

IS THIS THE END

OF ALTERNATIVE?

# guitar

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# NO DOUBT

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by Bob Gulla

DOUBT

Tom Dumont  
& Tony Kanal  
Signal The  
End of  
Modern Rock

**O**ne thing is for sure. The bell has tolled. Alternative rock is dead. Shut the coffin, tighten the bolts. After some brilliant contributions (Nirvana, Nine Inch Nails, Sonic Youth) to the music world over the last decade, the flame is now extinguished, sending its last, weakened plume skyward. Eh . . . better to burn out than to fade away, right?

Though "serious" players may be breathing a collective sigh of relief at the news—alternative rock having served as a thorn in the side of many of you for quite a while—its death leaves a few questions unanswered. First, how did it die? Wasn't it just storming the airwaves? Second, what will take its place in the national market? And last, does anybody care?

The truth is, the music wasn't developing lasting relationships with its fans. No sooner would Band A release a decent record attracting a handful of us when Band B would come along and steal us all away. There was no band loyalty on behalf of its fans and no band development on behalf of their labels. So really, in an attempt to capitalize on it, the industry killed its own (bastard) son—shot it dead. What will take its place, you ask? Whether you like them or not, bands like 311, Counting Crows, the Eels, Fun Lovin' Criminals, Sponge,

and the subject of this month's cover story, No Doubt. In lieu of superstar mega-bands—which have grown rarer than dodo birds in Des Moines—these outfits have capitalized on the gaps, burrowing sizable niches between the alternative and mainstream groupings, with crossover potential most alternative bands couldn't dream of (Weezer, where'd you go?). These bands talk the talk of their fans, empathize with them in a way so many alternative bands couldn't, and see the forest and the trees within it.





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to become one of the most coveted bands in the land. After gigging in and around L.A. for over five years, their eponymous debut in 1992 sank like a stone. Not to be discouraged—their live shows were still anticipated events—the band regrouped and in early 1995 released *The Beacon Street Collection* on its own, without the aid of a label. That also made little commercial impact, but its follow-up, *Tragic Kingdom*, the band's first album under the aegis of Trauma/Interscope, has sold enough to keep it at the top of the charts for months. If you don't already have a copy of it you're in the loser minority, 'cause 10 million others already do.

Needless to say, the L.A. crew proved to be in demand and hellishly elusive to track down. After a breathless world-

wide search, the band turned up in the wilds of England on the brink of their first universal tour. Judging by the sales of albums and concert tickets, the rest of the world is not far behind the U.S. in their infatuation with No Doubt. We had a chance to speak with both Tom Dumont and Tony Kanal, two of the instrumental and songwriting minds behind the band's massive success. Tom was up first.

*Have you ever worked as hard as you're working right now?*

Tom: No, no way. The day-to-day things aren't really that hard—talking on the phone, going to photo shoots—but being away from home for two months is hard, and some days, frankly, it's hard to find a place to comfortably take a shit. Sometimes you don't have time to take a shower and clean off last night's sweat. Overall, it's a lot easier than working at McDonald's, but at the same time it's hard work.

*Are you saying fame is not all it's cracked up to be?*

Tom: No, not really. I'm just being realistic. Honestly, it is really fucking great. All my life I wanted to be doing this, I just thought I'd end up doing it in clubs, on a more modest scale. And although this ends up being different from what my romantic notion of a successful rock band really is, I'm still happy that we are super busy and have a lot of things to work on.

*Is it a case of too much too soon?*

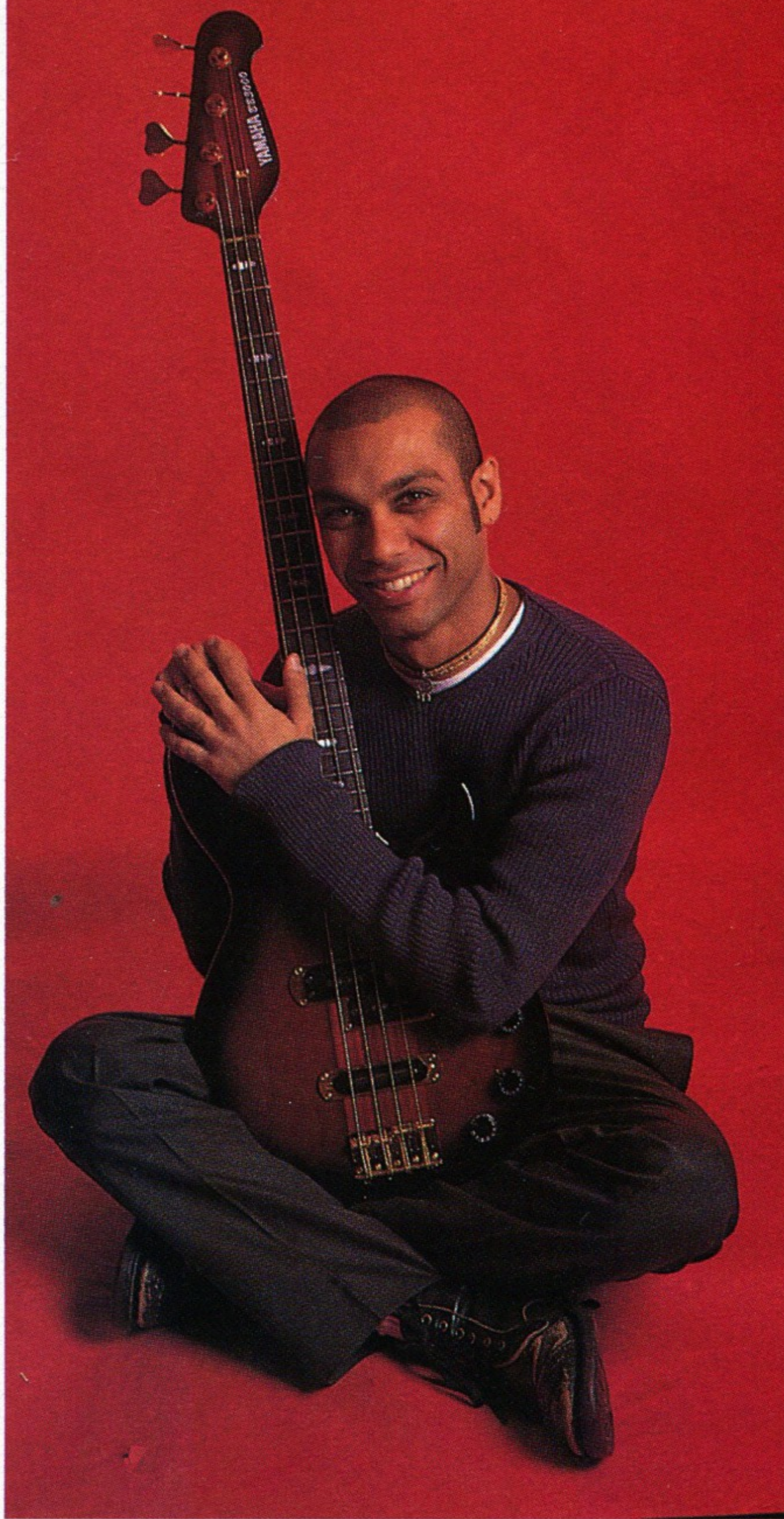
Tom: Too soon? I'd say no, because we've been together for 10 years. But it has happened pretty suddenly in a large way. For a while we were worried about it, because we really want to build a lasting career out of this—do it for five or ten years. But at some point the success just got out of our control. We don't know if we're gonna be the next Milli Vanilli or whether next year people are going to want to hear us all over again.

*You guys seem to be everywhere these days. Have you compromised yourselves in any uncomfortable way in terms of marketing or music?*

Tom: Tricky question. I guess the answer is no. But there have been moments where I've compromised myself, personally, like in photo shoots where I had to wear something I felt foolish in. But musically we never have. We're pleased with what we've done, and even though we made *Tragic Kingdom* in 1994 and we're way past that now, we're still pretty happy with the record. We're not the kind of band that got its respect for. . . . I dunno, it's kind of hard to explain. We're not known for being musicians' musicians—not like Steve Vai. We're more known for certain visuals and

To most who see them, No Doubt is about over-exposed, kewpie doll singer Gwen Stefani. Her hiccup-y, hyper-dramatic voice and stunning presence grabs mesmerizing command of an audience, and her sweaty midriff, as omnipresent as jiggling buns on *Baywatch*, does hold a kind of hypnotic allure. But, dudes, let's take a step back and re-examine this band from the inside out. Strip away the Gwen visuals and what have you got? You've got the engine—guitarist Tom Dumont, bassist Tony Kanal, and drummer Adrian Young—that powers this band with turbocharged muscle. Together the trio guides No Doubt through a minefield of rollicking styles, from hard rock and metal to ska, soul, reggae, and funk. Guitarists should appreciate Dumont's and Kanal's versatility, as well as their simplicity as songwriters; they're the keys that have unlocked the doors to hit singles like "Spiderwebs" and "Just A Girl."

Founded in 1986 by Gwen and her brother Eric Stefani (who later quit to become an animator—he now works on *The Simpsons*), No Doubt has coughed up the dues necessary





JOE GIRON

being song-oriented, which is fine with us. We never set out to be Rush, and we couldn't pull it off anyway.

*You started out as a metal guitarist.*

**Tom:** Yeah, I was really into Rush, Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, and some progressive rock: Kansas, Yes. I loved all that stuff, but then I moved on. That's where I came from, though, learning Rush songs.

*When did you first start playing?*

**Tom:** I first picked up a guitar at 12. I really wanted to be a great player and play really fast and fit in, but I couldn't do it. I just didn't have it. I loved playing, but couldn't pull off the guitar wizard thing, so that's when I quit metal and started playing for the fun of it. That's when I joined No Doubt.

*How did you begin learning to play?*

**Tom:** I got a 12-string guitar from a relative and took the extra strings off and played it as a six-string. My dad paid for lessons at the local music store. I started out playing James Taylor and the Beatles and I learned regular chords and fingerpicking patterns. I picked it up pretty quickly. From there on I was self-taught. My older sister—who went on to get her degree in Classical Guitar at UC Irvine—taught me a lot of stuff, and then it was all listening to Sabbath and

Rush and trying my best to learn the stuff. In my first band in high school we played tunes like "Jacob's Ladder" and "Natural Science" at talent shows. We bit off quite a lot there for kids our age.

*What happened in college?*

**Tom:** When I started college I was a music major. I took theory for two and a half years at Orange Coast College. Learned a lot of classical stuff: Italian 6 chords and Neapolitan chords and four-part harmony writing. I learned some piano and singing. It helped, but at the same time it constrained me because there were all these rules that you had to heed. At the same time, I was starting with No Doubt, and Eric [Stefani] was breaking all the rules I was learning. He came up with the greatest, most fucked-up chord progressions, so I was getting an education from both sides.

*Did you finish your formal education?*

**Tom:** I finished the two-year program at Orange Coast College, then moved to Cal State Fullerton, the main college, but that's where it ends. To get a degree I needed to specialize in one of their instruments. Classical guitar was the closest to what I played, but I felt like I was starting over. After getting a command of rock, I had to start over. I'd much rather have an amp and crank power chords, so I dropped out.

*Your solo on "Don't Speak" shows some classical training.*

**Tom:** Oh, yeah. As I recorded it I was thinking about how any true classical players would've hated the way I did it. I played it with a pick—a huge no-no. I hated the anal sitting position and the fingering positions. We did a number of run-throughs and we tracked them and spliced it together from six different solos, but I'm pleased with it. When I hear it in the supermarket I think we pull it off. It sounds very poppy, but it works as a piece of music.

*What was your first electric guitar?*

**Tom:** A black Les Paul copy, when I was 13. I got it because I liked Ace Frehley. To this day I'm obsessed with the idea of Gibson guitars.

*You're into Hamers, too?*

**Tom:** Actually, I play Hamers a lot live. Right when we finished the album I bought a Flying V, and I liked the idea that it was a '50s kind of space-age design, but its image was very much '80s metal. Same with the Explorer—it was a good visual element. So I looked around for companies that made Explorers and V's, and Hamer, for me, was the company that made them best. I've got mahogany and maple top Hamer Explorers [known by Hamer as the Vector—Ed.], plus a korina Explorer and a korina Flying V [the

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using them and not enough time playing straight guitar. But I've changed my attitude about that. I've always had a Cry Baby wah pedal around, and a box made by Dunlop that's kind of like an octave pedal but produces a tone that sounds like a Moog synthesizer. It only works for high notes and solos, but it's really amazing. I have a tremolo pedal, and my setup is in stereo, where I can shift between two amps.

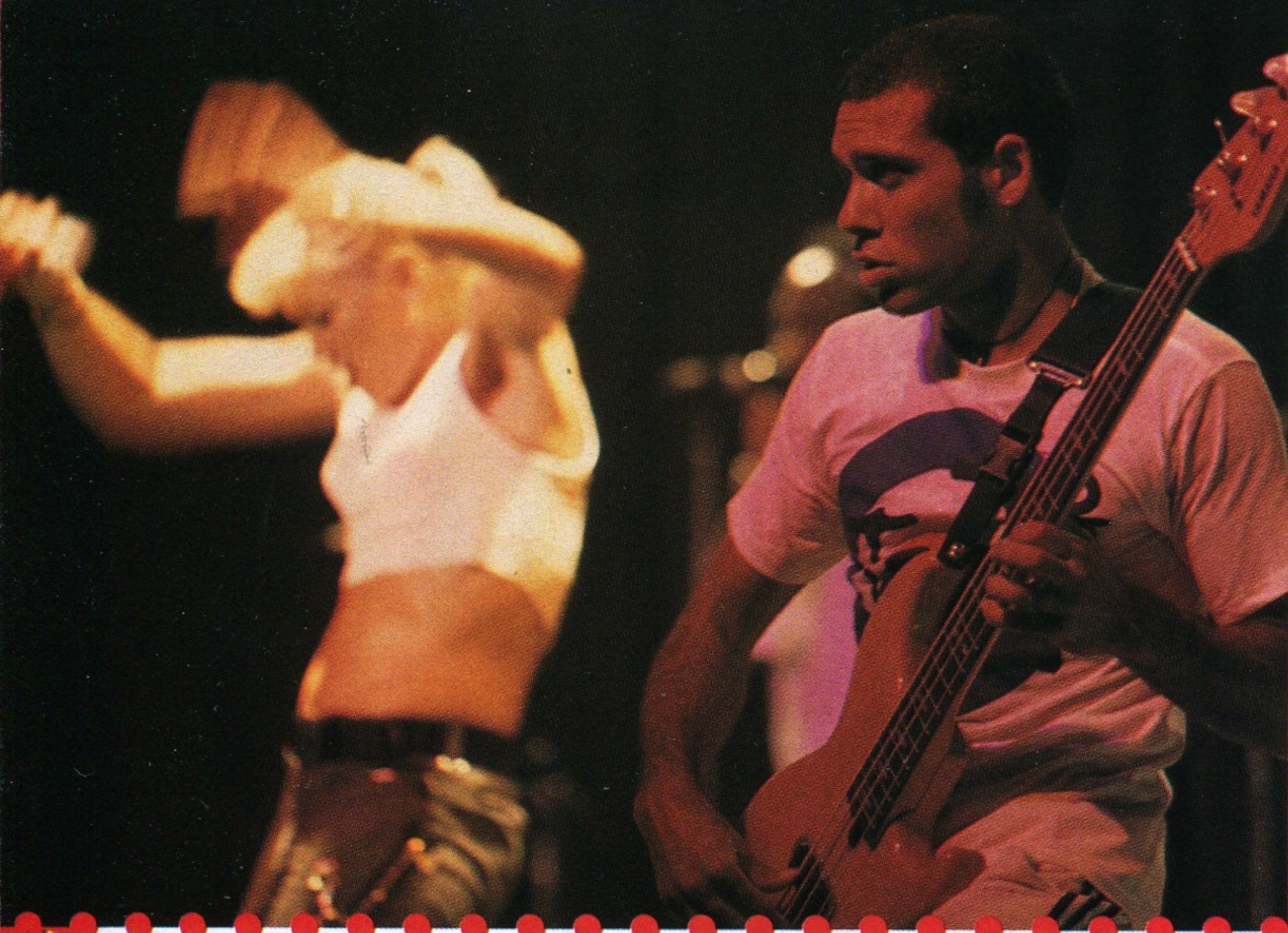
*There are so many guitar styles on Tragic Kingdom. Just what kind of guitar player are you?*

**Tom:** That's a hard one. Songs on the album aren't, for the most part, written around the guitar. They're written more from the rhythm of the bass and drums, and I really want to complement that with my guitar playing. I like to be versatile enough to make each song different from the next. "Just A Girl" is a rock riff, "Excuse Me Mr." is a kind of a country-ish guitar thing in D minor for the verses, and pretty punked-up. Every song is different.

*Do you feel like the third member of the rhythm section?*

**Tom:** It started out that way, but we moved into more of a rock sound on the last record. On "Spiderwebs," for example, Tony wrote it

STEVE JENNINGS



Hamer Standard]. They're very much in that old style. They play great, they sound great, and they look great.

*You sound like you're acquiring some nice guitars. Are you a collector?*

**Tom:** I don't have any great vintage guitars, just some fun ones now. When we recorded *Tragic Kingdom* I didn't have any of my own guitars. I had to rent them. I rented a couple

of Gibson SG's with P90's, and then got the Hamers when we started touring. But when we go back and record I'll have a huge assortment to draw from.

*What about effects?*

**Tom:** Traditionally, I've been a no-effects kind of guy, just playing through clean or distorted channels. I used to think that guys who have a lot of effects spend too much of their time

## SPONGE WAVES GOODBYE TO ALTERNATIVE

by James Sullivan



Though Sponge's second album, *Wax Ecstatic*, finds Detroit's platinum-sellers owing as much to classic hard rock, Southern rock, and glam as any style that might be considered "alternative," the band readily acknowledges that the rise of the Alternative Nation was instrumental in their remarkable early success.

"What alternative did was open up the parameters of what could be played on the radio," says guitarist Mike Cross. "Our first record (1994's *Rotting Piñata*) was released at a time when Nirvana and Soundgarden were doing well. We have a lot of gratitude for bands like that.

"What we owe alternative is that it took the pressure off for us to fit into a certain style and let us just write naturally," he says. "It brought honesty and integrity back to songwriting."

Guitarist Joey Mazzola says that Sponge was lucky enough to hit the scene at the ideal moment: "In terms of radio airplay, when we first started there were less than 20 alternative stations. As we grew, so did alternative, to something like 200 stations."

Yet now, with nowhere to go but down following the phenomenal mainstream success of "alternative" over the past few years, those same stations are shopping for clues to "the next big thing," a still-evolving musical direction that isn't likely to include a whole lot of guitar bands. Mazzola and Cross are well aware that the rise of alternative gave rock

bands a fresh-sounding forum in the commercial marketplace. Is it unsettling for a band like this to contemplate radio's impending move away from guitar-based bands?

"I think we're back to square one," Mazzola says. "Of course alternative's become mainstream—there's no denying it. We're in a transitional period now—the end of alternative and the beginning of the next big thing."

It's Sponge's hope that they've proven themselves to be quality songwriters whose talent will carry them beyond any category restrictions. "There's no denying we're a hard rock band," says Mazzola, "but we've always put twists in our music, so it's kind of ambiguous. That's what makes us Sponge."

"You can't get stagnant. Look at U2—they started as pure guitar/bass/drums, and now they're techno. These are trends, and everybody wants to be in on the latest," he continues. "Well, maybe not everybody."

Cross says there's not much danger of Sponge going that route. "What we are and always have been is a five-piece rock band," Cross says. "Maybe you could call us a modern rock band, because we're about 1994 instead of 1974." But "alternative," he says, has always seemed like an ambiguous term: "To me, alternative would be classical music—something that's not mainstream at all."

The Sponge six-stringers say they're in good shape in part because of the considerable artistic leeway Columbia gave them when they signed: "We looked more for commitment than being on a cool label or getting a lot of money," Cross says. "We wanted to stay in control of our own destiny. What Columbia has done is to let us carve our own niche."

"A lot of people feel you can put a band together and somehow the magic record company is gonna sell you a lot of records," he concludes. "That's one of the biggest lies in the industry. The important thing is to mark your own territory and not get caught up in the money or pleasing a lot of people." ☐

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as a single-note bass line, so I had to write something around it, to fill it out. That little octave thing there is me trying to fill in a guitar part without stepping on the vocal or the bass line.

*The intro riff on "16" sounds like a Led Zep ripoff.*

**Tom:** Yeah! Tony wrote that, and I, not being too creative, just doubled Tony's bass line and made it fatter. In between I put this little pick harmonic thing on it that I got from Mötley Crüe. You do a harmonic on a single note and scrape your pick down it. Mötley Crüe did it, and so did Missing Persons on "Words."

*You finally get a chance to go nuts on that flashy hammer-on part at the end of the title track.*

**Tom:** I knew it was a total metal-sounding

that thing going. I guess it's that whole new-wave/punk idea that they're not necessary or they're too showy. I do them but they're short. A lot of times I just copy the vocal melodies.

*What will your new material sound like?*

**Tom:** We're going in two directions. One is that same new wave-y, Cars approach. The other is more rhythmic, leaving a lot of open space for vocals and horns. But we've only got eight new songs since starting this whole touring cycle. I think we'll be more prolific when we get home.

*Did you have a clear idea of where you were going musically when Gwen's brother Eric [the band's main songwriter] left?*

**Tom:** We did once we sat down and started putting together songs. We hit on this theme of '80s new wave, trying to use those types of



thing, but to me it fit the part. Like when "Eruption" came out—I half-assedly learned that solo, but nobody does those these days. I don't know what kids think when they hear me do it, but it's simple, just two chords going back and forth. It's a lot of fun but hard to do live because it's doubled and there are octaves in the second section of it after the hammer-on thing.

*Are there other moments live when you get to step out?*

**Tom:** In "Spiderwebs," we break the middle bridge section down and I get a chance to do a lot of noodling during that—trying to be tasteful in between Gwen's antics on stage. I never really get a chance to break out and do "Freebird" solos, which I would like to do, but never in the history of the band have we had

sounds for keyboard patches and musical influences as a guide. But because I was into metal, all the new wave I knew was from the radio: the B-52s, Devo, the Cars.

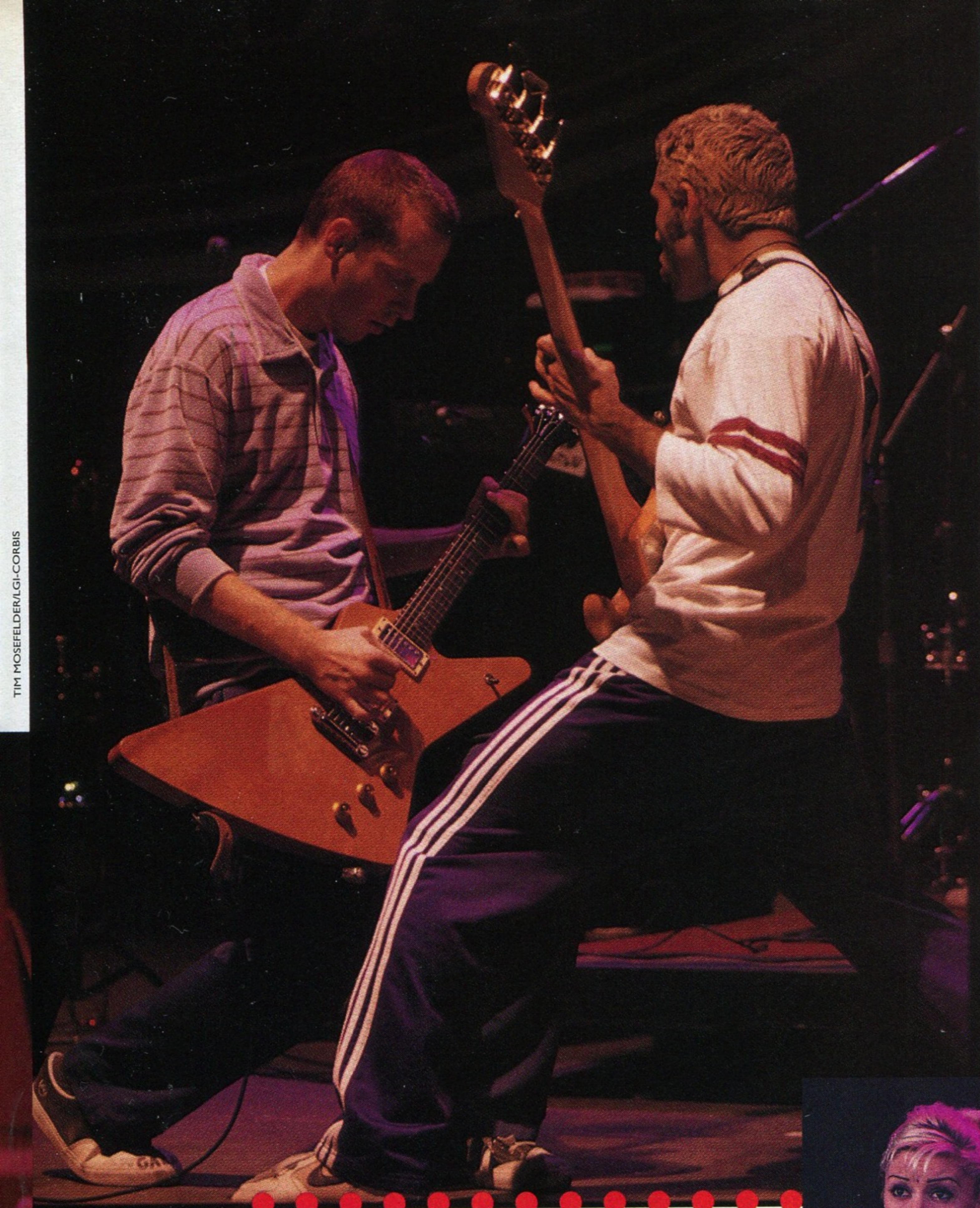
*It must be satisfying to write songs that so many people have a chance to hear.*

**Tom:** It feels great. I co-wrote "Just A Girl," and when that started getting played it was really thrilling, and it gave me confidence. I had finally put together something that worked and that people could react to.

*Is it difficult, as a guitar player, to find yourself behind an attention-grabbing singer like Gwen every night?*

**Tom:** Good question. Yeah, there are times when I think all of us as musicians would like more of the attention. We've been "real" musi-

STEVE JENNINGS



cians for 10 years now and we're all good players and we all take ourselves seriously. We're not top musician guys, but we can be pretty creative and I'm pretty proud of what we've done. But the attention we get is

because our songs are hits, and . . . well, you know why. Even though Gwen is what they think of when they think of this band, I still feel proud that I've played a really big role in helping this band succeed. All of us did.

**Having joined at the age of 16, No Doubt is Tony Kanal's first real band. As the rubbery heartbeat of the No Doubt sound, Kanal has already received accolades from bass pundits, and deserves credit from guitarists, too, having provided the nasty bottom from which many of Dumont's licks spring.**

*Have you had any time to enjoy yourself during this mega-success?*

**Tony:** Yeah, a little bit. In the past when we

toured we did five or six shows a week. This time it has opened up a bit, because Gwen can't sing more than four shows a week. She has had a problem with her voice and didn't want to push it. But the off days get filled up with press.

*So is this your 15 minutes of fame?*

**Tony:** Absolutely. But it's been a very fulfilling 15 minutes. We started to have a good time—you know, "Let's be in a band!" We never set out to make significant change in the world. We were here to make music and have a good time. We've had such huge ups and downs. We're just happy to be able to enjoy it while it's happening.

*Did you start out as a bass player?*

**Tony:** No, I actually played saxophone up until high school. My best friend's brother, Dave Carpenter, was the bass player in my high school band and he was graduating, so when I became a sophomore he asked me if I

wanted to be his bass replacement. So I tried it out and haven't looked back.

*What was so cool about the bass that made you drop the sax?*

**Tony:** Dave Carpenter was cool about the bass. He was so inspiring to me. He still plays, and he was my teacher that first year. Then I started listening to records to hear the bass player. Dave introduced me to Stanley Clarke and Jaco Pastorius, and other great jazz bassists.

*But you didn't get involved with a working band until No Doubt, right?*

**Tony:** Yeah. Prior to No Doubt I listened mostly to funk, but when I met Eric and Gwen I was 16 and got exposed to the two-tone ska thing: the Specials, Madness, the Selecter, English Beat. Then I got into the southern California punk-funk scene, with the Chili Peppers and Fishbone. Flea, Horace from the Specials, and Norwood from Fishbone were *huge* role models for me as a bass player.

*How do you fit in with that elite company?*

**Tony:** I don't fit in. I don't feel like I'm a musician's musician. I don't think I've reached that level. Maybe in the future. Those guys are very high caliber. I don't pretend to have gotten to that level.

*If you had to do a solo record, what would it sound like?*

**Tony:** What No Doubt is is what I am. All of us came from such diverse influences, and we've incorporated all those different styles into the band and actually made it work. The direction No Doubt is heading is the direction I head. This band has been my life for the last 10 years. I'm 26 now. So where it goes, I go. This is it.

When I was younger I never envisioned myself becoming a rock star or anything. I always envisioned going to college and becoming a doctor or something professional. But destiny just happened and I've never looked back. Realize that up until two years ago we were all still working

and going to school while the band was going. We had our day jobs to get by.

*Many of the songs are driven by you and [drummer] Adrian Young.*

**Tony:** If there's any compliment that we can pay ourselves it would be that myself, Tom, and Adrian work very well together as a rhythm section. His style as a drummer is incredible. There's no other drummer I can name I'd rather play with.

*Tell me about your bass rig.*

**Tony:** When I started I was playing that high





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school standard Rickenbacker bass. The first bass I purchased was the one I still have, the Yamaha BB1500. It has been my main bass for the last 10 years: a passive bass with a bolt-on neck, and it has never let me down. I'm always looking for other basses but I know I can always count on that one. I bought a BB3000 in Japan, a one-piece of the same bass. The original bass, the 1500, is easier to slap and less rigid, and it's light—I'm not the biggest guy and I like to get around onstage—but the 3000 gets better tone. Maybe that's because it's newer, but I get a more solid sound out of it than the 1500. I have a MusicMan now, too, a four-string and a five-string.

I play through a Gallien-Krueger 800RB head that I bought a year ago, and an Ampeg SVT 8x10 cabinet that I bought in 1989. I have a couple of G-K 2000RB's, too, but it's all pretty straightforward—no effects. I'm always trying stuff out. I might add a compressor to my rig.

*Do you still put time into learning?*

**Tony:** No, to be honest, I don't. The last few years I've been on the road and that takes a lot out of you. Your daily routine is made up of checking in and out of hotels, finding decent places to eat, soundchecking, and doing major amounts of press. I have to say, I can't see myself sitting down to play bass just to play bass. It's been such a whirlwind. Maybe after it settles down I'll get back to learning.

*Does the criticism of No Doubt as a lucky, marginal talent bother you?*

**Tony:** Yeah, I guess it does somewhat. People have to realize that we spend our time playing, writing songs, rehearsing, doing press, touring . . . we play a lot of different roles. A lot of musician's musicians only do one thing: play. If we only had to play, we'd probably get pretty good ourselves. But I think it would be an unfulfilling career overall.

*Do you have anything to say about No Doubt's role in helping to kill alternative rock?*

**Tony:** We can't claim to be that significant. We just do what we do, and have ended up here. I wouldn't say that alternative rock is dead. I would say that the grunge scene's mellowed. All of us like Soundgarden, Nirvana. . . . But the grunge label has almost totally faded. Music comes and goes in phases, and the record-buying public is fickle, too. Right now we're lucky to be what people want to hear. Next year they'll listen to something else. Because of that, we need to write music for ourselves and not to appeal to someone else's idea of what the public wants. ☐