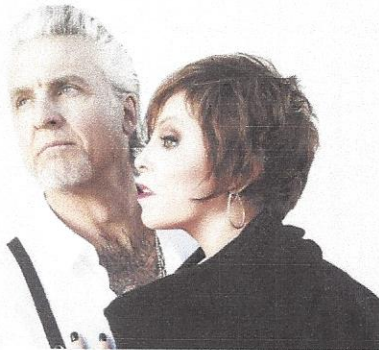


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Pat Benatar and Neil Giraldo bring the rock to Jersey

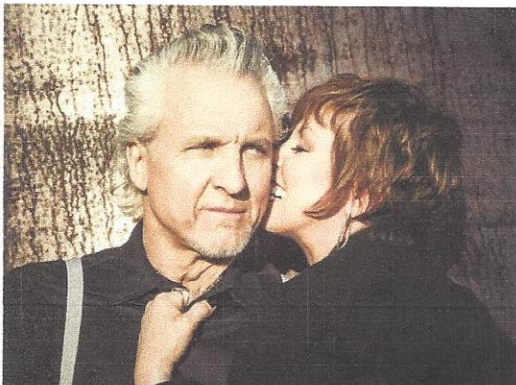


For nearly 40 years, Pat Benatar and Neil "Spyder" Giraldo have been essentially inseparable on stage, in the studio and at home.

The partners first met in 1979 and hit the charts that year with the hard-charging "Heartbreaker." After all of this time Benatar — the fierce singer with the booming, classically trained voice — and producer/guitarist Giraldo are still hard at work, four-time Grammy winners and parents of two daughters.

"There's no way for me to explain how critical (having each other) was and is," said Benatar, 64. "Our relationship is remarkably incestuous. It is rich and full on so many levels. And living a life that is like that, where not only are you allied as musicians and as musical partners, songwriters, etc., you then also have a romantic relationship, a familial relationship because you are parents, you're a family. So you have this life that is so intertwined and it is not without its challenges.

"I mean, we go home at night and our work goes with us, so we work really hard. We've been doing this a long time, it'll be almost 40 years, so we mostly have it down but it is not without challenge. Things happen and then you have to try and navigate through that because just like everybody else you have either career challenges or you have personal challenges, and these two things are at odds sometimes. But we have tried, vehemently, to always put our family and our personal relationship before everything. And then, as important as our professional lives are, they always come after."



One of those challenges Benatar was speaking of? Crafting a crowd-pleasing setlist that touches on their mainstream successes, the deeper cuts for the devout fans and any songs that happen to be personal favorites of the artists themselves.

"When you've been doing it as long as we have, it becomes kind of like — and I don't mean this any way except positive and good — is that it becomes kind of like a musical theater piece. In other words, it has a beginning, a middle and an end. So you want to keep those things intact because those things work really well for the show as a piece.

"So then, plugging in all of those other things, we have a thing called 'The Holy 14,'... which are the 14 songs that they bitch about if we don't do them, so we try to incorporate those, always. But that doesn't leave a lot of room (for other material)."

Recently, Benatar took to Facebook to get the fans' opinion on whether or not she and Giraldo branching out into "The Unholy 14," a collection of relatively obscure numbers.

"Everybody went crazy," Benatar said. "They were like 'Yes! Yes! Yes! If I never have to hear "Hit Me with Your Best Shot" again I'll take it,' that sort of thing. So we're doing that for this tour, so we're adding in all of these other things that we wish we could be playing all the time and things that they ask for all the time."

Their current tour brings the Brooklyn-born, Long Island-raised Benatar and the Cleveland native Giraldo back to New Jersey for an 8 p.m. Saturday, July 29, engagement at the **35th annual QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning** at Solberg Airport in Readington.

Other featured performers scheduled for the festival include George Thorogood and the Destroyers on Friday, July 28, Jake Miller on Saturday, July 29, and Plain White T's on Sunday, July 30.

Unlike another recent New Jersey appearance — a March gig dedicating the Asbury Park Press Stage at the historic Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank which saw Benatar and Giraldo performing as an acoustic duo — their Readington show will find them in full-band mode.

The beauty of the Benatar/Giraldo canon is that songs like "Shadows of the Night," "Love is a Battlefield" and "We Belong" work equally well as bare-bones acoustic numbers and full force rock 'n' roll rallying cries.

"It's really great to be able to strip away everything and still have a song that stands up by itself. ... As you begin the writing of it you're writing on a guitar or a piano and just the two of you — that's how, basically, all songs begin, (for) most songwriters," Benatar said. "You listen to John Lennon's old tapes and everything, they all basically start the same.

"So the goal is to have a song that is complete, coherent, works on its own. If you get that, you should consider yourself extremely lucky. That's basically how it works. Spyder has a theory that every song begins as a country song, just a few chords and some words and it has to stand up just like that, and we try to go for that every time — not consciously, it just happens."

PAT BENATAR AND NEIL GIRALDO

WHEN: 8 p.m. Saturday, July 29

WHERE: The 35th annual QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning at Solberg Airport, 39 Thor Solberg Road in the Whitehouse Station section of Readington

TICKETS: General admission \$24 in advance and \$35 at the gate, \$10 in advance and \$15 at the gate for children 4 to 12, VIP tickets to the Benatar and Giraldo performance: \$89 to \$125

INFO: For tickets, a full schedule of events and more information, visit www.balloonfestival.com.