



OUT FROM THE VINE...

BUT THE SPIRIT MADE ME WIN

IT'S FRIDAY NIG

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WITH GARY WILSON
THE ECCENTRIC POP PERFORMER LOVES MAKING MESSSES. HE SPOKE TO ADHOC ABOUT THE EXTREME ART AND MUSIC THAT INSPIRED THE CHAOS.
by Joe Bucciero

AdHoc: You play at different types of venues with different types of audiences, from lounge music bars to DIY spaces. Do you cater your performance to the situation at hand?

Gary Wilson: You gauge things. I've always done both [lounge music standards and original music]. My dad worked at IBM in the daytime, and then worked four to five nights a week playing standup bass with a quartet. You get into a working band, and you do your original stuff also.

Now, the restaurant crowd, the hotel crowd—none of those people know who “Gary Wilson” is. I'm a sideman for a guy in his 80s who does Johnny Mathis and Nat King Cole. Just recently, I was playing with a lounge band, then I had to do a show with Black Lips and Ariel Pink down the street; I had to rush from playing conventional, Great American Songbook standards to doing a Gary Wilson show. I used to do that in small towns sometimes: I'd be covered in milk or flour from a daytime park show and then put a tuxedo on and start playing some sophisticated jazz-pop. The combination keeps me balanced: one extreme to the next.

Were there any early musical experiences you had that were particularly formative?

I was into Dion when I was eight years old; my mom would curl my hair to look like him, and I would go into school, a fourth-grader with curly hair, looking like Dion. I wrote my first song in fourth grade, influenced by Dion—songs like “Runaround Sue” were some of my favorite songs.

When you perform as Gary Wilson, you often do so in costume, wearing glasses or a mask or a wig. It seems like playing a character, but you keep the name Gary Wilson.

It's always a process—a transformation. I was into Fabian when I was 10; then I got into the Beatles, joined a rock band, and got into the weirder rock stuff like the Mothers [of Invention], Captain Beefheart, the Fugs, Lothar and the Hand People. We're talking '67, '66. At that point, I joined [Lord Fuzz]. Lord Fuzz had good chemistry—a bunch of Italian kids who lived in a three or four-block radius. [Around the time I was 13, we were] playing every weekend; our moms would take us to the gigs. But I was also playing in the youth symphony, playing cello and bass; I was into classical music, and I was into rock music. I started listening to Frank Zappa talk about Edgard Varèse, which got me into twelve-tone—Boulez, Schoenberg, Varèse.

All of a sudden I got into John Cage, at thirteen or something. That really turned me around. I got into avant-garde art, avant-garde theater—anything highly experimental. I was into Robert Rauschenberg and all that messy art, and my shows turned into that. I remember we did a show in Los Angeles—five, seven, eight years ago. There were these hippie guys from Marin County near San Francisco that owned the place. We covered the stage with pounds of baking flour, and at the end of the night, the whole place was a wreck, and the guys were going, “That's great. Looks like a piece of art—we're gonna keep it like that.”

I had done a couple records, like *Another Galaxy* [1974]. Adult Swim uses a couple of my songs from when I was 16, 18—“Dream(s)” and “Soul Travel.” This was jazz fusion from when I would go see Don Cherry, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Stanley Clarke. I had a chance to see a lot of these bands in the '70s—like Sun Ra—because I got out of high school and you could go to New York City. I'd go see Pharoah Sanders and John Cage shows in the city. And here I was playing Frank Sinatra music with this lounge act. But it wasn't until I turned 23 or 22—when I started doing “Chrome Lover” and “Sea Cruise,” some of my earlier works—that

Who is Gary Wilson? It's a question Beck fans likely asked twenty years ago, when he namechecked Wilson on “Where It's At.” It's one Stones Throw Records devotees likely asked in 2004, when the label—hitherto known for hip-hop-oriented releases by Peanut Butter Wolf and Madlib—put out Wilson's cosmic funk LP, *Mary Had Brown Hair*. And it's something young Californians likely ask now when they see the bewigged, mess-making, 62-year-old Wilson on local bills with Ariel Pink.

The upstate New York-born, San Diego-based performer recently released the slick, libidinous LP *It's Friday Night with Gary Wilson*, his tenth album since reviving a long-dormant career in 2003. Full of terminology and love interests—such as a mysterious woman named Linda—that have been recurring in Wilson's work for decades, *It's Friday Night* adds more layers to the existing Gary Wilson story, one that effectively began with Wilson's self-recorded, self-released breakthrough LP, *You Think You Really Know Me*. When it came out in 1977, that scattered collection of keyboard-led pop songs betrayed a bewildering array of influences, from saccharine kitsch to twelve-tone composition. Alongside it, he developed a singular style of experimental performance full of peculiar costumes and messy stage antics.

The precocious Wilson studied cello and bass—as well as jazz, classical, and modern composition—throughout his childhood, while nurturing an interest in what he describes as “extreme art.” By the time he graduated high school, he'd played bass in lounge bands, shredded in the rock group Lord Fuzz, and compared notes with a surprisingly receptive John Cage, whom he met after looking up the legendary composer in the phonebook. *You Think You Really Know Me*, which he released when he was 23, brought those divergent interests together; according to the artist, it was also the moment when he “became” Gary Wilson—the same Gary Wilson that, forty years on, is still dancing provocatively with mannequins on stage and releasing bizarre, self-recorded pop LPs like *It's Friday Night*.

Robert Rauschenberg once said that he tries to act in the gap between art and life. Does Gary Wilson exist somewhere between the two as well? After speaking to Wilson on the phone about the various stages of his artistic development, I'd argue that he's gone ahead and eliminated those boundaries completely. Where many artists seek to create a distance between public persona and private self—assuming a new name, putting on a new look—there seemed to be little difference between the “Gary Wilson” I'd seen on stage and the verbose yet obtuse man I spoke with. When *It's Friday Night with Gary Wilson*, it's Friday night with the artist, the man, the story, the music, all at once.

I finally found out who Gary Wilson was. Everything hit around the time *You Think You Really Know Me* came out. Now I have to stay on track with who Gary Wilson is. I have to throw a lot of songs out because they don't meet my criteria for Gary Wilson.

You played CBGB around that time—what was that like?

I'm from upstate [New York], so when I did the album [*You Think You Really Know Me*] in '77, I tried to push it in New York City a lot. That's how I got into playing CBGB—I still remember waiting for Hilly Kristal, the owner. I waited for two or three hours, then he finally walked in. I handed him *You Think You Really Know Me*, and he said, “Well, I'll put you on a Monday show”—the audition night, you could call it. It worked out that he liked us; the last time I played there was around '79, and we headlined Thursday, Friday, and Saturday there. I always treasure that as an interesting moment in my life.

I get a sense of Gary Wilson as coming out of post-John Cage art and performance of the '60s and '70s.

I met John Cage in the '60s, and I still can't figure out how I pulled that one off. I was writing music for our school chamber orchestra. I would write music influenced by John Cage, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff—my three favorite New York composers at the time. My violin teacher said, “Why don't you try to get a hold of John Cage?” Lo and behold, his name was still in the Manhattan phone book. I called him—I was 14 at the time or something—and I said, “I'd like you to look over my music.” And he said, “Well, you can send some scores to a [P.O.] box number.”

He invited me over to his house in Haverstraw, New York, which is outside of New York City. My mom had to drive me from upstate New York to Haverstraw, and we got lost in the woods. When we get to Haverstraw, I was at the general store, and I called Cage and said, “Mr. Cage, I'm lost.” So he came down in his car—I think it was a big old Ford Thunderbird. He picked me up in his car, and my mom waited for me at the general store; he drove me up to his house, and we went over my scores. [Cage] was a very big influence for me. He made me start seeking out the most extreme art, the most extreme music.

Another person I had seen when I was a teenager who I felt was quite extreme was Hermann Nitsch. I had seen him at a local

university. He would have a whole street with butcher paper on it, and he would have people from the windows throw blood and eyeballs—animal eyeballs—out the window and onto the sheet of paper. That was an insane show: blood art, or whatever you'd want to call it. I always try to entertain myself [when I play live], so each show has its own dynamic. The interludes might be a little longer: you might do “6.4 [= Make Out]” [from *You Think You Really Know Me*], and it turns into a 12-minute thing.

What brought about your use of props and costumes?

Back [around when I was first making music as Gary Wilson], when [my friends and I] were in our small town, we'd visit thrift shops, go garbage picking, find things to throw on the stage. We'd get bed sheets, whatever we could find in the house, before a gig. Duct tape a pillow to the side of your head—these are just things we would do because we didn't have a lot to work with in a small town.

I used to do painting when I was a teenager. I would take these six-foot-by-six-foot sheets of plywood, and then I'd nail on tires and chairs and stacks of hay and [cover them in] flour and vivid red paint, turning these six-foot spaces into three-dimensional spaces. It was very Robert Rauschenberg-inspired. I'd get into these art shows, sometimes New York state art shows, where they'd rent out a freakin' sports arena and bring in a thousand artists from around the state. I was 17, 16, and I would put my paintings up and put prices like \$70,000 or \$100,000 on them and call them [names like] “Linda, Kiss Me.”

It's interesting that you'd call your assemblage “Linda, Kiss Me,” which could easily be a title of one of your songs. Were there any other experiences from that time period that contributed to the development of Gary Wilson, then and now?

I feel bad about the killing of fish and animals. I grew up upstate, and I'd see deers thrown around cars, guys coming back from the woods. I still can't understand the rationale for wanting to kill something. Even fishing—I never liked it, even though my parents had a summer home on Lake Ontario. How can you go out and look for a rabbit or a duck? How could you look at a deer and want to kill it? And people think I'm weird? No, *that's* weird. I used to have pet ducks when I was a little boy. Everything wants to live. 🐼