

THEY CAME FROM WITHIN: THE INTRA-BAND BATTLES, THAT IS. BUT NOW THAT NO DOUBT HAVE EMERGED FROM A ROCKY HIATUS WITH RETURN



FUTURE

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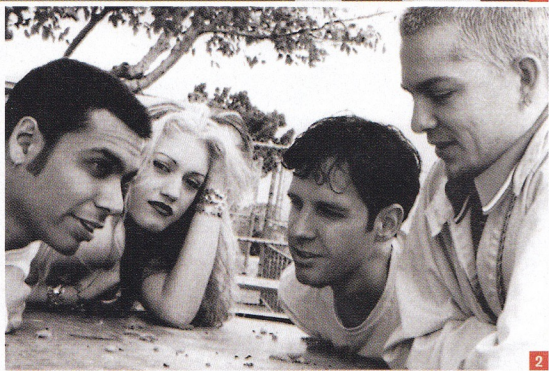
OF SATURN,

ONLY GWEN STEFANI'S INTERNAL CONFLICTS STILL RAGE.

BY CHRIS WILLMAN

THERE'S A WAR BEING WAGED FOR Gwen Stefani's soul. On one shoulder sits Suzy Homemaker. On the other, Suzy Quatro. • The rocker in Stefani seems to be winning out over the family gal by an Orange County mile. Which doesn't mean that No Doubt's new album, *Return of Saturn*, isn't ringed with massive layers of doubt about the domestic road not taken. "Who will be the one to marry me?" she asks in the album's dreamy centerpiece track. In "Simple Kind of Life," Stefani not only daydreams about giving up show business for a more tranquil station in life, she even imagines the birth-control screwup that might take her away from all this careerism. "I always thought I'd be a mom/Sometimes I wish for a mistake.../You seem like you'd be a good dad." • No need to buy her off-again, on-again significant other,

THESE



IN THE PINK Stefani (1) parties with Rosedale and Puffy Combs at a pre-Grammy bash in 1998; (2) powwows with (from left) Kanal, Dumont, and Young in early 1993; and (3) performs in Los Angeles in 2000

Bush frontman Gavin Rosedale, a copy of Dr. Spock just yet, though: This is fantasy, she insists. "When I was 21, I was ready to get married. Girls are always thinking of that. We're programmed," Stefani explains. "But I have to clarify this, because everybody gets it wrong. 'Marry Me' is *not* about the fact that I want to get married. I don't want people to think, 'Oh, she's turning 30 and getting moody and wants to settle down!' It's more about how I used to think that's all I ever wanted, and the confusion of realizing that I *am* more faithful to my freedom than I ever thought I could be. And that's scary."

So she's Just a Career Girl after all. And what a career: Probably no band that ever started off with as unremarkable a debut as 1992's ho-hum ska-fest *No Doubt* has ever gone on to craft a follow-up as successful as 1995's *Tragic Kingdom*...or an album as good as *Return of Saturn*, which, even as we don't speak, is bringing round a lot of formerly dismissive critics. You don't even have to be having an early midlife crisis to succumb, though it helps. For all of the quartet's new-wave revivalism, the disc fits squarely within

rock's grand tradition of confessional singer-songwriter platters, meaning there are plenty more ante-upping admissions of insecurity, confusion, and mortal anxiety where those delusions of familial bliss came from.

The ante that Interscope Records might prefer to see upped is the 10-times-platinum figure the peppy *Tragic Kingdom* managed in America (15 million internationally). Rarely does that kind of commercial lightning strike twice—"Never," guitarist Tom Dumont corrects us—but if you press the band, they'll admit selling half that many would be affirming enough. They've had a good enough start, selling 202,000 copies the first week out, and becoming the first female-fronted band to make a significant impact on alt-rock radio in well over a year. But even the modest goal of halving their previous success may stand as a challenge in the ever-younger-skewing pop climate into which No Doubt step, banging out anthems about grown-up "growing pains," taking on the concerns of the VH1 demographic in a total *TRL* world. And *that's* scary.

1. LARRY BUSACCA/RETNA; 3. GARY WILK



IT WAS DEFINITELY MY LEAST FAVORITE TWO YEARS of my life," says Stefani, settling onto a couch in Interscope's new digs, which were no doubt largely subsidized by...No Doubt. She's recalling the period spent writing and recording *Saturn*, during which "it was hard to figure out which of the Gwens is the real Gwen." Straddling 30, as she just did, "you start to feel like, this is me, this is what I am: All those years of blossoming, and now it's time to...perish." She laughs, not meaning to sound quite so morbid. "At the time, I didn't know what the feelings were all about. I was like, Why do I feel sad, and why is it that when I eat ice cream, it is not helping?" It was Rossdale who told Stefani she must be going through "Saturn returns," an astrological concept that explains (in case more obvious theories about scary round numbers don't suffice) just why facing the big three-oh tends to be a self-analytic drag.

Some folks cure their first midlife crisis by buying an SUV. Stefani dyed her hair Easter-egg pink, with blond highlights. She's color-coordinated today, curling up with her morning coffee in a pink velour sweater Ed Wood would kill for. She will not go monochromatic into that good night.

"I'd never experienced any kind of depression," she explains, describing her initial bafflement at developing a taste for Sylvia Plath. "I've always been a happy-go-lucky, passive type who attached myself to one person and lived happily through them. But I got to a point where I was going, oh my God, maybe this is what an adult feels like—and it sucks! And maybe nothing will ever be as exciting as it used to be when I was going through puberty. But," she adds, caffeine-cheered, "I feel a lot lighter now."

She's hard-pressed to explain her cure, other than experiencing the same postpartum elation the whole band felt when the album was done. There was no small pressure on this humble Anaheim, Calif., foursome, who'd quietly enjoyed a cult following on the So Cal scene from their '86 inception until *Tragic Kingdom* took to the stratosphere circa 1996. Says producer Glen Ballard, "It's a pretty regular occurrence that the follow-up album for a huge album can be the least fun album for any artist. They were beginning to feel like that was going to be the case. Everybody dreams of having that kind of problem, but the truth is, once you get there, it's not fun. I insisted that they have fun. And...they kind of came around."

Not before some false starts. Following 27 months of touring, they took just two months off before going back into the studio with *Tragic* producer Matthew Wilder in February '98. Half a year and a half-dozen or so tracks later, producer and band amicably parted. Six months after that, they picked Ballard (of Alanis fame) as their new coach—or doc; he describes his first task as producer as "performing triage." Sifting through tapes, Ballard found the weary band weighed down by 40 demos, and whittled the list to a workable 20 or so. Eventually, they cut two dozen tracks to arrive at *Saturn*'s 14. Did we mention money was no object?

But time was, to some minds. Due dates passed, but as

bassist Tony Kanal argued, "What, are we trying to capitalize on the momentum of *Tragic Kingdom*? It's been years!" They mixed and mastered one version of the album last summer, only to have Interscope execs suggest they soldier on further still in search of a single. Band members weren't sure they wanted to accept that advice from a company that initially had so little faith in *Kingdom* it had sublicensed the album to a smaller label. Stefani gamely offered to keep writing, resulting in a con-cretemp with drummer Adrian Young and especially Dumont, who firmly informed the singer that *he* was done. A short cool-off vacation ensued, during which Dumont sent Stefani his own demos as a peace offering, and the group came back together to record a final track, "Ex-Girlfriend," which has turned out to be one of the best rock singles since rock was in vogue. (And which set the terrible precedent of proving a record label right.)

There was also a tension—a healthy one, they insist—between, on one side, ex-lovers and ongoing confidants Stefani and Kanal, who steered toward a more reflective tenor, and the lyrically unconcerned camp of Young and Dumont, who were less than stoked by the prospect of touring behind a bunch of soul-searching ballads. "Whenever it seemed like it was getting too mellow or melancholy," admits Young, "I probably was irritating everybody, making sure that we didn't let it fall below the line of *not rocking*. That was something I was constantly pounding on, telling Tom, 'Put more distortion on your guitar!' trying to sneak in fast tempos here and there."

EX-GIRLFRIEND" IS NOT, AS MANY ASSUME, about Stefani's relationship with Kanal, à la "Don't Speak," but written during a fallow period with Rossdale. ("There's a little bit of Tony still [in some lyrics], too," Stefani says.) "Of course [Gavin] is gonna be all over the album, because certain things in my life are off balance, and I write about those. The relationship definitely suffers because I'm doing the band the whole time. But," she says, "I'm all over his album, not necessarily in a good way."

Perhaps the woman doth protest too much. Among the more likable and least pretentious of rock stars, this 50-miles-southeast-of-the-Valley girl probably *would* make a good mom, come to think of it. She's not so sure herself.

"Anyone who knows me knows having a family has always been the most important thing to me. I wanted to be a mother—which is an unconditional giving of love—and a supportive wife, and suddenly, I can't even be a good girlfriend, because I can't seem to find the right time to call. I want to do it all, but I can only do one thing good, and right now I've chosen to do this. Being in a band is a bit of a selfish choice." Maybe it's just the coffee talking, but she seems a little blue about the big life picture and positively elated about the smaller one—that is, the year about to be spent on the road—all at once. For the time being, just call her Suzy Houserocker. ■

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