Heart Guitarist Nancy Wilson Sees the Band's New Album, "Beautiful Broken," as the Summation of Heart's Four Decades of Hard Rock History.

By Alan di Perna

"I feel it's a true Heart album," says guitarist Nancy Wilson of her iconic band's newest release, Beautiful Broken. "It's got the romance and musicality of some of our earlier songs. But it also has some really heavy rock moments. That's the duality that has always been our signature." Beautiful Broken is Heart's 16th album to date, and it comes 40 years after the U.S. release of the band's debut album, Dreamboat Annie, in 1976. That disc introduced the talented Wilson sisters, Ann and Nancy, to the world. Ann's powerhouse voice and Nancy's rock-solid rhythm guitar work played a pioneering role in establishing a hard-won place for women in rock.

Heart's newest album glances back at their past with revisited and turbocharged recordings of some of their older songs, balanced by a set of new tunes that prove the Wilson sisters have lost none of their punch and panache. But rather than reprise their greatest hits, the band chose to revamp lesser-known, deep album tracks, such as "Down on Me" from 1980's Bebe Le Strange and "City's Burning" from '82's Private Audition.

"It was a chance to do some of..."
our favorite, most misunderstood songs, along with a few new tracks," Nancy notes. "There was one song, ‘Heaven,’ that was just a bonus from a live DVD we had done. It never really saw the light of day. Also the song ‘Beautiful Broken’ was another favorite bonus track [from 2012’s Frantic] that we never quite finished. We also got to revisit some of the songs where we’d always kicked ourselves because they didn’t turn out as well as they could have the first time around. ‘Sweet Darlin’ [from Bebe Le Strange] is one of those; ‘Johnny Moon’ [from 1983’s Passion Works] is another. It was extremely fun to go back and give them another life in the studio.”

Powered by Nancy’s hard-hitting, downtuned guitar, “Beautiful Broken” features a guest vocal from Metallica’s James Hetfield.

“He’s a really old friend of my husband [film/tv music director] Geoff Bywater,” Nancy explains. “They kind of grew up in the Bay Area with Sammy Hagar and some of those guys over there. We were listening to ‘Beautiful Broken’ in our kitchen and he said, ‘James Hetfield would sound incredible on this song,’ I was kind of like, ‘really?’ But the more I thought about it the more I thought it was a great idea.

“We sent it to James and he said, ‘I love it. I’ll just take it to my studio and bark along with the track.’ But what he did was a lot more than bark along. He brought his unmistakable vocal style, but also added incredible harmony vocal parts and new lyrics in the break section—thereby kind of co-writing the song. It’s really cool that he didn’t just toss it off. He actually worked hard on the song and brought some amazing elements to it.”

Among the album’s new tracks, Nancy takes the lead vocal on “Two,” a song penned by hip-hop/r&B sensation Ne-Yo. “That was another one I heard in the kitchen and I was...”

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— NANCY WILSON

Wilson has composed scores for a number of films, including Almost Famous, Vanilla Sky and Elizabethan. And Beautiful Broken also possesses a kind of cinematic expansiveness. It was recorded at Hollywood’s legendary Sunset Sound—“expensive, but worth it,” Nancy says with a laugh. The disc also features orchestral scores from the equally legendary arranger Paul Buckmaster, noted for his work with the Rolling Stones, Elton John, Miles Davis and many others. But at the end of the day, the disc is an unmistakable product of the Wilson sisters’ unique musical vision, with its light-and-shade dynamism of heartfelt acoustic balladry and hard rock crunch.

Forty years down the road, Nancy Wilson feels she’s in a better place than she’s ever been.

“Looking back over the decades,” she says, “starting out at twenty, your brain’s not even fully baked yet. And in your thirties, forties, fifties and sixties you gain perspective and, if you’re lucky, you gain love in your life—if the wind is not completely knocked out of your sails by the time you’re my age. So I feel I’ve been through a series of lifetimes and that I also learned everything about love.”