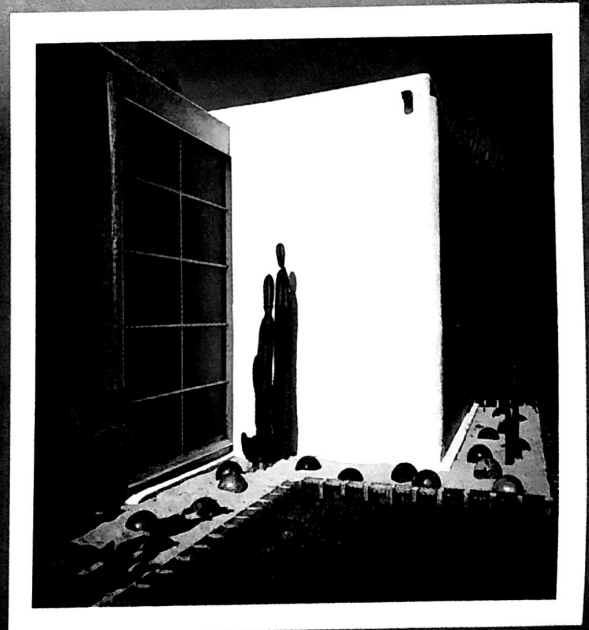


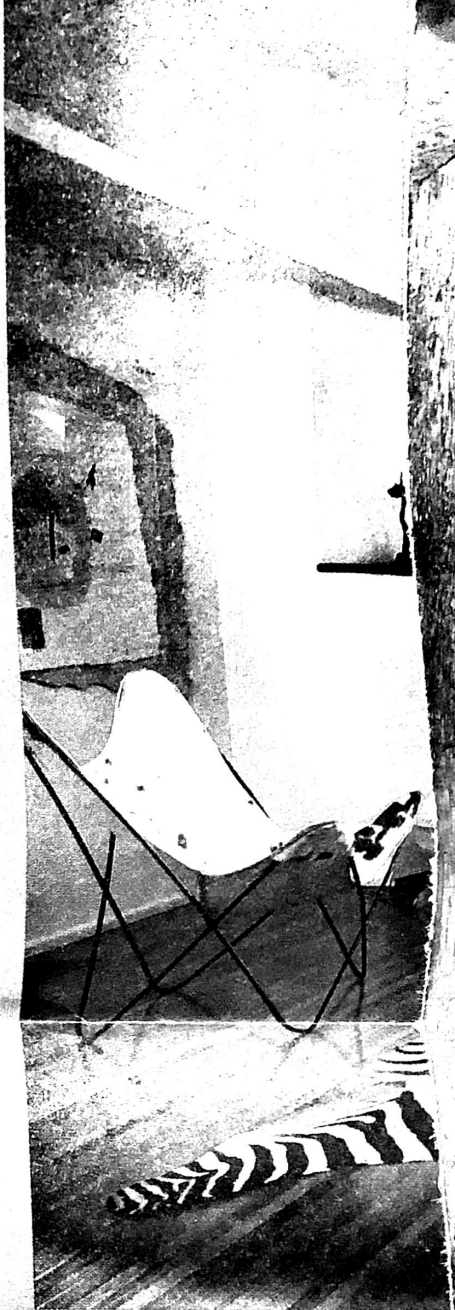
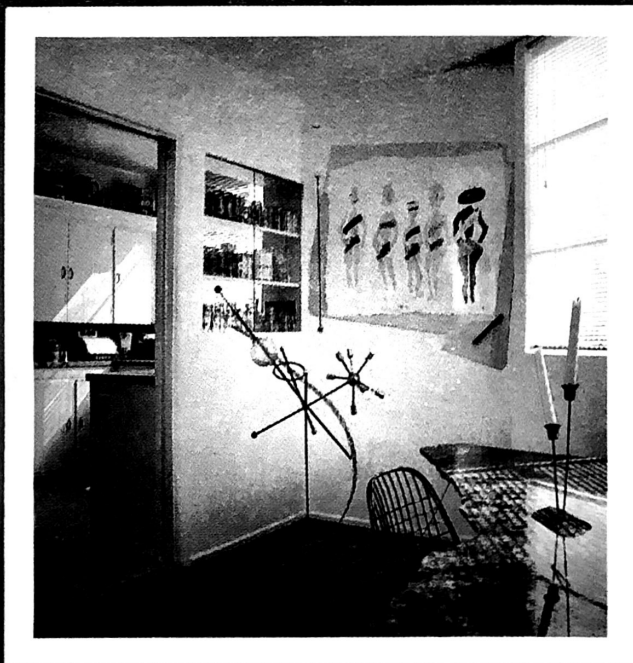
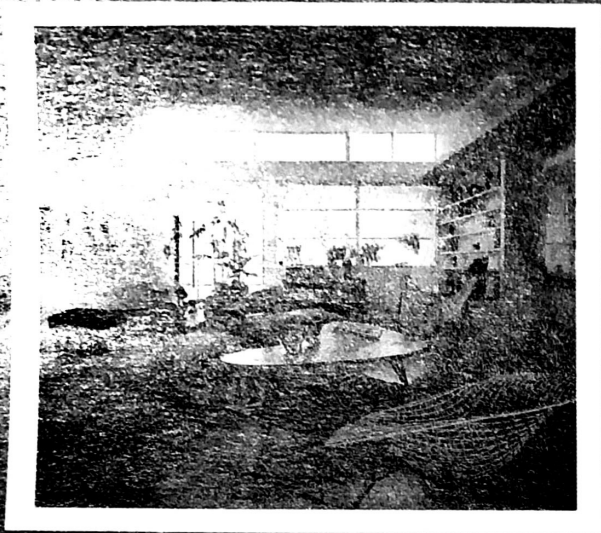


ARCHITECTURE

# The Rock Doc and Her Moderne Party House

BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA





White walls and hardwood floors of Willis' living room (above) serve as a showcase for the owner's collection of angular '50s furniture and her own kinetic artwork.

In the same room (upper left), as seen from the rear, a metal mesh chair and footstool by Harry Bertoia (foreground) are the only pieces by a name designer.

The mantel of the living room's fireplace continues into the dining room (center left) and forms the top of a cabinet that houses part of the Rock Doc's china collection.

The view from the dining room into the kitchen (lower left) is dominated by a geometrically elaborate satellite lamp and a construction on the rear wall by Willis.



"I shouldn't have really painted it pink, but how could I resist?" Allee Willis, songwriter, furniture designer, artist and collector *in extremis*, confesses in the voice of a child admitting to breaking a dish. She is remorseless, but performs the expected apology. Her William Kessling-designed streamlined, moderne house is what she painted.

Willis isn't one to apologize. She relishes and nurtures her role of renegade. In front of her North Hollywood residence, built in 1937 and used as a "party house" by MGM for their visitors from the East Coast, Willis has torn out the shrubbery and planted cactus and multicolored bowling balls. Her red 1955 Studebaker Commander and tritone '55 DeSoto are parked in the driveway, since her garage has been converted to an art studio. She answers the front door, which slides into the wall—"pocket doors," as they were called, were a Kessling trademark—and the first thing to catch one's attention is her hair.

Willis, 35, wears it shorn short on one side, long and unruly on the other, dark underneath and bleached blonde on top. This mop, the oversized red bandana shirt, striped trousers and leopard-skin-topped brogans are all part of her style. Not lifestyle but life as style.

"The atomic '50s...I've been collecting stuff from that era since 1969, before anyone else was into it," says Willis with pride. And when a realtor showed her the Kessling house, she knew she'd found a perfect home. It wasn't actually a

'50s tract house, but it worked. Kessling, a protégé of the great L.A. architect Rudolph Schindler, built about 20 houses around L.A. between 1935 and 1937, when he was arrested and jailed for embezzling supplies from Schindler. "People believe he's alive, and all of us who own Kessling houses would love to meet him but no one knows where he is," says Willis.

When she moved in, her new digs became the stage for her dramatic collection of furniture and objects. "All the furniture is authentic," she declares. A pair of amoebically curved pink sofas, shot with silver metallic threads, embrace a boomerang-shaped table. A butterfly chair covered in brown-and-white cowhide and a white metal mesh chair with matching ottoman, in black by '50s designer Harry Bertoia, are nestled in front of the curved white-and-blue-tiled fireplace. But Willis is quick to add that the Bertoia chair is one of the only pieces by a name designer: Most of her furnishings come from junk stores and thrift shops. She crows, "I would much rather own something really extreme and abstract in shape by someone you've never heard of than by a name."

This writer of such hit songs as the Pointer Sisters' "Neutron Dance"—which became the theme song of the movie *Beverly Hills Cop*, with combined sales of more than 7 million albums and singles—owns a hi-fi that cost \$45. Fellow songwriters and musicians were startled to learn that, until a few years



ago, she had no modern “stereo” equipment. But that’s her perverse way.

As she continues the tour of the house, which is considered by the L.A. Conservancy to be one of the city’s finest examples of streamlined moderne architecture, she summarizes her life. Born and raised in Detroit, where the Motown sound had a pronounced influence on her later musical ambitions, she went to the University of Wisconsin, graduating with a degree in journalism and communications. She aspired to becoming an advertising executive, à la Mary Wells. But after a stint in New York City, writing copy to promote the black and female groups at Columbia records, Willis struck out on her own as a performer and songwriter, financing the move with part-time work as a hatcheck girl at Reno Sweeney’s and Catch a Rising Star.

She recorded a solo album, *Childstar*, for Epic in 1974, attracting the attention of such musicians as Herbie Hancock and Patti LaBelle. So began her meteoric rise as songwriter. In 1976, she moved to L.A. and became known as the “Rock Doc,” writing original pieces for other musicians plus finishing their songs, molding them into hits. She was respected for her speed and prolific output. In 1978, more than 60 of her songs were recorded, and in ’79, three went gold: Earth, Wind and Fire’s “September” and “Boogie Wonderland,” and Maxine Nightingale’s “Lead Me On.” So it went: A legion of artists began recording her work at the rate of more than 100 songs a year.

“I had a ball for four years, and I worked with everybody from Stevie Wonder to Bob Dylan. But ultimately I felt empty,” she remembers. “I was an absolute machine, but I never started on anything from the beginning. I felt like I was the Carpenteria of songwriters. I could only be as good as who I was working with, so I could never get the type of music I wanted. People would bring me a little bit of melody and I would collaborate with them.”

All of this is by way of explaining a one-and-a-half-year period when she cut down her huge output, focusing on quality more than quantity. Simultaneously, she read up on electronics and built a recording studio in the house, which she had bought in 1980. She also craved other creative outlets, since her position as “Rock Doc” had left her unfulfilled. Her house is awash in the results. Among the “authentic” ’50s furniture, there are pieces of her own design. One pair of tables is constructed from windows of World War II fighter bombers, painted with swirls and spatters and mounted on automobile springs. She has begun selling such creations and was commissioned to design a dining-room set made of wrought iron, aluminum and cowhide, with a black-lacquer tabletop. The table and chairs sold for \$5,500. Recently, Willis formed a furniture company with partner Greg Abbott.

Kim Milligan designed Willis’ bed from an old shower door, an amoebic footboard of black-and-white cowhide, a “satellite lamp” *Continued on page 91*

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and a clock. Matching black metal, cowhide and blond-wood cases for her television and VCR, and a blond-wood chest of drawers, customized with decorative panels of cowhide complete the '50s-motif bedroom set.

Milligan's bar, a mosaic boomerang on a black base with a pair of dancing Ubangis on the front, stands in a corner of the living room. Willis explains how these invented '50s pieces fit into her collection: "It's all in the spirit of the atomic age, so I don't find it a conflict between this and keeping it pure. If I like something, I like it."

The Kessling house, with strong curves and angles in every room, seems the perfect environment for the expression of Willis' eclectic tastes. Frosted clerestory windows flood the living and dining rooms with light, while the front of the house masks all this with flat planes of pink stucco. The dining room is bowed out to the back yard, with windows overlooking a pool full of floating toys. In the breakfast nook, she had the banquettes recovered in period pink vinyl and the counters resurfaced in rosy atomic formica. She even found the craftsman who had laid the mosaic tiles at Radio City Music Hall in 1933 and had him inset images of rocket ships, Cadillacs and atomic-energy signs into her linoleum kitchen floor.

But the kitchen and paneled "rec" room downstairs testify to Willis' tendency "to buy in bulk." Shelves in the kitchen are lined with hundreds of salt and pepper shakers—shakers that pop out of a plastic TV set, shakers shaped like Howdy Doody, like Little Black Sambo, like rocket ships. Downstairs are china figurines of Aunt Jemimah and Uncle Ben, a curved bamboo sofa covered in leopard-print vinyl; and on the wall are a framed pair of blond-wood bongo drums, opening to reveal a completely stocked bar. Willis offers her analysis as curator: "The '50s was a convenience era—the rise of the middle class, the leisure class. There were convenience aesthetics, though things were never that practical. The curve furniture was supposed to conform to your body but it's really uncomfortable. Most people who spend any time in this house go out of their minds because they say there is no place to sit. I'm used to it."

A second downstairs room looks as though previous residents may have included Ricky and Dave Nelson, Wally and Beaver Cleaver, and Barbie and Ken. Shelves are stacked with toys and games—there's Mr. Peanut, Cootie and board games like I'm George Gobel—along with books from TV shows like *Lassie* and *The Rifleman*. They sound a deep chord of nostalgia in even the most hardened heart. "I have three more rooms like this that are filled with boxes of this stuff," Willis admits.

A child of the media, she is the proud owner of 12 black-and-white TV sets. Like many of us, she enjoyed a childhood disoriented by the riches of TV. She remarks, "I would like a career based on sidelines. Andy Warhol, to me, has the best career."

One such sideline is her art. Displayed on the walls of the house are painted figures mounted on backgrounds; some of them literally dance to Willis' music. She puts on the record, *Neutron Dance*, and her painting comes to life, the figures rocking to the music, the skyscrapers in the background sliding back and forth. She emphasizes that this is one of her first, from 1983; her more recent kinetic pieces have up to 247 moving parts orchestrated by a computer chip. She has sold some 70 of these works, and others will be exhibited at the James Corcoran Gallery next year.

Willis' second sideline is video. One such she assembled with "two bored friends," singer/songwriter Lauren Wood and TV agent Ed Millis. "They Must Be Told" was made for \$300, edited in Willis' bedroom and starred such notables as Linda Ronstadt, Pee-Wee Herman, Karen Black, Lesley Ann Warren, Buck Henry, Teri Garr, Toni Basil and Elvira. Willis played the part of Mrs. Spitbarf, the alter ego of Indira Gandhi, which she played in blackface. It drew crowds to EZTV, and lived up to the makers' hopes of being "a really bad movie."

With a new video and single of her own coming out, Willis refuses to limit herself to one pursuit and considers the art, the furniture, the music and the collecting to be mutually reinforcing. "I liked the '50s because it was a period of freedom, experimentation, spontaneity. It was such a creative environment. I don't consider it a chic style, it's part of my psyche. I always knew I didn't want to do what others were doing." □



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