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*Ann and Nancy Wilson of Heart perform in October 1976.
RICHARD CREAMER/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES*

[ANATOMY OF A SONG](#)

The Rage Behind Heart's 'Barracuda'

By Marc Myers

Sisters Ann and Nancy Wilson say the 1977 hit was a furious response to sexism they faced in the music industry as the band's popularity soared

Outraged by record-industry sexism in 1976, Ann Wilson of Heart wrote a poem expressing the pain and humiliation of workplace harassment.

When Heart released "Barracuda" on its second album, "Little Queen," in May 1977, the single, co-written by four band members, reached No. 11 on Billboard's pop chart.

Recently, Heart co-founder Michael Fisher, lead vocalist Ann Wilson, guitarists Roger Fisher and Nancy Wilson, and drummer Michael Derosier looked back at the song's evolution. The Wilson sisters now tour as Heart,

Michael Derosier tours with Heart by Heart, and Roger and Michael Fisher's new album, "Heart of the Blues" (Human Tribe), is due later this month.

Edited from interviews:



From left, Roger Fisher, Ann Wilson, Nancy Wilson and Steve Fossen in 1977 at the Oakland Coliseum in Oakland, Calif. PHOTO: RICHARD MCCAFFREY/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Michael Fisher: From Heart's start in 1972, I had a clear idea of how I thought the band should sound to be successful. My vision as creative director was to combine the female folk and R&B sophistication of Ann's lead vocal with the high-energy rock feel of my brother Roger's guitar and Steve Fossen's bass.

In 1976, Heart was touring in support of its first studio album, "Dreamboat Annie." On Oct. 15, we were in East Lansing, Mich., to open for Bob Seger & the Silver Bullet Band. Several hours before the concert, Heart was on stage rehearsing as we checked sound levels and lighting cues.

ANATOMY OF A SONG

Roger Fisher: At the soundcheck, Mike Derosier and I began jamming. We were just horsing around playing a galloping riff. I wasn't thinking of any outside influence. Eventually, I added chords.

Michael Derosier: Roger and I had a great beat and riff going. An inspiration for me was the feel that Nazareth had on their cover of Joni Mitchell's "This Flight Tonight."



Clockwise from top left: Roger Fisher, Michael Derosier, Steve Fossen, Howard Leese, Nancy Wilson and Ann Wilson of Heart in 1977, the year 'Barracuda' was released. PHOTO: MICHAEL MARKS/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Roger Fisher: As Mike Derosier and I developed the riff and beat, my brother, Mike, loved what we were doing and recorded it on a cassette tape.

Nancy Wilson: With the success of "Magic Man" in the fall of '76, we began to have trouble with our Canadian label, Mushroom Records, which wound up folding in 1980. Ann and I had written "Magic Man," the band's first big hit. It reached No. 9 on Billboard's pop chart.

To promote the hit and the band, Mushroom designed a trade ad to look like the cover of a supermarket tabloid. The ad had a photo from our "Dreamboat Annie" cover shoot. Ann and I were cropped at our bare shoulders so it looked like we weren't wearing tops.

The ad's headline read: "Exclusive, the Heartbreaking Story! Regional Hit Mushrooms Into Million Seller." Then under the photo of Ann and me standing back to back, the headline read, "Heart's Wilson Sisters Confess: It Was Only Our First Time!"

I freaked. Mushroom made it seem that my sister and I were incestuous lovers. I was furious.



Heart released its first album, 'Dreamboat Annie,' in 1975. An outtake of the cover shoot was later used in a trade ad styled like a tabloid, with the headline "Heart's Wilson Sisters Confess: It Was Only Our First Time!"

Ann Wilson: To Mushroom executives, it was a funny badass rock-sales technique. For Nancy and me, who were raised by a feminist mother, we felt violated. Supermarket tabloids were toxic and never allowed in our home. We were really offended. So was the band.

Nancy Wilson: When we were kids, Ann and I moved around quite a bit. Our father, John, was a major in the Marine Corps and was stationed in Panama and Taiwan before we moved to Seattle, Wash., in the early '60s.

Our mother, Lou, was tough, too. As a family, we were a fighting unit. From childhood, Ann and I felt powerful, capable and good at our craft. We were

outward bound and emboldened to prove ourselves. We had each other to lean on.

It was insulting that men in the record industry thought our inclusion in the band was ornamental. Ann and I wrote many of the songs, and the industry treated us as second-class artists.

Ann Wilson: After our set in East Lansing and before Bob Seger went on, both bands were backstage milling around with record industry execs and hangers-on. Everyone was drinking and schmoozing.

Suddenly, this guy who supplied local stores with records came up to me. He said, "Hey Ann, how's your lover?" I said, "Mike [Fisher] is great. He's right over there. Go say hi." He said, "No, no, your sister. You know." He was referring to the trade ad.

I saw red, but our mother raised us to be dignified with anger and not explode. I just shut down. I went to find Nancy. I felt humiliated. I told her what had happened.

I've never been homophobic. I've always felt people can love whoever they want. But this was about being sleazy and insulting my family. It was maddening.

The band was staying at the Hotel Pontchartrain in Detroit. After we drove back, I went up to my room and sat on the bed and began writing a poem about how I felt.

The poem took about an hour and would become the lyrics to the music that Roger and Mike Derosier had come up with at the soundcheck.

The porpoise in the poem was Nancy: "Back over time, we were all trying for free / You met the porpoise and me... 'Sell me, sell you,' the porpoise said / Dive down deep now save my head."

Nancy and I were huge Beatles fans. When "I Am the Walrus" came out in 1967 on "Magical Mystery Tour," Nancy and I called each other porpoise. Then we shortened it to "porp." We liked that porpoises were considered smarter than most ocean life.

The "western pools" were our houses on the west coast of Oregon, where we could relax: "All that night and all the next / Swam without looking back / Made for the western pools, silly, silly fools!"

The word "barracuda" came last. I first tried tiger and snake, but they didn't have the same evil creepiness of a barracuda—a slimy fish with no morals lurking in the water waiting for its prey.

When my poem was done and we were back home in Seattle in early December, Nancy and Roger came over to the house that Mike [Fisher] and I shared.

Roger played the riff. I sang and fit my poem's words into what Roger played. As a lyricist, I was influenced by Bernie Taupin at the time.



Michael Fisher with Ann Wilson in West Vancouver, B.C., in 1975, in front of her new Jaguar XKE. PHOTO: NANCY WILSON/MICHAEL FISHER

Roger Fisher: To gracefully merge Ann's words with the music, the second measure of each verse was changed to a bar of five beats instead of four. It was keyboardist and guitarist Howard Leese's idea.

Michael Fisher: After the ad, the incident backstage and Mushroom's lack of tour support and payment, we discovered that our producer Mike Flicker had left the label.

When I found out, I knew Mushroom had breached our contract. We were free to leave and sign with Portrait, a CBS division.

"Barracuda" was recorded at Seattle's Kaye Smith Studios. We recorded the song's basic rhythm track in one take with Roger, Nancy, Steve, Howard and Mike Derosier in Studio A.

Then as Ann recorded her lead vocal in Studio A along with Nancy and Howard overdubbing background vocals, I worked with Roger on overdubbing his solos and effects in Studio B.

Roger Fisher: I came up with these tremolo harmonics on my guitar—the ringing sound you hear each time my chugging riff stops. I also had a flanger that gave my Stratocaster a sweeping sound. At some point, I reached for something behind my amp. The close proximity of the guitar to the amp’s tubes created a cool sweeping oscillation, like an alien attack. I used the sound toward the end of “Barracuda,” where Howard and I answer each other’s guitar chords.

Nancy Wilson: Song endings can be tough. Once you’re on a galloping horse, it’s hard to slow down. We tried a bunch of different things, but most felt corny or stupid. So we decided to snap it off abruptly. During the mix, each of us sat at the console and had our own fader. We slid them all up slowly as the end neared so the volume built. Then we just cut them off. It was like the slamming of a door.

To this day, Roger’s guitar on the recording is one of rock’s most iconic sounds. I’ve tried to recreate it numerous times without much luck.

Ann Wilson: No matter where Heart toured in the ’70s, we came across our share of sleazeballs. “Barracuda” is me coming unglued. I never cried over stuff like that. I just got deeply disturbed and angry, and channeled it into my song-writing and vocals.

When I recorded my lead vocal, I felt rage. You can hear it in my voice. In that photo of Nancy and me bare-shouldered, we were just showing that sisters could be friends. Instead, we became the objects of cheapness. We were made to feel worthless.

Funny thing is, I wasn't really angry at that record guy while recording my vocal. I was more furious at the culture that gave him permission to say something like that to me.



Ann Wilson and Nancy Wilson with gold records they were awarded for a milestone in sales of their second album, "Little Queen." PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

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