

Pat Benatar: Top Voice Takes Her To The Top 10

-Lynn Van Matre

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She may be the tiniest of challengers in the rock arena, but Pat Benatar is also one of the most formidable. She's the hottest among rock's singing sisters, and her second album, "Crimes of Passion," is one of the Top 10 best-selling in the country.

"It's the old story," says Pat Benatar with a shrug. "You've got these stereotypes, and people are afraid to break molds, and they don't know where to put you – so they put you in the most obvious category. You're either the Emmylou Harris type, real sweet and laid back, or you're the cold and bitchy type, or you're a sex object. Unfortunately, if you've got any looks at all, that's where you get put. Into the sex object category. Immediately."

The last pronouncement is delivered with a shake of her head, where a mop of curls recently gave way to a close cropped pixie cut that is soon to be shorn even shorter. It's Benatar's free afternoon in Chicago during a recent stopoff for a couple of concerts at Park West, and the singer's spending it washing a couple of pairs of jeans in the Holiday Inn's coin-op machines, doing an interview, and getting another haircut.

"I figured that short hair would seem less cheesecake than curly hair," says Benatar, "but it doesn't seem to be working. Maybe I should shave my head or something. I'm trying to do what I can from my end. The main point is that I want people to concentrate on my music."

At 27, standing 5 feet tall and weighing in at 90 pounds, the Brooklyn-born Benatar may be one of the tiniest of challengers in the rock arena, but she is also one of the most formidable. In terms of tone and technique, she possesses the finest voice afloat in the current new wave of women fronting male rock bands, a classically trained, multi-octave soprano at one time considered far more suited to Puccini than pop. "A few people have even criticized me for having too good a voice," she says. "They say it's too clean for rock and roll." She is also one of the hottest things going at the moment with a Top 10 album and the potential to outsell most of her singing sisters.



Bypassing the “Betty Boop” image of Blondie's Deborah Harry, not as tough as Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders, unwilling to play the doormat role Linda Ronstadt reels in, yet unwilling to come on as anything less than 100 per cent female, Benatar is most interested in working rock's middle ground. So far, her approach – strong but not overly aggressive, singing songs that could be done by a man as well as a woman – has met with striking success. Her late 1979 debut album, “In the Heat of the Night,” produced a pair of hit singles (“Heartbreaker,” “We Live For Love”) and soon sold the 500,000 copies required to be certified “gold.” The follow up, “Crimes of Passion,” is currently one of the Top 10 best-selling albums in the country, and Benatar is understandably happy....except for that *sex symbol* thing. The sex symbol thing is very much on Benatar's mind at the moment.

Benatar, truth be told, does not look all that much like a sex symbol at all. She is certainly attractive – but in a delicate, gamin sort of way that's a far cry from the tousle-haired, heavily made up version of herself that wears a tight leotard and come-hither look on both of her album covers and a sultry expression in her publicity photos. It's an image that Benatar, who admittedly found useful initially, has tired of and now wants to shed as soon as possible. Haircuts are part of the process. So is the switch from tights to spandex pants for stage wear (still tight, but not *quite* as revealing).

“The sexy image was a good marketing point at first, sure,” she acknowledges. “But I never meant to be overtly sexy. I liked wearing tights because they were comfortable and I didn't have to fuss with them onstage. But I always wore a jacket over my tights. If I'd wanted to be overtly sexy, I'd have worn a skimpy little top. It's all so silly. If you're a woman who wants to look good but doesn't want to come on overtly sexual, it can be a real problem finding something to wear that falls in between.”

“And I certainly don't want to come on androgynous. All I'm trying to do, really, is show another side of what it means to be a woman. Which to me means not being overly aggressive, but having enough strength to walk away from a relationship or a situation that's killing you.”

“I want to be strong, but I also want to remain female. I never wanted to come on sexless, like Patti Smith. That's an easy way out, but I didn't want to look like a boy. I wanted to look like a woman and get past the stereotype of the pretty girl who can sing so that people will pay attention to what you're saying instead of just looking at you.”

Benatar, unlike a lot of her peers, is a relative latecomer to rock. Born Pat Andrzejewski (the name Benatar is from her now dissolved marriage to high school sweetheart Dennis Benatar; she now lives with Neil Geraldo, lead guitarist of her band), she first seemed destined for a more classical career.

“I started singing classical music when I was 14,” recalls Benatar, whose mother once sang in the chorus of the New York City Opera. “I was in training to go to Julliard.”

She never made it; at 19, bored and disenchanted, she quit singing altogether rather than put up with the pesky restrictions vocal training imposed.



“It was like being in ballet or something,” she says. “You couldn't swim unless it was really warm outside because it might effect your voice. You couldn't smoke marijuana because it might hurt your voice. You couldn't stay up late because you might ruin your voice. It was really terrible. So I gave it up and got married.”

After her marriage to Dennis Benatar, she gave college a whirl, studying health education before dropping out. “I hated it,” she explains. Shortly afterwards, Dennis was drafted and stationed at Ft Lee, and Benatar got a job working in a bank, soon to quit.

“Every day I'd sit there and think of ways to steal all that money,” she says, “so I decided I had to get out of there. The only other thing I knew how to do was sing, but I hadn't done that for about three years; so I decided to start low-key.”

Benatar's entry into show business was decidedly ground-level. Switching from Puccini to pop, she landed a job as singing waitress, playing second fiddle to a salad bar in a Hopewell, Virginia, restaurant.

“I did all the cover songs,” Benatar says. “Diana Ross hits, Liza Minnelli songs, usually with potato salad or bleu cheese dressing stains on my outfit. You'd wait on tables until it was your time to go up onstage, then put down whatever you were doing and sing.”

From there, Benatar moved on to lounge bands and copy bands playing the Richmond, Virginia, club circuit. Somewhere along the way – she's not sure exactly just when or how – the idea of a rock and roll band fronted by a woman vocalist began to appeal to her.

“I loved doing rock,” she says, “and I knew that there was something unique about a woman singing it. This was before the whole women-in-rock thing was fashionable, and I knew it would be really difficult to do; but I wanted to try. I remember Linda Ronstadt had just had a big hit then, and I figured that there had to be a way to do what she did, except project a stronger image. I love Linda's voice, but I don't relate to the songs she sings. I'm no a hard woman; I like taking the softer role. But I'm not about to get killed in a relationship. I'd go out nails flying and rip the guy's face out instead.”

Around the time her resolve to rock was crystallizing, Benatar's attention was caught by an article about Catch A Rising Star, a New York City club that regularly featured new talent. Comic Freddie Prinze had just been “discovered” there, and Benatar hoped the club could provide her with a similar

break. In 1975, with her husband's Army hitch over, the couple headed for New York, where she once again worked in a bank - "just long enough to be eligible to collect unemployment" - by day and sang at night. Her audition at Catch netted her a job, and the club's owner later became her manager.

"That was the poorest part of my life," she says. "I worked at Catch every night and sang at weddings and bar mitzvahs, anything to make a buck. But I was meeting a lot of songwriters, and the voice that I sing with now started to evolve. When I started out doing pop, I imitated everyone from Barbra Streisand to Janis Joplin. But when I started doing some songs that nobody had recorded, I stopped imitating singers because there was nobody to imitate. So my other voice and style started to emerge."

"If I've been influenced by anybody now, it's male singers," she adds. "Over the years, I listened to English bands a lot - the Who and Led Zeppelin especially. And in the end, my way of singing turned out to be patterned mostly after people like Roger Daltrey and Robert Plant."

In December of 1978, after months of looking for a label, Benatar and her band landed a contract with Chrysalis Records and began recording their first album, a process that was interrupted briefly when the group decided they'd do better with a new producer. Michael Chapman, well-known for his work with Blondie and a number of other bands, was called in, and "In the Heat of the Night" was released in September or 1979.

"Since then, I've been compared with just about every other woman singer," says Benatar cheerfully. "I don't let it bother me. I've been compared to Ronstadt, for instance, which has no bearing at all. I love her voice, but I don't relate to her songs at all. Debbie Harry and Chrissie Hynde? Oh, I love them. They're both crazy. Chrissie, though, is a little bit to the left of what I do. She's what I think people thought I was like when I began - the real hard, cold kind of woman. I don't know what she's really like because I've never met her, but her songs to me are the really gut-level, stab-him-with-a-knife kind of thing. Chrissie's a brilliant writer and a great singer, but her point of view is harder than mine. As for Debbie, I know her and like her - she's like Betty Boop, man - but I don't know where she stands on things. To me, Debbie's...oh, a pop phenomenon. *She's* the one who's the sex symbol."

"It doesn't really bother me that people tend to lump all of us women rock singers together now," Benatar continues, "because that always happens when there's a new wave of anything. In the end, though, what will happen is that certain people will be left and certain people won't, and then you won't be compared anymore. That's the main thing you're working toward, that longevity. Making it through the phenomenon of it."