"Crazy on You" (1975)

Ann: This was written during the Nixon years, when we couldn't imagine things could get any worse. I mean, there was still the war, I was up in Canada with a draft evader who couldn't come down across the border to visit his family or else he'd be arrested. ... It was a very different time. People who went up to Canada to evade the draft were really looked down upon and considered felons. That was a real big player in our lives. Plus there was the whole oil crisis, gas prices were skyrocketing. ... We just felt everything was going to hell. It was a very stressful time. And so I wrote the words to this song, which is basically about how my only refuge from the world was my love for this man.

Nancy: The acoustic intro was written with the song in mind. What I was trying to get at was a thing like what Paul Simon had done on his version of "Anji." I took that sort of tempo and groove and put it in the key of the song and worked on it for a couple of days. We were kind of hell-bent on making *Dreamboat Annie* into a concept sort of thing. At the time we were listening to stuff like Yes, where you had Steve Howe doing some mellow acoustic intros to things. And there were lots of different parts to songs – it wasn't just riff-verse-chorus-bridge-verse-chorus-out, or whatever. We were trying to be more creative and kind of meaningful and poetic with these songs. We weren't afraid to be a little bit more "lofty" with all of it, to a certain degree.



"Heartless" (1977)

Nancy: "Heartless" is something Ann and I wrote together. We were pretty naïve in the early days – we grew up in a really loving family, with a mom and dad who were in love with each other and respectful of each other. And we didn't have brothers. But then we got out on the road and we started seeing the way the guys in the band would sort of go through these groupies. And the girls would get their hearts broken and their feelings really hurt. There were real tears involved and the guys were like, "Ah, well, I'm off to the next city!" We felt bad seeing these men really confusing these young girls. Although if you think about it another way, that's what the girls were there for too. They were putting themselves in harm's way, and a lot of them got harmed.

Ann: There's actually two versions of this album [1977's *Magazine*], because we were fighting with our record label [Mushroom] at the time. They came out with a full-page ad that was made to look like the front cover of a tabloid paper. And in it was an outtake from the *Dreamboat Annie* photo session that had Nancy and I back-to-back with our tops pulled down beyond the shoulders. And the caption below it was: "It was only our first time!" It sort of went along with the whole unspoken idea that Nancy and I were lesbianic lovers. They were trying to make easy, sleazy success out of that image. And Nancy and I felt insulted by it, because we were trying to achieve something higher. We were trying to break into music respectfully and with a little more class than that. So we said, "You can't do this with us." And the key man in our contract with Mushroom was our producer, Mike Flicker, and he saw it that way too. And he said, "Well, I'm leaving." After he left, our key man was gone so we exercised our right to get out of our contract. And they went up against us. So the record company put out their version of *Magazine* and then we put out ours. Afterward, a judge in Seattle recalled their version. It was just a strange time.



"Barracuda" (1977)

Ann: We were in Detroit opening up for the Kinks. Our dressing room at that time was always full of people from the industry. We used to call them "rack jobbers" – people whose job was to get the word out about the band and get your records out to the points of purchase and that kind of stuff. And there tended to be a sleaze factor involved with a

lot of those people. So we came offstage after the show and this one guy who was in the room came up to me and went, "Oh, Annie! Bay-bee! How's your *lovah*?" And at that time I was with Mike Fisher, the magic man. And I said, "Oh, he's fine. He's right over there." And he went, "No, no, no. I mean you and your *sistah*! You're lovers, *right*?" And it dawned on me then and there that our mother had been right – we were going to be misunderstood as sisters in rock, and in the most base kind of way. It pissed me off and I went back to the hotel and wrote the words to "Barracuda." Then we came up with the groove later and stuck them together. So it was a song written out of being insulted. And I guess I realized, "Yeah, well, this is kind of a slimy business."

People always ask who the porpoise is in the lyrics ["'Sell me, sell you.' the porpoise said"]. Nancy is the porpoise. We used to call each other that. I think it was an evolution of the walrus, because we were big Beatles fans. We used to have all these pet names for each other, and that was the one at the time.



"Bebe Le Strange" (1980)

Nancy: The title came from something we saw in San Francisco. We used to go there to meet up with [longtime writing partner] Sue Ennis, because she was going to UC Berkeley. We'd get a hotel room and have writing sessions and then go into the city. And one time we were driving around and we passed this sort of dive called Jacques Le Strange. And it was like, "Wow, what a cool thing!" [*Adopts French accent*] "*Le strange*." So we took it. We kind of turned it on its ear and switched the gender and used it for the song.

Ann: The lyrics were paraphrased from a fan letter. Back then there weren't a whole lot of bands that featured women that had made it on a national level. They were all still in the basement, you know? And this one chick wrote and said basically what's in the lyrics: "We saw you and we really dig you but your real names aren't sufficient. We have to rename you and make you an icon." These girls needed to figure out some kind of banner to go to war under.



"Break" (1980)

Ann: That was when Mike and I were breaking up. The lyrics ["After a while there just ain't no more magic, man"] are a not-so-thinly veiled thing. The first thing that happened was [guitarist] Roger [Fisher, Mike's brother, who had been in a romantic relationship with Nancy] was let go from the band. Just all kinds of stuff was going on and it was beginning to melt down. And if Roger was no longer in the band it didn't take long for Mike and I to start moving apart. I got really tired of the role of being a "wife." I was going out with Nancy and Sue Ennis on these writing weekends, and when I'd get back and have to settle down into not being independent, not being an artist, it was too much for me. I was 28 years old and I just wanted to fly. This was also when punk music was first getting really huge on the radio, and that super sped-up, hyperdrive sound seemed to be the ultimate way to express these feelings. It was like, "Get me out of here," you know?



"Johnny Moon" (1983)

Nancy: This was originally on *Passionworks*, and it's one of the ones we redid for *Beautiful Broken*. It's a song I rediscovered and said, "Wow, that was really unique and well-crafted and intriguing and mysterious and strange and musical." But that was the era when production was shifting away from analog into digital, and the sound of some of those early-to-mid-Eighties records was so harsh. Not to mention that the mind-expanding sort of drugginess of the Sixties and Seventies was turning into the more

ego-expanding, more cocaine-driven sort of thing of the Eighties. And the way people were recording things and piling it all on, it was like, more is better! So it was great to get another opportunity with this song.

Ann: For me, that whole *Private Audition / Passionworks* era was when I was at my most lost. In terms of substances and alcohol, stuff like that, I don't feel I was able to focus that well. I was OK live, but I couldn't focus enough to go into the studio and make it work. And so some of those songs, they were good songs, but they got lost. "Johnny Moon" is one of those, and it came into focus great on the new album.



"What About Love" (1985)

Nancy: We were in quite a few situations with [producer] Ron Nevison in those days where we were listening to cassette tape after cassette tape of various demos that were written by the L.A. stable of songwriters at the time. There was lots of Dianne Warren and Holly Knight and people like that. For the first time, we were discouraged from doing very much of our own songwriting, which was different for us and it bummed us out a lot. But there were these hit-makers whose songs everyone really wanted us to record, more than we'd ever thought of doing before.

Ann: At the time, that transition was really hard for me. And for a couple of reasons. One was that we were accepting songs from outside writers. I think we came to the realization that, "Hey, we're not writing so well right now. We're not coming up with the goods." So we decided to go ahead with it and audition some outside stuff. And you can make sense of that in your brain, but it's hard to convince your emotions and your ego to accept that kind of thing. So it was rocky for me. When I first heard the demo for "What About Love," my hackles went up because I thought it sounded like a victim song. "Oh, poor me! What about me?" It felt like an "I'm so weak and you can just walk all over me" type song. And so I rejected it. But our producer and the record company and everyone kept working on me, and I finally agreed to sing the song. And when I did, I brought my own sort of rage to it, I guess. It ended up not being a victim song and I think it's good.

Nancy: I thought the album cover photo for [*Heart*] was really cool. It was very Prince and the Revolution, you know? We took a whole new sort of fashion stance from the

previous few years, where we'd been having a harder and harder time getting noticed. They say the average lifespan of any rock band is three to five years. So we'd already outlived our first lifespan. We wanted to do something really noticeable and make a big statement. A musical statement. A fashion statement. It was a good idea, and it really worked.



"These Dreams" (1985)

Nancy: The lyrics were by Bernie Taupin. Martin Page wrote the music. And when I listened to it, I was like, "It's so deep and so heavy. Oh, man, that's a song I should sing! I *need* to sing it." Because the few Heart songs I had sung up to that point were kind of the softer, more ethereal ones. But management and everyone was like, "No, no, no." But I just kept harping and harping on it. And Howard Kaufman, our manager at the time, finally said, "Look, you can record this but mark my words, it'll never do anything. It'll be too confusing – it doesn't sound like what people expect Heart to sound like." So we recorded it and it turned into our first Number One single. And Howard was funny. He said, "Remind me to always let you do the opposite of what I tell you!"



"Alone" (1987)

Ann: Just like with "What About Love," I heard the demo of this and thought it was so weak and drippy and wimpy. But then when I got my hands on it, being all sort of

tormented inside, it sprouted a new head and had a lot more edge to it. So I was happy with it. But by this album [*Bad Animals*], I was over the whole thing – the outside writers, the MTV visuals. Even though we kept doing it for a while, it stopped being fun after the *Heart* record. It became an expectation I reluctantly agreed to. And we all know that when you reluctantly agree to something it's not the best use of your time.

Nancy: It's a really beautiful song, and one of those songs where it's still just a joy to perform. But by that time there was so much artifice surrounding everything. To maintain that sort of an image and do all those videos and try to sustain that through the live shows, it became a parody of itself. It just got to be too much, the whole MTV-ness of it all. At that time it felt like any kind of progress that women had been making in music was being set back a couple years. People were saying stuff to me like, "Well, if you just put Ann's face on your body, you'd have it all!" And it's like, "*Really?*" It was kind of a rude time to be an imperfect girl in the entertainment business.



"All I Wanna Do Is Make Love to You" (1990)

Ann: That was a demo in a big pile of demos that the A&R department at Capitol gave to us. We were just slamming through all these songs and this one popped out because, obviously, it's really catchy. But it has a really controversial story to it, at least for that time. A woman is driving along in the night and picks up a hitchhiker. They have casual sex, she gets pregnant and keeps the baby. And she kind of gloats over it when she sees the hitchhiker again and he recognizes his own child. And I mean, as an actress I could put it across. But as a human being I thought it was pretty disgusting. Pretty dark and negative. And just the fact that the whole casual-sex thing, it's OK that boys will be boys, but turn it around and make it come from the woman's view and all of a sudden it's so excitingly weird and titillating. I thought it was gross. So that's why we don't do the song anymore. I can't sing the words – I'm not that good of an actress. I can't get off on it.



Lovemongers, "No School Today" (1997)

Nancy: I think there were a couple really good songs on *Whirlygig*. This is probably one of my favorites. It has a sort of "collage" aspect to it, and a more trippy sound. The Lovemongers came together because we felt kind of overinflated by the end of the Eighties. And seeing that the whole rock style was turning on its ear, we knew we needed to kind of go back to square one, go back to the drawing board and go home to Seattle for a while and do music for the pleasure of doing music and not for the sporting event of it all. We were kind of licking our wounds and decided to put a band of friends together. And we did a lot of things that we felt too confined by the big corporate thing called Heart to do in that band. We went back to the clubs and just had a blast. It was super fun. And we didn't make *any* money [*laughs*]. We actually had to pay to play. But it was worth it. It gave us time to take a breath before we went back into it again.

Ann: The path we were on had become really uncomfortable, and then by the time we got to the early Nineties we said, "OK, we're done with this. We're nobody's damn servant." And that was the biggest joy about the Lovemongers. There were no expectations. We went into it saying, "This is the Lovemongers. It's not Heart. You're not going to hear any Heart stuff." I was the bass player and singer, Nancy played all the guitars, it was just a whole different thing. It was so freeing.



"Dear Old America" (2012)

Nancy: We were getting ready to record the *Fanatic* record and Ann just started pouring these amazing lyrics into her notebook. This was one of them. It's especially poignant and meaningful for us, being military brats who moved around most of our lives with the Marine Corps. And we saw what it did to our dad, who was injured many times. He survived, though emotionally he dealt with a lot of post-traumatic stress. He woke up with nightmares for the rest of his life from the stuff he had to go through and witness. So I thought the words that Ann wrote were so powerful. And then [producer] Ben Mink and I kind of provided the jam and set it to music and it really turned out great.

Ann: It's a story about PTSD and a whole generation of young people in America who are now a warrior class, and are bred only for that purpose. They're cannon fodder. As the daughter of a marine officer who was in two wars and who came back with pretty serious post-traumatic stress, there's definitely a little bit of anger in it. The first verse is about a young soldier in America dreaming about the romantic idea of going into the military and getting out there and fighting. And the second verse is about being there, and how incredibly terrifying and surreal and degrading it is to see all this stuff that humans are not meant to see. And then the third verse is about being back home and not being able to fit in, not being able to resume your life because you know too much. You can't ever get back to where you were before. You've gone through the out door and you can't go back in.



"Stairway to Heaven" (2012)

Ann: When we were asked to come and participate in the Led Zeppelin tribute [Ed. note: Heart performed for the surviving members of Led Zeppelin, as well as President and Michelle Obama, at the Kennedy Center Honors in Washington D.C.], I thought, "Yeah, that's good. *We should* be there!" But I didn't think they'd ask us to do "Stairway." Maybe "Rock and Roll," something like that. A song that's cool, but not the ultimate anthem.

Nancy: It was an interesting couple of days. It was *beyond*. It's like, Led Zeppelin ... and the president! And it was Christmastime in D.C., so it was really cold. My hands were sort of frozen during the rehearsal. I could hardly play. And I hadn't really played the song too much in advance. So the rehearsal went very poorly. And the musical director was like, "Oh, don't worry. I can just kind of shadow you during the performance. ..."

And I said, "No, no, no. I'll just get my fingers warmed up first. I've got this!" And when we did it, we were just really, really nervous. But we looked at each other and took a huge, deep breath. Exhaled. Didn't hurry it and just stayed on it all the way through.

Ann: Nancy and I went up there to do it and we were like, "We *cannot* fuck this up. This has to be right on." And to calm ourselves we said, "Well, what's the most obvious meditation technique we can grab onto right now?" And it was the thing about holding the bowl of water in front of you and not spilling a drop. And that's what we thought about when we went out there. Then after we came offstage, we spilled the bowl all over the place! [Laughs]

Nancy: It turned out really cool. Afterward there was a dinner, and the Zeppelin guys came up to us individually to say how much they liked the performance. Robert [Plant] told us, "I've grown to hate that song so much because people just murder it all the time." And it's like, "What?" But then he said, "But you guys did a great job with it." And people like to tell us, "You made Led Zeppelin cry!" But I think it was more about their family. The fact that Jason Bonham was drumming on the song with us, and wearing the bowler hat like his dad used to wear, was one of the things that really affected them emotionally. For them to see him up there was, I'm sure, the bigger reason for them to get emotional – more than just watching us!



"Beautiful Broken" (2016)

Ann: I wrote the words in 2012 or 2013. And the vision I had for it was of a sort of fabulous disaster chick, kind of in the form of someone like Courtney Love. She's complicated, she's gorgeous, she's got it all wired tight, you know? But she has a design flaw upstairs that makes her unable to live in the world normally. It's a character study, really. And getting James [Hetfield] to sing on it, that was an idea that Nancy had. I think she thought, "Well, we need somebody to kind of underscore what this is about in a rock sense." And so James came back with that "just like you and me" thing.

Nancy: James is a really old friend of my husband's. We were listening to the bonus-track version [of "Beautiful Broken"] that came from the *Fanatic* album, and it had such a great, raucous spirit. It had that aggression and that rock thing and so he said, "Well, why don't we see if James might want to give it a listen and try to do some stuff on

there?" And James came back and said that he loved it. So we sent him the new track that we had just recorded. He took it to his studio and he did amazing work: He added a new part, some new lyrics, all the background vocals. And I think he brought the song more into focus than it had been. It was great to see it transform like that into something sort of new, which is what we did with a lot of the songs on this album.