

The Go-Go's Recall the Debauched Days of Their Hit 'We Got the Beat' 35 Years Later: 'We Were a Five-Headed Monster'

Rob Tannenbaum Billboard May 20, 2016



From left: Schock, Wiedlin, Valentine, Caffey and Carlisle photographed in 1982. Mario E. Ruiz/ZUMAPRESS.com

According to band lore, one of The Go-Go's' first shows prompted a review as concise as it was disgusted: "The Go-Go's are to music what botulism is to tuna." The group was all but incompetent at the time of its first gig, at a Los Angeles club in May 1978, but the three founding members -- bassist Margot Olavarria; guitarist Jane Wiedlin, then known as Jane Drano; and singer Belinda Carlisle -- had fun with their bratty songs, including "Robert Hilburn," a taunt of the Los Angeles Times' old-guard music critic: "Bet you think you're really smart/We know better, you're a boring fart."

They added Elissa Bello on drums and lead guitarist Charlotte Caffey, who also began to write catchy pop songs -- including, eventually, "We Got the Beat." Spurred by what Olavarria calls a "cutthroat drive for commercial success," the band upgraded the rhythm section, replacing Bello and Olavarria with drummer Gina Schock and bassist Kathy Valentine, then

signed to I.R.S. Records, which released its debut album, *Beauty and the Beat*, on July 7, 1981. The first single, “Our Lips Are Sealed,” hit No. 20 on the Billboard Hot 100, and the follow-up, “We Got the Beat,” crested at No. 2 and pushed the album to No. 1 on the Billboard 200 in March 1982, making The Go-Go’s the first (and still the only) girl group to top the charts by writing and playing their own songs. “It’s pretty incredible, to go from zero to 100 in only four years,” Carlisle says.



The reunited band (with touring bassist Abby Travis, second from right) took a bow at the Hollywood Bowl in 2014. Mathew Imaging/WireImage

This summer, the 35th anniversary of the album’s release, The Go-Go’s are on a farewell tour (minus Kathy Valentine, who was fired via email in early 2013), and they’ll play “We Got the Beat” at the Billboard Music Awards on May 22. The band’s signature hit has been covered on *Glee* and by Kidz Bop Kids, Duran Duran and, hilariously, by the industrial metal band Bile; used in a Bugle Boy [ad](#); and soundtracks the opening montage of the 1982 teen classic *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. But “We Got the Beat” also has a stormy, unlikely history: Caffey wrote it while stoned, and the band members didn’t want to include it on their album, then tried to prevent it from being released as a single. Luckily, they failed.

Belinda Carlisle: We had no doubts we'd be rich and famous. I remember standing at the copy machine when I was working as a secretary at the Hilton Hotel Corporation in Century City, thinking, "I'm not going to be doing this much longer."

Margot Olavarria: I started the Go-Go's -- me and Elissa Bello, who was the cousin of a high school friend of mine. The story of how the band began has been twisted over the years. It's part of the mnemonic process: people forget things and reshape their memory to their own benefit. There's a myth that I'm a Valley Girl. I'm Latina -- I was born in Chile -- which set me apart from the rest of the band. In the history of L.A. punk, there's been a focus on the contributions of Latinos.

Jane Wiedlin Recounts Forming The Go-Go's in 'Under the Big Black Sun' Audiobook
Excerpt: Exclusive

Jane Wiedlin: I was certain we were going to be huge stars. You can't help but be incredulous when it actually happens. And it's never the same as how you think it's going to be.

Kathy Valentine: I saw The Go-Go's play with The Plugz and was not impressed. It wasn't a real band. If you'd told me I'd be playing with them less than a year later, I would have laughed.

Olavarria: We didn't know what we were doing. But at the time, there was no shame in being a horrible musician.

Gina Schock: The first time I saw them, they played two songs. Then they came back for an encore and played one of the songs again. They weren't great, but there was something shining about them.

Carlisle: We asked Charlotte to join the band because she was the only one who knew how to plug a guitar into an amplifier.

Charlotte Caffey: Belinda and Margot, our original bass player, asked me to join their band one night at the Starwood, when I was playing bass with The Eyes. I said yes. X had poached our drummer, D.J. Bonebrake, and The Eyes were coming to an end. I was intrigued: Belinda was wearing a black trash bag cinched at the waist, spiked heels, ripped fishnet stockings and bright purple hair.

I'd graduated a few years before that with a bachelor's degree in music -- like, classical piano. So I unlearned everything. I didn't know how to play lead guitar. There was a freedom in not knowing how to do it.



From left: Caffey, Wiedlin, Carlisle, Schock and Valentine sip on Boy Howdys for rock magazine Creem in 1981. Robert Matheu/Camera Press/Redux

Valentine: I saw them again maybe six months or a year later, and they were much better. The difference was Gina had been added as their drummer.

Schock: I met a couple of the girls at a party and they said, "Oh, we're looking for a drummer." They came over, we played a couple of songs, I quit the two bands I was in, and they got rid of their drummer, Elissa. I don't think she wanted to be a drummer, anyway.

I could always get a gig, because I was a girl. Edith Massey, the star of John Waters' films [Pink Flamingos and Female Trouble], lived in Fells Point, Baltimore, and I saw her in her thrift store. "Gina, I'm putting a punk band together. You wanna join?" I was 19 or 20. Edie and the Eggs played in New York, L.A., San Francisco. I knew it was time to leave Baltimore. I hopped in my dad's pickup truck with everything I owned -- my drums, my PA system, amplifiers -- and got to L.A. on Valentine's Day 1979. Then The Go-Go's came along.

Valentine: Gina imposed a work ethic on the band.

Schock: I was used to playing clubs, four sets a night, and rehearsing four or five nights a week. And they were doing it on the weekends, a couple of times a month. I was like, "We've got to change this. I came out here to be a rock star."

Caffey: I brought in a song, "How Much More," that Jane and I worked on. It was more pop, but we still couldn't play very well, so we kind of created a new sound: melodic but raw. It was scary to bring in pop songs to the band, because they seemed to be in with all the punks, and I was on the periphery of the punk scene. I thought, If they reject this, I'm screwed, because this is the way I write.

Carlisle: We all had pop sensibilities. The [Buzzcocks](#) is probably the one band we all loved. We were a punk band, but as we became more adept with our instruments, we were a pop band.

The Go-Go's Announce Farewell Tour

Caffey: I was spending New Year's Day [1980] alone, listening to Motown songs, watching a Twilight Zone marathon and getting high on a cocktail of stuff. All day I was trying to write a song. I stopped and said, "F--- it, I don't care." The minute I did that, boom, an idea popped into my head. I ran to get my cassette recorder and sang "We Got the Beat" into the recorder to document it. I knew I had written something special. It took two minutes. I didn't labor on the lyrics. It's a simple song, which goes back to the '60s, when I had my ears glued to the radio for the Stones, the Beatles, and the Beach Boys .

Valentine The simple, introductory drum part is the biggest hook. The second you hear that, you know it's "We Got the Beat." Gina is the one who catapulted the song. I don't think the chorus or the lyrics or the melody are enough to carry that song.

That's one of the things I'd argue about, whenever we fought about publishing. I was enough of a songwriter that I made plenty of money, but I thought it was fucked up that the singer and the drummer made such paltry amounts of money in publishing. It's the vocal performance and the drumbeat that push the song over the top. And now that they've kicked me out of the band, I can say whatever the f--- I want.

John Guarnieri, production/A&R director, I.R.S. Records: "We Got the Beat" really stood out when I saw them live. The crowds went wild for it -- an anthemic chant, everybody sang along, fists pumping in the air and people pogoing. I kept saying to Miles [Copeland, I.R.S. president], "You've got to see this band."

Schock: We thought if we went to England, they'd understand us and we'd get a record deal. We were opening for [Madness](#), and then [the Specials](#). They were tough audiences -- skinheads. They hated our guts. Belinda would walk offstage completely covered in spit. I remembering walking offstage a lot of times and we'd all be crying.

Caffey: We ate leftovers. When Madness and the Specials were done eating, we ate their leftovers.

Carlisle: It was also probably the most fun we ever had. We had no money, no cares, we were young, living in a big crash pad. I remember getting high on cough syrup because we had no money for beer. It was before the Internet, so we'd write to everybody back home about how successful we were and how great things were.

Caffey: Prior to going to London, we made a four-song demo. Dave Robinson, who ran Stiff Records, wanted "We Got the Beat" as a single. There were only four songs to choose from, so it's not brain surgery. Robinson offered us money for the publishing to "We Got the Beat." It was some shitty amount, like 500 pounds. And Ginger Canzoneri, our manager, thought, "Hmm, I wonder what publishing is." She read up on it and said, "F--- no, we're not giving up publishing."

Schock: I don't remember anything about recording the demo. Want me to make something up?

Carlisle: The Stiff single really changed things for the Go-Go's. It was released in the United States while we were in the United Kingdom. We came back and played a weekend at the Starwood, and there was a line wrapped around Crescent Heights [Boulevard]. It wasn't just the punk kids anymore.

Valentine: I was asked to be a temporary replacement [for bassist Olavarria, who had contracted hepatitis A]. My first gig with them was Dec. 31, 1980. We did three nights at the Whisky a Go Go, and as soon as the shows were over, I was asked to stay. They told me they wanted a more experienced musician in the band, and they liked that I was a songwriter as well.

I didn't think they handled firing Margot very well, but felt like I was too new to be butting in their business.

Olavarria: I found out I'd been kicked out of the band from my good friend Exene Cervenka, from X. The Go-Go's wanted someone with more pop song capability, and the desire to succeed, pretty much at any cost. There was a lack of integrity on their part, and the part of

their manager, and their lawyers, who I also sued. I was already in a better band -- [Brian Brain](#). The lawsuit took three years.

It's sad that they played the drug card to explain why they kicked me out [Olavarria had been arrested for buying cocaine]. I find that so ridiculous. I was an outrageous party girl, I really was, but the others, in many ways, were way worse. And all of them continued in the drug world. I mean, I moved to New York and I saw Charlotte in my neighborhood -- Alphabet City, a notorious, drug-infested neighborhood. I knew what she was doing here!



From left: Schock, Johnny Cash and Wiedlin backstage at a London Go-Go's concert in 1982.
Courtesy of Gina Schock

Caffey: People at the record labels were like, "We don't want to sign you, you're girls" -- sexist, ridiculous nonsense. I.R.S. Records was the right place because Miles Copeland was as crazy as we were.

Guarnieri: The I.R.S. roster was full of bastard children: The Cramps, Wazmo Nariz, Skafish... The Go-Go's and I.R.S., we were both underdogs. I remember Miles saying one day, "As go The Go-Go's, so goes I.R.S."

Wiedlin: Miles is like P.T. Barnum, or Colonel [Tom] Parker -- he's eccentric, and smart, and strange. When he said we were going to shoot a music video, we were like, "Music video? That's stupid. You suck." We were totally bratty about it. But the timing was perfect for us. I wonder where our career would've gone if MTV hadn't launched the same summer.

Richard Gottehrer, co-producer: Miles said he had a great girl group, and he thought I should produce them. At first, I wasn't interested. I'd done lots of girl groups. But I went to see them play at New York University [in Manhattan]. They weren't great players, although Gina was a great drummer, and Kathy was second best as a player. But the songs were terrific.

It was a relatively small budget for *Beauty and the Beat*: \$35,000. I went over the budget and paid another \$7,500 out of my pocket.

Schock: The first thing Richard said was, "You need to slow down the songs." We really looked up to Richard. He'd produced Blondie so we felt like we were in good hands.

Gottehrer: I told them they had to slow down, put the songs into a groove. The songs deserved to be treated with respect.

Caffey: Kudos to Richard. I appreciated his vision and his tenacity in dealing with us.

Gottehrer: This was when I learned that girls can be as disruptive and dirty as boys. Who knew? It might have been drinking, it might've been going out, looking for booty -- I'm not sure if they were into their drug phase yet. But that energy and personality came across on the record.

Caffey: People think we were America's sweethearts. Yeah, sweethearts from f---ing hell. I mean, we were just brutal. But fun.

Gottehrer: The funny thing about "We Got the Beat" is, The Go-Go's didn't want to record it with me. They said, "We already did it. And our fans already have it."

Caffey: We said the most outrageous stuff. We knew nothing.

Gottelher: I said, "Oh, really? How many fans do you have? There are millions of people in the world. This could be a huge hit." And I was right. We stuck Gina in the storage room at the Record Plant, to get the ambience, and then doubled the drums. Everything was precise. They played and sang everything on the album themselves. I might have played percussion. There might've been somebody who did something on an early model synthesizer. But that's about it.

Carlisle: A couple of us were concerned about how our peers in L.A. perceived us. With the small amount of success we'd had, people said we sold out, we weren't punk after all, blah, blah, blah. Hearing the album made us feel like they were right -- we sounded like we sold out. Also, my voice on the album is sped up, so it's hard for me to listen to. I sound like the Chipmunks.

Caffey: The first time we heard Beauty and the Beat, we cried our eyes out.

Schock: We thought Richard made us sound too pop. Of course, six months later, when the album went to No. 1, we loved Richard and thought he was a genius.

Gottelher: They didn't talk to me for a minimum of three months. Might have been six. Miles, I think, threatened to kill me: "You've ruined them. I gave you a punk band and got back this pop crap?" I said, "Does that mean you're not going to pay me back the \$7,500 I laid out?" Then I went to L.A. for the celebration A&M threw, when the record went to No. 1, and they were happy to see me. And I did get the \$7,500 back, because I had royalties on the album, and it sold in the millions.

Guarnieri: There's a promotion strategy: With a new band, you don't come out of the box with your best song. We knew "We Got the Beat" was the hit, so we started with "Our Lips Are Sealed," to introduce the band.

Caffey: Radio stations started to add "Our Lips Are Sealed" because they wanted to get rid of Michael Plen, our crazy radio promotion guy.

The Go-Go's' Biggest Billboard Hits

Michael Plen, head of promotion, I.R.S. Records: Radio perceived them as a novelty act because they were a girl band. American Airlines offered a deal: You could travel for 60 days, as long as you connected on flights, for \$600. So I bought a ticket and went from city to city, trying to convince radio stations to play The Go-Go's. My nickname is "The Attack Hamster." If I think a song has hit potential I'll be a pest, the way a hamster will jump on your leg and you're like, "All right, we'll play your record, get off me."

After we broke “Our Lips Are Sealed,” the girls didn’t want to release “We Got the Beat” as a single. They were like, “It has already been a hit.” We made a compelling case for it, and they said OK.

Caffey: It got to No. 2 -- Joan Jett was No. 1 [with “I Love Rock ‘n Roll”]. But our album was No. 1 for six weeks, which is insane. Considering where we started from, I’ll take that.

Carlisle: Four months after the album came out, we played Saturday Night Live, which was a disaster. We were sitting around all day, drinking, and we were completely plastered by the time we went onstage. I was in bad shape, but I think a few others were in much worse shape.

Valentine: We got drunk -- I’m not gonna say names, but it wasn’t just me -- and then you try to balance out your buzz with different substances. I don’t know where the coke came from or how we got it, but it wasn’t hard to get anything. Somebody said, “OK, girls, 60 million people are watching.”

Caffey: Why would you say that to us? We were terrified out of our minds.

Valentine: I remember being terrified. It couldn’t have been that bad, because we sold tons of records after it. I mean, tons.

Schock: One person in particular was cock-eyed drunk -- if you look at the clip, you can see who it is. We did two songs, “Our Lips Are Sealed” and “We Got the Beat.”



Dick Clark chatted with Carlisle and Valentine on American Bandstand in 1982.
Courtesy of Dick Clark Productions

Caffey: Here's the thing about The Go-Go's: Onstage, any moment could be a total train wreck. I can see why Belinda didn't like her performance that night. Looking back on it, I really don't f---ing care. It's where we were and who we were at that time.

Guarnieri: Miles Copeland managed The Police, who were signed to A&M Records. And A&M distributed IRS, so we had that going for us. He got choice gigs for The Go-Go's, which was key.

Caffey: When Miles said, "I want you to open for The Police," we were like, "We can't do that! We're headlining clubs."

Wiedlin: The Police tour was huge, because they were blowing up. That, and the MTV exposure: Every week things got bigger and bigger. We didn't stop. We'd finish a two- or three-month tour, go home for a few days, then start another one. And each tour, things would change. The first time, we went out in a van. The next time, there was a trailer for the equipment. The next time, we were on a crappy tour bus, and the next time we were on a good tour bus. Then we bought our Learjet! No, we never did that.

Exene Cervenka, singer, X: The Go-Go's success was a big deal for women, I thought. The thing that upset people was when they were on the cover of Rolling Stone in their underwear. These days, they'd be naked and Photoshopped, but back then, people were held to a different standard, especially women, because we were fighting for credibility. In retrospect, people were a little harsh on the Go-Go's. And there was probably a little bit of envy. I never thought of them as sellouts.

Schock: I'll tell you, girl fans were actually pushier than the guys. The guys got scared, because when the five of us were together, we were out of control. If I were in the room with the five of us, I'd leave. It's like a five-headed monster.



The 7-inch single for “We Got the Beat,” which reached No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100 in April 1982. Courtesy Photo

Plen: The biggest misjudgment The Go-Go's made was to not follow “We Got the Beat” with another single. They'd become cocky, and their attitude was, “We're tired of this material. We want to make a new record.” Wikipedia says there was a third single from the album, but I can tell you, there wasn't, not in the proper sense. They put the brakes on an album that could have easily released another hit. We had arguments about it, and I remember [A&M Records head of promotion] Charlie Minor said, “You don't ever stop a record that's selling.”

Carlisle: We've been known to change the lyrics when we sing it live. “We got to pee.” “We beat the meat.” It always makes us laugh.

Valentine: "We got big feet." "We beat the meat." Anything to entertain ourselves.

Schock: "We gotta eat." "We beat the meat." Something filthy or stupid. We're like a bunch of high school kids.

Olavarria: I'm not bitter, because it's been such a long time, but I have no friendly feelings towards any of them. It's tedious and boring for me to talk about; I was in Brian Brain, which was a better band, for so much longer, but nobody's calling to interview me about that.

Valentine: Elvis Costello reviewed "We Got the Beat" for one of the English music papers, and he slammed it. I think he said it was moronic. It is kind of dumb, like The Ramones -- dumb, but fantastic.

Carlisle: When we formed the band, we were going to call ourselves either the Misfits or The Go-Go's. We looked in Webster's dictionary, and "go-go" meant "joyous, carefree and fun." That's what "We Got the Beat" is.

Caffey: The song lets people feel good for a few minutes, and that's a valuable thing in the world today, because it has gone f---ing batshit crazy, as we all know. It's an uplifting reprieve. Belinda, Jane, and I all grew up in California and the song has a California air to it -- an easiness and a simplicity.

Gottelher: "We Got the Beat" was a truly great recording because The Go-Go's were fun. And fun is always good.

Valentine: One time, we were rehearsing for a Go-Go's tour, and much to our annoyance, Belinda was rehearsing her solo tour down the hall. It was probably in the '90s; we were all pretty bitchy in the '90s. I remember standing outside the door and listening to Belinda's band play "We Got the Beat." The hot-shot studio drummer she'd hired couldn't play it right.

Carlisle: My life is a series of manifestations. Looking back, I believe that energetically, you can achieve anything you want to achieve. That's what we did, against all odds. It was a total energetic thing. I know it sounds airy-fairy, but to me, no other explanation makes sense.

Schock: Right time, right place, right drumbeat. Right chords. Right lyrics. Good song, but incredible drumbeat. Iconic drumbeat! I don't know what it would be without that incredible drumbeat.