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POP MUSIC

And the beat goes on

■ After decades of bonding, disbanding and reforming, the world's most successful female band have nothing left to prove.

By David A. Keeps, Times Staff Writer

Though the Go-Go's have not recorded any new music since 2001's "God Bless the Go-Go's," a CD recently hailed by Steve Van Zandt on his "Underground Garage" radio show, they have toured at least six weeks every summer for the last eight years. Now living separate lives as wives, mothers, solo artists, hit songwriters, reality TV stars and music industry players, the "First Ladies of the '80s," as the Go-Go's are sometimes called, reconvene at casinos, benefits and lucrative gigs for Yamaha and Microsoft. "The Go-Go's earn more now as a touring act than they did in the 1980s," says Brett Steinberg, their rep at Creative Artists Agency. They remain the world's most successful all-female rock 'n' roll band. Ever.

Descending from American girl groups and beach boys of the '60s with a dash of '70s British rock glam, the Go-Go's — Charlotte Caffey, Belinda Carlisle, Gina Schock, Kathy Valentine and Jane Wiedlin — were the first L.A. band to spin punk and pop into solid gold. Their sunny hits, "We Got the Beat," "Our Lips Are Sealed," "Head Over Heels" and "Vacation," took early 1980s dance rock out of the Hollywood clubs and onto the national charts. This year alone, the songs have popped up in national TV commercials for, respectively, Pizza Hut, Kmart, Pantene and Priceline. "Vacation" also appeared in Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11."

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platinum debut, "Beauty and the Beat," they will perform all the songs on the record for the first time.

"Dude, we're like Springsteen. We rock for like an hour and 20 minutes," jokes rhythm guitarist Wiedlin. "And we're also doing our first costume change. We're going to come out looking like Cher." In some ways, the Go-Go's already do. They have endured as symbols of Southern California pop, as particular to Valley Girl mall-punk of the '80s as Cher was to the Sunset Strip of the swinging '60s. They earned their stripes over the course of just four years and three recordings ("Beauty and the Beat," "Vacation" and "Talk Show"), stepping over rock's gender line to prove that they could play — and party — as hard as boys.

During that time, however, drummer Schock recalls, they were on "a conveyor belt, answering the same damn questions over and over.... They worked us to death, and we did what we were told to be successful." By 1985, they were finished, torn asunder by the fame they had so assiduously sought. There were substance abuse problems, constant ego trips over who was getting the most attention, financial battles with their record company and one another over songwriting royalties, and screaming matches that sometimes escalated into physical fights.

"We didn't have guy groupies," Carlisle remembers. "We wanted them, but I think they were too afraid of us. They'd come backstage into this vortex of energy and just cower."

It took five years before the Go-Go's could stand to be in a room together. In 1990, they played a benefit for the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and recorded a cover of "Cool Jerk." Carlisle had already scored a No. 1 single with



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"Heaven Is a Place on Earth." They toured briefly in recession-struck small towns, billed as Belinda and the Go-Go's. The reunion didn't stick.

In 1994, almost a decade after the Go-Go's first dissolved, they released a compilation CD. "Return to the Valley of the Go-Go's" exposed their musical and psychological punk roots. There were pictures and stories that hinted that the five members shared an appetite for self-destruction on a par with Aerosmith and Guns N' Roses. Six years later, the whole story would make for a sensationalistic episode of VH-1's "Behind the Music." On stage or in front of a camera, the Go-Go's were America's sweethearts; elsewhere they were a drinking, drugging prototype for today's Girls Gone Wild. "We did exactly the same as everyone else," says Wiedlin. "The only thing that makes our story interesting is the fact that we were women."

Punk beginnings

The Go-Go's began as a do-it-yourself lark for Wiedlin, a fashion design student, and Carlisle, a would-be flight attendant born Belinda Kurczeski in Burbank. Carlisle held court as "Dottie Danger" in an apartment nicknamed "Disgraceland" in the Canterbury, a Hollywood punk rock dump.

"We were wearing trash bags for dresses, dying our hair a different color every week," recalls Carlisle.

"It's probably hard for people to conceive now, but having crazy-colored hair and wearing ripped clothes was genuinely shocking then," remembers Wiedlin, who called herself Jane Drano.

One night in 1978, Carlisle and Wiedlin, both 19, were bonding over punk-rock boys, clothes and music at a party with a mutual friend, Margot Olaverra. They decided to form a band. Wiedlin painted numbers on a guitar to learn how to strum chords, Olaverra played bass and a fellow punkette, Elissa Bello, took the drum seat. Carlisle, who had briefly drummed for the Germs, would be the lead singer.

Calling themselves the Misfits, they shared a rehearsal space at the Masque, a Hollywood punk club in the basement of the Pussycat Adult Theatre in Hollywood, with the more accomplished musicians of X and the Motels, who gave them lessons out of pity. Two months later, the Go-Go's made their live debut, playing a fashionably angry political anthem. "Everyone in the audience was either horrified or laughing hysterically," Carlisle recalls.

The Go-Go's, however, were undeterred. They recruited 24-year-old Santa Monica-born Caffey, a classically trained pianist then playing bass in a group called the Eyes. Could she also play lead guitar? Of course, she lied.

The next Go-Go brought discipline. After reaching a career pinnacle playing drums in a band with Edith Massey, a star in director John Waters' early films, Schock, then 21, relocated from Baltimore to Los Angeles in 1979. She was already playing in two bands when a friend urged her to see the Go-Go's.

"They were like a dog that was so ugly it's beautiful," Schock says. "They needed work, but they were having so much fun." Within a year, Schock's treatment had transformed them. In 1980, the Go-Go's pawned most of their stuff and toured England with the ska group Madness on less than \$5 a day. They also secured a deal to release a single, "We Got the Beat," on a British label, which became an import hit in U.S. dance clubs, where a more accessible brand of punk and synth-pop, called new wave, was minting stars such as Blondie and the B-52s.

Despite their popularity, the Go-Go's could not get a record deal. That fall, bassist Olaverra fell ill. Caffey approached Valentine, a 21-year-old guitarist from Austin, Texas, in the ladies' room at the Whisky. Could she be ready in four days? Sure, Valentine replied. All she'd have to do was get a bass and learn how to play it.

Valentine became a full-time member in 1981, the year the Go-Go's signed to IRS, an indie label created by the manager of the Police. They were dispatched to New York to record their debut LP, "Beauty and the Beat," on a three-week, \$25,000 budget. They posed for the cover as spa beauties with their bodies and hair wrapped in towels. After the shoot, the towels had to be returned to the store for a refund so the band could eat.

Back in Los Angeles, the Go-Go's made a promotional clip for "Our Lips Are Sealed," the first single from "Beauty and the Beat," which was released in July 1981. With five cute girls driving in a convertible and splashing in a fountain in their funky thrift shop threads, it was a natural for the emerging music channel, MTV. By March of 1982, "Beauty and the Beat" had hit No. 1. There was nowhere to go but down.

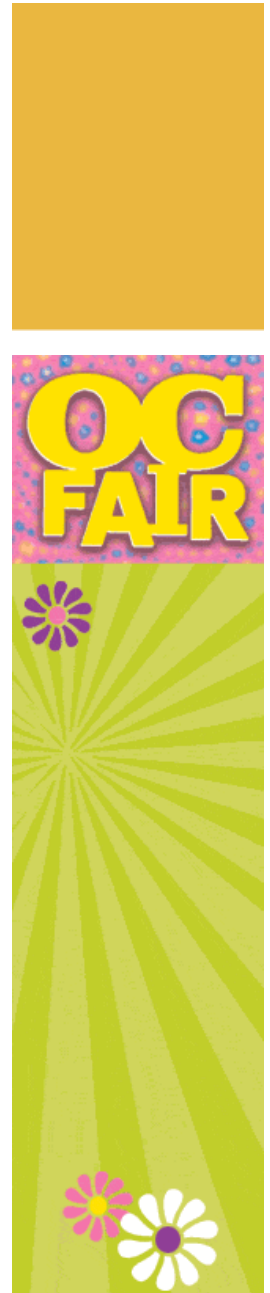
Fame's downside

The more famous the Go-Go's got, the more arrogant they became. They turned down merchandising deals, maintaining their punk integrity even while they were becoming bubblegum pop stars. Their success distanced them from their punk peers, but their behavior did not.

"We were isolated in our own little pack," Schock explains. "We'd do anything to amuse ourselves." There were innocent pranks with costumes and Polaroid cameras, and more self-destructive behaviors. Booze and coke — and for Caffey, heroin — were used to celebrate triumphs or ride out the rough spots. In 1983, Caffey was sidelined with carpal tunnel syndrome, and Schock discovered she had a small hole in her heart that required surgery.

"We canceled everything and rented two white convertibles," Caffey remembers, "and drove to Palm Springs with every possible drug we could get. And we made rules: Gina could only take Valiums — no cocaine, no drinking — because we were worried about her heart. We were freaking out. I think I broke the ice one night by saying, 'Gina, if you die can I have your Corvette?' And then we started laughing, but it was a really touching moment." On their fourth LP, "God Bless the Go-Go's," the group movingly recall their demise on "Daisy Chain," a song that will accompany a short montage film during tonight's show. It's a haunting ballad of lost innocence, with lyrics that tell the story of where the Go-Go's had gone.

I've gotta go nonstop / Gonna stay up 'til we hit the top / Soon the other stiletto would drop / for the Sweethearts of Pop / Trying too hard to play the part / KV burned out like a shooting star / Bean [Gina] brought down by a broken heart / We were falling apart / The lines were blurred, the pace insane / I gotta save myself from this runaway train / Never even said goodbye Sweet Jane.



Wiedlin was the first to go. She didn't like taking drugs anymore.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with it, except when people get addicted to them," she says.

By then, Caffey was hiding a \$300-plus-a-day heroin habit. In the spring of 1985, she went directly from playing a show in front of 250,000 people in Rio de Janeiro to a room with 15 strangers in a South Pasadena rehab. When she was released, she quit the band. The record company pushed Carlisle forward as a solo artist; her first hit, "Mad About You," had in fact been written for the fourth Go-Go's album.

"I just thought it was the most insane thing in the world to break up," Valentine says. "One in a million bands get to this point. I remember getting home and the phone rang and it was the L.A. Times wanting a comment, and I just thought, 'My entire life has ended.'"

New lives

In fact, it was just the beginning.

"I was devastated," Schock says, "but in retrospect I actually got to live in the house that I had bought, see my friends and find me again." All of the Go-Go's have found themselves. Schock moved with her two dogs to San Francisco, "which is loaded with freaks, so I love it," and is a music producer, currently working with the Australian group the Stone Parade.

Valentine is married, has a 4-year-old daughter and in September wrote and produced "Lightyears," her first solo LP as a singer-guitarist. She is moving her family back to her native Austin.

"I came to L.A. 27 years ago, I got in a hit band and now I am cashing in my chips and taking my winnings home," she says.

Carlisle has lived in France since the 1994 Northridge earthquake. Her son, she says, "is 14 going on 50." Being a solo artist, she says, was a nerve-racking experience. "All of a sudden I went from being this cute, chubby Go-Go to being this sort of glamorous female pop singer, and I never was that. It just drove me nuts." In January, she will release a CD of French *chansons*, covering Edith Piaf and Serge Gainsbourg.

"I still have a hard time believing this is my profession," she says.

Wiedlin has recorded with the L.A. group Sparks, released solo records, done voiceover work and appeared in films including "Star Trek IV." "The one with the whales," she says of the film. "I was not one of the whales."

Wiedlin and Caffey also wrote "But for the Grace of God," a No. 1 country hit for Keith Urban. After a spell living with her husband in Costa Rica and Panama, Wiedlin divorced and moved back to Los Angeles. She also appeared on VH-1's "The Surreal Life." "It was like being a rat in a lab maze," she says of the reality program. "They especially liked doing things to freak me out and make me cry."

Caffey has never left L.A. She is married to Jeff McDonald of the L.A. group Redd Kross and is the mother of an 8-year-old. She's formed a record label, Five Foot Two, with her sister-in-law, musician Anna Waronker. Recently she and Waronker wrote the score for a musical about '70s porn queen Linda Lovelace, which they expect to have its Los Angeles stage premiere this year.

"I am so lucky to be alive," Caffey says. "There are not a lot of people that have been strung out on heroin that just get to completely re-create their life." When they are together, it's easy to forget all the "high drama," as Schock puts it, that the Go-Go's have endured.

There is baggage, to be sure, but they have learned when to speak their minds and when to hold their tongues. They have become, Caffey says, "a sisterhood, a marriage, a family." The roller-coaster success of the Go-Go's, Valentine adds, was "a hard-core education in relationships — I'm a better wife and a better mother and a better friend because of the Go-Go's."

"We really do love each other," Carlisle says. "There's a chemistry and a magic, and it is not normal ... there has to be some sort of karmic reason for all of that."

Today, the Go-Go's are infinitely comfortable with who and what they are, individually and collectively. They operate as a five-woman comedy crew, as bawdy as you'd expect from women who once dressed in garbage bags but more like wacky moms when kids are around. After a quarter of a century, the Go-Go's are so in tune with what makes them laugh that they practically speak in their own language. They joke that, although they have no plans to record, they want to call their next CD "Countdown to Menopause." Last Sunday, the group played a short set at the radio station Star 98.7 (KYSR-FM). Richard Blade, the quintessential British import '80s DJ, asked them how they managed to look so young.

"We were pickled for quite a few years," Carlisle demurred.

Their songs, however, remain fresh, as appealing to 5-year-old Hilary Duff fans as they are nostalgic for fiftysomething baby boomers.

"It's amazing, seeing people of all different ages singing lyrics to songs we wrote when we were so young and thought we knew everything," Caffey says. "We really captured a moment in time, and that moment has expanded into 25 years."

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