


INSIDE

no doubt

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Madonna in monkey boots fronting a

ON ANY NIGHT OF THE WEEK, THE SLEAZIEST AND MOST powerful insider secrets of the music industry are just part of a casual conversation at the nearest Holiday Inn. Tonight is no different. Across from me sits Gwen Stefani, the leggy, platinum-blond sex-goddess singer for new-wave heroes-of-the-moment No Doubt. She is shamelessly explaining how she rewarded the California radio DJs who plugged

**No Doubt get in the ring (from left):
Tom, Gwen, Adrian, and Tony.**



manic collision of pop, punk, and ska: This is Gwen Stefani, and this is her band, No Doubt.



GWEN AND TONY, HER BASSIST, SPLIT UP LAST YEAR. "But I still force him to make out with me sometimes. I say, 'I'm not gonna hurt you, I'm just gonna kiss you!'"

No Doubt's first big hit, "Just a Girl."

She baked cookies for them.

"I wasn't bribing them," she tells me. "I just felt like I needed to do something to say thank you. I felt like we owed them something. Like, Jed the Fish is my *favorite* DJ, even though everybody thinks he's a dork. But let's face it, all DJs are idiots."

So did the guys in the band help? I ask.

Gwen laughs. "They just said, 'Great idea, Gwen. Everybody likes food.'"

This mix of girly-girl sweetness and bachelor-boy philanthropy spurred on No Doubt's flagship single—which, ironically enough, struck some listeners as a feminist call to arms. But theirs was not to be your typical American overnight success story.

NO DOUBT ARE THE FRESHEST KIDS ON THE block. Their wild style is an amalgam of ska, hardcore punk, hip-hop hiccups, and shiny metallic power-pop. Gwen Stefani holds the whole thing together: She has a voice that can phase-shift from sugary sweet to boulevard badass in half a second flat. She squeaks. She yelps. She growls. She is in touch with her inner Ethel Merman.

No Doubt rage in many splendid colors, but they embrace one label wholeheartedly: "new wave." And right now is a curious—perhaps excellent—time to be a new-wave band. Punk is king, and everything old is nouveau again. But unlike punk bands who want to be the ratty voice of the underground, new-wave bands have never aspired to make anything but shiny, happy pop, even when they're singing sad songs.

Nevertheless, it's a little startling to hear No Doubt talk about their influences. "Sting is rad," declares Gwen. "The Police were the best. I loved *The Sound of Music*. I liked Cyndi Lauper too. And I cried myself to sleep in the ninth grade when Madness came to town and I didn't have tickets."

No Doubt began as a ska band about eight years ago in Anaheim, California. After years of playing for the scooters-and-parkas crowd,

after losing a singer to suicide and a principal songwriter to an animation gig with *The Simpsons*, the band began a paring-down and juicing-up which resulted in their new album, *Tragic Kingdom*. The record's title is partly a joke about No Doubt's home studio, which is a block and a half away from Disneyland.

But *Tragic Kingdom* is also a pun about new wave and the band itself. Theirs is music that smiles crookedly, that glimmers as it cries: No Doubt sometimes sound like dippy, throwaway candy-stuff pop, but they've risen above real tragedies. Now, as their album rockets up the pop charts, they're trying to confront the fear that they themselves might be disposable.

"I WANT TO BE ABLE TO TELL MYSELF: THIS IS IT, right now." I want to feel our success because it's gonna go away. It's not as real as I thought it was gonna be. Like, someone will come up to me and scream 'I love you! You're my favorite band in the world! I've been listening to you for a *month!*' And I look at this girl and she's dressed exactly like me, with NO DOUBT written on her stomach. You know that she doesn't know who you are, and *you* know that you're a dork. Are you getting me?"

Backstage at the Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, about an hour before No Doubt will open for Bush, Gwen Stefani is trying to explain herself as she combs out her starlet-blond hair. Now she goes to her makeup case, which is covered with Hello Kitty and Rude Girl stickers, and pulls out a rainbow-rhinestone-studded black bra. Today was laundry day, and her bra is still not dry. She grabs a blow-dryer and goes to work.

Gwen formed No Doubt with her brother Eric in 1987. The children of a Dylan-worshipping dad, the Stefanis grew up with Southern California's bastion of new-wave radio, KROQ. By the time he was in high school, Eric Stefani was writing songs like

"Ache," which was about having his wisdom teeth removed, and "Rose Bush," which was about trimming the family rosebushes. Eric always made his sister sing his songs.

After they discovered English ska-revival bands like Madness, Eric and Gwen formed No Doubt to play with California ska bands like the Untouchables, amid a burgeoning late-'80s suburban rude-boy scene. Their first singer was a kid named John, whose style was more Bad Brains than Bad Manners. The band almost broke up when, less than a year after they'd formed, John killed himself. Instead, Gwen took over lead vocals and No Doubt pressed ahead.

The band signed to Interscope in 1991 and released a self-titled debut album, but the record company had second thoughts. Interscope withdrew financial support for No Doubt's tours and refused to allow the band to record again, except in dribs and drabs. Thus began the agonizing three-year start-stop project called *Tragic Kingdom*.

Before the record was finished, Eric Stefani quit the band in frustration and devoted himself entirely to his day job on *The Simpsons*. Then Gwen broke up with her boyfriend, Tony Kanal, who also happened to be No Doubt's bassist. Such were the tribulations that inspired most of Gwen's lyrics for *Tragic Kingdom*.

"Last year, my brother and my boyfriend left me at the same time," she tells me. "But I was so dependent on Tony. We grew up together—he was sixteen and I was seventeen when we started going out. Since we broke up, I've become my own person. I also think God gave me this gift of being able to live on a strange fantasy planet where Tony still likes me. And I know he does, 'cause he admitted it to me the other day."

But how can you stand to be around him?

"It's crazy," Gwen says. Then she starts giggling. "Well, I force him to make out with me sometimes. I crawl in his bunk and he'll say, 'Get off me!' I say, 'Don't worry, I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm just gonna kiss you!'"