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WITH GWEN STEFANI**

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BEST GROUP

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No Doubt!

GWEN STEFANI

Tops The Top

BY VINNIE PENN

Gwen Stefani took top honors "Best Female Vocalist" – and No Doubt won "Best New Group" in the 1996 Circus Magazine Readers Poll.

"Peek-a-boo!" is the first thing No Doubt lead singer Gwen Stefani utters when I answer my telephone, and from the way she says it – with a sunshine sweet little giggle – it is obvious from the outset that the native Californian is all girl, a "real girly-girl", as she puts it. But one thing Gwen Stefani definitely is not, is JUST a girl.

And "Just A Girl", the firecracker first single off *Tragic Kingdom*, No Doubt's third full-length record (and second official one for Trauma Records), is a sarcastic shoot 'em up of that very fact.

Now, over a year after the release of the band's breakthrough song and pretty much ten years together, No Doubt is a household name, a way of life...in other words: They've arrived.

Proof of that fact?

How about *Tragic Kingdom* inching its way into Billboard's Top Ten

albums chart and staying there after being on record store shelves for a period of time that often sees bands at the same point putting out their follow-up? Or how about the subsequent hit singles that came hot on the heels of "Just A Girl", like the reggae/rock foot-stomper "Spiderwebs" and the heart-wrenching ballad "Don't Speak"? Some would even say that doing an arena tour with those other

chart-toppers, Bush, was a relatively good sign.

But, to Stefani it's the little things, like appearing on "The Late Show with David Letterman" ("I still can't even believe we did that," says the singer). Not long after our encounter the band even took the Saturday Night Live stage.

"Going to Europe, too, was totally a dream-come-true," she purrs. "I was influenced by a lot of English bands. I still am. So just to be able to go there was unbelievable. Madness was one of my favorite bands, and I loved going to the places that they wrote about. I was like, 'oh my God, Primrose Hill! Camden Town!'"

To a couple of kids from Orange County, California, who had been local heroes for some eight years by the time Billboard came calling, a trip across the pond must have been a vindication of sorts. After all, co-founder of No Doubt, Stefani's brother Eric, couldn't even take the wait anymore, bailing just before the big time beckoned.

So the cross-country trek was endured as a four-piece: Gwen, guitarist Tom Dumont, bassist Tony Kanal, and drummer Adrian Young. But they prefer to think of themselves as a six-piece, including their two



No Doubt's frontwoman Gwen Stefani is the epitome of energetic good, clean fun.



No Doubt (l to r. Tom Dumont, Tony Kanal, Gwen Stefani, Adrian Young) is one of several outfits -- many of whom hark from Southern California -- that run the gamut from rock and punk to ska and funk on their respective musical maps.

zany horn players.

"They're amazing," Gwen boasts. "They put on a show of their own. You could just watch them the whole night."

As if anyone could take their eyes off Stefani for long periods of time, especially when the tiny ball of fire zips around the stage all night herself. There is no denying, however, that their horns are an integral part of what has become known as the No Doubt sound. Check out the brass blast that kicks off the rocker "Different People," if you're still not convinced.

"Well, we always had horns in the band," she says. "From the beginning we were labeled a ska band and it was never really true because we were always striving to have our own sound. In the past it was always a problem, like 'how are we gonna market these guys' or 'there are too many different styles'. Some reason it just

happens to work now and people don't mind it and kinda like it."

"Like" is putting it mildly. The record-buying public ate "Just A Girl" like it was an appetizer, "Spiderwebs" as if it were the main course, and enjoyed "Don't Speak" for dessert. Seconds is surely an option as well. "Sunday Morning" is a splashy, riff-filled ride, "Excuse Me Mister" a Madness-made free-for-all, and there's even a taste of disco with "You Can Do It."

"But, honestly, the biggest deal for us with this little bit of success, is that it's unbelievable because we never thought this record would come out first of all," she explains. "The goal was just to get the record out and everything else has been such icing on the cake...so sweet. We just really appreciate it. We know it's going to be gone some day. We're just trying to take every second of it and go, 'this is

so awesome, so much fun.'"

Plus, it did take three years to make *Tragic Kingdom*, a disc named, in part, after the proximity of the band's rehearsal space to Disneyland in Anaheim. Doubts of the record's pending release were especially high since No Doubt's previous outing was an independent CD on their own label

"I remember when I was younger, thinking that I would never be hard enough or cool enough or tough enough..."

EXPRESSION OF THE MONTH

No Doubt's Gwen Stefani drawn by Sarah Walker of Manville, RI



NO DOUBT'S

HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

SKA-INFLUENCED SOUND

BY JESSICA LETKEMANN

Back in early 1987, Gwen Stefani was a pretty well adjusted high school junior who loved the early 80's ska band Madness. And she shared a fascination for *The Sound Of Music* soundtrack album with her older brother Eric.

"Eric got way too much creativity and motivation when we were kids," Gwen told *Circus* about her brother. "He was always pounding on the piano and forcing me to come into the living room and sing with him and stuff like that. He was the one who got me into this. He's my biggest musical influence."

It was Eric who coerced his little sister to be in his new band with his high school buddy John Spence. Tony Kanal, who was born in India and lived in England until he was 11, joined the band after hearing that they needed a bassist. Kanal, not long after joining the fledgling No Doubt, was not only their manager, but also Gwen's boyfriend.

With Spence singing, Gwen singing harmony, Eric playing any

instrument he could teach himself (trumpet, keyboards, even accordion), and Kanal playing bass, the band began playing small gigs like high school talent shows. But Gwen was still very young and her mom and dad wouldn't let her go out on tour outside of Anaheim, even with Eric there to protect her.

In fact, "Just A Girl," No Doubt's

"We went through some really bad times in the past couple of years – personally and bandwise – and our whole way of dealing with that is humor," Gwen said.

endlessly catchy first hit, was inspired by Gwen's dad worrying about her safety when she was younger.

"I got the idea," Gwen explains, "when my dad used to yell at me for going to Tony's house and coming home real late. I don't think a lot of guys know what a burden it is to be a girl sometimes."

In the punk-heavy music scene of the time, having a girl in a band didn't exactly make things easy. For whatever reason, they didn't get their first real gig until they opened for a band called The Untouchables in nearby Long Beach in 1987.

But Gwen's gender was soon to be the least of the band's problems. In December, 18-year-old John Spence shot himself in the head, sending his bandmates spiraling down into depression over his demise, and leaving the band's future inevitably doomed.

Or not.

Again using his talent for persuasion, Eric Stefani convinced Gwen that maybe she could try being the lead singer. She did not like the idea,

but eventually agreed to try it.

It was after Spence killed himself, that guitarist Tom Dumont, whose previous band shared rehearsal space with No Doubt, and drummer Adrian Young joined.

Dumont loved Kiss, Judas Priest, and Black Sabbath. Adrian was a Hendrix, Journey, and Steely Dan fan until discovering ska, New Wave, and punk in junior high. Dumont and Young melded with the other two musicians and Gwen Stefani's two-tone British ska fanaticism. This created an odd mix of influences that would ultimately result in No Doubt's distinct melting pot sound.

Turning their troubles into energy, the band began playing as many gigs as they could find. Gwen has said in interviews, time and again, that No Doubt is a live band, not a studio band. It's no wonder that within a couple of years, the band was opening for famous Southern Californian bands like the Red Hot Chili Peppers (whose eccentric bassist Flea produced their original demo) and Fishbone. And once that happened, it wasn't long before record companies noticed them.

No Doubt was signed in 1991, and their first, self-titled album was released in February 1992 on Interscope Records at the height of the "grunge" revolution. Unsurprisingly, the uncompromisingly happy-sounding reggae, ska, New Wave, funk, and pop wasn't what the country at large was interested in buying in terms of music and *No Doubt* sold very poorly.

When it came to making a second album, Interscope got cold feet and tried to discourage them. So without any new releases, they plowed ahead through the early 90's playing shows and eventually became so frustrated about their inability to release tunes from their increasingly-huge repertoire that they recorded, produced, and released their own official bootleg, *The Beacon Street Collection*. On *Collection*, "We had so many songs we knew weren't going to make it onto *Tragic Kingdom* - we'd written about 60 - that we just decided to put a CD of some of the stuff out ourselves," says Kanal.

By the time it was released in early 1995, No Doubt had hit an interpersonal brick wall. Gwen and Kanal's romance fell to pieces and Gwen's

brother, Eric, left the band to become a full-time cartoonist for "The Simpsons."

Instead of letting these events stop her, Gwen was inspired to become the band's key songwriter. Where Eric had written a lot of No Doubt's lyrics before, Gwen stepped in with lyrics that told semi-autobiographical tales of everyday feminism ("Just A Girl") and failed love ("Don't Speak"). Interscope was so impressed at their self-made album that they gave the green light for another one, which soon became *Tragic Kingdom* (released under their subsidiary Trauma Records.)

"We went through some really bad times in the past couple of years - personally and bandwise - and our whole way of dealing with that is humor," Gwen said. "I think that's really apparent in the record. Even though things may have been bad, and some of the songs are sad if you really listen to them, there's still an element of humor to it all."

Within weeks of releasing "Just A Girl," the album's first single, the band were an overnight success. This took nine years in the making, of course. Following up with "Spiderwebs," and "Don't Speak," and touring so hard

that Gwen lost her voice, No Doubt quickly became one of 1996's bigger success stories.

Personal intrigue has also been a subtext to the band's year in the sun. It's ironic that the songs inspired by Stefani's relationship with Kanal are now what is making them famous. And it's just a little too fitting that Stefani has been strongly rumored to be dating America's reigning modern rock pin-up boy, Bush's Gavin Rossdale. When asked by *Spin* about the status of their relationship, Rossdale vaguely explained, "I think that she's amazing but so do a lot of people. As far as her being my girlfriend, when you're on tour with someone for three months..."

But personal lives aside, what really counts is still the energy and the band's willingness (perhaps even need) to put on a great show musically and with a touch of light and fun for *anyone* who comes.

"Gwen gets the girls into it," Kanal explains. "With a lot of other bands it's a testosterone thing. Gwen will definitely get the girls involved, give them songs that are their songs and it's their time to get boosted, be in the pit, whatever. Everyone feels like they're part of it, nobody gets left out."



In the punk-heavy music scene of the time, having a girl in a band didn't exactly make things easy.