

the B-52s

FUNPLEX

the B-52s:
Kate Pierson
Fred Schneider
Keith Strickland
Cindy Wilson

Welcome to *Funplex*, the first record of the 21st century from **the B-52s**. "It's loud, sexy rock and roll, with the beat pumped up to hot pink," says guitarist Keith Strickland. Eleven fresh new songs, crafted by the groundbreaking band that put Athens, GA on the musical map in the late '70s, and conquered the world with its savvy hooks, unconventional approach to music-making and original style. "*Funplex* sounds like us, updated," adds Fred Schneider. "It's the B-52s now – or fifteen years from now."

From the opening burst of "**Pump**," with Keith's garage-rock guitar and Kate, Fred and Cindy's one-of-a-kind vocal interplay, *Funplex* is instantly recognizable as prime, yet contemporary, B-52s. Vibrant selections including "**Keep This Party Going**," "**Ultraviolet**," and "**Hot Corner**" reaffirm the quartet's status as "the world's greatest party band." Yet they continue taking risks, too, yielding future favorites such as the transcendental "**Juliet of the Spirits**" and "**Love in the Year 3000**," where atmospheric introductions unfold into multi-layered harmonies and burbling beats. On the propulsive title track and first single, the three vocalists adopt distinct characters, running amok on diet pills and slinging tacos in a sprawling shopping center. "It's the seedy underbelly of the mall," chortles Fred.

The creative odyssey of *Funplex* began with Keith Strickland, who composes the music for the group. "I had been listening to a lot of electronic dance music and early rock and roll. I was inspired to use these two aesthetics together with our own sound to write some shameless dance-floor party music." At home in Key West, FL, he commenced crafting new tracks that retained iconic features of the band's sound – such as their primal guitar hooks – while also emphasizing grooves. What emerged were originals like "**Eyes Wide Open**," with its throbbing low-end and oddball percussion, and the chugging, unvarnished "**Too Much to Think About**." Songs that can stand (or shimmy) shoulder-to-shoulder with the best work by newer contemporaries like LCD Soundsystem, The Rapture and the Killers.

"I'm trying to convey a feeling when I write," Keith explains. "I like to think of my instrumentals as landscapes. The chord changes, rhythms and sound quality of the instruments are all aspects of a sonic space, which is designed for Cindy, Fred and Kate

to step into. I want them to feel inspired by the music and expand on that feeling with their melodies and lyrics ... little did I know that with our new songs ... they were going to get all sexy."

The other members of the band were busy incubating new songs, too. "I'm always writing lyrics," says Fred, "I have notebooks full of ideas, not just for songs, but cartoons, films, everything." The band began meeting regularly at Nickel & Dime Studios in Atlanta, GA for Stage Two of the writing process. Working with Keith's foundations, Kate, Fred and Cindy commenced with their trademark "jamming," creating melody lines, lyrics, and vocal harmonies, turning over myriad ideas until they hit upon the ones that served each song best.

"During the 'jamming' process Cindy and I usually focus a lot on melodies ...then the harmonies start to flow....and the magic begins," Kate elaborates. "Sometimes we start with title or subject ideas but we often go to our laptops and jam out on lyrics while listening to the music."

"Most people could not do this," confesses Cindy of their democratic modus operandi. "What we're trying to do is rare, but it works out. And you get a song that is multi-faceted, and has different senses of humor, and depth to it." For instance, the initial spark for "Juliet of the Spirits" came from Keith, according to Kate: "He made a suggestion to look to the Fellini movie" – 1965's *Giulietta degli spiriti* – "for lyrical inspiration, since his movies have always been an influence on our look and our hair! Cindy, Fred and I took it from there." The title "Deviant Ingredient" may have sprung from a line of Cindy's poetry, yet the song's vocal twists, and vivid images of trawling the martini mile, are born from all the members' intersecting imaginations.

To help formalize the sound of *Funplex*, the band recruited producer **Steve Osborne** (Happy Mondays, Doves, KT Tunstall), who had favorably impressed Keith with his work on New Order's 2001 return to form, *Get Ready*. "Steve was strong, directed everybody well, had great ideas... and he understood us, too," says Cindy. "A lot of people wouldn't know what to do with our band, but he appreciated the quirkiness, and made it work. Can you imagine what a hard job that must have been?"

While Osborne and his team – programmers Pete Davis, Dave McCracken, and Damien Taylor, and engineer Dan Austin – helped refine subtle percussion and keyboard parts, enhancing the original tracks, they also made sure to retain a hefty dose of spontaneity. "We didn't do a whole lot to the vocals," reveals Kate. "The philosophy was to keep them a little raw. A lot of attention was paid to the individual tracks, but we were careful not to sound too slick or overproduced."

Recording took place in two locations, first at the Clubhouse in Rhinebeck, NY, followed by John Keane Studio in Athens, GA. Working at the latter venue, in particular, enhanced the good vibes that surrounding the making of the record. "It felt like coming full circle," says Kate. The studio was literally just a few blocks from the site of the house where the band played its first show, at a party on Valentine's Day, 1977. "We were tapping back

into that wellspring of creativity," she continues. "It was like the spirit of when we started. My voice teacher used to say tension is the enemy of all art, and being in Athens melted away any tension. It's so easygoing there."

You'll find glimpses of the band's Athens, GA roots in the lyrics of "Hot Corner," too. "That was a real corner by our old studio, in the Morton Building, where a lot of hot action took place," Kate recalls. "Like 'Love Shack,' the song is a mix of all things Athens: the bus station where Keith and Ricky worked, the dance parties we crashed, the crazy outfits we wore."

The B-52s have come a long way since their revolutionary 1979 self-titled debut, featuring the evergreen "Rock Lobster." Following the loss of founding member Ricky Wilson in 1985, the group rebounded with their triumphant 1989 smash *Cosmic Thing*, which spawned the Top 10 hits "Love Shack" and "Roam." Although their last recordings to be made commercially available were the songs "Debbie" and "Hallucinating Pluto" for the 1998 anthology *Time Capsule: Songs for a Future Generation*, the band has remained a popular and active live touring act.

Looking back at band's pioneering fusions of punk, new wave, and vintage rock, it would be tough to imagine the contemporary musical landscape existing without having encountered the intersected spirits of Kate Pierson, Fred Schneider, Keith Strickland, and Cindy Wilson. "We all cross-pollinate, and create a wonderfully crazy blossom," explains Fred. Botanists don't need a name for this stunning specimen, though. It already has one, known around the world: **the B-52s.**



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