

## The Pixie Who Roared

-From *Rock Chicks*, Alison Stieven-Taylor

When Pat Benatar was approached by VH1 to appear in the hit rock series *Behind the Scenes* she responded in her usual direct New York way: “I know how these things end up, they lost everything, and the shit hit the fan. I don't have any of this. And you can dig too baby cause you ain't gonna find shit. My life is very boring.”

Boring is hardly the word for a rock chick like Pat. But her life is extraordinarily normal for someone who has lived in the public eye for the best part of thirty years. Pat has been married to Neil Giraldo, lead guitarist in her band, for over two decades. She's a superstar who does her own cooking and grocery shopping and hangs with the other moms at her kids' sports events.

Pat was initially another success story from the Chapman Chinn stable, who had written hits for Suzi Quatro and produced Blondie's *Parallel Lines*. Mike Chapman, producer of Pat's first album, was the man with the Midas touch. Just as he had launched others into the superstar stratosphere, so he worked his magic on Pat. Since that first album, *In the Heat of the Night*, she has sold over thirty five million records.



Patricia Mae Andrzejewski, born in 1953 if Polish-Irish heritage, lived on the wrong side of the tracks in Lindenhurst on Long Island, New York. Her father was a metal worker, her mother a former opera singer. Money was tight and Pat and her brother Andrew grew up with few material possessions. Lindenhurst was divided by railroad tracks. The middle-class kids lived on one side, the don't haves on the other. “I think I always worried about...our being so poor,” Pat said.

Her mother's love of music was passed on to daughter. Pat trained as an opera singer, encouraged by her mother to use her natural gift – three and a half octave range. As she grew into her teens she discovered rock and was a big fan of bands like Led Zeppelin. She found it hard to listen to popular music on the radio and then have to switch to classical tones, and even harder still to stick to rigid practise sessions. Gradually her interest in opera waned. Pat turned her attention to Motown, R&B, the girl groups, the Beatles, the Stones. She performed in every school musical. She wasn't planning a career in music though. She wanted to be a school teacher.

At nineteen she married her high school sweetheart Dennis Benatar, who was drafted into the Army shortly after. The young newlyweds were shunted off to Richmond, Virginia, and Pat shelved any ideas of going to college. To alleviate the boredom she took a job as a bank teller, but it drove her to distraction. “I was there with all these proper little Southern girls, which is such a whole other thing when you're from New York,” she said.

Pat took any job with a musical element, including a stint as a singing waitress in a roaring twenties

restaurant where, dressed as a flapper, she would hit the stage to sing a few songs before going back to the tables to take orders. It was a good way of gaining a broad musical education – she sang everything from cabaret and R&B to contemporary songs in hotel lounges and smoky clubs.

By 1975 the pair were back in New York, but the marriage was on the rocks. Before long Pat filed for divorce. She took whatever singing work she could. There were months of performing at cabaret venues on Long Island and a role in the short-lived production of the sci-fi musical *Zinger*, composed by Harry Chapin.

She got her big break one evening at Catch A Rising Star, a Manhattan club that held open-mic nights. It was 1977. By the time Pat got her turn to take the stage it was around 3 AM. The waning crowd was paying little attention to the wannabees on stage until Pat let rip. Singing the Judy Garland song “Rock-a-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody”, she blew them away. “Everybody just went crazy. I didn't do anything spectacular. It was just one of those magical things.” Afterwards club owner Rick Newman approached Pat about performing regularly. Shortly after he became her first manager.

Pat sang at the Star for the next year. One night she turned up in a Halloween outfit she'd been wearing at a party and performed her usual routine. The costume – a black catsuit with heavy black eye make-up – gave her an added edge. The crowd was electrified.

The buzz around Pat was palpable. Jeff Aldrich from Chrysalis Records heard the rumours. He made the trip to the Star and liked what he saw, signing her on the spot. In no time Pat was in LA recording with one of the hottest record producers in the world. Mike Chapman.

Chapman had not intended to take on any new acts. But when he heard Pat's voice he couldn't resist. This woman had a vocal reach strong enough to shake the foundations and high enough to break glass. Sound engineer Peter Coleman also produced several tracks and formed a strong musical bond with Pat.

Chapman suggested she work with Neil Giraldo, the guitarist from Derringer who was known for his musical arranging skills. When Giraldo, with his dark wavy hair, tattooed arms and rock'n'roll vibe, walked into the studio it was love at first sight. “I called up my girlfriend and I go, 'I met the father of my children.'” She...says....”What is wrong with you?...It's 1979, you don't have to marry him to sleep with him.” “But I knew. I was in love ....instantly.”

Her first studio effort was released in 1979. *In the Heat of the Night* eventually went multi-platinum, reaching number twelve on the Billboard pop charts. But early on it was a struggle to get airplay. After all, Pat was a woman and you could only have one female in the top ten at one time. Her debut single, “If You Think You Know How To Love Me”, written by Chapman and songwriting partner Nicky Chinn, was a slow mover. But “Heartbreaker” delivered Pat's first top forty hit. It was emulated by “We Live For Love”, written by Giraldo. At Chrysalis everyone began to realise that Pat Benatar was on her way to being a rock star.

Despite her amazing vocal range, she was on a steep learning curve when it came to making music. Before she'd recorded *In the Heat of the Night* she'd had little experience with real musicians. And she had found it difficult to articulate what she'd like to sing other than to say she wanted to rock. Giraldo took charge of the musical direction, but Pat the perfectionist wanted to learn as much as she could.

A touring band was formed with Giraldo on lead guitar and keyboards, Scott St Clair Sheets on rhythm

guitar, bass player Roger Capps and ex-Derringer drummer Myron Grombacher. The live Pat Benatar shows rocked. She appealed to both sexes. Pat reveled in the attention, but also could see the humour in it. “The guys get silly,” she said. “They take their shirts off like they are guy groupies or something.”

Pat's opera training meant her voice had the stamina to tackle the big rock numbers she loved. But adapting to rock was no easy matter and, she said, took a good two years, finding out “how I could scratch up my voice, rough it up, and still not rip my throat out.” Her range was a powerful tool. The transition from opera to rock came as a shock to Pat's mother: “she was a little freaked out.” Her father was supportive, but not of the decibels. At his daughter's concerts, he resorted to wearing earplugs.

On stage she was a powerhouse. She clad her tiny, athletic body in spandex tights worn with a leotard or a top cinched in with a wide belt. She wore high heels and kicked, punched and stomped her way through sets. Pat's onstage persona drove the audience wild. As soon as the house lights went down, she was transformed into a “vampish, sensual bitch everyone wants to love and to make love to”, one critic wrote. She “struts and purrs, prowls and growls, and shakes and screams.”

Pat loathed the sex kitten image Chrysalis came up with to promote *In the Heat of the Night*. A poster depicting Pat in tights and leotard was the stuff of male fantasies, the publicity blurb painting her as a tough-talking man-eater: “A lot of women singers today seem to be saying, 'If you love me and then hurt me I'll die'. I say, If you love me than hurt me, I'll kick your ass.” But the sexy, hard=ass act proved it's worth in platinum sales. Pat's records dominated the charts in the early 1980's and Chrysalis took every opportunity to prove that sex does sell.

As her first album climbed the charts she rebelled, discarding the tights, throwing on a jacket and lopping off her hair, much to the chagrin of her publicists. She also had a clause written into her contract that stipulated no photos would be issued without her approval. But it didn't matter how much she railed against the image. Pat was viewed as a sex symbol.

Less than a year after her first album was released, *Crimes of Passion* produced by Keith Olsen hit the charts. The public went nuts. *Crimes of Passion* went gold in less than two weeks, clocked up more than four million sales, reached number two on the charts and delivered Pat the first of four consecutive Grammys for best female rock vocal performance – an unprecedented run. One of Pat's best known songs, “Hit Me With Your Best Shot”, was the first single and her first top ten hit.

*Crimes of Passion* positioned Pat firmly on the female rock'n'roll throne from where she would rule unchallenged for four years. The songs on the album were had hitting in their messages. Pat was keen to use her music to make statements: “to sing a worthless lyric is like jerking the public off and jerking myself off.”



Managing the balance in her relationship with Giraldo – she was his employer as well as his lover – was difficult at times. By the time they were in the studio recording the next album both were feeling the strain. *Precious Time* was Pat's first album to reach number one. Its single “Fire and Ice”, written by Pat, guitarist Sheets and Tom Kelly, hit the number two spot on the Billboard chart. The album launched four top forty hits - “Fire and Ice”, “Just Like Me”, “Promises In the Dark” and “Take It Anyway You Want” - and delivered Pat her second Grammy.

In 1981 Pat and Giraldo decided to end their relationship but continue to work together. Pat put on a brave face, telling journalists, “it came down to having a career or being Mrs Giraldo. We both love our careers too much to give them up. We could either be lovers or work together.”

In August, when MTV went to air for the first time, Pat's “You Better Run” video was the second to be aired. Music videos became just another thing an artist had to do, and pay for, to support their records. Chrysalis wanted their star property to be a video star too. She became one of the stars of MTV, although she wasn't convinced the audience needed such literal translations of songs. She preferred they used their own imaginations.

The Benatar-Giraldo separation didn't last long. By the time her fourth album, *Get Nervous*, was released in 1982 they were married. Giraldo had popped the question while he was producing John Waite's solo album in New York. They were married in Hawaii on the beach, without any paparazzi, family or friends – just two strangers who acted as witnesses. Determined to work at their relationship and not let the music suffer, the pair made a series of compromises, such as making sure each had a room on tour, so they weren't in each other's pockets. Whatever they did worked because they are still married.

*Get Nervous* was another triumph, delivering four top forty hits, two of which made the top five - “Shadows of the Night” and “Looking For A Stranger”. *Get Nervous* rocked hard, but it also included more pop-oriented tunes. Pat wasn't happy with the album, feeling the record company had interfered too much, which had resulted in a manufactured feel. And they were still controlling her image.

The first line-up changes to the Pat Benatar band happened around this time with Scott St Clair Sheets leaving and Charlie Giordano coming in on keyboards, but the nucleus remained and the on-stage dynamics were clearly part of her success.

In 1982 Pat and Giraldo moved to LA with their animals, to suburban Tarzana in the San Fernando Valley. Pat was determined she could be a rock star and be married and make both work. “I don't want to be fried and I don't want to be dead.”

Money and fame didn't bring her any closer to the respect she wanted, respect she felt was automatic for her male counterparts. “The attitudes never really changed. We'd be at board meetings with the president and vice president of the label and we're generating billions of dollars. But when I'd leave the meeting somebody would go, 'hey, nice pants!'”

Pat's contract demanded she deliver an album every nine months, as well as perform and do promotional tours. And it seemed the more money she made Chrysalis, the tighter their grip on creativity. They didn't want to alter a winning formula, but Pat was feeling stifled. She wanted a change, even if that meant risking her chart domination.

The next album was recorded during the 1982-83 world tour when Pat and the band performed across Europe and the USA to massive audiences. *Live From Earth* captured Pat's energy and vibrancy on stage and gave her one of her biggest hits and one of her most enduring songs. "Love Is A Battlefield" made it to the top ten and delivered her fourth Grammy.

On her next record *Tropico*, Pat began to soften her sound and there were less hard rocking tracks. The album reached fourteen on the Billboard chart and delivered a top five hit with "We Belong".

Pat gave birth to her first daughter Haley in 1985. Twelve months later she was back on tour with hubby and baby in tow promoting her seventh album, *Seven the Hard Way*. The Benatar entourage traveled in luxury on a private plane. Pat approached motherhood in her usual pragmatic fashion and got on with the job.

*Seven the Hard Way* was Giraldo's first solo stint as producer for his wife. The album reached twenty-six on the Billboard chart and launched two singles, "Invincible" and "Sex As A Weapon". It is her least favourite album. During its recording the record execs showed their true colours. "I'd just had a baby...they didn't care...They wanted the record immediately...we had the contract from hell." Her relationship with Chrysalis went into a downward spiral. Caught up in a contract that allowed the company to put an artist on suspension – which "meant no royalties, no money" - she ended up in court, but couldn't break free from the label until 1993.

Her wry sense of humour and her ability to be self-deprecating were Pat's weapons against the overwhelming status of rock star. When they were not on stage or in the studio, Pat and Giraldo were at home in LA watching movies and playing board games or working out.

One thing she isn't fanatical about is songwriting. Self-conscious about her ability as a writer, Pat would often give Giraldo one of her songs with the caveat that he read it when she wasn't around. She may have reached mega-star status, but her ego certainly hasn't.

It was nearly three years before the next Pat Benatar album was released, in 1988. Pat had insisted on some downtime. *Wide Awake In Dreamland* benefited from the hiatus. "All Fired Up", the first single released, promptly went to number two on the mainstream rock tracks chart, and nineteen on the top 100. Giraldo and Grombacher, the only two of the original band line-up, were joined by Kevin Savigar on keyboards and bassist Fernando Saunders.

In 1991 Pat took a new musical direction, singing the blues on the album *True Love*. From a vocal perspective the material gave her no trouble. But she got considerable grief from those around her who said she was going to kill her career. Pat and Giraldo, both huge blues fans, pressed on regardless. *True Love* got a mixed reception. Some thought her segue into blues was a perfect fit, others labeled the effort atrocious. One rock reviewer even described her as a "white bread fluff peddler". Pat shrugged off the bad press. It wasn't like she hadn't heard it before.

*True Love* featured a number of BB King songs, including "Payin' the Cost To Be the Boss", which made it into the top twenty. Giraldo called in Roomful of Blues, a band that had been around since 1967, to add the horns to his guitar work.

Pat and Giraldo took *True Love* on the road, performing in intimate theatres around the USA. Gone were the 1980s trademark tights, short wraps and clinging tops. On this tour she wore a dress, stockings and pumps and there wasn't a "You Better Run" or "Love Is A Battlefield" in sight.

Getting back to her rock'n'roll roots, *Gravity's Rainbow*, released in 1993, was classic guitar rock with anthems, ballads and hard-hitting rock songs along with a touch of quieter moments that were almost R&B. The album was universally praised. *Rolling Stone* welcomed back “Benatar the rock diva...Benatar sounds genuine once again.” The album's best performing single was the Benatar/Giraldo penned “Everybody Lay Down.”

*Gravity's Rainbow* – named after Thomas Pynchon's novel, which Pat described as “the most bizarre book...about man's inevitable race to destroy himself” - was the last album she did under the Chrysalis label. Released in the year she turned forty, the album allowed Pat and Giraldo to focus on social issues that were close to their hearts. It wasn't the first time they had tackled tough subjects. Way back in 1981 “Hell Is For Children”, a song written by Pat after reading a newspaper article, had powerful lyrics that dealt with child abuse.

Pat's second daughter Hana was born in 1994. The next year she embarked on a major US arena tour, *Can't Stop Rockin'*, along with the Fleetwood Mac and REO Speedwagon. It were as if time had stood still and she was back rocking her heart out like she was still in her twenties. The onstage garb had changed though – there were no zebra jumpsuits or lurex tights.

In between ferrying her kids to sports matches and keeping house, Pat has continued to tour and record. She released an acoustic oriented album, *Innamorata* in 1997, her first independent release: “there was no way...I was going to stand there and let a twenty-five year old tell me what to do.” Any notion that not being signed to a major label was a hindrance was quashed as quickly as it was raised. The album may not have reached the lofty heights that she enjoyed in the 1980s, but it did get positive reviews and, most importantly, pat and Giraldo were happy with the work.

Pat Benatar still sells lots of records and she still pulls a good crowd after nearly thirty years of hard rocking, “I don't know what the hell I thought I would be doing but I didn't think it would be this...I feel grateful as shit that I still get to do it.”