

Classic Tracks: The Go-Go's "Our Lips Are Sealed"

by Barbara Schultz

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Nothing says 1980s L.A. like The Go-Go's on the radio. Those sweet, bright, infectious songs were the perfect soundtrack for a sunny day—still are, though 30 years have passed since one of rock 'n' roll's first all-female bands released their debut album, *Beauty and the Beat*.

The Go-Go's formed in the midst of L.A.'s late-'70s punk scene. None of the founding members—Belinda Carlisle, Jane Wiedlin and Margot Olaverra—were professional musicians. They were friends who bonded over shows by bands like The Germs and The Dickies.



Some of The Go-Go's look a little the worse for wear in this 1981 publicity photo. From left: Charlotte Caffey, Jane Wiedlin, Belinda Carlisle, Kathy Valentine, and Gina Schock

In her recent memoir, "Lips Unsealed," Go-Go's lead singer, Belinda Carlisle, recalls being outside a party in Venice, Calif., and the exact moment three fans became band mates: "...the three of us found ourselves sitting on the curb with beers and cigarettes. We talked about the Sex Pistols' show in San Francisco, which was still fresh in our minds, and I added stories from my trip to London, and eventually we were talking about starting our own band.... It was like making a pact."

The first Go-Go's lineup included Carlisle, Wiedlin on guitar, Olaverra on bass, and Elissa Bello playing drums. "Our first rehearsal was at Margot's apartment off Robertson Boulevard," writes Carlisle. "We were pretty scattered and lost. We didn't even know how to start; we barely figured out how to set up our instruments. We banged around, tried to write songs, and then went to Denny's for dinner. We were situated in a booth, a mix of kooky hair styles and colors wrapped in cigarette smoke. All of us were in agreement that our first rehearsal had surpassed expectations."

They had nowhere to go but up, and the punk scene was all about DIY. The group kept at their instruments and began writing songs together. They invited bass player Charlotte Caffey to join their group, but they wanted her to play lead guitar. So, she spent a week learning to play guitar. The band started gigging at clubs like The Masque and The Whisky a Go Go. English ska group Madness invited them to open on a tour of the UK, where they cut an EP for Stiff Records.

As success began to build for The Go-Go's, differences between some of the band members became problematic. Carlisle relates in her memoir that Bello was unreliable, and was replaced by Gina Schock. Olaverra became disgruntled as the band's sound

became less hard-core and more pop; unwilling to lose momentum in the direction that was working for them, The Go-Go's replaced Olaverra with bassist Kathy Valentine.

It was the "classic" Go-Go's lineup of Carlisle, Wiedlin, Schock, Caffey and Valentine that finally signed with IRS Records and partied their way to New York City, and through the making of their first album, *Beauty and the Beat*.

"...our producers, Rob Freeman and Richard Gottehrer, had their hands full with us," writes Carlisle. "We were either drinking and partying in the studio or hung-over from the night before."



Batman fan Jane Wiedlin pals around with engineer/co-producer Rob Freeman and, clockwise from top, Belinda Carlisle, Kathy Valentine, Charlotte Caffey, and Gina Schock in Soundmixers Studios

Freeman, who engineered as well as co-produced the album, is a perfect gentleman, however. He mentions nothing about the musicians being the worse for wear in describing the sessions.

"I believe we went to a rehearsal studio first, so that we could hear them live and get a sense of what the band was capable of," says Freeman, who had also worked with other seminal IRS bands such as The Ramones and Blondie. "We wanted to make this record sound as live and together-as-a-band as possible."

The Go-Go's had been playing out for more than a year, and they had a full slate of great material written for the album, including "We Got the Beat," which had been included on the Stiff EP, and "Our Lips Are Sealed," written by Wiedlin with Specials lead singer Terry Hall. The musicians had developed a romance/friendship during The Go-Go's UK tour, but Hall was not single at the time.

"After we left, he sent Jane a letter about their complicated situation," Carlisle writes. "She set some of the lines from that letter to music, added some lyrics of her own (she's a genius), and voila, she had 'Our Lips Are Sealed.'"

"I was so in love with 'Our Lips Are Sealed,' Wiedlin recalls in the liner notes to the 30th-anniversary edition of *Beauty and the Beat*. "I thought, if they don't like this, it's just gonna kill me. I was very nervous to bring it in to the band, but everyone loved it."

Basic tracking for *Beauty and the Beat* took place at jingle house Penny Lane Studios. "Penny Lane was a wooden room," Freeman recalls of the now-defunct studio. "Wooden floors, wooden walls, wooden ceiling. The ceiling was as high as 16 feet in places; the room was about 25x35 feet. But there were little spaces between the wood slats that covered these surfaces, and the wood was installed on top of [absorptive] insulation. So the room had great acoustics, and it was not too tingly or boxy."

In the main tracking room, Freeman placed drums close to the control room glass, and baffled off guitar and bass amps, creating three-sided structures around the guitar cabinets and an enclosed tunnel-like setup around Valentine's bass amp.

"The guitars were baffled, but left open enough so that their sound bounced off the walls and came around front of the ambient drum mics," explains Freeman. "That created just enough leakage to give the guitars an open-room sound on top of the control I had on the tracks, which came from a close dynamic mic, right on the amp, as well as a condenser mic back about four to six feet. The mics captured the main guitar sound, but when you brought the drum sound up, it would get some guitar in it, and that really opened things up.

"You can hear that leakage in the intro to 'Our Lips Are Sealed.' The guitar that's strumming is on the right speaker, but in the left you'll hear the leakage; to me, it's beautiful."

Bass was captured with a large-diaphragm mic, placed four to five feet from the cabinet, and a DI. All of this gave Freeman the opportunity to use one input or another on a given instrument, or combine the two.

Penny Lane's control room was equipped with a Trident TSM console and a 24-track Otari MTR90 2-inch machine. Freeman remembers few of the exact mics that were used during basic tracking, but he does recall that Carlisle sang into a Neumann U47. "They had a good assortment of very useful mics: U87s, a wealth of them; Sennheiser 421s, the black teardrop mics," he says. "Those were used largely on drums. They had an AKG D12 ribbon that we used in the bass drum. There were a lot of dynamic mics around the drums, and then overhead I believe we used a couple of nice Neuman pencil mics—possibly KM56s. I used top mics only on snare, hi-hat and each of the toms, and these would tend to be close dynamic mics—probably Sennheiser 421s or 441s. The drum setup probably entailed 6 or 7 tracks, and I would have a lot of fun compressing and doing other stuff with [during the mix]."

During tracking, Freeman says he used just a little compression—probably via the studio's UREI 1176s and/or LA2As, but little or no EQ, as he preferred to keep things as dynamic as possible.

Though Freeman would have been happy to take the project from start to finish at Penny Lane, a scheduling conflict forced the group to move over to the multi-room Soundmixers Studios after about a week. "By the time we left Penny Lane, we had done all of the basic tracks and an initial round of overdubs, which



Rob Freeman at the MCI 500 series in Soundmixers with Charlotte Caffey and Gina Schock

included most of the lead vocals,” Freeman recalls. “But we had not yet recorded any backing vocals or Jane’s wonderful bridge on ‘Our Lips Are Sealed.’”

At Soundmixers, Freeman recorded overdubs to an MCI tape machine via an MCI 500 Series board. “The studio they put us in had a sort of 70s attitude about it,” he says. “It had a lot of carpeting and was acoustically deadened. But they had a powder room down the hall with a big open area in the front of it with lots of mirrors. We ran wires down the hall, about 30 feet, and recorded vocal lines in there—handclaps, percussion, even guitar overdubs.”

After several days at Soundmixers, however, they all had to decamp again, this time to Record Plant Studio B, where a full day was devoted to final overdubs for “Our Lips Are Sealed”: shakers, tambourines, handclaps, keyboard touches.

And at the end of that day, Freeman worked up a rough mix of the song. “It was two in the morning, and we were just ending the session, and it was feeling pretty damn good,” he says. “So, I said to myself, let me just take a rough mix tonight—tuck everything in so it all sat nice. I really liked the mix I did, but something was a little off toward the very end of it, so I said, ‘Let’s roll back and do it again.’ Then I cut together the front half of the first mix with—from somewhere in the bridge, the ‘Hush my darling’ part—the second half of the second mix. And that became the hit single. It was done in 10 minutes—two mixes and the edit.

“From there, we went back to Soundmixers,” Freeman continues. “We tried to remix the song as part of the final album mix, figuring that what I did at two in the morning for 10 minutes was supposed to be a rough, but nothing came close. Where was the magic? The magic was in the moment; the magic was in the Record Plant EMT reverb plates; the magic was in the Record Plant API console. In fact, after a couple of days, we went back to Record Plant [Studio C] and mixed the rest of the album there in 30 hours, using that ‘rough’ as our benchmark.”



“Our Lips Are Sealed” became a Top 10 single, on a double-Platinum album—a great success for Freeman, whose career also included working with Twisted Sister, KISS and Abba, as well as The Go-Go’s, Ramones, Blondie, etc. However, he eventually shifted into sound-for-picture work, becoming a production sound mixer for films, documentaries, commercials and TV. At press time, he was busy on A&E’s series *The Glades*.

The Go-Go’s, of course, became pop-punk superstars; they’ve disbanded and re-formed a few times over the years, but are now on tour, celebrating the 30th anniversary of *Beauty and the Beat*.