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GWEN

NO DOUBT

GWEN STEFANI'S SURVIVED A FRIEND'S SUICIDE, A FLOP RECORD, AND A BAND THAT WAS SET ON SELF-DESTRUCT. NOW SHE'S AN INTERNATIONAL SEX SYMBOL WITH A HIT RECORD, A HIP BOYFRIEND, AND A WHOLE NEW SET OF TROUBLES. By David A. Keeps

Imagine being in high school back in the mid-'80s. You play piccolo in the marching band. You hate math. You're a little shy of confidence and creativity. And a little chubby. One day your older brother brings home a record by a nutty English group called Madness. It's rad and it totally changes your life. You hang out with the punkers and mods and start making your own clothes. Then your brother decides to form a band and makes you the lead singer. You are Gwen Stefani, sixteen going on seventeen.

Weeks, months, years fly by. It is 1992. A lot of crazy shit has gone down. You have lost your other singer to suicide. Your trumpet player gets his girlfriend pregnant and quits. You have a new guitarist, drummer, and bassist. Your band, No Doubt, releases a debut that tanks, so your record company blows you off. By 1995, you've been dumped by your boyfriend, the bass player. So you sing a song about it, "Don't Speak," written by

you and your brother, who's just quit the group, and it sends your second album, *Tragic Kingdom*, to the top of the charts. It is 1997 and you are Gwen Stefani, twenty-seven, multi-platinum queen of pop.

This is a really exciting time to be Gwen Stefani. And a confusing one. Her fashion aesthetic has been celebrated in *Women's Wear Daily*, but *Newsweek* called her a "skank." Critics question her credibility because she is from unhip Anaheim in Orange County and plays hugely successful, hugely catchy music. Her first hit, the feminist-lite "Just a Girl," has become an anthem of empowerment for her massive teenage female following, but she has always dreamed of being married and having kids. She is Doris Day in a tank top and bondage pants. It is unlikely that she will ever be the subject of a Camille Paglia essay.

There's more. Her low-profile relationship with Bush's lead singer, Gavin Rossdale, has given birth to high-octane ➡

rumors that they are (a) engaged, (b) married, (c) having a love child, (d) none of the above. (The correct answer is d.) She is suspected of being both a music industry marionette and a martinet, the de facto leader of the band, a future solo artist and movie star. (She has already met with three top Hollywood agents.) Not surprisingly, Gwen has her reservations about this story focusing on her, and the band waged a small, uncivil war over it.

I ask bassist Tony Kanal about all this. None of the band want to contribute to a story about just Gwen, but he responds diplomatically: "Before this record came out, we were always a band, a democracy—this was never an issue. There's a natural tendency for the media to gravitate toward lead singers—particularly females—and if you've seen Gwen perform, you can see that she deserves it. It's not something we've been dealing with for a long time, but I think we've gotten used to it." Gwen acknowledges that it's a problem they may never fully resolve. It's no coincidence that the video for "Don't Speak" was a narrative in which the band watch Gwen be singled out for the cover of a magazine.

"We were on tour for too long and we weren't getting along," says Gwen. "We thought the saddest thing we could do was a video about the band breaking up, 'cause we really thought we might." She is insistent about one thing: "It's not like Gwen Stefani and the No Doubt background loser boys," she declares. "I would feel naked without them."

Oh. And all this sex symbol stuff. Don't even go there. "I

from music critics. Their lead singers are held up to a strange double standard: Too Pretty To Mean It. If misery loves company, Gwen Stefani and Gavin Rossdale are made for each other.

After the show, they slip off to Beverly Hills for a private party for Bush. When she's in town, Gwen still lives at home, so her whole family is here, too. Gwen cuddles her baby sister Jill's brand-new daughter, Madeline. Later on, she returns to Gavin's lap. He holds her gently, one hand just underneath the back strap of the dress he bought her especially for tonight.

I NEXT MEET GWEN STEFANI FOR DINNER AT THE SWANK MAY FAIR hotel in London. No Doubt are here to promote their European tour. She has a Bloody Mary. (She's not much of a boozier. The last time was when No Doubt celebrated hitting number one. Tequila shots. "Self-torture," Gwen deadpans.) She orders pasta and a salad. Healthy. I want something meaty. So I ask her about the men in her life. There are two things Gwen cares deeply about. What her parents think and what her fans think. "I believe that sex is a sacred, private thing," she declares.

When it comes to the men in her life, there haven't been many. In the summer between eighth and ninth grade, there was Brad, her first French kiss. He had braces. In band class, she met a bad boy who had hair like Robert Smith and an uncontrollable urge. "Every day I would just be fighting him off," she recalls. Once, she had a mild case of groupie-itis: "I made out with the keyboard player from Fishbone, and he

She was singing "Just a Girl" and "Show me your tits!" "I'm up there making a point about how I feel the song is not as cool as a Courtney Love song, it is my life. They just

think earlier on there were ideas that since I'm a rock chick that I would be some slutty wild woman, and I'm totally the opposite. People are suddenly starting to accuse me of selling myself, like obviously I knew that ten years down the line if I kept it up, I would make some money off this belly button."

SCENES FROM AN AWARDS SHOW

The camera crews recording the celebrity arrivals at the American Music Awards never even see Gwen Stefani. No Doubt are late, and as nominees for Best New Pop/Rock Artist, they have to be seated. Pronto. No time for photographs. Gwen, very '40s-cover-girl gorgeous, swoops in, confiding to a friend, "What about my nails not being done?"

After No Doubt lose the Best New Artist award to Jewel, Gavin Rossdale sends an emissary to bring Gwen backstage. Sitting on his lap, she is anything but inconsolable. Soon, however, she looks the slightest bit worried. "My band is probably wondering where I am."

Gavin and his band, who are nominated for Best Alternative Music Artist, head down to the auditorium with Gwen in tow. "Let's go and watch the other cunts win," Gavin says, looking straight at me. "And you can quote me on that." Smashing Pumpkins take home the trophy. Typical.

It is no small irony that Bush and No Doubt are on Trauma Records. Each band suffers from an identity crisis. Bush, who are English, have outlasted their American grunge counterparts; Americans No Doubt are toffee-flavored new-wave ska. In a sluggish musical economy, these bands are a genuine, organic phenomenon. Unfashionably pop, they have shifted some ten million units for their label, yet they command nothing but abuse

tried to take advantage of the situation and I was not about to, and he got really mad."

She remembers the day she met Tony Kanal when he came to audition for the band. "He had on white huarache sandals and white baggy pants, and his hair was out like full funk, like really into Prince. I was really into dark guys then, and he has such a dark sense of humor, I couldn't help liking him." For nearly eight years they were joined at the hip. The relationship grew lopsided: She heard wedding bells; he sought space. He was a gentleman, Gwen says. "He did stay with me way longer than he wanted to." On *Tragic Kingdom*, they sugarcoated the bitter pill of their relationship and created modern bubblegum pop. They still had their friendship, and now they had success. "It's scary to think I could love Tony so, so much, and that now I can have a life without him. It's so scary that there's nothing you can do to guarantee anything is gonna be permanent."

In February of '96, she found herself on the road with Bush. No Doubt's leg on the tour was supposed to last three weeks. It stretched on for three months. On the third day she knew. "I was worried I was going to have to hide in my bunk, 'cause there's no way I was gonna start hanging out with some dude who's in a band that every girl wants to fuck." She winces. "Sorry, Mom," she says into my tape recorder.

The last thing she wanted was another musician. "But who am I ever gonna meet who is honestly gonna love me for who I am and not want my money? That's why I think me and Gavin have hooked up. When we get together, it's not like we talk about how much money we make and how many hit singles we have. We talk about, 'Dude, you're a fox! Quick, give me a kiss'—like two normal people that just wanna take a break from their work lives and hang out with each other."

Gavin Rossdale has it all. "He's the most sickeningly romantic

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guy I've ever met. And on top of it he's physically perfect—and I'm not even into that.”

Still, he's a London guy, she's a California girl. They're both always on tour. They haven't talked about their relationship in the press before “because we really haven't known where we stood. Why should we tell everyone else what's happening when *we* don't even know?” Gwen is certain of one thing: “If I get a crush on someone, that's that. My whole life is directed around that. I can't help it. I love love.”

SCENES FROM A CHILDHOOD

Gwen Renee Stefani was born October 3, 1969. Her first memory is of her and her older brother Eric stealing Oreos



CHANTING,

heard the audience being a chick in a man's business. Even though maybe totally miss the whole point, and I feel like a whore.”

from the kitchen, scraping out all the white stuff and making a big ball out of it. She was a girlie girl, playing baby dolls, house, and dress-up. Her big brother was “a nutcase,” always drawing cartoons of her and pounding on the piano every morning. “He was the one with all the talent; I was like Eric's little toy. He forced me to sing.” (I tell Eric this and he laughs: “I'd use the word ‘begged.’ I didn't take a whip to her. She had a great voice and she was really cute and had her own thing going.”)

Her fifty-something parents, Dennis and Patti, were once in a folk band called the Innertubes. Mom played autoharp; Dad played guitar. There was a lot of Dylan on the family turntable. “Gnarly,” Gwen recalls. She preferred show tunes: *The Sound of Music*, *Annie*, *Evita*, Kermit the Frog's “Rainbow Connection.”

She did sports. Water ballet. Soccer. “Mostly for fitness reasons,” she says. “My grandma was one of those really obese women—I think that really frightened my mom, you know?” At twelve, Gwen was put on a strict diet. “It was out of my mother's love for me. I don't know if that's so good for a kid to be concerned over that so early. I think it's haunted me in a way.”

Her Catholic parents were very protective. Before she saw *Flashdance*, her parents lectured the whole family about the heroine's sexual mores. For her graduation Gwen had to go to Disneyland instead of the usual hotel parties and had to be home by midnight. Six years ago, her dad took the family on a *Roots*-like trip to Italy. “It was like strict rules,” Gwen remembers. “We're going there to see the churches and the art, and you can't talk to boys, and you have to wear long dresses with your shoulders covered.” She was twenty-one.

Gwen couldn't believe some of her school friends hated their parents. Hers did nothing so stern that she had to hurl the F-word at them like some other girls. She did use the word onstage, against her mother's wishes, at a show that Mom had invited

relatives to, and for a week mother gave daughter the silent treatment. I call her mother. “That word?” she asks. “That's what you wanted to interview me about? I was quite shocked that she put that in her act. I know it's really common for young people, but I hated to see her accept it.” At least she isn't pierced or tattooed, her mother says. “Her fans can go and bleach their hair and that'll be enough.”

Gwen was her daddy's girl, her mother tells me. So I speak with him, too. Having been a marketing executive for Yamaha, he'd worked with bands, allowing Gwen to meet Sting and A Flock of Seagulls. He was supportive of his son and daughter's ambitions, but concerned. “Luckily we never had any troubles with her drinking or taking drugs,” he says. “She's serious about doing the rock-star thing as a profession, as opposed to ‘Let's go party.’”

And what does he think of his little girl becoming a sex symbol? “That's a little troublesome. She's very self-conscious about the whole thing. I think she's hit on a trend in society where blatant sexuality is really not what's happening; the healthy, athletic, happy, honest approach is where she's at, and that's why people find her attractive.” And her boyfriend? “Gwen's certainly very emotional, but I have 100 percent confidence in her judgment.”

SCENES FROM A PHOTO SESSION

In a London photo studio, wearing hot rollers, a sweatshirt that says DON'T TOUCH ME, and with a slight case of “pillow face,” Gwen still looks as fresh as a breeze on Sunday morning. I offer her a chocolate biscuit. No thanks. “I've started my diet today.” She thinks it's ridiculous that a few good photos have made people think she has abs of steel. “More like abs of Jell-O,” she says, frowning comically.

There are two band photo shoots scheduled. Gwen would like a close-up of the four of them sitting in chairs; the man from *New Musical Express* sets up a full-length shot. They go through their Madness poses. Gwen focuses carefully on each shot, chin down, eyes wide. Tony, jet-lagged, tries to keep his open. Guitarist Tom Dumont lifts his shirt and shows off his belly. “It's important to be comfortable with your body,” he explains. Drummer Adrian Young agrees. “Let's all drop our trousers and stand in our boxers,” he suggests. So they do. “You guys are nasty,” Gwen squeals, all boop-boop-be-doop.

Next setup. “What kind of expression does the *Melody Maker* like?” Gwen asks the photographer. She gives them plenty, directing the band to follow her lead: “Look dreamy. Cock your heads this way, I'll cock mine the other way. Now smile. Give him serious pissed-off English faces. Attitude. Oasis.”

It's almost over. “I have this really good idea that the ➡



"WE WERE on tour too long and we
about the band breaking up.' It's not like Gwen Stefani and

New Musical Express wouldn't do," she purrs as the band sit down side by side in the chairs. "Believe me, you'll love it."

Believe me, he does.

IN A CAR, DRIVING FROM NEWCASTLE TO MANCHESTER, I PLY Gwen with fresh fruit. She takes out a videocam and films us, introducing me to her parents. "It's going to be a proper, very educational story. And very ladylike," she promises. Her voice is tired—she had a problem with nodes last year—so for a while she quietly does vocal exercises that sound like gargling and bees buzzing. She's a bit embarrassed; I try hard not to laugh.

She's a delight, sweet and sincere, totally enjoying the success she feared might never happen. "I get my jollies singing onstage. Sometimes I feel guilty, like maybe something's wrong with me that I need that attention." Autograph hounds? "No big deal. Unless you're really busy and trying to buy tampons and it takes forty-five minutes because you're signing stuff." That's Gwen, always trying to please everyone: Her mom. Her fans. Her band. Herself. Sometimes she must feel like Gwenderella at a quarter to midnight.

Later we talk about her place in rock herstory. In the late '80s, all the bands in Orange County were punk-rock boys. No Doubt were different: Their herky-jerky ska was fun, their lineup was interracial, and there was Gwen. "At first, other girls would snarl and be jealous, like, Why does she have the right to even be up there?" Now, Gwen notes, "there's this real bond that happens and it's kinda like girl power. They can come to our shows and get in the pit and feel aggressive."

It isn't always empowering. When No Doubt played a pro-choice benefit, the not-very-political Gwen told the audience, "If I got pregnant right now, I wouldn't get an abortion. But isn't it cool that nobody can tell me what I can and can't do?" Afterward, she says, "the organization was like, 'We would've never asked Gwen Stefani to be involved if we knew she was going to say *that*.'" That's hypocritical, says Gwen. "They were pro-abortion, not pro-choice."

She also has discovered that even in the late '90s, boys will be pigs. At one concert, she was singing "Just a Girl" and heard the audience chanting. "I'm like, 'Cool, they're really getting

and he left to pursue a career in animation. (He has no regrets. He's working on a short film, has a new band, and may write with No Doubt in the future, he tells me.) Then Tony split up with Gwen. "I just had to grow up," she says. "I had to go *whoosh* and become my own person in the last two years."

SCENES FROM A PROMOTIONAL TOUR

No Doubt are just getting started in Britain, so Tom and Gwen spend four days visiting radio stations, playing unplugged versions of "Don't Speak" and "Just a Girl." (It pays off brilliantly; two weeks later, "Don't Speak" will enter the U.K. singles chart at number one.) At Viking FM in Hull, Tom answers all the questions put to him by soloing on his guitar. On their way out, off the air, Gwen says goodbye to Cameron, the wacky DJ, in her best rock-chick manner: "Thanks for playing our fucking record!"

At Hallem FM in Sheffield, she does a spirited, sarcastic version of "Just a Girl" and a hushed, poignant rendering of "Don't Speak." Eyes closed, utterly confident, she warbles, scats, and sing-sobs her way through the song.

Afterward, in the lobby, she stands in her full-length leopard coat, looking like Bonnie without her Clyde. (Gavin picked it out. "I said, 'What am I going to do with a pimp coat like that?' And now I wear it all the time.") She's starved. "Dude," she tells Jasper, the jolly promo guy from the record company, "my stomach lining is *digesting* itself."

We buy sandwiches at a gas station minimart. Tom and I spot a headline on a men's magazine: BRIDGET FONDA PUTS THE ASS IN *THE ASSASSIN*. We open it and look; Gwen doesn't. Later she tells me that she doesn't think pornography should be banned, it just makes her feel sorry for everyone involved.

In the car, she says, rather tongue in cheek, "There's a new controversy." Tom and Tony were offered the cover of *Guitar* magazine without her and Adrian. "Of course they'll do it," Gwen says. We talk about how No Doubt was offered the cover of *Rolling Stone*, and how that magazine's readers' poll ranked the group as the second-best new band while its critics named them the third-worst. "That's stupid. Don't put both in then," she says. "It just makes the magazine look dumb."

weren't getting along," says Gwen, "so we thought, 'Let's do a video the No Doubt background loser boys. I'd feel naked without them.'"

into it.' And then all of a sudden it's 'Show me your tits!' I'm up there making a point about how I feel being a chick. Even though maybe the song is not as cool as a Courtney Love song, it *is* my life and how I've been meant to feel throughout ten years of being in a man's business, and suddenly they just totally miss the whole point and I just feel like a whore. Like, what am I doing up there in front of all these boys with a little top on? Maybe I'm asking for it, you know?"

She's been through worse in the ongoing soap opera of No Doubt. There was John Spence's suicide nine years ago. "When you're that age and you don't even know the person is having problems, it comes as a complete shock." The band was constantly on the verge of breaking up. After their quirky, not very listenable debut album flopped, they persevered. They had a loyal local following (Gwen's red vinyl Contempo Casuals dress from the cover of *Tragic Kingdom* is enshrined in the Newport Beach Hard Rock Cafe), so they released their own CD, *The Beacon Street Collection*. "Interscope never knew what to do with us. They were still telling us to turn the guitars up and try to be grunge." Eventually the music business wore Eric down,

WE ARRIVE IN MANCHESTER TO DISCOVER THAT BUSH ARE playing two hours away. Despite her grueling schedule, Gwen wants to go. Her logic is compelling—"Dude, I do this all the time. I'm a rock chick"—but in the end she's too exhausted. At dinner, Gwen consoles herself with a sip of red wine and some passion-fruit sorbet. "Whatever you order for dessert," she warns me, "you'd better be prepared to give up a forkful."

Maybe it's the diet she's on, maybe it's just the way she talks, but it strikes me that every time Gwen tries to explain No Doubt, she uses unappetizing food metaphors. The group is a "watered-down version of Two-Tone." The record, a "salad of stolen devices." No Doubt is "dessert: We don't claim to be a main meal." It's as if she's apologizing for making music that's so delicious. I chide her for it. She takes the bait. "We never claimed to be saving the world with this—these are pop songs. But they also are songs from my life. So if you say they have no depth or meaning, it's like, well neither does my life, and neither does that whole horrible time period of breaking up with the boy of my dreams. It's like, Fuck you." Which, in its way, is like punk rock. And her mom may not like it, but it's also very, like, Gwen Stefani. •