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B-52's take on a new look

THE B-52'S - At the Channel, Friday night.

It was billed as a secret gig, but it was the worst-kept secret in town: even without advertising, the B-52's drew a full house to the Channel on Friday. About 500 fans were turned away at the door, but another 1500 got to hear the Georgia dance band fire up their songs of strobe lights, whammy kisses and rock lobsters.

The show was part of a brief, low-profile tour to prepare for a rock festival in Rio next month. A new album and full-scale tour are promised for mid-spring, but this time the B-52's brushed up on old material. With a few exceptions, the song lineup was the same as on last year's tour.

But the band looked and sounded a little different this time, and with good reason: two of them were Talking Heads. On most songs, the B-52's got capable help from the Heads' rhythm section, drummer Chris Frantz and bassist Tina Weymouth. The bands' friendship goes back a few years, since Heads leader David Byrne produced the B-52's third album. More recently, Weymouth made a video with B-52's singer Fred Schneider.

The Heads helped to solve a longtime problem: because only three of the five B-52's play instruments, they've always had trouble getting a full sound onstage. In the early days they played without

help, but the sound was thin. Last year they relied on backing tapes, which filled out the sound but took away the warmth.

But with this year's extra players, the B-52's could finally open up and swing. A few songs still used the original lineup, with Ricky Wilson's guitar scratching against Keith Strickland's solid drumbeat. But later Strickland moved to keyboards, while the Heads and two horn players joined in. For the first time, the band jammed onstage, turning "Party Out of Bounds" into a long rhythm workout. The horn-driven "Big Bird" even had a surprising touch of jazz.

Old fans could still make a few complaints: the band slighted their last two albums, and relied on the early records for crowd-pleasers like "Private Idaho" and "Rock Lobster." It would have been nice to hear some new songs, or even something from Schneider's recent solo album. And there was no need to play "Mesopotamia" twice, since it wasn't even a hit.

Still, it's hard to complain while you're dancing. The band was in strong shape, with Schneider playing the jovial MC; and Kate Pierson and Cindy Wilson singing their hearts out. The upbeat rhythms and offbeat lyrics made for a rousing, if familiar good time.

- BRETT MILANO