

THE STORY OF THE B-52s

NEON SIDE OF TOWN

Scott Creney & Brigitte Adair Herron



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Ricky Wilson and Jeremy Ayers, and
to our child, Noam Russell Crenery.*

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allowed us to access nearly every article ever written about the band, as well as archives of fan-club-only interviews where the band talked more openly about their music and career than they typically do in on-the-record interviews. We also want to express our deep appreciation to the employees of the UGA Special Collections Library for their generosity and vast knowledge about the radical history of Athens.

Rather than being seen as the definitive story of the B-52s, we hope this is one of many more to come. The B-52s, both the band as a whole and the individuals within, contain multitudes. And as with rock luminaries like Prince or Bob Dylan, there is space for many different perspectives about their lives and their art, as well as illuminating stories about the band that have yet to be told. Knowing this would likely be the first critical biography of the B-52s, we have tried to be as objective and respectful as possible. This meant editing out moments when our irreverence veered into outright cynicism. It also meant limiting our discussion about the band's personal lives to what was already in the public record, irrespective of what we may have been told in interviews or stories people in Athens told us while we were writing the book.

Any one of these chapters could easily be expanded into its own book. It's impossible to tell the story of the B-52s without discussing the AIDS epidemic, the University of Georgia art department, or the late 70s/early 80s New York City art-and-music scene, among other subjects, but it's even more impossible to do justice to the depth and beauty of those stories in a book about the B-52s. We urge anyone interested to explore and document the history of these subjects further.

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Scott Creney is the author of the poetry collection *Nation Full of Caesars* and the work of creative nonfiction *Dear Al-Qaeda: Letters to the World's Most Notorious Terror Organization*, which was a Small Press Distribution bestseller. They graduated from Emerson College in Boston, MA with a BFA in Writing, Literature, and Publishing, during which time they toured the US reading original poetry with the Guerilla Poets, who produced a collection entitled *Speak These Words: A Guerilla Poets Anthology*. They have written about music, books, and film for *Clash Music*, *The Fanzine*, *Collapse Board*, and *Ablaze!*, among others. They contributed six chapters to *101 Albums You Should Die Before You Hear* (Ed. by Everett True). Scott was also the bass player for the Athens band, Tunabunny, who released five critically acclaimed albums before going on hiatus in 2017. Most recently, Scott collaborated with Brigitte Adair Herron on “You Won’t Find It Online: Entering the Archives to Tell the Story of the B-52s,” a chapter in *Exploring the Archives: A Beginner’s Guide for Qualitative Researchers* (2022), which was a 2021 Society of Professors of Education Outstanding Book Award winner.

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Society of Professors of Education Outstanding Book Award. She has authored numerous book chapters in edited volumes on qualitative interviewing, and articles in the journals *Cultural Studies* <=> *Critical Methodologies* and *LEARNIng Landscapes*. Her writing on music has been featured in the book *101 Albums You Should Die Before You Hear* and on the websites *Collapse Board*, *Vice*, and *Eldredge Atlanta*. She is a multi-instrumentalist with a long history in the Athens music scene, including her work most recently as a guitarist, singer, and songwriter in the Athens bands Tunabunny and Mesmerized by Avon.



CHAPTER 1

Neon

I think we were original and each of us and our personalities coming together It was like alchemy and it propelled us into the future for a long time to come.¹

—Cindy

They began in 1976 as five friends playing music in the small college town of Athens, Georgia, looking for a way to have fun. Before they became the B-52s, Ricky Wilson, Cindy Wilson, Fred Schneider, Kate Pierson, and Keith Strickland were five smart, charismatic individuals who knew how to make an impression. One night they decided to play some music together—as an experiment, as a lark—and something incredible happened. Call it magic, call it chemistry, call it luck, but as the B-52s, they transformed into something larger than life. The band played a show at a friend’s party, and the people there lost their minds. The size of the audience has continued to change over the years, but the effect has somehow remained the same.

The band encouraged people to believe in themselves. The subsequent Athens music scene is unimaginable without the B-52s. Their arrival in New York City in December of 1977 profoundly influenced the next several years of music and art to come out of that city. Critic Michael Azerrad wrote that listeners “took the band’s very existence as permission to break out of the mainstream-music rut; from there, some of them broke out of

mainstream ruts of all kinds.”² The B-52s have made the world a brighter and more spectacular place. To borrow a line from their song *Wig*, everywhere they go has become “the neon side of town.”

Neon is incandescent. Neon is modern and futuristic. Neon is maximum intensity. Neon is the quality of light produced by stars, and neon illuminates the illicit areas of cities around the world. Neon is rarely found on earth. Neon produces an unmistakable reddish-orange light. Sometimes neon is purple. In Miami, neon is almost always pink and often in the shape of a flamingo. Neon is a gas; neon is a noble gas. T Rex said life is a gas. Neon light became popular because it was impossible to ignore. Neon light has no stable compounds.

With the exception of that flamingo in Miami, the B-52s are all of these things. And because the band itself is unstable and always in flux, any attempt to define them in a single sentence or paragraph has fallen short of encompassing the totality of the B-52s.

The neon light on the surface of the B-52s’ music can sometimes shine so brightly that it obscures the darkness that lies at the heart of most of their music. The band wrote plenty of serious songs—songs about danger and paranoia, about poverty and the environment, about loneliness and spiritual emptiness—yet too many critics have only noticed the band’s more lightweight qualities. Greil Marcus wrote in 1990 that they’d “never be more than a decent joke.”³ Longtime *Village Voice* music editor and self-proclaimed “Dean of American Rock Critics” Robert Christgau damned the band with faint praise in 1980 when he called them “the world’s greatest new-wave kiddie-novelty disco-punk band.”⁴ J.D. Considine, appraising the band’s career in the 1992 edition of *Rolling Stone Album Guide*, rated none of their albums higher than 3.5 stars—and most of them 2.5 or less—dismissing them as “a party band in the truest sense of the term.”⁵

It isn’t just male critics who have slighted the band. In 1997, *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock* was written to “gather in one place the numerous and varied talents and achievements of women,” and extended all the way back to Mamie Smith and Ma Rainey. Despite this, the book only devoted a single paragraph to the women in the B-52s, and mostly just talked about their clothes. It reduced their music to “carnavalesque keyboard playing,” “impressions of sea creatures,” and “a virtually unintelligible rendition of the amazing line, ‘Why won’t you dance with me? I’m not no limburger!’”^{6,7} The writer didn’t mention Kate or Cindy by name, referring to them simply as “the female vocalists.” Yet,

Cindy and Kate each have their own distinct singing and writing styles. Their voices are easily discernible, and it's as interesting to analyze their similarities and differences—as singers and songwriters—as it is to parse out the dynamics in other rock partnerships like Lennon and McCartney, Mould and Hart, or Foster and McClellan.⁸

Billing themselves as “a tacky little dance band from Athens, Georgia,” or “the world’s greatest party band,” has invited people to underestimate the B-52s, even as they’ve said those things with a wink, and with more than a touch of false humility. But this needs to be stated clearly: the B-52s are one of the most unique popular bands in the history of rock and roll. Unfortunately, this uniqueness is so evident that it has come to define the band at the expense of their music, and ultimately, their place in the rock canon. Almost from the beginning of their career, the band’s image (and subsequently, their music) has been reduced by critics, and some fans, to that of camp thrift store party cartoons. While those qualities certainly exist, they only make up a fraction of the band’s aesthetic, to say nothing of their music. The B-52s didn’t dress in costumes. They weren’t Kiss, or Devo. Countless onstage photos and videos exist from the band’s creative peak, 1978–1981, where Kate and Cindy aren’t wearing wigs. The B-52s have worn whatever they felt whenever they felt like it. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems critics mistook the band’s remarkable style for a uniform. Even worse, this emphasis on their clothes and style has almost always been examined on a surface level. This is unfortunate because even the B-52s’ idiosyncrasies have clear antecedents in rock history. If anything, dressing up for the stage should include them in the rock canon, not exclude them.

But then the rock canon, with its endless lists and its absurdly Boomer-centric hall of fame, has never been fair. While this book’s authors see the rock canon as something that should be expanded, if not outright exploded, we see the exclusion of the B-52s from that canon to be absurd, not just by our standards, but by its own.

Because no matter how original and different they were, the B-52s were also a great rock band in the conventional sense, with an abundance of strengths. They had one of the most original guitarists of his generation. They had three people fronting the band, one who wrote strange and subversive lyrics delivered in a voice that could go from playful to angry with no warning, another who sang in a soulful mix of Dusty Springfield and Bobbie Gentry,⁹ and yet another who could hit incredible soprano high notes while playing two keyboards at once. They could harmonize

like the girl groups, and shout like the avant-garde. All of this while being backed by a drummer who hit so hard that, 35 years later, he was the first thing their tour manager in the early 80s remembered about the band's live shows.¹⁰

Contrary to most conventional wisdom, the B-52s were a band that could, by anyone's definition, just flat-out rock. Songs like *Strobe Light*, *52 Girls*, *Wig*, or *Rock Lobster* are driven by a relentless ferocity. Listen to the conviction and sheer anguish in Cindy's voice when she sings *Give Me Back My Man* or *Hero Worship*. Hear Fred's full-throated screams in *Channel Z*. Listen to Kate's ascending repetition of "fire!" in *Wig*. The ending of *Private Idaho* walks it home harder than any Southern rock of the 1970s, harder than Skynyrd, and harder than the Allmans.

The B-52s' music is rooted in a particularly Southern version of rock, one influenced by the ecstatic transcendence of gospel and the fierce abandon of early rock and roll. Both of these genres also placed an emphasis on visual expression and flamboyance. For all that sets them apart, the B-52s played with a passion that embodies the very nature of rock and roll, from Little Richard through Prince (a man who was known to whip out the *Rock Lobster* riff in concert).

With their cheap clothes and even cheaper musical equipment, the B-52s were astute practitioners of the time-honored Southern tradition of making do with limited means. When a string broke on Ricky Wilson's guitar, he just learned to play without it. In the process, he developed a method of playing that involved unusual tunings and missing strings that became its own style. Without the two middle guitar strings in the way, he found he was able to switch from playing rhythm parts on the two thicker top strings to playing lead parts on the two bottom strings faster, and with more force, than he could have done otherwise. The intricacy of his playing on *Private Idaho* is almost impossible to recreate on a properly strung guitar.

Like much of the band's early music, Ricky's guitar style challenged assumptions about skill and ability, as well as genius and amateurishness. There's a common idiomatic phrase use by Southerners, both Black and white alike, about "making a dollar out of 15 cents." In a 1997 essay on the nature of coolness, Donnell Alexander explained how coolness was about "living on the cusp, on the periphery, diving for scraps ... being outside looking in." The B-52s, as a band that contained gay men and strong, liberated women living in the South, had plenty of experience as outsiders. Alexander also noted how limited resources could force people

to improvise, and in the process come up with something new, that is, something cool:

The real secret weapon of cool is that it's about synthesis. Just about every important black cultural invention of this century has been about synthesizing elements previously considered antithetical. MLK merged Eastern thought and cotton-field religious faith into the civil rights movement. Chuck Berry merged blues and country music into rock 'n' roll. Michael Jordan incorporated the old school ball of Jerry West into his black game. Talk about making a dollar out of 15 cents.¹¹

Though Alexander emphasizes the Black experience, this approach has been utilized by poor Southerners from all backgrounds. And while there's a big difference between slave cooks fashioning delicious food from the scraps given to them by white plantation owners and a kid learning to play guitar in his bedroom, Ricky's resourcefulness and capacity for improvisation echoes this tradition. "In the beginning," he explained, "I kept breaking strings. I couldn't afford to keep replacing them all the time so I just wrote songs like that."¹²

Critics initially praised the B-52s for what they saw as an ironic or retro sensibility, but their presentation was rooted in something far more practical. Fred explained the band's approach at length in a 1993 interview:

The reason people thought we were trying to revive the sixties was because we had no money and all the instruments were whatever Keith and Ricky had. A Sears guitar and a cheap drum kit. So people thought we wanted to be [60s surf rock band] the Ventures. We liked the Ventures, but it just so happened that was the only guitar Ricky had.¹³

The band's poverty was real enough that, according to Kate, when the band first started getting written about in New York, "We couldn't afford to buy the magazines. We'd buy one copy and share it."¹⁴ This same impulse also fueled the band's outlandish stage costumes, which were found by digging through the thrift shops and department stores of downtown Athens. The B-52s' "trash aesthetic" that people talk about is more rooted in the culture of the South than in John Waters movies. Virginia native Missy Elliott's use of garbage bags and mirrors in her video for *The Rain* (*Supa Dupa Fly*) resembles the impulse that had Kate and Cindy putting pocketbooks on their heads and calling them wigs. Elliott talked about her iconic outfit in a 2017 interview. "To me, the outfit was a way

to mask my shyness behind all the chaos of the look.... The outfit was a symbol of power.¹⁵ The B-52s also used dressing-up as a way to get out from under their self-consciousness. Despite their reputation as a party band, Ricky and Cindy spent most of their first New York show hiding from the audience.

There's an inherent form of protest in trash art. Consider the double meaning of the word *refuse* (noun, accent on the first syllable) and *refuse* (the verb, with an accent on the second). Being excluded from mainstream society, whether through deliberate choice or being excluded by others, can give you a different perspective on that society. What mass culture deems treasure can start to look like trash, and what the culture deems trash can start to look like treasure. Seen in this light, trash art functions as a rejection of mainstream values, while also being a statement about one's alienation from those values, and a refusal to conform.

With their second-hand clothes, cheap guitars, and minimalist instrumentation, the early B-52s weren't just being different, they were making a statement.

SPACE AGE

The B-52s sang a lot about outer space in their lyrics. While this is often depicted as one more example of the band's silliness, their portrayal of space as a place of freedom, where earth's rules no longer apply, is similar to the interplanetary vision exhibited by Sun Ra and George Clinton. Both men, along with writer Octavia Butler, are considered the progenitors of an aesthetic later dubbed Afrofuturism—defined, in the first dictionary we reached for, as

a cultural movement that uses the frame of science fiction and fantasy to reimagine the history of the African diaspora and to invoke a vision of a technically advanced and generally hopeful future in which black people thrive: this movement is expressed through art, cinema, literature, music, fashion, etc.¹⁶

One can argue the B-52s perform a similar reimagining, only through a queer and feminist lens. The B-52s were fans of both Clinton and Sun Ra, as well as other Afrofuturist touchstones like *Star Trek* and Jimi Hendrix, long before they started the band. According to Sun Ra's biographer, the B-52s saw Ra's Arkestra "every night when they first came to

New York.¹⁷ While there, they would have seen the bandleader direct a chant that sounds like it could have come from a B-52s song: *If you find earth boring / Just the same old same thing / Sign up for Outer Spaceways Incorporated.*¹⁸

Afrofuturist artists have presented themselves as being from outer space as a way to convey their (literal) alienation due to the racism of mainstream US society. In doing so, they took the otherness forced on them, and re-contextualized that otherness as a strength. Dressing outlandishly, and presenting one's self from outer space, was a grasp for personal and creative freedom, as well as a way to find protection in a dangerous and violent world. In his 1998 biography of Sun Ra, John F. Szwed called Sun Ra's depiction of space "both a metaphor of exclusion and of reterritorialization."¹⁹ The members of the B-52s, all dealing with their own brands of otherness, likely had similar motivations.

In her overview of Afrofuturism, Ytasha L. Womack asserted the hidden depth that can be found in outlandish clothes and songs about planets:

The space theme was more than just a kooky gimmick to play off the space age, more than an eyebrow-raising marketing ploy. The colorful, albeit shiny, costumes served as a visual tool to stimulate higher thinking and to prepare audiences for something new.²⁰

Biographer Paul Youngquist describes Sun Ra's Arkestra in words that apply just as well to the B-52s when he describes "a group of intellectuals and crack musicians ... womping up an alternative space program from the cultural detritus of the Space Age."²¹

None of this is to claim that the B-52s were Afrofuturists, or to equate one struggle to another. Rather, the comparison is made to suggest there is deeper meaning to be found in an aspect of the B-52s' aesthetic that is usually dismissed as mere fashion, or a goofy joke.

PARTY POLITICS

If the B-52s must be classified as a party band, then they are the sound of a party that is desperate and exploding. If they are a dance band, then they are a dance band that makes you dance relentlessly, a band that, at their peak, has made people shake the boards and strain the balconies of concert venues.

The problem has come when listeners and critics have defined them as *just* a party band, implying the band's music is somehow frivolous or shallow. For some of us, a truly great party is the closest thing to freedom we will ever experience. A party can be an expression of people's subconscious desire for revolution and anarchy. In a world still plagued by heteronormativity, consumerism, and conservatism, the B-52s' celebration of weirdness, chaos, and fun is a type of liberation, and liberation is always political.

B-52s songs often take place in liminal spaces, which cultural anthropologist Victor Turner called "an interstructural phase in social dynamics."²² Whether it was a beach party, a nude beach, outer space, a shack out in the country, or just a chemically assisted detour through your mind, in B-52s songs these places become settings where societal norms, particularly stifling ones, become irrelevant. As Turner explained, people in these conditions, "have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them from their fellows. Their condition is ... the very prototype of sacred poverty."²³ In the liminal spaces the B-52s sing about, everyone is welcome, and most importantly, admission is always free.

The B-52s understood the danger in being different, and so personal politics are everywhere in their music, and many of their songs tackle issue-based politics directly, with songs about environmentalism (Channel Z), vegetarianism (Juicy Jungle), animal liberation (Quiche Lorraine), and bigotry (Bad Influence). Fred stated this directly in a 2018 interview:

We were really pretty political as a band. Rather than clothes and wigs and stuff, I'd rather talk about politics, and I know the others do too, because it's more important, what's going on in the world.²⁴

The B-52s disrupted social norms, to say nothing of rock and roll norms, simply by walking onto a stage. A band with gay men, plus women who played guitars, keyboards, and bongos, was a radical concept in rock and roll in the late 70s—in many respects it still is. Their artistic and public identities were acts of rebellion against every orthodoxy you can imagine—cultural, political, social, et al. Even their well-documented Yoko Ono influence was, in the context of its time, an act of heresy in the rock world, a place where Ono's music, if not her entire existence, was considered a joke. The fact that the B-52s were still able to carve out a place for themselves—in the world, on the radio, in popular culture—can only be seen as an act of courage.

Through their music and style, the B-52s exploded conventional notions of gender and sexuality. Their lyrics discussed sex in ways rarely sang about in rock up to that point; it was playful, it was freaky, and the sex was always consensual. That they could be so disruptive, while at the same time making music that sold in the millions, is a testament to their genius. This duality, this ability to be simultaneously confrontational and accessible, strange and familiar, avant-garde and mainstream, is unusual in rock music. The B-52s have never made a record as challenging as *White Light/White Heat*, or as commercial as *Forever Your Girl*, yet they are a band that can be enjoyed by fans of both.

FLUIDITY POLITICS

In the B-52s' universe, everything—identity, sexuality, clothes, setting—is always in flux. Even the band's name is fluid. In 2008, the apostrophe was removed from the band's name, for reasons that have never been fully explained.²⁵ We have chosen to write the band's name as “the B-52s,” since that is what they currently call themselves. However, the correct placement of the hyphen and apostrophe has proven to be a challenge for journalists throughout the band's career, something the change in 2008 only amplified. When quoting articles, we have left the band's name written the way it appeared in the original source material, as a tribute to their fluidity. We have also chosen to write the title of the band's first album as *The B-52's*, since that's what it says on the cover.

The band's fluidity is subversive because it pushes back against the idea that society and identity have to be static, that the way we live is the natural order of things. When people call the B-52s' music empowering, this is what they are talking about. The celebration of fluidity and arbitrariness, of the dissolution of borders, runs all through their music. The band may have never written a protest song in the manner of Woody Guthrie or early Bob Dylan, but Rock Lobster is, with its boys in bikinis and girls in surfboards, every bit as political. Ways of living that seem fixed to us suddenly become unmoored, and people who would normally feel excluded or marginalized are now included. They are made to feel that they, and their experiences, count. This inclusiveness is a big reason for the deep fandom and love people have for the B-52s.

There's a Moon in the Sky (Called the Moon), from the B-52s' self-titled debut album, makes this ethos plain when Fred sings, *If you're in outer space / don't feel out of place / cause there are thousands of others like*

you. The lines celebrate an unabashed inclusivity—for anyone, whether they be gay, straight, pansexual, weird, clean-cut, loud, or quiet. As he continues to sing the line, Fred switches “like” from a preposition to a verb, reassuring the listener, now nearly screaming, that “others *like* you.” The message is that you—whoever you are, however you identify—are accepted. You are cared for. As Fred said in a 1980 interview, “Some people write all love songs. Some people write ‘life on the road songs.’ We just write ‘life in different space’ songs.”²⁶

The choices the B-52s made about how to present themselves has changed lives, and in some cases even saved lives. Their music has functioned as a beacon, not just for people struggling with their sexuality, but for anyone who has ever felt like an outsider. Even if you were trapped in your bedroom, or a small town where nobody understood you—or maybe where they understood you all too well—their records made people feel less alone.

The B-52s’ fluidity is a main source of their creative power. Unlike bands guided by a single songwriter, or an egomaniacal frontperson, the B-52s function more like an anarchic collective. Their music is an outgrowth of what each individual band member brings to it. Songwriting consists of lengthy collaborations, long improvisations that are later revisited in search of something that can be developed into a song. Keith explained the process in a 1990 interview:

Collective subconscious really comes into play when everyone’s improvising. Cause not one person is conceiving of this whole thing. It’s coming from five—in the beginning, five different points of view. There’s really no leader of the group, because we were a bunch of friends first, then we started the band. It would have been odd if all of a sudden someone had said, “Well, I’m the leader,” or, “You be the leader.” Friends don’t do that. You all work together.²⁷

Imagine the potential combinations five creative, free-spirited people are capable of forming, and you understand why attempts to narrowly define the band as “camp” or “retro” or “new wave,” or even “political,” feel so inadequate. Maybe the reason the band has never been properly defined is because no simple definition exists. It’s no accident that Mats Sexton, someone who deeply immersed himself into the world of the B-52s, titled his 2002 book about the band, *The B-52’s Universe*, as opposed to *The B-52’s World*, or even *The B-52’s Galaxy*.

Listening to all their albums in sequence, over the course of a day, one is struck by the stylistic breadth and emotional depth of their work. Because their music has always been a reflection of the people making it, there's an honesty at the heart of the B-52s that you can hear in everything they have ever recorded. Even less critically acclaimed albums like *Whammy!* and *Bouncing Off the Satellites* reward close listening. During this period, relationships within the band were fractured and complex, and so the music from this time is also fractured and complex. Feelings of depression, exhaustion, and confusion underpin many of the songs on these albums.

Ultimately, the B-52s' music communicates that all humans are unique and deserve a life of freedom. Many of their songs attempt to carve out new possibilities toward this utopian vision, most clearly on the *Cosmic Thing* track Topaz when Kate, Fred and Cindy sing, *Our hearts are traveling faster / Faster than the speed of love / Straight through a tear in the clouds / Up to the heavens above/ Our universe is expanding*. Their music has made the world a better place and filled it with an endless spectrum of color. The B-52s have made the world more incandescent; they have made the world more neon.

And so, we arrive at the end of this chapter in the same place where we began, on the neon side of town. Because even a planet as wild as this one still travels in a circle.

The energy of the universe must remain in balance. And so, because this story is oftentimes hilarious, it is also accompanied by tragedy. Because it is a story about people overflowing with life, it also contains a story of death. And because it is a story about failure and losing yourself, it is ultimately a story about victory and finding one's place in the world.

This is the story of the B-52s.

NOTES

1. Echazabal, "Change is Good."
2. Azerrad, Liner notes, R2 78357." Azerrad also mentions artists influenced by B-52s, including Bjork, Deee-Lite, Beat Happening, Chicks on Speed, Sleater-Kinney, Dave Grohl and "literally thousands of other bands."
3. Marcus, *Real Life Rock*, 59.
4. Christgau, *Christgau's Record Guide*, 54.
5. Considine, "The B-52s," 56.
6. Dibbell, "Women and Punk," 286.

7. By comparison, Me'Shell Ndegecello, Selena, and Laura Nyro, all received their own chapters, about a half-dozen pages each. The use of the word "unintelligible" is confusing, as the line is not only clearly enunciated, but is delivered with enough force to knock over a small houseplant.
8. The latter two were songwriting teams/factions in Husker Du and the Go-Betweens, respectively, and despite their bands being far less commercially successful than the B-52s, have seen their styles compared and contrasted in biographies about their bands.
9. In a 2022 interview, Keith Strickland said of her voice, "Cindy's voice can be beautiful, but it has a primal quality at the same time. I used to tell Ricky she reminds me of John Lennon."
10. Matthew Murphy in conversation with authors, May 28, 2019.
11. Alexander, "Black People Cooler," 50.
12. Lloyd, "B-52s," 37.
13. The B-52s' United Fans Organization (UFO) Issue #10.
14. Tannenbaum, "The B-52s Say Farewell," AR-14. The article still added an apostrophe to the band's name.
15. Ghansah, "Watching the Stars," <https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/a44891/missy-elliott-june-2017-elle-cover-story/>.
16. "Afrofuturism," [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com/browse/afrofuturism), accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/afrofuturism>.
17. Gross, "Sun Ra."
18. Moody, "The radical jazz activist."
19. Szwed, *Space Is the Place*, 140.
20. Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 58.
21. Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 140.
22. Turner, "Betwixt and Between," 98–99.
23. Ibid.
24. Greenblatt, "The B-52s: The Stories."
25. There is a Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/LogoDeface/>, dedicated to the missing apostrophe.
26. Isler, "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," 24.
27. Schoemer, "Beehives and Ballyhoo," 43.



CHAPTER 2

Athens: Pre-52s

We felt like outsiders, you know, and so this whole scene kind of empowered us. We could be ourselves, so to speak.¹

—Keith

The town the B-52s came from was every bit as unique as the band itself. Don't believe the story that Athens was a sleepy college town with nothing going on until five misfits woke it up. When the B-52s played their first show in 1977, they weren't the first incredible thing to happen in Athens. They were simply the latest in a long line of radical acts.

It took a while to develop, though. Jim Herbert would become one of the most acclaimed, as well as transgressive, artists in Athens history, and would go on to make videos for both R.E.M. and the B-52s. But when he arrived in 1962 to teach art at the University of Georgia, he recalls, "On the weekends, the campus completely cleared out. Nobody stuck around."²

Herbert had missed the turmoil that took place on campus a year earlier. After a federal court decision, UGA became the first Southern university to desegregate, admitting its first Black undergraduate students, Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton E. Holmes. The pair were met with hatred and vitriol from the white student population, and their presence on campus provoked demonstrations, and a near-riot outside Hunter's dormitory. Harassment of Black students and faculty would continue openly for the next several decades. UGA wouldn't hire a Black faculty

member until 1968, and wouldn't see a Black football player take the field until 1971. A Black student who graduated in 1976 recalled the university at that time as "an environment that if you were an African-American walking down the street in the spring and all of the windows were open, you would hear the ringing of ["n----r"] as you walked down the sidewalk."³ In 1987, a Black professor could find himself mistaken for a janitor, as Robert Pratt did after he became the first Black professor in the history department and a colleague asked him to change the toilet paper.⁴

The process of desegregation in Athens was marked with ugly tragedy and violence. On July 11, 1964, Washington D.C. resident Lemuel Penn was murdered by three Klansmen who lived in Athens.⁵ In 2006, the Georgia Historical Society, Lemuel Penn Memorial Committee, and Colbert Grove Baptist Church erected a marker on the spot where Penn was killed. The text reads as follows:

On the night of July 11, 1964 three African-American World War II veterans returning home following training at Ft. Benning, Georgia were noticed in Athens by local members of the Ku Klux Klan. The officers were followed to the nearby Broad River Bridge where their pursuers fired into the vehicle, killing Lt. Col. Lemuel Penn. When a local jury failed to convict the suspects of murder, the federal government successfully prosecuted the men for violations under the new Civil Rights Act of 1964, passed just nine days before Penn's murder. The case was instrumental in the creation of a Justice Department task force whose work culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1968.⁶

While the racism in Athens was typical of the rest of the South (and persists in new and old ways to this day), a politically progressive culture of protest and liberation rose up in Athens around this time.

There wasn't much of a music scene during the 60s and 70s, but the University of Georgia was on fire. In some instances, literally. Vietnam War protesters tried to burn down the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) building on five separate occasions between 1969 and 1972. The incident at UGA on February 10, 1969, was only the second case of arson involving a campus ROTC building in the entire country.⁷ In August 1970, one student even threw a Molotov cocktail into the building.

Other Southern universities had chapters of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), but UGA's chapter went to greater extremes, going so far as to stage an "Anti-Military Ball" three years in a row.

In 1967, members of SDS also helped successfully integrate a popular off-campus bar for students. The group then began “peace vigils” in 1968, openly demonstrating against the war. During one protest, anti-war demonstrators covered the ROTC building in graffiti, spray-painting the memorable slogan “Che Lives.”⁸

On April 10, 1968, several hundred students participated in the “March for Co-Ed Equality,” a protest organized by SDS demanding an end to gender-based discrimination. The students occupied an administration building for three days. Two weeks later, the student body overwhelmingly voted to eliminate the separate set of rules that existed for women students, and it was approved by the university in July. A *New York Times* article that month referred to UGA as “one of the most liberal universities in the South on student privileges.”⁹

In 1968, Robert Croker joined Jim Herbert as a teacher in the art school. They had been recruited by Lamar Dodd, a Georgia native who had spent time studying in New York City. He returned to the South in 1937 when UGA hired him as an artist in residence. The following year he was appointed head of the art department, a position he would retain through 1972. When the art department received increased funding in the 1960s, Dodd used his position to hire a series of radical teachers who would serve as mentors and catalysts for a burgeoning creative scene, one that encompassed visual arts, sculpture, film, and ultimately music. In his article “Why Athens?” sociologist Arthur Jipson wrote, “This art community was clearly (and visibly) distinguishable from the remainder of the community through their party behavior, adventurous lifestyle, and artistic and fashionable dress and demeanor.”¹⁰

One of the most radical hires was William D. “Bill” Paul, who became the director of the Georgia Museum of Art (GMOA) in 1967. “I thought our job was to supply questions,” says Paul, “and students could find the answers, aesthetic answers. And my other charge, I thought, was to give the art museum a physical, national presence. And we really did that.” The first exhibition Paul curated was titled “The Visual Assault,” and featured NYC artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, among others. According to Paul, “It got press as the largest show of contemporary art ever held in the Southeast, so we started with a good time.”¹¹ A year later, the museum put together an exhibition titled “American Painting: the 1960’s.” It included work from Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Cy Twombly, as well as Warhol’s famous Campbell Soup Can and Marilyn paintings. When the B-52s—a band that has received its share of pop art