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GWEN STEFANI

STYLE ICON MOTHER & WIFE INSIDE HER WORLD

BEHIND THE SCENES AT ELLE

EDITED BY THE INTERNS

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I'M

JUST

*Gwen Stefani is going back to the start: to singing, to the studio, to No Doubt.*

*She's still that girl we all want to be, but some things have changed, she tells Katie Mulloy*

Silk top by Peter Pilotto. Silk-tulle skirt by McQ. Leather and snakeskin shoes by Nicholas Kirkwood. Ring (worn throughout), Gwen's own

Photographs by MATTIRWIN

Fashion by NATALIE WANSBROUGH-JONES

A

GIRL





Silk top and matching skirt,  
both by Mary Katrantzou

Siren Studios, West Hollywood, summer 2012. While Gwen Stefani is upstairs somewhere, maybe having her eyeliner done, I'm running towards a pair of lift doors that are closing on some life-sized wall art of Steven Tyler and his crotch.

A frantic voice emerges from behind a small desk that I hadn't noticed and calls me back. A receptionist in her early twenties must 'call them' first. 'Are you excited?' she asks when I tell her why I'm here. 'I just love it when she's in the building,' she sighs. 'It's, like, so amazing to respect and admire someone for, like, their talent and not just because they're famous for, like, being a celebrity.'

I nod. I make some comment about the longevity of talent and how it is unbelievable that No Doubt, about to release their first album in almost 11 years, began in 1986.

She stares at me as though I've momentarily talked Flemish. 'Actually, I think you'll find it was 1984.'

*'For me when I first got into all the English ska music, that was, like, what defined me. That's who I am. If you are going to look at me, that is it.'*

About 50 minutes later Gwen Stefani walks out of the late morning sunshine and into the draughty, echoing hangar of an empty studio looking exactly as a woman who has gone all the way back to the beginning might do.

It is 26 years (I am standing firm on this) since Gwen joined her big brother Eric's little ska band in Anaheim, Orange County, California. And if someone had looked at her back then, then drawn a grown-up, futuristic version, they may have produced something like this. A fitted white shirt with a metal-look collar fixed by a skinny Dries Van Noten tie and slim trousers with zip detailing; the slightest touch of lady-punk. In her right hand she carries a decaf Starbucks (she swears she is addicted to what little caffeine is left in there), which she will sip throughout our interview staining its white plastic lid scarlet with her trademark lips. And now I have seen her up close, I can say that, yes, behind the shameless, celebratory make-up, her face itself is bafflingly, DNA-defyingly smooth. She looks... about 28. She is 42.

Sleeker, sounder, so much the same. She even carries her old friends with her. Sophie Muller, who, 16 years ago, directed the video for *Don't Speak*, is around today. They have been close all of this time, living down the road from each other in Gwen's Primrose Hill days and, because they are working together again on the video for *Settle Down*, the first song from the new album, Sophie has been staying with Gwen in LA for the past month. Gwen recognises the cyclical nature of her story. She will say later that she had fun experimenting in the solo years, 'playing different roles and pretending I was something else in a way. And now I just feel like I'm back to being the girl I was in ninth grade

when I discovered Madness.' Gwen and her bandmates – Tony Kanal, Tom Dumont and Adrian Young – have been trying to write this album – their sixth – since 2008. For the four years before that, they were on a self-imposed hiatus. During that time, Gwen, you'll remember, managed to keep herself busy. She collaborated with everybody: Eve, Pharrell, Dr Dre, New Order – and produced two solo albums that, combined, sold almost 20 million copies. But: 'I would never do that again,' she says. She suffers from that grim affliction, writer's block. 'I would never put myself through it, it was just torture... I cried during those sessions.'

During that time she also produced, with the help of her husband, Bush frontman Gavin Rossdale, two children. Her boys, Kingston and Zuma, who are now six and four respectively, managed, as kids do, to mess with No Doubt's plans somewhat. By 2008, when they reconvened to write, two years of pregnant-tour-baby-tour-pregnant-again left her creatively fried and unable to give anything to the record. 'We tried but it was horrible. I felt really hormonal, I felt really bad about myself. I couldn't write.' She had Zuma and still nothing. So, perhaps bonkers with breastfeeding, Gwen had the bright idea of going on tour to 'get inspired'. 'I was nursing and I had a toddler on tour; it was insane,' she laughs. 'I don't know how I thought that was going

to get me inspired or recharge my battery. Because it didn't.'

Though it did in a way – in the way that when life is at its most mental, you seem to pull something from it. The majority of *Push and Shove*, the band's finally-written sixth album, would end up being about 'being overwhelmed and the balancing and trying to do all of it'.

And on that subject, she concludes: 'It's not possible. There are always days that somebody suffers.'

Which is what tugs at Gwen constantly. Dominates No Doubt's record, dominates our interview. Unintentionally, we return to it over and over: her struggle to combine all the aspects of her life into one sustainable, satisfying package. 'The only thing I really worry about is, again – like, I keep bringing it up because it's my biggest stress – how do I do this *and* that? How do I do both? So that's like the constant battle that I have every day. I do worry about that all the time.'

It is becoming harder as the kids get older. 'When you first have a baby your life doesn't change. I mean, you have a little less sleep and you drag these cuddly things around and it's just amazing. But you still get to be you. Once they get to, like, five, six and school and it starts to get, like, "Wow, they got real problems. They're my responsibility..." Oh, my God. That is overwhelming.'

So despite the super-rich-super-famousness, there are still endless choices to be made. I've missed the last couple of fashion ►

*'[I had fun] playing different roles and PRETENDING I was something else. Now I'm back to being the girl I was'*



MATTIRWIN

Plexiglas and crystal-embellished cotton  
top and matching wool trousers, both by  
Prada. Leather and snakeskin shoes by  
Nicholas Kirkwood





Rayon-mix dress by Christopher Kane

MATTIRWIN



weeks because of school,' she shrugs. 'I can't leave the kids, I can't miss the first week of kindergarten. I just can't.'

The last year has been particularly tricky with Gavin off on tour – away then back again – throwing the Stefani/Rossdale routine around a bit. 'He's home now for, like, seven days, so just him being home makes everything different. In a good way,' she smiles. 'But also in a hard way because it changes everything.'

So it has helped being back in the studio with boys who have known her forever, who just get it; the shorthand of those who have lived the same life. They scheduled studio sessions around school days, limited themselves to a three-day working week and became uncharacteristically time efficient. 'They were so... careful. Like, my thing is, I'm going to come to work and write a record at 4pm and miss dinner with my kids and my husband and if I don't get something done tonight I'm a failure... So, you know, there was a lot of pressure.'

For all it has been a fight, she has loved it. Because 'being a mom is hard', and this stuff is fun. And more than that, it is the central part of her. 'I think a lot of working moms feel that way,' she says. '[They want] to have time to be themselves as well but, um' – she is drawn back to it again – 'it's really hard, there's a price to pay. Like today, I'm here talking to you and my son is at the beach. It would be super fun to watch his little four-year-old chunky legs running around, you know.'

*'It was all a big surprise. And I don't know what was better; the first nine years or the second. You know what I mean?'*

She has always insisted it's all happened by accident. She did it because she loved it – for nine years nobody beyond the Californian ska scene really knew who No Doubt were – and then everybody seemed to know who they were, and that created opportunity, which, obviously, she took.

So the early Gwen, who drove the band around in a van as the sun rose and did her make-up in a compact on the back seat, wasn't dreaming of fame or musical success. She was in love with her bassist, Tony Kanal, and she dreamed only of him. 'That first love you have is so huge and it was, like, so overwhelming and I remember defining myself by that.'

Basically I was so inspired by this love there was just nothing else. I wanted to get married, I wanted to have babies. It was such a short dream, you know what I mean? I didn't realise at the time there is so much more out there.' And then, thankfully, she got dumped. In songwriting she found catharsis, a dormant talent and the global generation-defining hit, *Don't Speak*. 'It unlocked a whole other side of me I didn't even know I had. Ever since then, I don't remember that little girl. She was different. I think that's the thing: discovering I had something I'm passionate

about and I think I'm good at. That defines me now, more than just young love or whatever.'

What about the next and lasting love? Shortly after she and Kanal split, No Doubt supported Bush on tour. Enter Gavin Rossdale. She fingers the plaited diamond bracelet that sits below a silver cuff on her right wrist. 'These are not my diamonds... but I was thinking they'd make a good 10-year anniversary present.'

She and Gavin will be celebrating a decade of marriage on 14 September, though they have been together for 16 not-altogether-smooth years. Given her dedication to him, you wonder how far she has really come from the 20-something who idolised love for love's sake. She has, in the past, described it as a relationship she 'can't live with, can't live without'. I put this to her. She pulls her legs down from the sofa so she is no longer facing me and clasps her hands between them. 'When was that?' she sideways-glances me. 'That was a while ago...'

She will share scant details. She has missed him this last year and describes the couple of months where they didn't see each other at all as 'horrible. But I'm so happy that he's doing what he loves to do and I think one thing that's on our side is that we both get it... We've been together for so long we know how to make it work.'

Inevitably, self-censoring doesn't work quite so well when it comes to songwriting and he has made it on to the album. 'There's a song called *Gravity* that's definitely...'. She trails off. I heard the song this morning when I listened to the album and scribbled down some of the lines – something like, 'We're so lucky, still holding on/Just like Venus and the morning sun, you and me got gravity.' It is a sweetly euphoric, fairly self-explanatory ode to enduring love. 'It's really hard to write a happy love song that doesn't sound cheesy. My mum cried when she heard it. I was like, "Whaaat?"'

The demands of the past year have meant she's taken a step back from the business of fashion (four years after attending her first fashion show, aged 30 – Vivienne Westwood, New York – she launched L.A.M.B., her own line. Harajuku Lovers, the mainstream, mainly accessories, line, inspired by her love of Japanese culture, followed. Last year she launched her kids' line Harajuku Mini in the US) though her personal relationship with it is as strong as ever. She is working a lot with interior-turned-fashion designer Kelly Wearstler, who she says is 'so straight-up chic'. When she shops she always looks ►

*'That first LOVE  
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and it was, like, so  
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I remember defining  
MYSELF by that'*

at Maison Martin Margiela and Junya Watanabe first. And, of course, there is her enduring love for Westwood.

And beneath all the knowledge and contacts is that innate ability to create an outfit rather than just wear clothes. Even when caught by the paparazzi going about her day-to-day business she is still always working it. She says she just has a strong instinct of what she wants to put on. Always has done, even in the years before the designer labels, when she was 'anti-fashion', shopping in thrift stores and flicking past girls in magazines for being too perfect. 'I just love getting dressed,' she insists. 'It wouldn't matter that there were people waiting outside my house or not, I would always get properly dressed. Ask anyone from before, from the first nine years [of the band], any of my friends.' The rest of it came in 2001 when she met stylist Andrea Lieberman – who took it to 'a whole new level' by delivering up Gwen's vision, in couture. The fashion world opened up. A year later, she was having her wedding dress made by John Galiano.

I say that I recently interviewed a singer who said that her own stylised look was just a mask, a work uniform. I get a sense that it isn't that way for Gwen. 'I think that when I go on stage, it's part of my ritual. In the 40 minutes I get ready, it's preparing me to transition into the hour and a half of sweat. But, no, I don't know. It's not that deep,' she stage whispers. 'It's just make-up. It's just clothes. You can't really make more out of it than it is.'

I think this nonchalance might be a new thing. She's always been honest about the work she puts into her body in order to fit into the clothes she loves, working out five days a week. But that has changed recently. 'I've kinda stopped working out for a while. There was so much going on in my life, I was like, "Do I really need to do this?" And it felt really good to let go of that and to start doing other stuff.' She says the focus has shifted from how she looks to how she feels. And when I ask her about the ageing process and if it bothers her (though, why would it? Look at her) she ignores the physical implications altogether. 'I think the thing that bothers me most is how fast time is going by. To look at my six-year-old. I mean I was just pregnant, I just did that tour... but, no, I didn't. [With this record] I just felt I was trying every day to not rush and to not feel pressured, like, "Oh, it has to come out now because of my age," or whatever. You can't predict what's going to happen, you just have to live in the moment. Everyone wants to rush me and hassle me. "What are you going to do

next?" That's the thing that upsets me the most about it, just how it goes by so quickly.'

*Me: What's the biggest misconception about you?*

*Gwen: I feel like none of it's real. Even the good stuff. It's impossible for anyone to really know me. My life, the reality of my life, is just the people that are really in it. The only time it ever feels real – and it's like a glorious version of it – is when I'm on stage. That's when you actually see the people. The people who bought the records and gave me this life.*

*I just LOVE getting dressed. It wouldn't matter that there were PEOPLE waiting outside my house or not'*

So that, as far as I'll ever know her, is Gwen Stefani. Though I think the receptionist, despite her misplaced confidence on dates, may have done as well in summing her up, identifying in that short exchange two defining reasons why Gwen is still a cover star.

Firstly: the effect she has on women. I think we all love Gwen Stefani a bit. Always have done. She was our girl-crush before the phrase existed, being, in those mid-1990s years, all that a teenage girl wanted to be. Bassy and pretty and cool and clever. None of that seems to have changed. She just topped it off by becoming a style icon and a good mum. And the other thing: for all that the glowing skin and the body and

the enduring cool suggests otherwise, showbiz-speaking at least, Gwen comes from another era. If this album does anything, it reminds us that she precedes our Kardashian culture, in which fame doesn't need to be a by-product of anything else. True talent is one of the most effective seducers. The receptionist loved her for it. So do we. ■

*Settle Down is out on 17 September. Push and Shove is out on 24 September*

**ELLE** UK.COM Watch Gwen in action on the set of this month's cover shoot at [ELLEUK.COM/ELLE-TV](http://ELLEUK.COM/ELLE-TV)

IN HER APPLICATION TO BE INTERN CELEBRITY EDITOR, THE WINNER, SAKAYNAH HUNTER, TOLD US SHE WANTED TO SEE GWEN STEFANI ON THE COVER. HERE, SHE EXPLAINS WHY

*'Muse and icon, she's a sophisticated and self-assured woman, with real feminine allure. It's her persistence and drive that have seen Gwen earn many titles in the entertainment industry: singer, record producer, actress and fashion designer. She also manages to be a great wife and mother – despite her heavy schedule. Plus, if there's one thing ELLE readers love, it's fashion. Gwen has a quirky, intuitive style, and is unafraid to be different. Her confidence just grows with age. This October, after a break, she returns to the music industry with No Doubt's album, Push and Shove. Who better than ELLE to celebrate the remarkable return of the icon that is Gwen Stefani? And is it just me, or are we all looking forward to having her unique style sensibility back on the scene? I know I am. Gwen will always be the one to watch.'*

MATT IRWIN

Silk jacket and matching skirt, both by Mary Katrantzou

