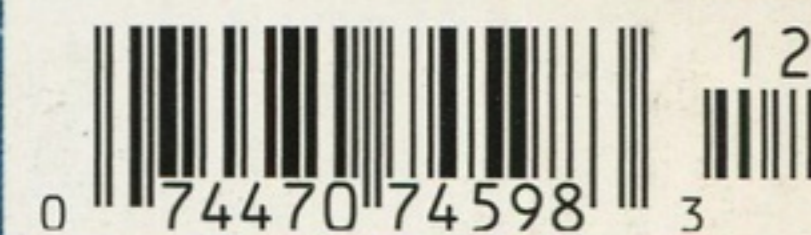


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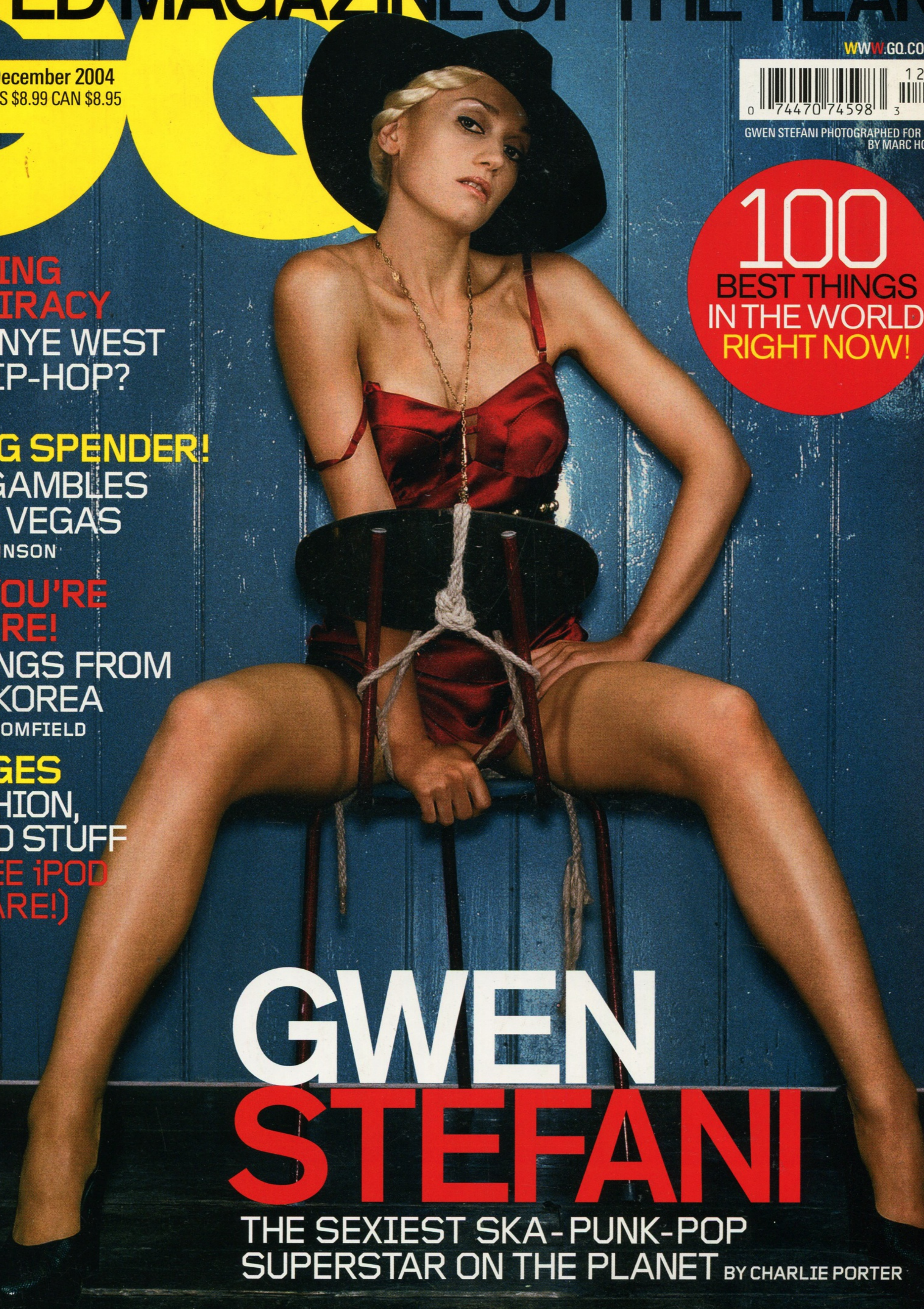
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GWEN STEFANI

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SUPERSTAR ON THE PLANET BY CHARLIE PORTER

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Gwen Stefani
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BOUND FOR GLORY

Story by **Charlie Porter** Photographs by **Marc Hom** Styling by **Andrea Lieberman**

Ska-punk siren **Gwen Stefani** is about to go stellar with her debut solo album and a plum role in **Martin Scorsese's The Aviator**. But **GQ** managed to tie her down...

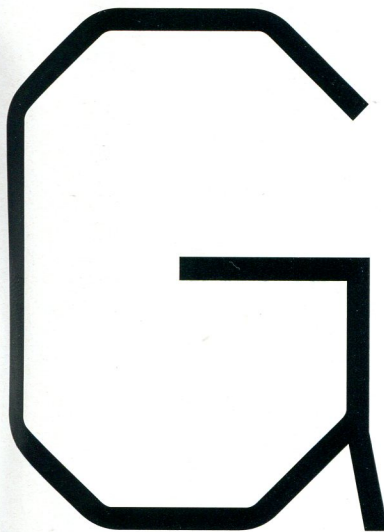


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'I'M SO LUCKY HOW IT'S ALL UNFOLDED.
BUT I WISH I HAD A FEW MORE YEARS TO DO
THINGS – IT'S GETTING CRAZY'



wen Stefani is

sitting in a Mercedes and she's fizzing, fast words, few pauses. "The record is ridiculous. It is RI-DI-CU-LOUS." Ridiculous, in her native Orange County, California speak, appears to be a very good thing. We're driving away from the photoshoot at an abandoned riverside building in deepest south London, where the basement rooms feel like dungeons and the sparse furniture includes what seems to be a miniature bondage chair, rope knotted tight across its frame. Would she sit on it for *GQ*? Stefani strides up and straddles it, happy to oblige.

Now on the back seat, the 35-year-old is talking about her solo album, a side-project from her on-sabbatical band No Doubt, as well as her film debut in Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator*. The tape recorder began on the seat between us, but she's grabbed it and holds it close to her mouth. She's long and limby, not the Hollywood shorty you'd expect, and she turns truly Amazonian in the space-age heels she wears with the thousand-pound bits of nothing. When we talk, out it pours, salty mouthed stuff in a sweet tone.

We can try and dress it up all we want, but we've spent the day in Deptford. The locality is grim, but for a few hours it becomes Gwenworld, a satellite town of LA. Earlier in the week, one of Stefani's people had told me, her tone call-centre flat, that they were going to "bang this story gangsta" – apparently a good thing. This became a *GQ* stock phrase, until someone discovered the slang originated from the particularly unsavoury sexual practices of West Coast hoodlums.

During the shoot Stefani bounces around the building: vest and combats when she arrives; miniskirt, bustier, barely anything when she's been trussed up. She mucks in readily, a trait that seems to be left over from her early no-money, no-fame days in No Doubt. Following their first live performance in 1987 – second on stage on a bill of 14 ska-punk acts – they cut their teeth as a back-of-the-van band. In fact, more than half of their 17-year history has been spent playing to increasingly loyal locals in their hometown of Anaheim, California. Stefani was 26 when the single "Don't Speak" broke through in 1996 and she suddenly found fame; an instant MTV image with her peroxide cover-girl hair and bright red lips. Even with the massive success of "Don't Speak", she had to maintain a get-on-with-it attitude. That song, and the rest of *Tragic Kingdom*, the album from which it came, was about the break-up of her seven-year relationship with No Doubt band-mate Tony Kanal. Which meant performing songs each night about the man standing on stage right next to her. Not how you'd want your public-eye career to begin.

Now she's used to living in the celebrity realm, there's this balance – hard worker and star. The latter sees her living a transatlantic life between her homes in Los Angeles and Primrose Hill in north London, which she shares with her husband of two years Gavin Rossdale, of British band Bush. Being a star also means she can snap; eight hours into the shoot, after she straddles a chicken coup in a thigh-slashed dress and the evening rain starts to fall. She's polite but firm: that's it, shutdown, let's get in the car. And she's still smiling.

After the drive, and after our drink, Stefani is having late-late dinner with Rossdale, and is ready in a bust-enhancing Vivienne Westwood construction, the tomboy thing of her early-career image now curving out to a more romantic femininity. But don't think she's demure – her "dudes" and "woahs" are all said wide-eyed, Golden State-style. Her new album is called *Love Angel Music Baby* (the initials spell out Lamb, the name of her clothing line) and she says it's "a silly dance record", something she's made while No Doubt relax after the success of last year's cover version of Talk Talk's "It's My Life", which recently won best pop video and best band video at the MTV Video Music Awards. Yet for the silly record, her co-writers and producers are among the most important musicians in America today: Andre 3000, Pharrell Williams and Dr Dre. The motive: to create a dud-free album, full of what Stefani calls "ABC songs" – easy-to-understand dance hits that are immediate, addictive, crazy. The result is one of the most ultra-hyped and ultra-anticipated records of the year.

It's pure coincidence that *The Aviator* is released at the same time, ending her years of searching for a suitable film role. Before she was cast in *The Aviator*, she went through relentless auditioning. "Something I really tried out for was *Fight Club*," she says. "When I got the

script, I thought, 'I can't do that, it's too nasty.' But when you meet the director David Fincher, he makes you think it's the most incredible women's role ever. And then you're suddenly like, 'Ohmygod, I fucking want this part.'"

She didn't get the part – it went to Helena Bonham Carter. For all subsequent attempts, the script hasn't been right, she hasn't been right, or her attention and schedule has been focused on music. But in January 2003 Martin Scorsese spotted a bus stop poster for US magazine *Teen Vogue* with Stefani on the cover. Balls were set rolling for her to try out for the part of Jean Harlow in *The Aviator*, Scorsese's biopic of Howard Hughes. "They sent me the script and I was 15 minutes looking for the part." She acts out flicking pages backward and forward. "I called and said, 'I don't see Jean Harlow in here.' It was on one page."

Actually, it was one line. Undeterred, she went to try out for Scorsese, where she was back down the ladder of fame. "It was so humiliating because you get used to being a star, and there are all these other girls at the same hotel. They are trying out for other parts, and they all know who you are. It's really awkward." But Stefani persevered and got the role, which involves attending a premiere on the arm of Hughes, played by Leonardo DiCaprio. "It was really familiar, because my scene is walking on the red carpet," she says. There was another reason why the fact-based role wasn't too tricky to perfect – Stefani's brief part of the script was taken from real-life film of Harlow. "Let's face it, dude, I had footage of her actually saying it."

In the movies, there are hundreds of people who can influence the outcome of the final cut. With the music, Stefani is fully in control, and when we meet she is still pushing herself to the limit. Even though she's already got more than enough tracks, she's hot from the plane after a last-minute recording session with Pharrell in New York, where they wrote and recorded three songs from scratch. ("I said, 'Dude, why the fuck isn't Pharrell on the record? He's going to be so bummed when it comes out and he's not on it'") and has only just got her head around the Dre track (the revelation came to her on a treadmill). She still sounds battered from going head-to-head with Andre 3000. "It's so hard to work with another artist that you're a fan of when you don't even know them," she says. "You have to walk in cold, and he's coming ►"

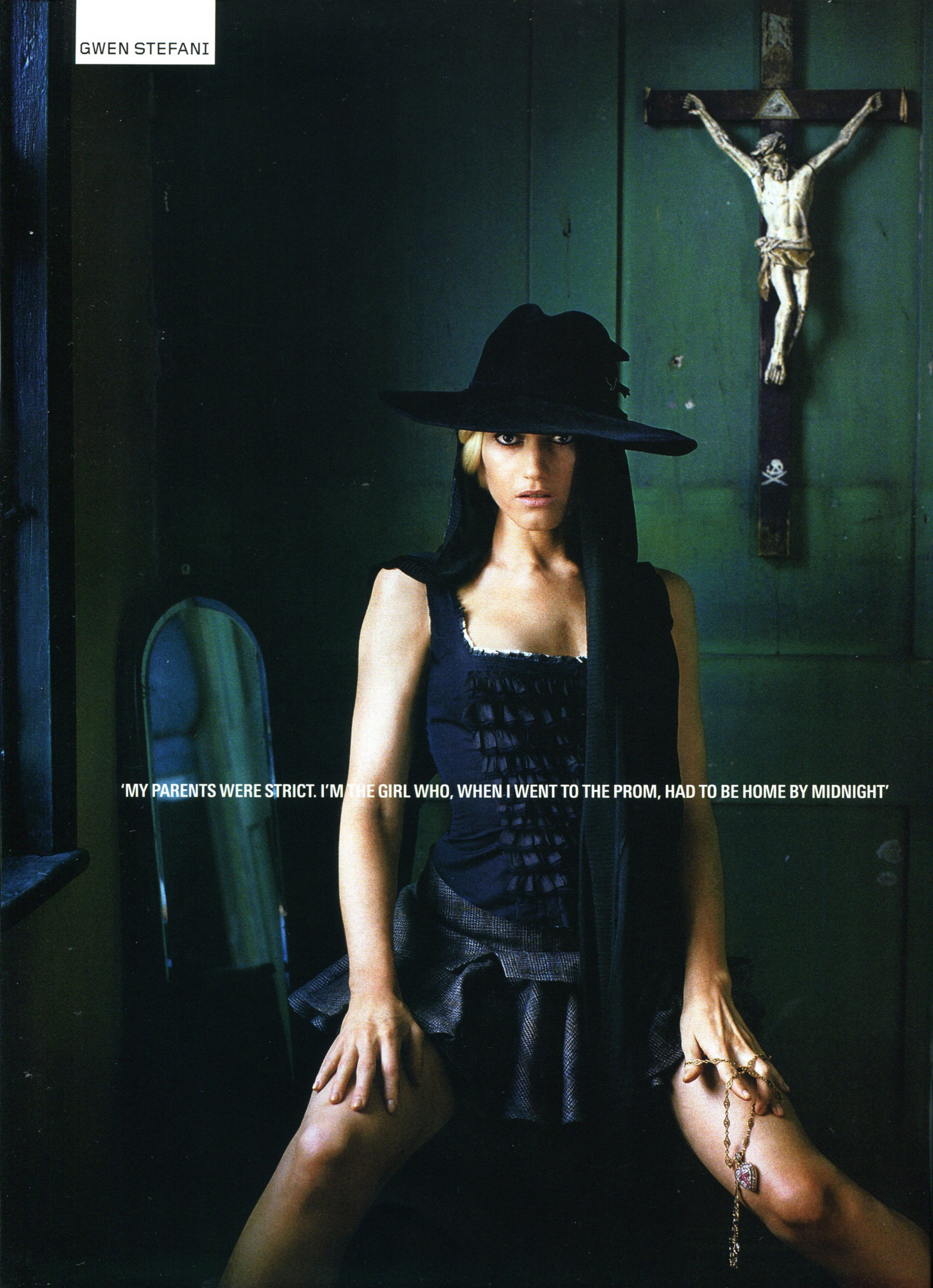
A fashion advertisement featuring a woman with blonde hair styled in a bun, wearing a dark blue ensemble consisting of a long-sleeved, open-front shirt-dress with a cutout waist, a matching high-waisted skirt, and long gloves. She is also wearing black high-heeled shoes. She is standing in a corner of a room with a rough, light-colored brick wall on the left and a wooden door on the right. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong light source from the left creating a bright spot on the wall and casting shadows.

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T'S SO HARD TO WORK WITH
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MY EGO WAS ALL BRUISED UP'

GWEN STEFANI

'MY PARENTS WERE STRICT. I'M THE GIRL WHO, WHEN I WENT TO THE PROM, HAD TO BE HOME BY MIDNIGHT'





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► up with all this shit, and my ego was all bruised up, rolled up in the corner." She blows a raspberry to show just how bruised up she was. And just to make it clear, the shit Andre was coming up with was good shit, not bad shit.

American pop in the 21st century is full of guest appearances, so Stefani's hook-ups are no great surprise. But the calibre and power of her collaborations belie her status – hot as a member of a four-piece band; potentially unbeatable as a solo artist. Some are repeat performances – Pharrell and his Neptunes partner Chad Hugo co-wrote No Doubt's 2002 single "Hella Good", while Stefani appeared with Eve on the Dr Dre-produced track "Let Me Blow Ya Mind" in 2001. Meanwhile, some are fresh meetings: the first single from the album, "What You Waiting For", is a collaboration with Linda Perry, formerly of Nineties band 4 Non Blondes, more recently the woman behind the credible rise of Christina Aguilera and Pink.

According to her definition, it's not a solo album. "If I was doing a solo record it would be, this-is-the-real-me, and I'd be on the guitar playing my heart out to everybody." No disrespect to Stefani, but the fewer this-is-the-real-me records inflicted on the world, the better. So why does she see it as silly? "When we were growing up, Tony and I were into Prince, Club Nouveau, Wendy and Lisa, the

about more spendthrift times. "We couldn't afford to make a demo. We used to rent the mic at two bucks an hour, then get to Taco Bell afterwards to make some cents. When we got signed to Interscope in 1991, we had to learn how to make records. The first record we made was shit because we didn't know how. I thought you jumped around like you did on stage." This first album, *No Doubt*, provoked little interest when it was released in 1992 – jumping around on stage was still clearly their forte.

Two of the founding members are no longer part of No Doubt. Singer John Spence committed suicide in December 1987, seemingly because of depression, after which the band called it quits, then quickly reformed. Gwen's brother Eric left in 1994 to become an animator on *The Simpsons*. Over those years, the four-piece which now makes up No Doubt formed solid bonds as they became a cult in the local community. "Even when I was 17 I would go into Tower Records in Anaheim and people would go, 'Look who's over there.' But it started to get crazy. I'd be going to college, and the day before we'd played there, and they'd banned us because so many people showed up, and we weren't even on the radio. I remember in class the next day, people going, 'Can I have your autograph?' I'd be all, um, 'I'm trying to learn.'"

time for the public. "A lot of things happened to us as friends and as a band, like writing an album about your boyfriend you never thought anyone would hear," she says. "Suddenly he's being beat up by everybody, them saying to him, 'You blew it, dude.' And in interviews all four of us would sit there, and they'd ask, 'So tell me, why did you break up with him?' for freaking years. And me, I was like, 'Wooh, I can't believe I got this new life, and all this confidence, and all this change.'"

Does she regret the break-up now? "No, nooooo way." Her second "no" is very long. "I don't regret Tony breaking up with me. That was what made me who I am, that gave me the power to have passion and drive."

The band seem to have survived because of their hard-fought past. Indeed, their history meant that although the subsequent two-and-a-half-year tour was the first time most fans had seen them live, the band were no beginners, adding to the buzz. "We'd been playing nine years, so we were pretty good at it," she remembers. "We'd go on stage, look at the audience and think, 'You're not going to fucking stand there and look at me, and not get off right now.' So when we went on stage, it was like, 'Fuck you, you're going to fucking like this.' We would kill it every time, and people liked it, because they like to be beat up a little bit."

HAVING WORKED WITH ANDRE 3000, DRE AND PHARRELL, GWEN STEFANI'S ALBUM IS ULTRA-HYPED AND ULTRA-ANTICIPATED

Family, the Time, and there was this one song by Debbie Deb called 'Lookout Weekend' that was a huge part of my life," she remembers. "So I thought, 'Wouldn't it be good to do a stupid Eighties dance record like that?' The idea just snowballed."

I try to make her see the discrepancy – that she calls these records a huge part of her life, then describes the genre as stupid – but the point doesn't stick. Maybe that is the point – their beauty is in their stupidity. "I'm a singles girl, MTV, I don't even listen to albums," she admits. "My husband is the opposite, the guy never listened to the radio in his life. And I'll be like, 'Can I please put on Radio 1 for, like, five minutes, and listen to what crap is on there?'" However much pop music is enjoyed and venerated after its release, it is because it is seen as throwaway at its inception that it is without hubris. It's a continuation of humility that has run through her whole weird career.

The story of No Doubt is a tragi-comedy. "We never made records, because we couldn't afford to make records," she says. We're now sitting in Home House, the London club where she and Rosedale held the UK leg of their wedding ceremony in September 2002. A fortnight later, Stefani wore her Galliano gown again for a reception at the LA home of her record label boss, Jimmy Iovine. Now, she's reminiscing

This knowing amateurism has its benefits. We're talking about how the skittish, stuttering rhythm of the Andre 3000 track on her album, "Bubble Pop Electric", resembles the goofy ska sound of nascent No Doubt. She thinks it's true of a track she did with Pharrell – "You Started It". "The chord changes are really weird," she says. "And with No Doubt we used to always write them like that, not on purpose, but because we didn't know what we were doing. Those kind of songs are so powerful because the changes are so weird, but once you get used to them, they're addictive."

Indeed, although her band was often on the same bill as punk bands, her home life was more than a bit nerdy. "My parents were strict," she says. "I'm the girl who when I went to Tony's prom, I had to be home by midnight. If I was walking to college, they'd drive by and say, 'You're not going to school like that.'"

Three years before *Tragic Kingdom*, the first record to get them serious attention, and cushioned by obscurity in the world outside Anaheim, Stefani wrote a raw song about her break-up from Kanal. "Don't Speak" wasn't the first single off the album – it was preceded by "Just A Girl" – but it was the track that blew the band way beyond their previous level. The album eventually sold more than 15 million copies worldwide, introducing the band to the masses at a painful time for them, but a juicy

Post-*Tragic Kingdom* and the ensuing years on the road, Stefani went back to California, finally moved out of her parents' house and bought her own place in LA. There followed another album in 2000, *Return Of Saturn*, but it was 2001's *Rock Steady* that consolidated their position worldwide with the hits "Hey Baby" and "Hella Good". Follow this with last year's greatest hits album *The Singles 1992-2003*, with that Talk Talk cover, and you've got a pretty satisfying, if loopy, career so far. Which brings us to the solo album. Oh, and to films.

She wants to do more movies, but it's hard to see how it'll fit into her work pile-up. Any major album like her solo project needs a year set aside for promotion. Then there's No Doubt, a band ruled by egalitarian meetings. Soon they will get together again to talk about their next step. Then there's her marriage: she says she plans to have babies. Then there's that women's clothing line, but since this is a men's magazine, I'll spare you the details.

"We're so lucky the way it's unfolded," she says. "Although, fuck, I wish I had a couple more years to do things, because it's starting to get crazy now." But this seems to be the pattern of her life: no breaks, just keep going. "We've been eating our cake for ages," she says, "going, 'Fuck, I can't believe we're still eating.'" **GO** *Love Angel Music Baby* is released on 22 November. *The Aviator* is released on 26 December.