

Q&A



HEART

Nancy Wilson discusses the inner workings of rock's best-loved sister act

NANCY WILSON HAS ROCKED audiences for more than three decades as the iconic guitarist for Heart, cranking classics like "Barracuda" and "Crazy on You" up to 10. But over the last several years, she found herself yearning for a new title: "lead autoharpist." "I've been looking for a place for an autoharp," she says with a chuckle. "For a half-decade people were like, 'Would you put the autoharp away? Get that autoharp out of here!'" She finally got her wish when she played autoharp on "Hey You," a track from *Red Velvet Car*, Heart's first new album in six years. It's not the hippest instrument, but the Seattle native never tires of finding new sounds to add to the group's ever-evolving musical palette. "I'm always pulling out my

mandocellos and mandolin, or my ukulele," says Wilson. "Anything with strings on it."

Red Velvet Car marks the studio debut of the current lineup of Heart, which also includes Wilson's vocalist sister, Ann—the group's only other constant member—as well as guitarist Craig Bartock, keyboardist Debbie Shair and drummer Ben Smith. (Bass player Ric Markmann performs on the album, but has since been replaced by Kristian Attard.) The band tapped producer Ben Mink for the recording and signed with Sony Legacy, whose Portrait imprint was Heart's label home in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The reunion has proven a success—upon its release, *Red Velvet Car* became the group's first Top 10 album since

1990. We spoke with Nancy Wilson during a tour stop in Nashville about how Heart keeps thumping along.

How are the new songs going over?

People are loving them, which is a really unusual thing. We have been doing two or three new songs in the set, and they're sitting still and getting into it. They don't just leave and go get T-shirts or a Coke when we play something new, so that's pretty cool. We're happy about that.

When you're recording, do you consider how the song will work on stage?

With this one in particular, we set out with a live ethic in mind—to be able to sing,

play and record at the same time in the same room, with eye contact. That sets it apart from songs that are constructed layer by layer in a digital context. So this one transfers very readily to a live situation, because we recorded it live. Some of the songs are layered, but the basis is always one take of people playing together at the same time. There's not very much finagling, or bells and whistles.

The lineup has stabilized over the last few years. Did that help?

Definitely. This lineup of the band has been together for longer than the original. We've had this musical conversation for close to a decade on stages together, and that's when the conversation starts to get really good. On stage we have an amazing rapport and vibe. It's really a relationship. It's a marriage.

How has the dynamic between yourself and Craig evolved?

We were like instant twins when we first started playing together. I'm kind of a chameleon as a musician. I'm really good at blending with people in general. But with Craig, we're the same age and we have almost identical musical contexts that we drew from. When we started writing together, it was like, "Oh, my God!" We'd sit around and play every song we heard on the radio growing up, and I would know all the chords and he would know the solo part, the bridge, everything. So we had this rich vocabulary already, and it's only deepened since then.

How do you decide who plays what?

Instinctively. I might be playing on an acoustic and Craig will switch to electric to fill it out, or I'll switch to mandolin or autoharp or some other crazy thing. That's all instinctive. You try something out, listen back and go, "Oh, it needs something else." The song tells you what it wants.

What guitars did you wind up playing on the new record?

I played a variety of acoustics, not many of which were my own. Ben Mink ended up playing a couple of my guitars, and I ended up playing a few beautiful borrowed guitars that were sitting around a friend's studio. There were a couple of cheap-o guitars that had an interesting character, things with strange tunings. I got into the autoharp a bit more. We were picking things up, playing guitar cases for drums, all kinds of

stuff was happening. It was really fun making this album.

What kind of gear do you use?

We like things with tubes. (*laughs*) Microphones and amplifiers with tubes, compressors with tubes. We have an old-fashioned ethic with that. That stuff sounds really good, the more analog-sounding the better. This friend of ours has this beautiful studio with all these gorgeous old tube amps, mics and great gear that we got to use.

How long did you spend recording?

We took it in three sections, each about two weeks long. It might have taken a couple of weeks to mix, so the whole thing would total about two months. It was pretty quick. We spent a lot longer getting the songs ready. We've been touring straight through. Plus being a mother, that takes a

Why did you return to Sony?

We were strictly out of pocket to make the album to begin with—or to get together to write songs, even. It's what we're here to do. This is our job. No matter what the economy is doing, we needed to figure out a way to do it. We figured that if we worked our butts off and did something decent—or maybe even better than decent—somebody would be interested and want to do it with us. So we did the album before anybody heard it. Sony liked it, and we took it from there.

What are the benefits of a major?

It means there's a chance that people are going to find out that the album is out—which is usually where things go wrong. (*laughs*) Usually nobody knows it's even there. So we do have a snowball's chance in hell this time.



The Wilson sisters in the studio, 2009

'I'm kind of a chameleon as a musician. I'm good at blending with people.'

little time, too. (*laughs*) That's the biggest job of all. Between touring we were writing, mainly with Craig Bartock. We turned the demos in to Ben Mink over the course of a year, and when he started liking what he heard he agreed to come in as producer. Then we ended up recording most of the things we had started with Craig, and then wrote another song or two with Ben.

What are your hopes for the band?

I would like for people to get into the album. I hope people will enjoy the ride, because we've done something personal and meaningful that we believe can uplift and enrich people's lives a little. That's what music is for. These are hard times, and hopefully we can help elevate the personal human experience a bit with our art.

—Chris Neal



'We've done something personal and meaningful that we hope can enrich people's lives a little.'