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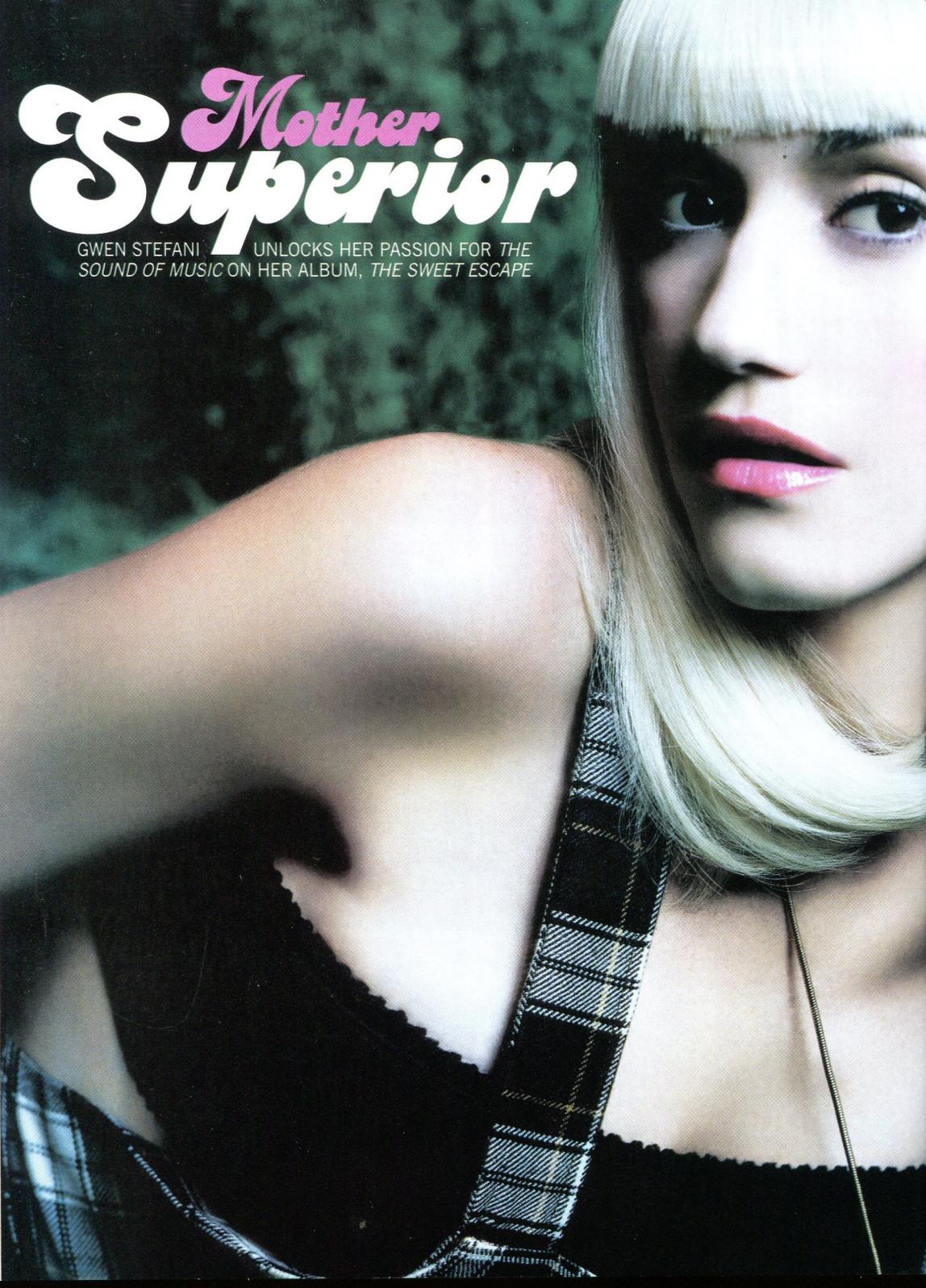
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THE HOLLABACK MAMA MATURES
WITH A MODERN LOOK AND SOUND



Mother **Superior**

GWEN STEFANI UNLOCKS HER PASSION FOR THE
SOUND OF MUSIC ON HER ALBUM, *THE SWEET ESCAPE*



or what felt like forever following the 2004 release of her quadruple-platinum album *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.*, gay clubs all over the world were alive with the sound of Gwen Stefani. The hit singles from the No Doubt frontwoman's solo debut—"Hollaback Girl," "What You Waiting For?" and "Rich Girl"—were a few of our favorite things, but did the overwhelming support she received from the gay community take her by surprise? "I'm always in awe of the energy, love and support I get from my fans," Stefani responds. "I wasn't surprised as much as I was ecstatic and humbled. I want the community to know that I feel 'em, and I'm glad that they are feelin' me."

If its chart-climbing first single "Wind It Up" is any indication, we'll be feeling her new sophomore effort, *The Sweet Escape*, for months to come. "There's not a lot of depth to it," she says of the track, with a laugh. "It's basically about trying to get the energy up and get people dancing on the dance floor." But what makes the single extra gay-friendly is the fact that it samples queer-favorite *The Sound of Music*, the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical about Maria, a problematic novice-turned-governess in Nazi-era Austria.

Let's start at the very beginning—a very good place to start: "Wind It Up" originally came out of a recording session with a then-pregnant Stefani and The Neptunes' Pharrell more than a year ago in Miami. "I had no business being back in the studio again because I really had no intention of putting another record out," she recalls. "I felt like I was just being greedy by going down there and hoping

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that I was going to get something out of it, but I couldn't help myself because I *am greedy!*"

Considering *Escape* features no less than five Neptunes-produced tracks, she and Pharrell must've done something good. Says the Grammy-winning singer of their collaborative process: "He drives the car and I sit next to him and feed him and try to get him all revved up to take me somewhere rad."

When she was putting together her L.A.M.B. fashion show last year, Stefani took "Wind It Up" and—"against Pharrell's will," she jokes—had a friend remix it for the runway with *The Sound of Music's* yodel-driven "The Lonely Goatherd," which led to the single's final incarnation. "It's one of my favorite movies of all time," gushes Stefani, who also names its star Julie Andrews as one of her biggest inspirations. "Something about that film just touched me over the years, so when I heard the mash-up, I actually cried. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it was so good and so fresh and amazing." Stefani hopes the track introduces the film to fans who aren't familiar with the 1965 classic. "This is my way of sharing something that I think is really great. Maybe people will go out and watch it. It's a really good film!"

Maria and her charges also inspired the "Wind It Up" video, on which Stefani once again collaborated with equally obsessed director and pal Sophie Muller (who filmed Stefani's just-released concert DVD, *Harajuku Lovers Live*). "The first time we ever met I told her I loved *The Sound of Music* randomly," Stefani says, "and she was like, 'Shut up. You do not.' It bonded us. It's the same kind of thing as people who like *Star Trek*—if you like it, you love it." In the clip's futuristic twist on the high-altitude action, which features robotic moves by Harajuku Girls' choreographer Sho-Tyme with his Asian-gone-Alpine muses, Stefani gets to holy-roll as a fashion-forward twisted sister. "To me, it looks like the Tetris, inside-of-a-video-game version of Maria on the hill."

The film's costumes—love the lederhosen!—get an unique update in the video thanks to Stefani's longtime stylist and pal Andrea Lieberman, particularly the scene in which Maria cleverly makes clothes for the children out of the curtains in her room. "Obviously, me being a designer and clothes-maker myself, I was very inspired by that scene, so we recreated it," explains Stefani, whose thoroughly modern Maria fashions sassy outfits for the dancers

using curtains emblazoned with her new logo: a "G" that resembles both a guitar and a wind-up key.

This key to "getting off on the dance floor," as she explains it, also unlocked the artistically stumped star, who had originally planned to have a second album out by Christmas 2005. "There was a real concept behind it when I started it about a year ago," says Stefani. "Three months after I had Kingston, I started going into the studio to start writing again and it was a huge journey because I didn't have that same inspiration. Every time I would walk in a certain direction, I would get a roadblock. Finally, it just became clear to me that it was all about the key, and the key is the music."

Though the ultimate goal of giving us guilty pleasure is the same, Stefani considers *Escape*, which she describes as a "poppy, sugar-coated album of delicious ear candy," a departure from *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* "The last record was all about '80s-inspired music, but this time I was over all that and felt like I was in a whole different place." She

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calls *Escape* more modern than her debut due to an increase in melodic, emotional tracks like the standout "Early Winter," a ballad she wrote with Keane's Tim Rice-Oxley—ironically with the intention creating another '80s heartbreaker like "Eyes Without a Face" or "Time After Time." The album also includes drops of golden sun produced by Akon, Nellee Hooper, Swizz Beatz and Stefani's No Doubt band mate—and former beau—Tony Kanal.

But the sweetest influence heard on *Escape* might just be that of Stefani's son, who is zero going on one. "I dedicated the album to Kingston because I want him to grow up and look back and just know how important he is," she says, beaming. "He's just like the most delicious...I can't even...see, I have no words for him."

It's somehow fitting that a nearby, nanny-watched Kingston gets the last word in our interview, however, crying out for a feeding as his mother says so long, farewell, *auf Wiedersehen*, goodbye.

The Sweet Escape (*Interscope*) is out now.