

PAUL MCDERMOTT

THE STORY OF THE B-52s NEON SIDE OF TOWN

by Brigette A. Herron and Scott Creney - Palgrave Macmillan

The Story of the B-52s: Neon Side of Town is the first critical history of the Athens band. Herron and Creney make the case that the B-52's are much more than, "a tacky little dance band from Athens, Georgia" or "the world's greatest party band." They argue that the band are rather, "one of the most legendary and influential bands in American popular music." They locate the band, "in the intellectual climate of their hometown of Athens," and follow them to New York's downtown scene of the late 70s and early 80s. The book goes on to make the case for the B-52's arrival in New York in late 1977 having, "profoundly influenced the next several years of music and art to come out of that city."

The B-52's (Fred Schneider, Kate Pierson, Keith Strickland, and siblings Cindy and Ricky Wilson) formed in late 1976 and played their first gig at a friend's house on Valentine's Day 1977. The band's short set that night included future singles 'Planet Claire' and 'Rock Lobster'.

The story continues through the recording of 8 albums, world tours, the tragic death of founding member Ricky Wilson from pneumonia-related AIDS, the band's regrouping and subsequent worldwide success with 1989's Cosmic Thing to their current farewell tour.

The B-52's took their name from Southern slang for exaggerated beehive hairdos and by early 1978 began weekend road trips to New York for gigs at two of the city's most iconic venues, Max's Kansas City and CBGB's: "The band piled into the Wilson family station wagon,

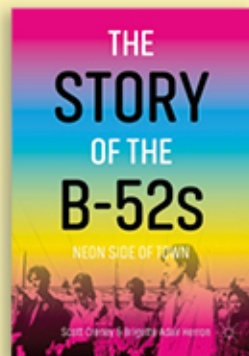
strapping their equipment to the roof of the car and drove 20 hours north."

Word spread quickly, Klaus Nomi and members of Talking Heads attend, at one gig John Cale is spotted sitting at the bar. The B-52's find themselves invited back again and again and, "a year later, sign a contract with one of the most prestigious record labels in the world."

The B-52's, the band's 1979 self-titled debut and its follow-up, 1980's Wild Planet, were huge commercial hits but by the mid-80s the band were tiring of the album-tour-album drudgery. In 1985 during recording sessions for Bouncing off the Satellites Ricky Wilson died. The band went on a hiatus before eventually regrouping, Strickland learned how to play guitar and started writing new music. Working with producers Nile Rogers and Don Was the band recorded 1989's Cosmic Thing: "one of the greatest, most unexpected comebacks in music history, made possible by one of the best albums they would ever make."

Hit singles and sold-out tours followed but, "in the face of unspeakable tragedy, they continued to imagine utopia in their songs." Cindy told Rolling Stone magazine, "It's like Ricky's having some kind of effect on our whole success. It's like he's up there seeing to it."

Further albums, soundtracks, tours and solo projects have followed and the authors successfully argue that through it all the band have, "managed to remain true to the values they began with—ideas about sex, gender, fluidity, collaboration, and fun."



MY #B52S TOP 5



1. Wild Planet

The band's second album contains 'Private Idaho' one their greatest singles, Herron and Creney assert that, "Wild Planet is the B-52's at the height of their powers." I agree!

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2. Cosmic Thing

The band regroup after Ricky's tragic death and produce their most commercially successful album. Five of its songs became huge hits including 'Love Shack' and 'Roam' and it's also, "the most emotionally moving album in their discography."

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3. The B-52's

The brilliant debut produced by Chris Blackwell at Compass Point. Singles 'Rock Lobster' and 'Planet Claire' sound as fresh and otherworldly today as the day they were released.

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4. Whammy!

Often overlooked in the band's discography, it was produced by Steven Stanley, the Jamaican engineer who had worked on Tom Tom Club's debut, and features drum machine and synthesizers to great effect.

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5. Mesopotamia

"I'll meet you by the third pyramid." Originally planned as their third full-length, this David Byrne produced record ended up as a 6-track EP.