

Spectator



From left: Fred Schneider, Keith Strickland, Kate Pierson, and Cindy Wilson

MUSIC

RETURN TO THE LOVE SHACK

The B-52s, the world's greatest party band, comes out (in more ways than one) with its first new album in 16 years **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

WHEN THE B-52s first formed in 1976, Jimmy Carter was about to win the White House. The last time they released an album of original material—in 1992—Clinton was on his way to taking over for Bush Sr. And as their first offering in 16 years hits the stands March 25, the country is abuzz with talk of the Democratic Party making history.

"We won't do an album without a Democrat in the White House," jokes B-52s guitarist Keith Strickland.

Whether you credit politics, the rise of derivative acts like Scissor Sisters and Mika, or a surge of creativity from a band that's never stopped touring behind classics like "Roam" and "Planet Claire," →



the B-52s are finally back.

While *Funplex* reflects Strickland's love of electronica, there's no doubt the album sounds like vintage B-52s, thanks to songs like "Pump," which played on *The L Word*, "Love in the Year 3000," and "Keep This Party Going"—goofy, deliciously surreal numbers that celebrate the mall, autoeroticized human beings, and, yes, partying. This seems in keeping with singer Fred Schneider's advice for his fellow Americans: "Forget the Republicans. Put all those right-wingers and religious nuts on the North Pole and let God take care of them. Everyone in America should take off their clothes and have a good time."

But something has changed for the B-52s since the release of *Good Stuff*—they got a little queerer. While it has long been known that the three original male band members (Strickland, Schneider, and the late Ricky Wilson) were gay, redheaded bombshell Kate Pierson has come out about her relationship with Monica Nation. (The two own Kate's Lazy Meadow Motel in Mount Tremper, N.Y.) Kate and Monica have been open about their relationship for some time, though it will likely come as a surprise to many fans.

"Well, it was news to me," Strickland says with a laugh.

For his part, Schneider doesn't remember how he found out. "Maybe she sent out an e-mail saying 'I'm a lesbian,'" he says, adding, "We were gonna ostracize her. *We want the press! Stay in!*"

If the B-52s had recorded nothing but "Rock Lobster," the band would live on wherever there was a party. But songs like "Cosmic Thing," "Private Idaho" (the inspiration for Gus Van Sant's film *My Own Private Idaho*), and "Love Shack" have

underscored their message that misfits would someday rule the world.

That battle cry was likely forged when Ricky Wilson and Strickland were still two closeted teens.

"Ricky is my first friend who came out," says Strickland, who lives in Key West, Fla., with his partner, Mark Hayda. "And it was really cute how he did it. He sat me down on a sofa and he said, 'Ricky Wilson is gay.' At first, because he was speaking in the third person, I was a little confused. But then I was like, *OK, that's cool*. I think it was six months later that I came out."

When Strickland met Schneider at the University of Georgia, the queer misfit group grew. "I met Fred at a street dance," he remembers. "At this time I was very flamboyant and I was really into the whole glitter scene. I had long hair, but I teased it out, and I wore makeup, and I'd wear like silver lamé pants. I was *far* more outrageous than I ever was in the band. I saw two people dancing out of this whole crowd listening to the music. I thought, *They look interesting*. The guy was Fred, and they looked at me and kind of laughed."

The B-52s famously formed one night after heavy drinking at a Chinese restaurant when a friend of Schneider's insisted they perform at her Valentine's Day party. So Schneider, Strickland, Wilson, Wilson's sister Cindy, and Pierson came up with six songs (including "Rock Lobster"), most of which would appear on their eponymous debut CD and are still live staples today.

The party almost stopped when Ricky Wilson died of AIDS complications in 1985. The band had been only quietly open until then. "Especially if you're in a rock and roll milieu," says Schneider, "you just don't trumpet it. We didn't back then. If people asked, yes."

But they were forthright about Wilson. "It was actually the same month, I think, Rock Hudson died," recounts Strickland. "There was a lot of fear around it and a lot of ignorance. People just didn't know. *What is this? How do you get it?* But he was very brave, very brave, and went very quickly. They just didn't have the drugs they have now. Of course, after that we didn't think that we could continue without Ricky."

The band had an album almost completed when Wilson died called *Bouncing Off the Satellites*. But it was the album *Cosmic Thing* three years later that would propel the B-52s to stardom and honor their

friend's memory the best.

"A friend of ours said he felt like the album was a funeral in New Orleans," says Strickland, "where the musicians sing and clap their hands behind a funeral procession and celebrate a person's life. There's a lot of reflection on that album. It was a bit-sweet success, definitely."

Selling 4 million copies in the United States, *Cosmic Thing* produced two top-10 hits with "Love Shack" and "Roam" and turned the cult band into MTV mainstays. If the piled-up hair and vintage clothing didn't prove the B-52s weren't your typical band, Cindy's announcement that she was leaving to be closer to her family—at the height of their success—did. For the record, Strickland says she never really quit; she just took a leave of absence.

But their record company, Reprise—suddenly realizing that this eccentric group was a massive chart success—pressured them to record a new album and tour. The result, *Good Stuff*, was rushed and, to some, unsatisfying. But a good thing did come out of it. Strickland decided to come out publicly once and for all.

"We had all been out in our private lives," he says. "The funny thing is, we were never asked in the press, and no one in the record company ever said anything. We were writing *Good Stuff* [which was overtly political by B-52s standards], and I felt like I wanted to get it out there and get it over with."

"I was really moved by Madonna," he continues. "She's not gay, but she's really supportive. Why should I hide being gay? Why is it something I should be afraid of talking about? There is often legitimate fear depending on where you live, but you just have to be very brave and be an adult."

And that's where the B-52s are today—adult but still ready to have fun.

"I didn't smoke any pot for the first time while doing this album—maybe once," says Schneider. "I'm really happy that I could channel whatever nuttiness without smoking pot every day."

Solo albums, side projects, families, and lovers have all helped B-52s return stronger than ever. And if the message remains the same, it's one worth repeating. While renting a video in Woodstock, N.Y., Strickland was recognized by the clerk. She said, "Oh, the B-52s meant so much to me. I never knew if any of them were gay. But it didn't matter because they made me feel good about being gay myself."

"Gosh, what a badge," he says. "Something like that really means more to me than an award. You put out something that made someone feel good about herself. That has been our message: It's OK to be different. Make it work for you. Be yourself. There's not going to be another like you." ♣