

Inside all that spandex and sequins, Pat Benatar is really...

The Girl Next Door

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Being a teen idol is a precarious business, but Pat Benatar – who is this year's undisputed queen or rock 'n' roll – is not worried. She may be selling millions of records and be the No. 1 fantasy for teenage boys. But she is also a scrappy little ex-bank teller from Long Island who still shops at K-Mart.

She has come through this door a thousand times before, but tonight Pat Benatar makes her first entrance. Fresh from a stomping, squealing SRO show at the 42nd Street pier, Benatar sweeps into the clotted confines of Catch A Rising Star, the East Side club where she began her career only five years ago singing as unhip and unfunky a tune as “Bye, Bye, Blackbird.” Benatar's repertoire may have changed since then – how far she has come is evidenced by her portrait gallery and three platinum albums enshrined on the wall – but to her old friends at the bar, she is still the 90-pound weakling with the sledgehammer voice from Lindenhurst, L.I.

“Sorry babe, can't put you on tonight,” purrs the club's comic kingpin, Richard Belzer, who emceed many of Benatar's early shows. Benatar laughs and throws back her fluffy, light-brown shag, as always haloed in a headband. This one is white, matching the space-age miniskirt that makes her look like a cross between Daisy Buchanan and Flash Gordon.

Instantly, she is engulfed by that old gang of hers from her scuffling days. It is a homecoming, and as in all homecomings, there are autographs to sign and babies to kiss. As Benatar scrawls “Keep on Rockin” on a young fan's T-shirt and poses in her sweetest wedding day smile with three matrons from her girlhood in Lindenhurst, all she needs is a Nathan's hot dog to run for mayor.

The crowd propels her into the main room, where starving comics are grazing at a special buffet table laden with fried chicken. The centerpiece of the buffet is a Benatar-sized chocolate cake inscribed with the lettering “Welcome home, Pat.” Such a celebration inevitably calls for your basic reunion portrait, and Benatar obliges. She steps onstage, creating a stampede to get in place and in frame beside her. All of a sudden, it seems – as it always does when the conquering hero returns – everyone wants to take credit for having been at the launch site. The crush is so great that two exasperated young comics stalk off, shaking their heads and wagging their drumsticks. As he passes the portal from the hallowed



cabaret, Gilbert Gottfried looks up at one of the torchy photos that have helped ignite the teen fever that has catapulted Benatar in to her position as the hottest female rock 'n' roll singer in America.

“O, Miss Benatar,” Gottfried intones, extending his hands upward in supplication toward the rock goddess, “teach us the secret of your success before the rest of us all rot here.”



The secret of Pat Benatar's success is really no secret at all: a bombastic sexual call-out to the pubescent that is suggestive when performed by the lynx-like Benatar but is ultimately about as dangerous as an Archie comic book. Still, the mass appeal is undeniable. Benatar, 28, shot up from nowhere in 1979 with “Heartbreaker,” a soaring hard-rocker that carried her debut LP, “In the Heat of the Night,” to platinum status. Her follow-up album also sold more than a million copies. It's single, “Hit Me With Your Best Shot,” became an inescapable fixture on AM radio. The latest album, “Precious Time,” huffed it's way immediately to the top of the charts. Like it or not, Pat Benatar has become the reigning queen of rock 'n' roll, ahead of such pretenders as Chrissie Hynde, Stevie Nicks, Rickie Lee Jones and Debbie Harry. “It's truly a movie, a dream, an amazing story,” gushes Benatar's manager, Rick Newman. “And it all has to do with one thing – Pat's love for rock 'n' roll.”

Pat Benatar (nee Andrzejewski – the Benatar is left over from her ex-husband) wasn't born to rock 'n' roll. She is the daughter of a sheet-metal worker and a mother who sang in the chorus of the New York City Opera. She spent an unclouded adolescence hanging out with the crowd, starring in the choir at Lindenhurst High and acting in local productions of musicals like “West Side Story.” A teenager with a sweeping three-and-a-half octave range, she was groomed by vice teachers for a career in opera, but she rebelled at the rigid training. She got married, moved to Virginia with her husband, Dennis, and worked for two years as a bank teller. Fed up with counting other people's money, she became a singing waitress – the “live Muzak” to tables full of drunks in a sleazy club called the Roaring '20s.

When Pat decided to get serious about her career, she wiped the French dressing off her flapper outfit and headed back to new York. Her break came in 1976, when she caught the ear of Rick Newman at an audition in his club, Catch A Rising Star. It must have been a grim sight that greeted the trembling Benatar as she stepped out onto the stage at 2:30 a.m. Most of the other hopefuls had run through their five minutes of comedy or music, and the few patrons still remaining were working intently on that morning's hangovers. But Benatar launched gamely into “Bye, Bye Blackbird” and drew a stomping, applauding response from the inebriated stragglers. Gradually, her tentative stage presence improved, and she dropped torchy standards form her repertoire in favor of rough, gritty versions of rock songs like Led Zeppelin's “Stairway To Heaven.” during a weekend showcase at Tramps, a downtown Manhattan rock club, executives from Chrysalis Records spotted her and offered her a contract. These same label heads had already singed Blondie's hugely successful Debbie Harry. The probably didn't

dare guess that they had just acquired an even more lucrative property.

Benatar is prowling around the stage in her Wayne Newton get-up: black tights, ankle boots and a long-sleeved, gold-lame leotard arrangement. She's been taunting some imaginary lover, begging him to take his best shot one minute, then turning around and demanding that he treat her right. She surveys the crowd at the 42nd Street Pier, and suddenly a wide grin cracks through the sultry mask. "Hey," she exults, betraying her Long Island roots, "I feel like I'm at my class reunion! Everyone I know is here."

Everyone, it seems is younger than 18 and almost through with vocational school. Sixteen-year-old boys from Queens with Styx, Springsteen and Van Halen logos scrawled across their chests peer longingly through binoculars while their Farrah-coiffed sweeties bop happily beside them. The girls don't mind; they know it's just an act. "God," admits Pat, "sometimes I feel like their mother."

Benatar would be proud to have a son like David Reynolds, who looks about 18, with curly red hair and a friendly, open face. "First of all, she's a real rocker, right?" he tells me, shoving his way as close to the stage as possible. "In fact, Elvis would be covering Pat's songs if he were alive today." And when Benatar plants both her high-heeled feet wide apart on the stage and sways at low speed, Reynolds and his buddies become whistling, raving little devils.



Unfortunately, her 17-year-old fans don't write the rock reviews that have been nothing short of blistering in their attacks. To the critic, Benatar is a cleverly constructed bionic chanteuse who's borrowed a little from New Wave, a little heavy metal, a little from Broadway, and come up with the artistic equivalent of a TV dinner. At first, reviews like this made Pat cry. Now she fires back. "Sometimes they're not criticizing you for the right reasons," she argues. "I mean, maybe I look like a girl who dumped him (the critic) in high school and he hates my guts. Or maybe he got wet on his way to the concert and he's angry because his sneakers are soaked. I don't even read reviews anymore."

What no critic will deny is that Benatar has an amazing set of vocal chops. When her warm coloratura swoops down, grabs a tune that's been mired in instrumental muck and swoops up with it, it can be an exhilarating rescue. The problem is, she hasn't created a style with much emotional resonance, as all good rock 'n' roll should. This may not be her fault. There is so much pressure to maintain her phenomenal sales record that turning out photo copies of previous LPs seems the safest route. She admits that "Crimes of Passion" was "the most disappointing work that I've done. I was in a coma."

Benatar is standing in short white shorts and drab, olive T-shirt, shivering slightly in the air-conditioned restaurant of the Marriott Hotel in Providence, R.I. She looks doll-like, as if she had been lifted out of a box full of excelsior, brushed off and placed upright on the sculptured red carpeting. The impression of fragility (she stands only 4-10 sans heels) is reinforced as we wander through the Arctic zones of the restaurant, searching for a little pocket of warmth where she can talk without endangering The Voice. She has to be careful because tonight she'll be giving it a workout at the Providence Civic Center, one more sold-out arena in this 60-city tour. Her throat is ailing slightly, but that doesn't cramp her giggly, animated, conversational style. Pat Benatar is exactly like your best girlfriend in high school, the one who was cute and popular and a little wild, who would pass notes in home room, steal eye makeup

from the drugstore and yak for hours on the phone. When she took you into her confidence, you were cool by association.

So there I sat, feeling like a cool sophomore, while one of People's 25 Most Intriguing People of 1980 held forth on such mysterious topics as fishing trips with collie and shopping for K-Mart bargains. "I still go to K-Mart, and when people in the store ask me what I'm doing there, I say, 'Listen, I need a bargain, too.' I can't feel good about paying \$300 for a dress yet... I never had anything in my whole life. I'd just been scraping and trying to get it together, so the first thing I did was I bought a Porsche. And when I was writing out the check I started to get such a bad migraine that I had to lie down. I was sick for two days."

The cover of her latest album hints at how Benatar must be feeling these days. Where she looked pantingly sultry on the previous two records, she looks like a pensive prisoner on this one, all tricked up in spandex and sequins with no place to go. Benatar admits that she is having trouble living out her dream.



"Before I became a star, I was such a confident *person*. What changed is that I became an extremely confident *performer*, but the person got lost. I became real shy and introverted... I think the biggest fight of your life is to maintain something that's yours alone, that no one else knows about or sees or does. You hide it and you keep it locked up. It's really difficult, especially when you have to do interviews. I get tired of telling people how I feel."

Her resentment of the record-industry flacks and functionaries is even more pronounced. "You're like Haagen-Dazs. You don't feel like a person. You are their creation and you never really had anything to do with it yourself. That's how they think."

In a sense, Pat Benatar *is* like Haagen-Dazs, a fancy name invented for an ice cream manufactured in the Bronx. An utterly, normal girl with a rich, undirected talent, she fell in with some shrewd business people who channeled those gifts in a marketable direction, concocted an exotic image and sent her on her way. Right now, just a few years but many millions of dollars away from Tramps, she is on the last leg of a five-month tour that's taken her zigzagging across the country in a \$95,000 customized Silver Eagle bus, outfitted with all the amenities. Her first tour was grueling, a 10-month marathon that was, she says, "crippling. Between Springsteen and us, we tour the most. I always say we tour to forget."

"But this tour is relatively relaxed. And since many of the band and crew members travel with their wives, Benatar has some female companionship to break up what is so often an exclusively male lifestyle. To keep herself under 90 pounds and control the effects of a serious ice-cream habit, she does an hour and a half of aerobics and spot exercises every day. Her routine is about as domesticized as it can get for an on-the-road-rocker. Until recently, her tour bus really was home because it also carried Benatar's lead guitarist and leading man, Neil Giraldo. He plays on, heading the band and helping to shape Pat's sound, but their romance is no longer so harmonious.

"The reason it works at all is that when we're up there, we totally forget we were lovers," Benatar says. "We're perfectly matched, which is what makes it so horrible. But when we get offstage, it gets a little difficult to deal with. If this was some other situation, everything would be perfect. I would be home

making sauce, having children and he would be so happy. But the career has to come first now. I tease him. I say, 'In five years, when all this blows over, you're gonna ask me to marry you and I'm gonna say yes like a jerk.'

For now, Pat Benatar has to continue playing the bad girl, a girl from whom any teenager with a varsity club jacket or a rebuilt Trans-Am could steal at least a kiss. But like all bad girls, deep down, Pat Benatar has some very sweet dreams. "I want to have a baby and raise a family. What happens is you get so self-satisfied as a woman. You're so secure and you feel like you've got the world in your hands. I mean, you feel so great! And you know what? All you want to do is take the emphasis off yourself and put it on someone else to worry about that's more important to me. When you're 19 to 26, those are the Me years when you're spending all your time on you. Then all of a sudden you just smooth out. I'm smoothed out now."