

Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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“Practicing My Purpose”

Songwriter Dan Wilson recovers his catalog.
by MAX SUECHTING

THE BEST POP SONGS seem to materialize on the radio by magic: perfect crystals of feeling without seams or joints or fingerprints. For Dan Wilson '83, however, the songwriting process is not a mystical pursuit but a practice, requiring at least as much patience and perseverance as inspiration. In the last two decades Wilson has written for or with many of the biggest names in pop, includ-

ing Halsey, John Legend, Weezer, and Joni Mitchell (with whom he worked well, Wilson says, because “she was really good at making me less nervous”). His talents have won him two Grammys (Album of the Year for his work on Adele’s album *21*, and Song of the Year for the Dixie Chicks’ impenitent comeback single, “Not Ready to Make Nice”) and two additional nominations.

A musician from an early age, as a teenager

Though songwriter Dan Wilson (left) mostly stays out of the spotlight these days, he’s still the frontman for the band Semisonic (above, at a 2012 show), which occasionally gets together to perform, mostly in their home state of Minnesota.

he played guitar and sang in several Minneapolis groups before taking his talents to Boston-area nightclubs and concert halls, often alongside his younger brother, Matt Wilson '85. In fact, Wilson says he spent so much of his time performing that, “When I went to my reunions later, people asked me, ‘You’re an interesting person, you’ve done interesting things—why did no one ever meet you in college?’ And the answer is that I was working all the time.”

O P E N B O O K

Leaders Born in Darkness

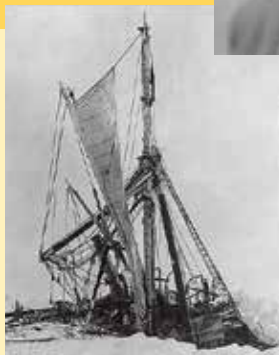
During a Twitter administration, it can astonish to be reminded that “Early in his presidency...Lincoln discovered the power of mastering his emotions in a specific situation carefully enough to take no immediate action or, in some instances, to do nothing at all.” So observes Robison professor of business administration Nancy F. Koehn, who draws her lessons on leadership from history, giving them a realistic gravity that theory or contemporary observation often lack. *Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Turbulent Times* (Scribner, \$35) tells the stories of five leaders who came to their roles “in the midst of a profound personal crisis.” Three of them, in outline, from the introduction:

Picture in your mind three snapshots from the past. The first is from late 1915. Ernest Shackleton, an explorer from Great Britain, and his 27 men are trapped on an iceberg off the coast of Antarctica. Their ship, the *Endurance*, has gone down through the ice, and he and his crew members are marooned a thousand miles from civilization with three lifeboats, canned food, and no means of communicating....Shackleton’s mission is somehow...to bring his entire team home safely. But he doesn’t know how he will do this. At night, when he can’t sleep, he slips outside his tent and paces the ice.... Sometimes, he doubts his ability to do what he knows he must.

The second snapshot is from the summer of 1862. Abraham Lincoln...is also uncertain about how he will accomplish his purpose: to save the Union in the midst of a civil war. He, too, has trouble sleeping and often spends the hours after midnight walking up and down the second-floor hall of the White House. The conflict is going badly for government armies and is proving much bloodier than anyone could have imagined. The commander in chief knows that slavery is at the heart of the contest. But he’s unsure exactly what to do about the almost four

million black Americans held in bondage. He’s also living with intense personal grief following the death of his son Willie four months earlier. In certain moments, Lincoln staggers under the weight he carries.

The third image is from the winter of 1961. It’s late at night, and Rachel Carson, a scientist and bestselling author, is alone in her study, trying to finish a manuscript titled “Silent Spring,” about the dangers of widespread pesticide use. Her subject is controversial, and she knows that large chemical companies, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other powerful institutions are poised to make war on her and the book as soon as it’s published. Despite the threat, Carson believes deeply in the work’s integrity and larger message: that humankind has an obligation to protect the earth and that this obligation involves a sweeping call to citizen awareness and action. She writes as carefully as she can, her work given urgency not only by the importance of her subject, but also by her medical situation. For more than a year, she has been battling aggressive, metastasizing cancer....[I]n certain moments, she doubts she can actually complete her book and say what must be said. When her anxiety rises, the author walks around the room, staring out into the darkness.



The young Rachel Carson (1940); Abraham Lincoln, wearied by the Civil War (1864); and the *Endurance* in the crushing grip of polar ice



After graduating, he returned to Minneapolis and once again joined Matt in the quirky alt-pop act Trip Shakespeare. The band recorded four albums before breaking up, leaving Wilson and bassist John Munson to form the more rock-oriented band Semisonic. Where Trip Shakespeare’s aesthetic sensibilities skewed toward surreal imagery and elaborate arrangements, Wilson’s writing for Semisonic tended toward serious and straightforward treatments of customary pop subjects: love, loss, and the travails of the aspiring artist in the jaws of the music industry. Semisonic became best known for their barfly hit “Closing Time,” which was nominated for a Grammy for Best Rock Song in 1999 and has remained a staple of jukeboxes and radio stations since.

Since the group’s last studio album (2001’s *All About Chemistry*), Wilson himself has largely stayed out of the spotlight, exchanging the jam-packed schedule of a touring band for a more stable career in the recording studios and rehearsal rooms of Los Angeles. In person, it’s easy to see why he’s become so sought-after: he radiates a sincerity that makes him seem immediately trustworthy, someone in whom you could imagine confiding a secret or from whom you might seek advice. In conversation he is friendly and easygoing, quick to laugh, but also an acute listener—he identifies the strains of Pure Prairie League’s “Amy” over the din of the crowded bar. For Wilson, who mentions sulk-pop princeling The Weeknd in the same breath as philosopher Karl Popper, songwriters share with philosophers and scientists the basic task of trying to understand and describe the world. His compositions reflect a profound faith in music’s ability to communicate that understanding.

This faith is on prominent display on Wilson’s new record, *Re-Covered*, in which he re-imagines some of the pop hits he helped shepherd into existence. He assembled a band of trusted friends and collaborators who rehearsed for several days before walking into the studio, where they opted to record each song live, performing as an entire group, rather than tracking individual



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE; LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (2)

instruments and then layering them with overdubs and complicated effects. This approach is evident in the band's easy chemistry: these are familiar, welcome recordings of simple, well-written songs. Wilson's uncluttered arrangements complement both his intuitive grasp of melody and the earnestness and clarity of his vocal delivery. Where the chart-topping studio versions of these songs sound carefully calibrated, processed, and polished (often quite pleasantly so), Wilson's versions sound more suited to a house party or a crowded bar than a stadium.

Indeed, *Re-Covered* often feels so lived-in it's easy to forget that these songs are "covers." Wilson's folk and country influences imbue "Not Ready to Make Nice" with a gentle sadness that avoids saccharine nostalgia; his version of Adele's "Someone Like You" pairs able guitar work with a lush string arrangement by the Kronos Quartet and shows off his impressive vocal range. But *Re-Covered* is not all mournful blues. Its distortion-laden versions of "Home" (written with Dierks Bentley) and "Landing" (a collaboration with his brother) draw from the driving, exuberant energies of hometown punk acts like Hüsker Dü and The Replacements. And Taylor Swift's "Treacherous" is sped up and stripped of its epic chorus, transformed from whispery country-pop into elegant, angular alt-rock.

For many listeners, however, the stand-out track will be the quietly urgent piano version of "Closing Time" that closes the album. "I still love that song," he says, and it's easy to see why. Perfect pop songs—like the Jackson 5's "I Want You Back," or Katy Perry's "Firework"—braid together the familiar with the novel. The genius of "Closing Time" is to stack that contradiction on top of the bittersweet melancholy of endings. As the lyrics put it: "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end."

Talking about the process of re-working songs from his repertoire, Wilson compares songs to jewels: different arrangements accentuate or dull certain characteristics, but the gem itself remains unchanged, a kernel of insight whose essential structure is durable and timeless. *Re-Covered* plays like a statement of this philosophy rather than just a compilation of recognizable singles. Indeed, it opens with what could well be considered a statement of method—some of Wilson's most memorable lines, from his collaboration with Gabe Dixon, "All Will Be Well": "The new day dawns, / And I am practicing my purpose once again."

Ensemble members reminisce in *Party People*, about the Black Panthers and Young Lords.



JENNY GRAHAM

Bards of America

Historical plays for a nation "stuck in the middle"

by LYDIALYLE GIBSON

THIRTY YEARS AGO, when Alison Carey '82 and Bill Rauch '84 were traveling the country with Cornerstone Theater Company, the ensemble they co-founded after graduating, they would set up shop for months at a time in churches and storefronts and abandoned gymnasiums. In small-town West Virginia or Nevada or North Dakota, they worked with local residents to produce classic plays adapted to the particularities of their communities. In town after town, a similar thing kept happening: the plays were almost always set in the present, but invariably, Carey says, "You'd bump into the past." A story circle in the Central Valley of California or a storefront in Mississippi would turn into a conversation about how people's families had ended up there, what traumas and triumphs

and fundamental forces had shaped their grandparents and parents and, by extension, themselves.

Carey, a history concentrator at Harvard, thinks back to those conversations now and sees a pretty clear through-line to her current work: overseeing the development of new history plays as director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's (OSF) American



Alison Carey

OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL