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GWEN STEFANI

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Gwen Stefani
A girl's best
friend

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In 1995 a bass player broke Gwen Stefani's heart. The result was 'Tragic Kingdom' - an era-defining act of ska-revival that sold over 16 million copies worldwide, spawned multiple hit singles and makes an appearance in Rolling Stone's 500 greatest albums of all time. Last year, a full two decades on, Stefani's 13-year marriage to Bush's Gavin Rossdale fell apart while the world watched on. And so she released her first solo LP in 10 years - 'This Is What The Truth Feels Like' - and went straight to number one on the Billboard charts.

In the 20 years that straddle these two break-up bestsellers there's been a dramatic shine-ification of the once darling of Nineties alt-culture. When 'Just A Girl' landed back in 1995, Stefani became an instant hero for suburban females across the planet - this pregnant 30-something journo included. She had perfect skin, took brave risks with hair dye and could pull off a bindi (before we'd heard of cultural appropriation). But she also understood the crippling humiliation of having your dad pick you up from the party. She was your cooler best friend; she was Cher and Tai from Clueless all rolled into one.

Now she's a bona fide A-lister - complete with perfect gnashers, a stint as a judge on The Voice and endless tabloid inches frittered on her personal life. So can the new material still penetrate? What does 2016 Stefani mean to the Nineties teens for whom she was a goddess in train track braces?

Today I'm in an office block in rainy London and Gwen's at home in sunny LA. Her slick PR patches me through. "I'm literally putting mascara on as we speak," she races, sugary-voiced and conspiratorial, like we're already mid-chat. It's my dream opening line. I'm instantly transported to my teenage bedroom - sat cross-legged on a cabin bed, framed by sponge-painted lilac walls, landline phone tucked under my chin and a pencil drawing of Leonardo DiCaprio smiling down at me. I'm tempted to ask her for make-up tips.

Stefani represented the every girl, because that's what she (kind of) was. She grew up in the sort of world that you'd associate with '80s Spielberg. Anaheim, California, was a suburban bubble of safety and picket fences. About 25kms from downtown LA, Stefani describes it as "basically Disneyland" - she means this literally; it's the home of the world's most famous theme park, so it consists largely of "a bunch of motels and hotels and people who come from Mexico to work." But Stefani's proud of where she came from - the Anaheim mini-tee she sported regularly in music videos is testament to this.

She describes a happy home, in which her parents - childhood sweethearts and regular churchgoers - raised four content and rounded kids. "We were kind of like the most idealistic family that you could imagine," she laughs. And so it seems apt that Stefani's first major musical influence came via another impossibly perfect family - the Von Trapps: "The first time I saw The Sound Of Music that was like a real inspiration for me." She recalls progressing from musicals (Evita and Annie were other favourites) to the bouncy ska of

the likes of The Selecter and Oingo Boingo: "I could mimic a cartoon style - singers that had a lot of character in their voice."

When Stefani talks about her pre-fame life, she describes herself as "passive" more than once. At 17 she joined a band because her "cool weird older brother" (Eric Stefani) had gotten into Madness and wanted to harness her yodelly set of pipes. She paints a wholesome picture of a high school outfit that built a home studio in the garage and kept out of trouble by religiously practicing their chord structures. "Every Tuesday and Thursday we'd rehearse. We were really disciplined," Stefani recalls. "We weren't partygoers. We did music. That was what was fun for us." Calling themselves No Doubt, the group was operating within a niche that gifted them an instant following: "From the very beginning of playing we had a big audience because we had gotten into this ska scene. We'd always play for at least 1500 people."

Around the time that Stefani turned 21 the band signed to Interscope. Two lukewarm albums saw the label lose interest. But then Stefani was unceremoniously ditched by then-boyfriend and fellow band mate, Tony Kanal. "I guess once I got dumped by Tony, it was like something inside me woke up," she muses. For the first time she became more than just the vocalist, placing herself right at the heart of the band's song-writing process. What followed was 'Tragic Kingdom' - an emotional outpouring that she recognises as "naive and pure and honest," and, of course, hella relatable to a mass world audience. "I'd found myself," she exclaims. "Before that I was such a passive nobody. Just in love with my boyfriend and living at my parents' house. That was not what I was gonna be when I grew up at *all*."

In fact, she was anything but. She was now a Grammy nominee, tartan revivalist and front woman for an international sell-out live act. Album sales rocketed and her role at the helm of those live shows became legendary. "We had it down," she beams. "It wasn't paint by numbers but it was passion by numbers. You knew that it was gonna be incredible. You could just sink into it."

Ten years and countless albums in, it was inevitable that No Doubt's standout star would go solo. She cites a love of everything from Debbie Deb to 808 bass and the sometimes-stifling "democracy" of the band as fuel for her side-projects. "I just wanted to make songs that said 'let's dance'." So she worked with big pop and hip-hop producers - from Pharrell to Dre - and began releasing instant hits. Her first solo album, 'Love.Angel.Music.Baby.', went multi-platinum and secured her status as a real-deal glossy pop star.

There's no denying the giddy joy of 'Let Me Blow Ya Mind' at a house party. But this new stage in Stefani's career saw her OG cult fan base lose interest (myself included), while she fostered a wider but less obsessive appeal. She had gone from representing aspirational otherness to polished inaccessibility, even on talk show appearances.

And, by last year, Stefani was reaching peak sleek. Her turn as coach on *The Voice* had seen her name reach a yet-wider audience; she was as famous for her clothing lines as she was for her music - she even had a successful signature scent. Then, in February, her perfect world appeared to crumble - the tabloids gleefully reported that Rosedale had committed the ultimate cliché liaison: a three-year fling with the nanny. "When you're at that low, low point you start to get reaaaal spiritual," Stefani whispers.

Prior to her world being turned upside-down, Stefani had been beavering away at broadening her brand. She admits to having felt the pressure to cash in on her TV stardom and release some obligatory still-got-it new music. She'd been hunting for off-the-shelf tracks from big name hit-peddlers - everyone from Charli XCX to Calvin Harris to Sia - but nothing was sticking.

It seems that the epic length of Stefani's career has served to work in two conflicting ways: when she's at her most self-doubting, its weight is like a stone around her ankle. "I think that I just started getting so insecure. When you have a long career you start going, 'Woah, how did I do that?'" But playing mentor on *The Voice* also had its benefits - it acted as a sort of *This Is Your Life*, montaging for her all of her 'best bits' into bite-sized motivation that allowed her to get creative at her very lowest ebb. "It really helped to wake me up again," she admits. "To go, 'I did all those things! Of course I can do that again.'"

And so Stefani ditched everything that she'd been working on and went back to basics. "The first time that I went to the studio I was crying, thinking, 'This is torture,'" she explains. But as she slowly immersed herself in the work, it became her safe place. She recounts what can only be described as a creative epiphany: "It went from, 'I'm kind of desperate; I really wanna be on the radio, but I'm too insecure to write new music,' to 'Nothing matters anymore.' That's when I started writing again. It was the only thing that I could do."

She surrounded herself with a small - if decidedly Swedish pop - team, including Justin Tranter and Julia Michaels. For the first time since 'Tragic Kingdom' she truly headed up the song-writing process, creating a body of work that journeys from rock-bottom devastation to the giddy and schoolgirl-ish love that was inspired by her new relationship with *The Voice* co-star and country warbler, Blake Shelton.

When we speak, Gwen has just watched Beyoncé's 'Lemonade' and is still reeling from the intensity of it ("It was crazy. I can't even believe it - especially for me. I was like, woah!"). On first listen her concurrent break-up study doesn't exactly reach the same depths of soul-baring artistic abandon; it's a genre-hopping 12-track pop record for 2016. 'Send Me A Picture' is a sultry ode to sexting that owes more than a small debt of tropical-tinged gratitude to Diplo productions; 'Naughty' strays into solo Gwen chanty territory and dabbles in the faux-'20s vocals and swaggering piano that are the hangover of Luhrmann's

Gatsby; there's even an obligatory cameo from everybody's favourite one-eyed trap king, Fetty Wap, on 'Asking 4 It'.

But repeat listens reveal layers that lurk beneath the pop sheen. First single 'Used To Love You' is the album's 'Don't Speak' moment - Stefani's voice is always best deployed when she sounds almost doubled over with heartache. Three listens in and I'm determining to wrap my tongue around the wordy chorus, ready for some bedroom belt-outs. Twinkly synths teamed with iconic lines like "Suitcase / Band-Aids / Pulling back out the driveway" make for a Roxette-ish nostalgic sadness that begs to be wallowed in. On 'Make Me Like You', Stefani's bottom lip is firmly out, in a coquettish tease that hammers home her universal adorableness. Showered in disco-pop confetti she successfully depicts the inconvenient head-spin of falling in love when you least expect it.

In her tracks and in conversation, there's a 17-year-old magnetism to how Stefani expresses herself - something both endearing and heartbreaking in the melodrama of her delivery. When she describes the initial emotions of discovering that her husband had betrayed her abundant affections ("Everything's falling apart. I don't care about anything except for not, like, dying in hell") I almost feel like I'm re-living the pain of my first break-up. The LP's most successful moments deliver a similar guard-down vulnerability that reminds me why I first fell in love with her.

Perhaps the album's appeal also comes from the sheer joy of watching a woman in her late-40s happily doing her thing, ignoring the act-your-age haters to pick up the pieces of a world that shattered, hurl her heart back into the love game and share how all of that feels with her girls.

With success already in the bag and freed from the crippling coolness obligations of youth she's treating this as a victory lap and it's utterly infectious. "The fact that 'Used To Love You' came out and actually got played on the radio - I mean, they don't play women over 25!" she squeals.

No Doubt was the first band I saw live without my dad there to chaperone. It was 1997 at Brixton Academy. I was wearing a teensy kilt and a midriff-freeing kids tee that was adorned with a fluffy leopard-print heart that came with its own comb and straddled my bee-sting breasts. Nothing - not even my friend getting carted off by medics having necked half a Volvic bottle of neat vodka - could have stood in the way of my pure and unadulterated joy that night. I was pretty convinced that Gwen had acknowledged me from the stage and 100% approved of my look. I knew that if we met we'd be friends.

It's impossible to have a career spanning 25 years that doesn't have its chinks in the armour (the questionable Harajuku Girl-flanked bloopers?), but perhaps that's the secret to Stefani's success; it's when she's allowing us in, laying herself bare and sharing her imperfections that she is at her most perfect.

