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[music]

Lily Cornell Silver: I'm Lily Cornell Silver, and welcome to Mind Wide Open, my mental health focused interview series. Today, I am talking to incredible singer-songwriter Ann Wilson. We are going to be talking about her experiences with body shaming, the panic, and anxiety that ensued from that, and tools she uses to overcome it. Thank you so much for watching, and I hope you enjoy. Hi, Ann. Thank you so much for being here.

Ann: Hi.

Lily: [chuckles]

Ann: You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

Lily: You're a musical icon, but you've also become, I think, an inspiration to people who are dealing with inner struggles at the same time. That's something I want to talk to you about is, you've had a lot of inner struggles while being in the spotlight. Do you feel like struggling with that while going through your career has strengthened you or do you think that's something that's been more of a challenge?

Ann: Well, of course, at the time going through it, it's a challenge, you know? I can't lie about that, super challenging, at different times, to be learning about yourself in public and making mistakes and all that stuff. But now I know that it has really strengthened me. It's helped me get a thicker skin, and just know when to drop things, when to just move on from things, and not to get all tangled up in emotions and drama, when to just walk.

Lily: Something that's really helped me with that, and something that I think has helped most people in our family and in our circle with that is music. I'm wondering when you got into music, and if any inner challenges or inner struggles were things that inspired you to start to pursue music.

Ann: For me, too, it's always been music that's the thing that has made me want to keep going. You and I both know, you probably know and I know I know, that the human element in the music industry is not the finest part of it.

[laughter]

Lily: Right. That's the variable, that's the wildcard.

Ann: Yes. Music is cool, dogs are cool, people, eh, sometimes are really cool, but the music is always an inspiration and a real energizing thing and a shelter.

Lily: How old were you? When did you know music was the thing that you want to do with your life?

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Ann: I think I was probably about 12 or 13.

Lily: Wow, okay.

Ann: I always felt because I come from a real musical family, like you, I always loved it and took part in it and everything with the family. But I never knew I was going to do it, level up to a professional level, I guess, till I saw the Beatles do it in '64.

Lily: Oh, wow. Okay.

Ann: I would have been 13.

Lily: Just in the vein of mental health and being in the public eye, I read that you developed a lot of anxiety and panic based on the people that were body shaming you and coming at you while you were performing. I'm wondering what that looked like for you and how you dealt with that, and how you continue to deal with that.

Ann: Well, I had that anxiety about that really peaked for me in the 1980s when Heart was having its biggest commercial success, and playing like, tour after tour after tour of all these bigger and bigger and bigger shows, and having number one records and all this stuff. When that happens, you get into this really intense cross-section of spotlights. On top of that, it was MTV days, when you had to not only be in a band, you had to look like a model, you had to be able to sing and dance and act, and look just fantastic, and all this stuff all the time from every angle.

You can do it in a video, but then trying to take that whole thing out and reproduce it live was what was really super hard for me, and I kept getting criticized for not looking like a model, for being real. There were a couple of reviews, I remember that were just so cruel, so personal, and just cruel and nasty. I remember one time going into reading this review, we were in an airport, and I read this review of the show the night before that really just landed on me for everything that was wrong with me, and didn't even mention that I sang.

[laughter]

Lily: Which is ridiculous like that's insane!

Ann: Oh, by the way, she's a singer, but anyway [chuckles], but I read this review, and it was so nasty that I had to go find a restroom and get into a stall and just chill because I felt that I was just going to go crazy. I felt it was just all too much. I couldn't take all that personal criticism on such a huge public scale. When I chilled out, and I finally came out, I was okay, but that kind of thing started happening, where that led to me having stage fright. Like, I don't even want to go out there.

That kind of critique all heaped upon one person in the band, it's all my fault. That was too much of a cross to bear for me. I couldn't handle it.



Lily: Absolutely. And not to mention that it's completely an unnecessary cross to bear, and has nothing to do with you and your talent and anything that matters. And I think that's something--I'm really so thankful that you're here talking about this, because it's something that I think affects so many people. I know just looking back on my life, especially as a young woman, it's really impacted my mental health, just the world we live in, around diet culture and body shaming.

It's something that so many people in my life, even people I love so dearly, just feel obligated, almost, to comment on. That's something I've dealt with my whole life, is people just feel like-- Even people I love and people I'm so close to always comment on what my weight is and what I look like before they even are like, "How are you?" I'm so thankful that you're here talking about that because it's so impactful.

Ann: Yeah, and I think having said all the stuff we just said, I do think that the culture has come a long way since the 1980s in that regard. I think that there's more body acceptance now, simply because people have stepped forward and said, "Look, this is the way I am. I'm me." I think we have come a ways, but we're still a ways from really accepting each other, not only body-wise but politically, and just all kinds of ways. I think that's built into human nature to try and compete.

Lily: Yes, that fixation on differences and that fixation on how you think other people could improve can be such a deflection and such a projection of your own issues.

Ann: With body shaming, it's a really neat way to put the person in their place. If you feel that they're getting out of line or wanting too much attention or something, all you have to do is just body shame them. They automatically are wimped out and they withdraw. You can knock them down.

Lily: Just the idea that that's what people would fixate on in reviews of your shows is so astounding to me because you literally have one of the most powerful voices in the music industry, and that's the fixate-- That's exactly, and you just described it perfectly, is if someone's powerful, if someone's talented, if someone's fulfilling their purpose, it's like, how can you knock them down? It's pinpointing on things that they can't control or that don't matter.

Ann: Yes. In the 1980s, that might have been the lowest of the low in terms of female acceptance that I've ever lived through. It was when the lowest premium was put on female naturalness ever. It was just really incredible to live through that. At first, it was pretty fun to get all dressed up and have big huge hair and with the makeup and all that was fun, because it was theater, but then it became an expectation.

Lily: You were on the road and touring and doing MTV stuff for many years while that was going on. So day-to-day, how did you deal with that anxiety and how did you deal with that stage fright?

Ann: Day-to-day I think I partied, you know? I partied to relax, to escape those feelings of anxiety, pretty classic reasoning. If something is really terrifying and off



putting and you can't face it, you might retreat into drugs and alcohol, which is what I did at the time. Also, that's such a classic rock and roll arc. You know what I mean?

Lily: Totally.

Ann: I started going to therapy, and I got sober, got clean and that helped so much. Then came back to Seattle, got off the big arena stage for some years. That really helped. Nancy and I had this local band in Seattle called the Love Muggers for a while which was just an acoustic. We played at bars on Capitol Hill and stuff and it was just fun. And that took the fangs out of it for me. It became fun and comfortable and inspirational again.

Lily: Therapy is something that I talk a lot about on this series, and how therapy can at first be really uncomfortable before it starts to feel a thing that's helpful and feeding you. I'm wondering if you had that experience at all, like if therapy was really difficult at first because that was my experience. Then it became a thing that's helpful.

Ann: For me too therapy was super hard at the beginning because I used to get the feeling that I shouldn't cry when I was in a therapy session because I'd never be able to stop. So for a while I kept myself from going to therapy because I didn't know really how much was in there. But then when I did, and I got past the initial tsunami of emotion and everything, it was good. I felt way better.

Lily: Do you feel like you've come to terms with the bullying and the nasty shit that's been done to you over the years, or do you feel like it's still weighs heavy on you?

Ann: No, I feel remarkably light and free from that now. I think just at some point it might have been when I started learning meditation techniques. About 2013, I started to really get into that seriously. It was before I'd met Dean, my husband and we weren't together yet and I was a single woman with two kids living on Capitol Hill.

I just kind of... Let it all go, and I would just meditate every day. It was a huge turning point in my life. I was having trouble sleeping, so I found a meditation thing called Headspace online, and I just started doing that every day. I started at five minutes and then went to half an hour and then went to an hour, it really helped a lot.

Lily: It's funny because I had Eddie from Pearl Jam on my series and he talked about Headspace too, as something that's compacted form of meditation that gives you this moment. I think about the story you told of, about being in the bathroom stall at the airport, like that in and of itself is almost a form of meditation. You're giving yourself that moment, where it's just you and you're not worried about anything else, or what anyone else is saying. That groundedness has been something that's been so key for me and taking care of my mental health. I'm glad to hear that that's been the case for you.

Ann: It's almost as if, when you get into a super hot tormented moment like that, it's almost like you have to say to yourself a few questions. What's the worst that can



possibly happen? How bad is that really? Which is what I did for myself. When I was in the bathroom stall, I had to go, "Okay, what's the worst that could possibly happen here?" Stay in here for a few minutes and just chill. That defanged situations, if you put your arms around them, your fear, you just walk up to it and put your arms around it. It's not so scary.

Lily: That's amazing. That's one of the main things I've learned in therapy actually is learning to stop running from your feelings and stop running from your emotions. That can be so uncomfortable, but that's where the real healing begins.

I remember that the big house in Seattle on Capitol Hill in times when I was little, where I'd come there and see your kids and see you guys and I know, my parents and other musicians used to come and hang out there. I'm wondering if creating that creative environment was helpful to your mental health, especially being off the touring circuit and being in an environment where it was just creativity.

Ann: Yes. That was so healing for me, is just to come down off of that 1980s hellish roller coaster and just come home to Seattle that had a thriving music scene, full of interesting people, and just come back to it and just be allowed to just be. Not wear any makeup. Not have any hair. Not have any clothes. Just be me. It was so awesome. In those years, in the '90s, the whole music scene needed a place that was neutral, where they could come and there weren't a bunch of lawyers wearing plaid shirts, trying to get them to sign contracts and stuff.

A lot of the young Seattle musicians during the '90s were caught in a crossroads of ideology because the music they were making, the message generally was, "Fuck you," and then here comes the industry saying, "Here, sign here, and we'll finance more "fuck you" records." [laughter] It was just this weird sort of thing that all these young grunge guys had to contend with. A lot of them were really unhappy with being famous. They couldn't hang on to it. It was torture.

Lily: Therein lies the mental struggle you were talking about, as being in the public eye when that wasn't necessarily something you were anticipating or even hoping for.

Ann: Right. It was almost like a situation where there were two kinds of animals, the kind who were like entertainment, Vegas-y, MTV, Hollywood-y type, who were born for that, and then there were these other type that were musicians who were real people.

There was this whole songwriter pool in Hollywood. They'd just crank them out, and they'd go, "Here, here's a song. Yours don't make it, so how about this?" All the songs that were being put in front of us were just cookie-cutter repetitions of what was on the radio. And if you agree to do them, you could make tons of money, but you lost your soul, basically.

Lily: Absolutely. Do you feel like, you guys, you feel like with Heart, you were ever not given the chances you deserved, because people felt that you didn't fit like the



mold of what you were supposed to be, or because of the body shaming? Do you feel like you were--

Ann: Yes. I think there was a kind of a glass ceiling, where if you were going to be who you were, you were going to look the way you looked, as good as you could but not like a model, you'd hit this glass ceiling. You could only go so far. Then you'd be told by management, "Oh, you got to keep this bass player because he's really good-looking." There was that mentality. It's hard to even look back on that now because it's changed so much.

Lily: It does feel that way, being a young person that knows people in the industry and, especially in the Seattle scene, it does feel like there's a movement away from being so preoccupied with image and how one looks, and we're moving back to like, "Okay, but what's the sound? What are people saying with their music?" I'm super, super thankful for that.

Would you have any advice to give, or words of wisdom or anything for people in younger generations, or especially young women that feel like, they don't fit into a mold, they don't fit into society and don't know what to do about it?

Ann: I think you just have to either be what you really are, or you're in for it. You have to choose between being some kind of a show business construct or not, just being yourself with your flaws. If you have to make that choice, choose yourself. Don't believe anything, don't take everything so seriously that you paralyze yourself. There's a point where you have to just go, "Okay, maybe this is all screwed up, but I'm just going to withdraw from it because it's not me. It has nothing to do with me."

Lily: Yes and especially when we live in a society, that's like, you're just being blasted with information all the time. With social media, too, you're putting yourself out there, basically, for others' approval. It's finding a balance between living in the world we live in now, but still not relying on others' perception of you, to truly be yourself.

Ann: Yes.

Lily: What is something that is giving you hope right now?

Ann: Well, just this right here that we're doing is really cool. It's just like getting to talk openly person to person about something like body shaming, or how to live inside of anxiety. I have great hope for people your age. Of course, many people, but especially your generation, because I think that you were born smart and you've got immense issues to tackle in your lives. Thanks to my generation, and all the ones before me, that we've left for you. [laughter] I've got a lot of hope, and faith in your generation.

Lily: Thank you so much for being here, Ann. I said it already but your voice in this series is so appreciated. I know so many people already do look up to you and



admire you, but hopefully, people will get that even more from this episode. Thank you.

Ann: Yes, I thank you for having me.

Lily: Of course.

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