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CO·CO'S



**BEAUTY AND
THE BEAT**
by Lisa Whittington-Hill

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BEAUTY AND THE BEAT

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Beauty and the Beat



Lisa Whittington-Hill

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2. "How Much More" (3:06)
3. "Tonight" (3:35)
4. "Lust to Love" (4:04)
5. "This Town" (3:20)
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(2:54)
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11. "Can't Stop the World" (3:20)

Introduction

Good Girls and Go-Go's

The Go-Go's debut album *Beauty and the Beat* was released the summer before my tenth birthday. I didn't immediately discover the album or the band. I was too preoccupied with trying to decide whether my upcoming birthday party should feature a My Pretty Pony or Strawberry Shortcake theme. Music at the time was Air Supply, REO Speedwagon, and "Jessie's Girl" by Rick Springfield. There was no MTV—although it would soon arrive—and my friends and I were still too young to really enjoy teen magazines like *Teen Beat* and *Tiger Beat*. For us, the idea of women and music was limited to Sheena Easton, Juice Newton, and Kim Carnes. All the records in my Mom's collection featured male singers like Barry Manilow, Engelbert Humperdinck, and Liberace. Please note that my Mom is hipper than this list makes her sound. An all-girl band that played instruments and wrote their own songs was something that didn't exist in our pre-teen world. That would soon change.

One of my friends had a sister who introduced us to the Go-Go's. We treated the band like cool older sisters who sang catchy songs and lived in some far-off, magical universe where Barry Manilow, math homework, and the flexed arm

hang in gym class didn't exist. When I found out the Go-Go's were from Los Angeles, I spent my lunch hour in the school library figuring out where the city was in an atlas. It seemed so far from my home in Canada, even though it was only a four-hour plane ride away. When my Mom took me to California a couple of years later, I spent my time mainlining MTV, which was not yet available in Canada, and obsessively looking out the window of our rental car for one of the Go-Go's as if Kathy or Belinda would just be walking down the Ventura Freeway in the middle of a Wednesday afternoon.

Once we discovered *Beauty and the Beat*, it became the soundtrack to after-school hangouts and overnight sleepover parties. We would stay up well past our bedtimes, listening to "We Got the Beat" and recreating *Beauty and the Beat's* iconic cover, which featured the band's five members in nothing but thick layers of face cream and white bath towels. We spent hours riding our ten-speed bikes around the neighborhood while drinking Slurpees and singing "This Town" at the top of our lungs. In our minds, we owned the town just like the Go-Go's did, even if our town was just the three-block radius around the local Red Rooster convenience store. When it was my turn to host the weekend sleepover, I pooled my allowance money together to get white towels that matched those on the album's cover. Using a Flintstones beach towel just didn't seem very Go-Go's. I should have just bought the towels at a department store, insisted my friends not wipe their messy, sleepover snack-covered hands on them, and then returned them for a refund just like the Go-Go's did for the album photo shoot.

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The more we learned about the Go-Go's, or more accurately about the squeaky-clean image of the band that was marketed to us, the more we wanted to be just like them. When it was time for our school's annual talent show, featuring a lip-synch battle of the bands, my friends and I decided we wanted to be the Go-Go's and perform "Vacation" from the band's second album *Vacation*. It felt good to finally have an all-girl band to choose from. There was never a shortage of options for the boys, which made the inclusion of two dueling Van Halen bands confusing. Belinda, Jane, Charlotte, Kathy, and Gina made us feel like we could own the stage, that we belonged there and that we could beat not one but both Van Halens. My best friend Cara and I both wanted to be lead singer Belinda Carlisle for the show. Cara was blonde with a bouncy ponytail and blue eyes. She wore tight, striped polo shirts in pastel colors and always smelled like Love's Baby Soft cologne mist. When she stood in front of the Slurpee machine at the Red Rooster after school in her Jordache jeans, all the boys in our class stopped caring about the local hockey team and only cared about Cara. It was clear Cara was our Belinda. It was decided that I would play guitarist Jane Wiedlin, which I wasn't too happy about. Years later, I learned that being Jane, the original manic pixie dream girl, was cool. I also learned a lot more about my beloved childhood band. Perhaps, more than I was supposed to know.

* * *

The Go-Go's were marketed as America's sweethearts. In their first *Rolling Stone* cover story in 1982, their girl-next-door goodness was on full display. The band was described

as “safe, wholesome and proudly commercial.”¹ The magazine called them “heroes for the little sisters of the longhaired guys who play air guitar at Foreigner concerts,”² and as evidenced by YouTube clips of concerts from the band’s 1982 tour, which show an audience of screaming teen and pre-teen girls, the magazine was right. Cara and her Jordaches would have fit right in.

What didn’t quite fit was the disconnect between how the band was marketed and who the Go-Go’s really were. “We were cute and bubbly, but we were also twisted, crazy, drug-addict sex fiends,”³ said Wiedlin in an interview in the *Behind the Music* episode devoted to the Go-Go’s. We all knew they were cute and bubbly, the twisted part, well, not so much. We also didn’t know much about the band’s punk past and roots in the 1970s Los Angeles punk scene. If the Go-Go’s had seemed foreign to Cara and me, just imagine what bands like the Bags or the Germs would have done to our fragile, sheltered pre-teen brains. The band’s punk past was not a part of the packaging of the Go-Go’s that was pushed on young fans, record buyers, and the press. In the days before the internet, social media, and TMZ, it was easier to control and craft a band’s image and stay on message. “If it wasn’t for the punk rock scene, the Go-Go’s never would’ve happened. Bottom line,”⁴ said Carlisle in a 2020 *Vogue* oral history devoted to *Beauty and the Beat*. Pre-Go-Go’s Carlisle almost became a member of the influential Los Angeles punk band the Germs as drummer Dottie Danger, but a case of mono kept her from fully committing.

When the Go-Go’s signed to Miles Copeland’s I.R.S. Records in April 1981, after being turned down by countless

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record companies because they were girls, their initial punk sound was given a pop polish. This was something the band rebelled against both while recording their debut album and when they heard the final product. “When the mix of *Beauty and the Beat* was sent to us, we all went out to the car to listen to it on the stereo—and we were *horrified*. We were so disappointed that it sounded the way it did. We wanted it to be faster and raunchier,”⁵ Carlisle told NPR in 2020 of the band’s initial reaction to the record. While the album may have featured a more pop sound, part of the band’s success, and appeal, was their ability to bridge pop and punk music.

When it came to their past, the Go-Go’s lips really were sealed. The group’s wholesome image masked the hard partying, heroin and cocaine, all things we glorify when it comes to male musicians but criticize, mock, and constantly make women apologize for. All-male bands like Mötley Crüe and Guns N’ Roses are treated like heroes for their hard-partying ways and tales of their drinking, drugs, and sex with groupies are well documented. Female musicians are not allowed to, or expected to, party as hard as their male counterparts.

When I later learned about the Go-Go’s partying, drug, and alcohol use and less than wholesome image, I felt betrayed. (Fun fact: one band member was kicked out of Ozzy Osbourne’s hotel room for partying too hard.) What happened to my wholesome sleepover idols? The Go-Go’s were a game-changing band for me growing up and they had lied to me. I wondered if Cara knew. Of course, the Go-Go’s hadn’t deceived me; the music industry, media, and society were to blame. For the band to be accepted and be popular,

there were, unfortunately, parts of themselves they had to keep hidden.

“There was a real desire on the part of the media and society for us to be nonthreatening and wholesome . . . We could have done more to try to control the way our image was thrust on us, but for some reason, that had to be part of the package in order for us to be accepted,”⁶ said bassist Kathy Valentine in the book *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The True, Tough Story of Women in Rock*. When the band tried to control their image, they were often powerless in the face of the misogyny of the music industry. When the Go-Go’s appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* for the first time in 1982, they wanted to avoid an overly sexual image. The cover featured the Go-Go’s in underwear—but unsexy, plain, white, men’s Hanes underwear. The image may have been wholesome, but *Rolling Stone* ran it with a coverline that said, “Go-Go’s Put Out.” When the band’s manager Ginger Canzoneri called *Rolling Stone* publisher Jann Wenner to complain about the sexist cover, he implied the band should have been grateful to be on the cover at all. Magazines like *Rolling Stone* love to market female artists as good girls but then turn around and exploit their sexuality to sell copies.

* * *

Beauty and the Beat was the first, and to date only, album to reach the number one spot by an all-girl group who not only wrote their own songs but also played their own instruments. The critically acclaimed album spent six weeks at the top of the *Billboard* charts in March 1982 and has sold over two million copies, making it one of the most successful debut

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albums of all time. The album featured two Top 100 hit singles: “We Got the Beat,” which went to number two on the charts, and “Our Lips Are Sealed,” which landed at number twenty. It also earned the band a Grammy nomination in 1982 for Best New Artist. They lost to Sheena Easton. Despite their success, the Go-Go’s were manufactured and marketed by the press and the music industry as good girls to sell their records. Their accomplishments and talent were often ignored at the expense of a focus on their looks and love lives. They were treated as a novelty act and had their story rewritten to sell records.

Years have passed since the Go-Go’s were head over heels, but, sadly, the gender bias that greeted the band and *Beauty and the Beat* continues today. Female musicians are still pigeonholed into tired and outdated sexist stereotypes. The marketing of the good girl image that was so popular with the Go-Go’s still exists and has been used to sell everyone from Britney Spears to Selena Gomez. Bad girls in music may exist, but only so they can be pitted against the good girl with media-manufactured feuds and competition—think early 2000-era Britney and Christina. *Beauty and the Beat* meant an image makeover for the Go-Go’s as they went from punk to pop. Carefully constructed and controlled image makeovers have become the standard now for pop princesses. There’s a script that must be adhered to and considerable damage control and spin happens when female musicians go off script or simply mature and outgrow it.

To talk about *Beauty and the Beat* is to talk about the contradictions that existed with the Go-Go’s and the image of the band that was marketed. It also means acknowledging

that although the Go-Go's broke barriers, media, society, and the music industry still treat female musicians in the same way they did when *Beauty and the Beat* was released.

* * *

The Go-Go's, a new documentary about the band by director Alison Ellwood, premiered at Sundance in 2020 to rave reviews. That same year, the band released "Club Zero," their first new music in nineteen years, and announced a reunion tour. And it wasn't just the Go-Go's that were in the news again. The female musicians they helped paved the way for, and that endured the same sexist treatment the Go-Go's experienced, were too. From Bikini Kill touring again to *Framing Britney Spears*, the 2021 documentary that reignited the debate around Spears' conservatorship and how the singer was treated by the press, to the controversy over a very glammed-up Billie Eilish on the cover of *Vogue*. Pop, and not so pop in Bikini Kill's case, princesses were big again.

While writing the proposal for this book, my Twitter feed exploded with the news that the Go-Go's would finally be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. The class of inductees included two women (Tina Turner and Carole King) which, sadly, is considered groundbreaking. There were also two bands being inducted that included former members of the Germs (Pat Smear of Foo Fighters and Carlisle), which is a nice nod to the Go-Go's punk past. Many assumed the Go-Go's were already in the Hall of Fame. At the end of Ellwood's documentary Police drummer Stewart Copeland comments, "What the fuck? They're not?"⁷ echoing the sentiments of many.

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But it is not just the Hall of Fame that excluded the Go-Go's. They are often left out of the narrative when it comes to feminist bands and influential female artists. The Go-Go's played their own instruments and wrote their own songs. They had a female manager, which was not the norm at the time. They also had female roadies, which was unheard of in 1981. They partied as hard as their male counterparts and made no excuses for their ambition or the evolution of their sound. They weren't the fun-loving, wholesome singing girl gang who all got along, and they never made apologies for that. One of the greatest and most successful all-girl groups in music history, the Go-Go's influence on female musicians has often been downplayed. They were trailblazers and no album by the band exemplifies this spirit more than *Beauty and the Beat*. The Go-Go's embraced the DIY spirit of riot grrrl before there was a Bikini Kill or a Bratmobile. "From the beginning our motto has been: 'Do what you don't know how to do,'"⁸ Wiedlin said in a 1982 interview.

They were brash and unapologetic long before Courtney Love. Girls making music on their own terms didn't start with Taylor Swift or Beyoncé; it started with the Go-Go's. A girl power anthem like the Spice Girls' "Wannabe" would not exist without the punk power anthem "We Got the Beat." The Go-Go's were a feminist band, but they aren't regarded as one. They were the original girls with guitars and attitude, and *Beauty and the Beat* was a feminist album, long before making an empowering call to arms was considered cool. *Beauty and the Beat* inspired me to pick up an air guitar when I was younger and still inspires me to make music, to make art, and to do it on my own terms. There are countless girls