

INTERVIEW

Hairplane

The B-52s are living simply and trying to get by—
a little older, a little wiser, and more fun than ever

BY LAWRENCE FERBER

PHOTOS BY ENKA AOSHIMA



The B-52s are (from left) Kate Pierson, Keith Strickland, Cindy Wilson and Fred Schneider

The B-52s—Kate Pierson, Fred Schneider, Keith Strickland and Cindy Wilson—who purloined their moniker from Southern terminology for exceptionally blown-out wig varieties, have regrouped, ready to party once more.

Currently touring the country with an otherworldly stage resembling sets from Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice*, they gallivant about with accompanying go-go dancers as strobes and assorted freakish lights burst into action. Also, there's a CD commemorating the occasion: *TIME CAPSULE: Songs for a Future Generation*, containing greatest hits like "52 Girls" and two new odes, "Debbie" and "Hallucinating Pluto."

The B-52s sprung from the party scene in Athens, Ga., a college town supporting the University of Georgia. Keith first met siblings Ricky and Cindy Wilson during high school.

"Ricky had already begun writing songs and he was amazing," Strickland says of the band's founding member, who died of AIDS-related illness in 1985. "I didn't know anyone who could write music. Then I met his kid sister, Cindy, when she was like 14. When she got a little older she started hanging out with us."

While attending the University of Georgia, Strickland encountered Schneider, who's originally from New Jersey. And as for Pierson, she "was friends with some other friend."

A fivesome, the group began playing at Athens parties and clubs till opportunity could no longer keep pace with their ambition. Unable to secure enough play dates at Athens clubs, they made pilgrimages to New York City, where the New Wave and Punk scenes were exploding. When they successfully landed bookings at legendary venues CBGB's and Max's Kansas City, press soon followed, as did more bookings back in Athens.

Come 1979, our intrepid partiers again ventured north, making New York their home. Once there, the adventures continued, including finding supportive friendships with the members of Blondie and other musicians.

Recalls Strickland: "We were blown away because we were big fans of Blondie and they invited us over one afternoon. Debbie Harry [namesake of the new song "Debbie"] was making daiquiris and we were hanging out—"She makes fierce daiquiris," Pierson interjects—"It was great fun. Their gold records were, like, laying on the floor and we thought, 'This is too cool!'"

A string of successful albums and singles followed, cementing the B-52s' reputation as die-hard vinyl and club happy-makers. Sadly, finishing one of their most mature and multidimensional albums, *Bouncing off the Satellites*, coincided with Ricky Wilson's death.

A somber end to music's living party favors? "After Ricky passed away, I wasn't sure I could do it alone," confesses Strickland, who co-wrote all the music with Wilson until that point. "I think we feared that it would be too painful without him; like you would feel that void even more so. So we took some time off and really thought that was the end of the group."

Strickland and Schneider are gay, as was Ricky Wilson. Even before its members' publicly came out, the band's signature anthem, "Rock Lobster," was credited with positively influencing the growth of an openly gay teenager, Aaron Fricke, in his autobiography *Reflections of a Rock Lobster*.

Says Strickland: "I can't imagine it any other way. We've always had this gay

the beach, and Cindy's in Atlanta."

Strickland admits that while the band is as much fun as ever, they've each mellowed in some ways, adding that he enjoys spending his time off cooking and gardening with Mark, his boyfriend of two years.

"At this point in our lives making a garden is really exciting," he says. "The more mundane pleasures of life become more exotic."

Pierson explains that the band's lack of pretension, evident throughout its history, was inevitable: "We're still a tacky dance band from Georgia. You can move to New York, but you can't take Georgia out of the band. Tofu and iced tea."

The band's got hopeful eyes on an upcoming box set containing rare tracks and jam material, and many studio albums to follow. When asked what's 15 years down the road, Strickland responds, after guffawing, "Oh, God, I hope I'm circling the Earth in some sort of space station," while Pierson assures they'll still be "rockin' 'n' shakin' our booties."

■ The B-52s play Aug. 15 at the River Queen Showplace, 1300 N.W. Naito Parkway in Portland. Tickets are available through Fastixx.



"I can't imagine it any other way. We've always had this gay following, though in the early days we were never really out about it." —Keith Strickland

"There are a lot of reasons why in the past some performers have been less vocal about their sexuality... Some performers want to have an air of mystery." —Kate Pierson



"Later...in the Catskill Mountains, [I] began writing music on my own. Cindy and Kate came to visit, I played them some stuff, and then we began writing again and found it to be very healing."

1989's *Cosmic Thing* followed, heralding a new era in the B-52s' existence: one of effervescent fun mingled with political awareness. In fact, one of the B-52s' most significant social statements exists in the simple fact that

following, though in the early days we were never really out about it. When I read *Reflections of a Rock Lobster*, that was such a badge."

Soberly continuing, he notes: "I went through this whole period where I resented the fact that I had to make a statement. If you're heterosexual you don't have to proclaim it—you just 'are.' I wanted to just 'be,' but I realized that's not the world I'm in, and in order for

that day to come I'm gonna have to make this big statement. After I did it, I realized it wasn't a big deal—nobody cared anyway!

"I'm hoping that on this tour we can bring maybe some gay activist organization with us, because the suicide rate among gay teens is just so high, and I just think it's important. The people who came out before us, they're pioneers. It was a very brave thing to do. The more of us who do come out, it'll have a critical mass and things'll get better and better."

Pierson's in accordance with Strickland's sentiment.

"The subject of sexuality comes up a lot," she says. "There are a lot of reasons why in the past some performers have been less vocal about their sexuality. For one, wanting to keep your life private. Another reason I think is not knowing the reaction of fans. Some performers want to have an air of mystery."

"I think we do talk about the fact it's important right now to be out and proud. Keith was just saying the other day how there are a lot of gay teenagers out there who commit suicide, and how important it is to be a role model."

While they largely share common ground on political and social issues, the band members are geographically divided between Georgia and New York.