“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, including 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 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.”

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.
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.
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