



# brits and giggles

America has been overrun with pop tarts, boy-band bores and nü-metal lemmings. Can **NO DOUBT** supply the joyous pop-noise that America needs now more than ever? Bill Broun visits Orange County, California's finest in London as they add the finishing touches to their next record, *Rock Steady*.

A sigh of relief has risen from London. No Doubt are in town for six weeks, mixing down—after recording at locations all over the world—*Rock Steady*, their much-anticipated follow-up to 2000's *Return Of Saturn*. For most people here, No Doubt are a sight for sore eyes—not to mention sore ears. Musically speaking, the city is fogged over at the moment.

When the bubonic plague hit in the 14th century, at least the great bard Geoffrey Chaucer was on hand to pen a bit of poetic

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soft-porn and a noble parable or two. He didn't have groupies, but he could entertain donkey-cartfuls of doomed peasants. Now there's Bob The Builder, a hard-hat-sporting cartoon currently holding down the number-one U.K. chart slot. The famously fickle London music press is baying for animated blood, exhausting its well-stocked cupboards of cutting phrases in defense of the homeland against Bob. And even the latest *de rigueur* creed in town—that Blur and Radiohead have become giant bores—is sounding strangely subdued. It used to be, in the good old days of Britpop or electronica, there was plenty of grist for the trend-callers' mills. If you kicked one once-feted group aside, a better one always moved in. Just ask Morrissey or Fatboy Slim or Stereophonics. All have been dutifully filleted, then fried, like cheap cod. Nowadays, the demoralized nitpickers aren't so sure about this addiction to annihilation. Can the NME really afford to beat up such worthy targets as Damon Albarn or Thom Yorke? After all, Bob The Builder doesn't even have the decency to whine about bad reviews. And why should he? He's currently more powerful than Prime Minister Tony Blair, and far more authentic, most Brits would say.

So why would No Doubt set up house, even temporarily, in this discouraged nation? They were, after all, the ultimate feel-good party band of the '90s, the last decade's answer to the previous one's B-52's. There are exactly three reasons: 1) the most sought-after producer in the world lives here; 2) the least interesting singer in the world, Gavin Rossdale, of Bush, lives here, performing the worthy task of being singer Gwen Stefani's boyfriend; 3) as one of London's many thousands of Irish immigrants might put it, at the moment Americans are very “hot shite.”

In fact, even Americans are acting like Americans, which isn't usually the case when they visit Europe, asking for a pack of Gitanes ciggies and directions to the Tate. When Stefani gambols into one of the sunny sitting rooms of Olympic Studios, she walks with a spring of step and a bounce of hair that seem dangerously larger than life. This is a powerful, extroverted über-woman, a barbell-tossing GI Jane who could probably physically injure most music journos. There's something else, too. On another level, she's a more humanly accessible Madonna (another London resident), which for most mortals means a lesser goddess. But a goddess is a goddess, and here she stands, in a tight yellow and green tracksuit

jacket and slightly grotty jeans. She stretches back, revealing a well-administrated set of abdominal muscles for someone at age 31. If there is some huge psychic undertow in her—that sense of woundedness which almost dragged *Return Of Saturn* into a confessional black hole—it's being kept hidden today. As is last year's pink hair. She's back to peroxide blonde, with just a hint of brown roots showing.

She offers a handshake: two cold, lovely fingers and nothing more. “Hi! I just did my nails.” Yup. She's already gone, slipped up into that old “just a girl,” born-in-Orange-County ether. Don't believe it. Turns out, separating the performance from the performer isn't so easy.

“The only conscious thing that we did with this record,” Stefani lowballs, “was to make simple songs, fun, happy, upbeat songs you could actually dance to.”

A quick listen to six of those new tunes while sitting at the mixing board beside producer Mark “Spike” Stent (Madonna, Depeche Mode, Oasis, Björk, Spice Girls) reveals another story. This is a record of epic calculation and, if one brief listen can be trusted, a masterpiece. Yet Stefani makes it sound accidental. “When we went on tour last year with *Return Of Saturn*, we were listening to a lot of dancehall-style reggae at aftershow parties. So when we came home, we went, ‘Let's write one of those songs.’ It started off there.”

Needless to say, it didn't end there. *Rock Steady* has developed into a complex amalgam of Jamaican influences old and new, early-'80s new wave, electro-funk and synth-pop. It's more indebted to Kraftwerk and Herbie Hancock than a pile of Moogs, and far more arty than it wants to be.

The biggest news, everyone will say, are the list of collaborating producers. Prince's mellifluous harmony arrangements—not to mention his voice—threaten to take over the new jungly track “Waiting Room.” (“We got to work with one of our idols,” bassist Tony Kanal says, almost breathlessly.) Since we're going all 1981, better mention Ric Ocasek. His work on the knobs makes “Don't Let Me Down” virtually a long-lost Cars song. On the dubby angle, producer Nellee Hooper, as well as the “Riddim Twins” Sly & Robbie, leave delicious “dat's foony, mon” imprints on *Rock Steady*, and, really, this is where the new record ploughs fresh ground.

Appearing slightly worried by the mention of synthpop, producer Stent adds with typical English understatement; “There's a fantastic

feeling overall. Well, I think so.” And soon, you'll probably be thinking so, too. The single will probably be the slightly Shaggyish “Hey Baby,” though the menacing “Hella Good” is a helluva lot better.

“*Return Of Saturn* was our dark and sad album, and it was genuinely a hard time—mostly for me, I think,” says Stefani. “That's out of our system. The new record is a good-mood record. We started with the drums. In the past we always started with guitar. And everyone we worked with was just so amazing, and it's been so fun.” It is perhaps the thousandth time today that one band member has praised another band member, or a producer, or a parent.

Cast the mind back to the skadelic mid-'90s, before all the Britneys and Christinas, before a second could pass on MTV without a closeup shot of some honeyed section of midriff. It's worth recalling that Gwen Stefani owns the mother of all navels. Not that she's gone under any Taliban veil, but is she drawing away from the very girly-girl fashions she helped popularize? And, artistically speaking, just how influential does she think her bellybutton has been? Did she help create the cultural horror that is Britney? Can she sleep at night?

“I don't think those girls are copying me,” Stefani says tersely. “They're just completely manufactured by people trying to make money. There are people out there looking for girls who can sing and dance and look cute. They teach them everything to do, the girls become huge, and they believe that they are huge.”

Her voice has shifted from a frenetic Melanie Griffith patter to a calmer, more sincere tone. Now, at last, the mask is coming off.

“We used to all go to school, and we all had jobs, and the fun thing in our lives was Thursday and Sunday when we rehearsed. Once in a while we might buy a band lunch for \$3.50 each at Mexi-Casa. We all had backup plans. No one was ever trying to do this to make money.”

It's a plausible defense, but don't get out the weeping violins just yet. No Doubt have made it in a big way: They're hanging out in one of the most expensive cities in the world, and they won't be eating cheap burritos tonight. They've also brought some much-needed fun to town. Their only serious local competition, Bob The Builder, may not be capable of contracting bubonic plague, but we can hope, can't we? **ALT**