



WITH A TIMELESS BODY OF
WORK, THEY REMAIN THE
ONLY BAND OF WOMEN TO
TOP THE ALBUM CHARTS.

BY HOLLY GLEASON

PERFORMERS

THE GO-



The Go-Go's:
Charlotte Caffey, Kathy
Valentine, Belinda Carlisle,
Jane Wiedlin, and Gina
Schock (from left), 1981

-GO'S



*Hey! We got something to say
Gonna make the world shake
Ready or not - here we are / Better get out of our way!
Looking for heroes / We are Club Zero . . .*

They were brash. They were brazen. They were punks. They were . . . girls. Charlotte Caffey, Belinda Carlisle, Gina Schock, Kathy Valentine, and Jane Wiedlin wrote their own songs, played their own instruments, and walked their own walk. Absolutely, unabashedly, unapologetically female. And together they were the ultimate girl gang who chased a dream - of being a free-for-all good-timing rock & roll band - as one.

Founded in the same late-seventies L.A. punk smelter as X, the Plugz, Fear, and the Germs, the Go-Go's might have had a thing for surf guitars, power pop, Merseybeat melodies, breezy harmonies, and a backbeat that'd snap you, but they were every bit as unrepentant as anybody who walked out of the Canterbury and rocked the Whisky, the Starwood, or the Masque. They lived with the same unwavering ferocity, perhaps even more defiant because they were young women in a largely male world.

The Go-Go's were more than equal. Long before they'd sign a record deal, they sold out shows everywhere, supporting Madness and the Specials on tours in England and the West Coast. The iconic punk label Stiff Records issued their demo of "We Got the Beat" as a single, landing a U.K. demi-hit.

Plugging into swerving girl group emotions - covers of Wanda Jackson's "Let's Have a Party," the Shangri-Las' "Remember (Walking in the Sand)," plus "Johnny, Are You Queer" (before Josie Cotton recorded it) - set the stage for a randy, raucous take on what it meant to be freewheeling and female. They plugged into girl power long before it was a catchphrase.

In the beginning, some boys' club critics scoffed, others even accused them of being unable to play their

instruments. But Caffey was a classically educated pianist; Valentine had been playing guitar since age 13 - and, besides, the whole point of DIY and punk was how hard you threw yourself at your songs, not technical prowess.

*It doesn't matter what they say
In the jealous games people play
Our lips are sealed
Pay no mind to what they say
It doesn't matter anyway*

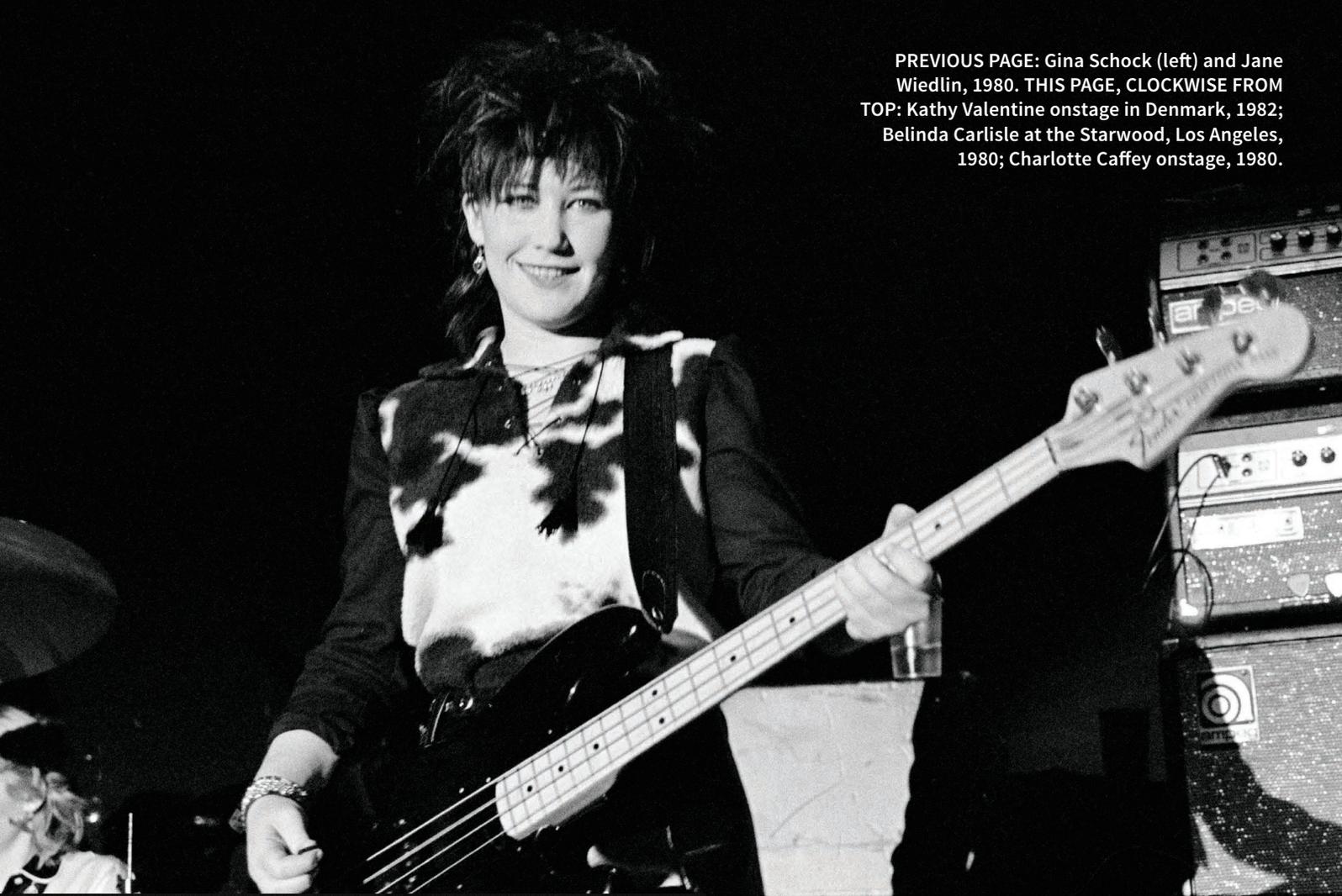
The Go-Go's didn't care. Belinda, in her kitsch-chic, blended little-girl innocence and sultry taunt. Charlotte, an all-American blonde, jangled and spun electric solos. Gina, arms flailing, threw tomboy allure that punched the drums hard. Jane, the original manic pixie dream girl, bounced and whirled with her guitar. Kathy, with her knowing sneer, matched Schock's drums with a melodic thumping bass that kept things moving.

They came to play, to romp, to extol the passion of being young, snotty, and aware. It got so stupid, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a January 5, 1981, piece headlined "Why Can't Go-Go's Get Record Deal?" following their standing-room-only four-night run at the Whisky that started on New Year's Eve. Citing a fear of an all-female band, as Chrissie Hynde, Deborah Harry, Pat Benatar, and Heart's Wilson sisters were all making a mark, the unspeakable was now in print.

In classic Go-Go's form, though the members lamented the situation, not one of them conceded defeat. That irrepressibility drove their sound; even the sad songs came with an effervescent buzz or a horror-movie foreboding.

But as feel-good as the songs were, there was a cynicism and a nihilism that made the undertow delicious. Yes, "Lust to Love" packed sinister tension, but it's the girl who loves and discards, promising "Love me and I'll leave you," until . . . she falls. "Skidmarks on My Heart"

PREVIOUS PAGE: Gina Schock (left) and Jane Wiedlin, 1980. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Kathy Valentine onstage in Denmark, 1982; Belinda Carlisle at the Starwood, Los Angeles, 1980; Charlotte Caffey onstage, 1980.



THIS PAGE: The Go-Go's at the Venue, London, 1981. OPPOSITE PAGE: Reunited Go-Go's, 2001.



felt like classic girl group stuff, but the metaphor was bawdier, gearhead savvy, and more gauntlet-tossing than anything Phil Spector allowed. Not to mention the bondage (“Ropes”), self-mutilation (“Blades”), and a knowing sense of Hollywood’s shattered dreams (“This Town”). The Go-Go’s were drilling down on reality, not a Barbie pink daydream.

With band manager Ginger Canzoneri, who hocked her jewelry and refinanced her car to pay for their 1980 U.K. tour, pressing the labels to sign them, the Go-Go’s were estrogen on stun. If they were stonewalled by inherent male bias, this was a heat-seeking missile. Once launched, it was destined for greatness.

Miles Copeland III ultimately signed the quintet to his Los Angeles-based indie I.R.S. Records. Teaming with producer Richard Gottehrer, who’d guided Blondie’s era-sprawling new wave, off to New York City they went.

If the young punks weren’t studio proficient, they fed off one another’s energy, creating a rock/lust/drink/laugh slumber party that sonically captured what it meant to be young, smart, female, and euphoric.

If dudes didn’t get it, *Beauty and the Beat* was a dog whistle for young girls everywhere. Perky, snarky, rebellious, and winsome, the album’s eleven songs were a manifesto for how we felt. As Bikini Kill’s Kathleen Hanna testified in Alison Ellwood’s 2020 documentary, *The Go-Go’s*, “As a young girl going into a space where women owned the stage, and owned it unapologetically like they were born to be there — to me, it represented a moment of possibility.”

It was more than possible. “Our Lips Are Sealed” became a video weeks before MTV launched; America got a glimpse of the band in all their anti-glam glory. Cruising in a late-model car, jamming together, splashing



around in a fountain, they created a universe where girls were given license and took it – all the way to the bank. As Caffey recalled in 2020, “When we’re us against the world, it’s the best.”

Touring incessantly, they were opening for the Police when Sting informed them that their debut had just knocked his album out of Number One on the Top 200 *Billboard* chart. A pretty big deal when the headliner congratulates you for unseating him on a tour about which *Trouser Press* raved, “The group can play large arenas with its ingenuous enthusiasm intact.”

*See the kids just getting out of school
They can't wait to hang out and be cool
Hang around 'til quarter after twelve
That's when they fall in line
They got the beat . . .*





FIGHTING
FOR WHAT
THEY
BELIEVED
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THEY COULD
TELL THEIR
TRUTH
THEIR WAY
AND HAVE
BIG FUN
DOING IT.



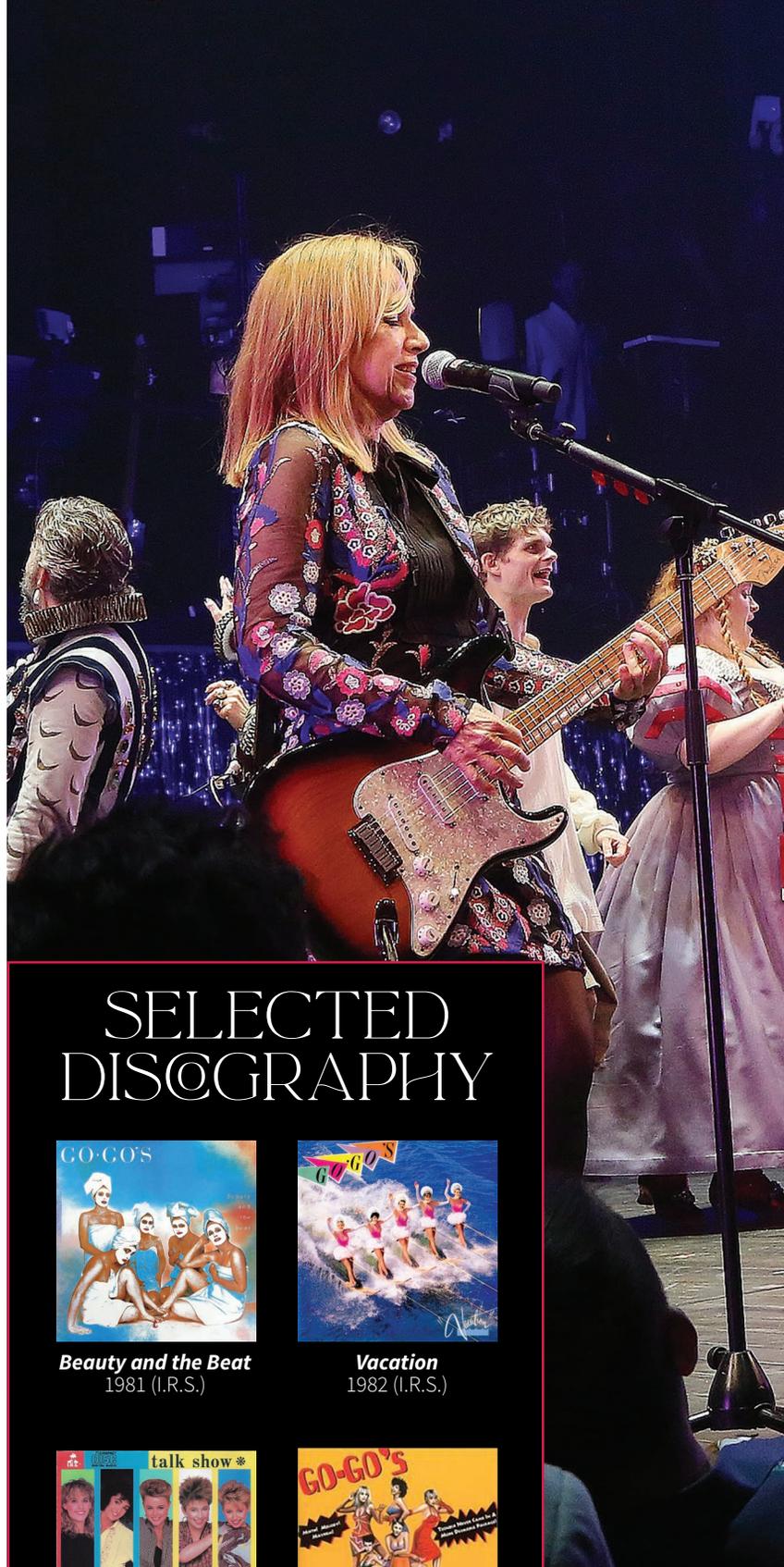
They proved they had the beat of young America. By believing in themselves, embracing the music they loved, bopping and finger-popping and making it look easy, they told generations of kids, “You can, too.”

Beauty and the Beat lived at Number One for six weeks. Here’s the wow: The Go-Go’s were the first all-girl band to top the album chart. Truly jaw-dropping: They remain the only all-girl band to have topped the album chart.

Double, then triple platinum. A 1982 Best New Artist Grammy nomination. Headlining their own arena tours. They burned fast; they played hard. Their VH1 *Behind the Music* is legend.

But don’t let that obscure the music. Or the solidarity. In four short years, the Go-Go’s cranked out three albums that all left a mark. *Vacation*, with its water-skiing cover and video, took their 1981 debut’s retro-glam face mask/towel turban beauty aesthetic for a vintage tourist turn. With *Talk Show* in 1984, “Head Over Heels” and “Turn to You” turned to hits.

By the time the band hit the Rock in Rio Festival in 1985, where they slammed 350,000 people, they were exhausted. They’d appeared on *American Bandstand*, *Top of the Pops*, countless awards shows. They’d inspired



SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Beauty and the Beat
1981 (I.R.S.)



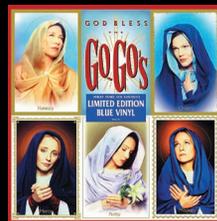
Vacation
1982 (I.R.S.)



Talk Show
1984 (I.R.S.)



***Return to the Valley
of the Go-Go's***
1994 (I.R.S.)



***God Bless
the Go-Go's***
2001 (Beyond)



***Beatnik Beach
Summer***
2020 (UMG Recordings)



The Go-Go's do a special curtain call with the cast of *Head Over Heels*, the Broadway musical based on the band's songs.

countless young women to pick up guitars, basses, drums, to write plucky songs that spoke up about how they felt, called out lame boyfriends on their crap, made the first move, and owned the stuff nobody talks about.

Like sisters, they'd fight, break up, get back together. Varying degrees of solo success, but nothing like the sum of their parts. Inspiring *Head Over Heels*, an Elizabethan romcom Broadway musical set to their songs, which debuted at the 2015 Oregon Shakespeare Festival, they've watched their short-lived career continue to yield.

But more important is the impact they've had on music. For *God Bless the Go-Go's* (2001), Billie Joe Armstrong cowrote "Unforgiven," their Number 22 Adult Top Forty hit. "The Whole World's Lost Its Head" gave *Return to the Valley of the Go-Go's* (1994) its only U.K. hit and a Number 28 on the Modern Rock chart.

Courtney Love, Haim, Hayley Williams from Paramore,

Bikini Kill, Gwen Stefani, and so many more young women held their ground because of the Go-Go's. When news of the Hall of Fame induction broke, X's John Doe offered the ultimate benediction. The elder statesman/historian texted Wiedlin, "OG punks for the win!"

Indeed. Four decades later, as the dust swirls and punk seems almost nostalgia, the Go-Go's remain. Yes, they were girls who looked at the music that came before, embraced the charm and the hooks. But they also understood rejecting the tropes, not being "good little girls," eschewing that glossy *Playboy* sex appeal.

As *Musician* offered in its *Talk Show* review, "The best party songs are the ones with the darkest and angriest hearts." For the Go-Go's, fighting for what they believed meant they could tell their truth their way and have big fun doing it. Obviously, the little girls – and a whole lot of other people – did, too.