

Cover Story

GWEN STEFANI: An "Orange County Girl"

By Denise Penn



S "Sweet Escape," the second solo album of singer, songwriter, and fashion designer Gwen Stefani will debut on December 5, 2006. This new album follows her 2004 quadruple-platinum "Love. Angel. Music. Baby." and the birth of her first child, Kingston, in May of this year. "The sound has evolved a lot over the last two years," says Stefani. "It's dance music but it's more melodic and more modern."

Stefani has garnered a huge base of fans in the LGBT community, since skyrocketing to stardom as the front person for the band, No Doubt. "Hollaback Girl" is popular in gay clubs across the country. Stefani is appreciative:

"I'm always in awe of the energy, love and support I get from my fans," she comments. I wasn't surprised as much as I was ecstatic and humbled. I worked really hard on that album and to see it connect with everyone on so many different levels makes what I've worked so hard for, all the more worthwhile. I want the community to know that I feel them and I'm glad they are feeling me."

Murder victim Gwen Araujo, the transgender teenager who was murdered in Northern California in 2002 was born Eddie Araujo. She loved Stefani's music, her fashion sense, and attitude and had chosen the name "Gwen" for herself in honor of Stefani, her idol. From the age of 14, she aspired to go to Hollywood to become a make-up artist. Araujo's mother had her name legally changed to "Gwen" posthumously.

Supportive of LGBT rights, when Stefani was asked what she would you say if any of her No Doubt band mates ever came out of the closet, her response was "I would support him - or anyone for that matter - 100 percent in coming out."

Ironically, Gwen Stefani was born and raised in Orange County, which is known across the country a bastion of conservatism and a stronghold of homophobia. Indeed, The Briggs Initiative, which would have prevented gays and lesbians from teaching in California's public schools (1978) was originated in Orange County as were so many other political actions. Reverend Sheldon's anti-gay "Traditional Values Coalition" was based in Anaheim, as well.

One of the songs on the new album is titled, "Orange County Girl" in honor of her roots. Hip hop producer and musician Pharrell Williams worked with Stefani on this track: "'Orange County Girl' was one of the songs that I wrote when I went to Miami to hook up with Pharrell," she explains. "It was during Hurricane Dennis, so I went down there and it was the craziest weather. We were in the studio and kind of having a difficult time so we went bowling and it was very inspiring because

the bowling alley had, like, blasting music. And I just remember sitting next to Pharrell and him just suddenly it was like a light bulb went off over his head. I had been saying I wanted to write a song about where I come from and I had all these little notes. It was, like, twelve midnight, and so we went back to the studio. It was shut, like, locked. They had to bring the guy back and unlock the studio. We go in and Pharrell has this little light piano and gives me two tracks to choose from and I chose the one that was "Orange County Girl." I went back to the hotel room and came back the next day around 3:00 and the song was written. It was just one of those kind of magical ones that just was meant to be."

Gwen Stefani was born in Orange County and grew up in Anaheim where she attended Loara High School. She was on the swim team and marching band, and later attended California State University Fullerton. Her first job was scrubbing floors at a Dairy Queen and she once worked at the makeup counter of a department store. Stefani made her debut in 1992 as the front woman of the band NO DOUBT, a group which included Tom Dumont, drummer Adrian Young, and Tony Kanal, with whom she had a long term relationship.

The band played in local clubs before recording. Their second album "Tragic Kingdom" (1995) sold more than fifteen million copies worldwide, featuring the singles "Just a Girl", and "Don't Speak".

Stefani recorded her first solo album, "Love. Angel. Music. Baby." in 2004. With influences from hip hop and R&B, the album contains pop and dance tracks and the single "Hollaback Girl" which became the first US digital download to exceed sales of one million. She married Gavin Rossdale in December 2005, and they announced that they were expecting their first child together during a concert in Florida. Their son, Kingston James McGregor Rossdale, was born in Los Angeles in May of this year.

Stefani designs many of her own clothes, and her costumes. She has become known as a fashion trendsetter, and debuted her clothing line, L.A.M.B. (named for her album) in 2003. It includes many accessories as well as jackets and jeans and is influenced by the Gothic / Lolita look popular in Japan.

A singer-songwriter, fashion designer, and actress, Stefani, as an Orange County Girl, has been strongly influenced by the state of

consciousness created by living near Disneyland. She has a definite appreciation for fantasy and costumes, as do many artists. But growing up in a neighborhood where you might run into someone in a snow White or Donald Duck costume on their way to work creates another dimension. It is different that Hollywood, partly because it is based on the presumption that the fantasy is 'family entertainment'.

Gwen Stefani grew up in a house on Beacon Avenue less than a mile from Disneyland with her father, Dennis, her mother Patti and brothers and a sister. A long-time Beacon Avenue resident told the LN that he came out of the house recently to find several teens standing on the top of their parked SUV next to the "Beacon Ave." street sign, taking pictures of it. When he asked what they were doing, they excitedly asked, "Is this where Gwen lived?"

It is where she grew up; On Beacon Street, you could hear the thunderous booms and could see the explosive glitter of the Disneyland fireworks from your backyard every night at nine O'clock during the summer. While fireworks were part of special celebration for the fourth of July for many children, they became ordinary, and were even a nuisance for Anaheim kids.

Another facet to the "fantasy" created by living on the fringes of Disneyland was that just a few blocks away from the Magic Kingdom where people came from all over the world to spend lots of money, there was poverty. Up until recently, the people who built the rides, worked in the hotel and restaurants, and cleaned the park after closing lived in apartments in a crime-ridden neighborhood behind the Disneyland Hotel known as "Jeffrey-Lynne." There were as many as ten people living in one apartment, and the rents were sky high. But the millions of visitors who spent their vacations there never saw that.

The 1995 No Doubt song, "Tragic Kingdom" eludes to some of these socially conscious themes: "The parade that's electrical /It serves no real purpose/Just takes up a lot of juice/Just to impress us."

The first track on the new album is "Wind it Up," and she makes the hills come alive with the sound of music —just as Julie Andrews did when she played Maria in the movie years before Stefani was born: "I did a whole new session with Pharrell about a year ago," says Stefani. "We did a bunch of songs together that are on this record. And I don't know what the inspirations for those were. We were

just so pumped up about the stuff that we had done together and he invited me down to Miami. And I said, "Okay, let's go, let, let's go." So, I went down there and we wrote four tracks that are all amazing. And the first one was 'Wind It Up.'"

She continues: "I took the track and I had a friend of mine do a remix of—with a mashup between the Sound of Music and the track. And it's just a dream I always had, was to take the Sound of Music—which is one of my favorite, favorite movies of all time and one of my biggest inspirations, Julie Andrews; and just, I don't know, something about that film, it just touched me over the years. And I've referenced it a million times for other things. When I actually heard the mashup, I actually cried. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it was so good and so fresh and amazing. And it ends up being the first single. So, it's very exciting."

The music video for "Wind It Up" was released on November 10th, and was directed by the award-winning filmmaker, Sophie Muller. Muller has directed hundreds of music videos, notably for Annie Lennox and the Eurythmics. She recently directed the critically acclaimed comeback video for the Dixie Chicks, "Not Ready to Make Nice."

Stefani comments: "Of course, I was going to have Sophie Muller do the video because one of the things that makes us such amazing friends is because we have a lot of similar things that we love. And one of them is the Sound of Music. The first time we ever met I told her I loved the Sound of Music randomly. And she was like, "Shut up. You do not!" And it's almost like people that like Star Trek. It's the same kind of thing. There needs to be a name for the people that like the Sound of Music. It's like Trekkies, but Sound of Music people. So Sophie was doing the video and we were trying to come up with ideas for "Wind It Up." And we were thinking of all these different things and it was obvious that we had to do a couple of modern kind of futuristic plays off of the Sound of Music."

The relationship with Muller goes back to earlier NO DOUBT days: During the 1997 MTV awards, when NO DOUBT won the award for best group video, Stefani thanked her: "I'd like to say that Sophie Muller is a genius." Gwen has also said, "Sophie Muller is one of my most talented friends. She can and will only do projects that she is inspired by. She is driven by creativity and the love for what she does and as a result she never compromises. I consider her a true artist. I was a fan of Sophie's work before I even imagined working with her. She has a very pronounced style and taste that drew me in. I think she has the gift of being able to bring out the artist's personality, emotion and style."

Stefani's dancers – "The Harajuku Girls" – have been a subject of controversy. First featured in music videos from the L.A.M.B. album, Stefani credits them as her inspiration and muses for her album, as well as for her own fashion line, L.A.M.B.

Harajuku is one of Tokyo's fashion districts and it is where much of Tokyo's 'street fashion' – and the 'Gothic Lolita' look – originated. Critics say that the costumes the dancers are dressed in – Japanese schoolgirls – among other things, are a means to perpetuate stereotypes of Asian women as passive, submissive "geishas."

The video from her first single "What Ya Waiting For?" includes the four "Harajuku Girls."

In a Marie Claire interview, Stefani says the idea came to her in a dream. The album also includes a song titled "Harajuku Girls" in which Stefani sings, "Harajuku girls/ you got the wicked style / I like the way that you are/I am your biggest fan." Some have criticized her for perpetuating stereotypes of Asian women, and a website has even been set up (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) to "Save the G4."

Actually, not all of The Harajuku Girls are from the streets of Japan. Reportedly, they are all professional dancers from Los Angeles except Rino Nakasone, who was born and raised in Okinawa, Japan, and came to the US in 1999 after meeting Stefani. She is a respected dancer and has been hired for both performances and music videos by the top choreographers in the industry.



In a recent OC Weekly article, ("Yellow Fever: They Got it Bad, and That Ain't Good" Nov.2, 2006) Vickie Chang points out how annoying it is that heterosexual men in Orange County see Asian women as accessories, and proclaim their attraction to them almost as if it is a fetish. She also points out that 58% of the students attending the University of California, Irvine in Orange County are of Asian descent.

Some have quoted comedian Margaret Cho as being critical of the foursome, comparing the Japanese schoolgirl concept to using African-Americans in blackface. While Cho does raise this issue, at the same time, she points out the importance and benefit of increased visibility: "...One day, we will have another display at the Museum of Asian Invisibility that groups of children will crowd around in disbelief, because once upon a time, we weren't there."

Whatever the intention, subliminal or intentional, Stefani has brought attention to the issue. The lyrics to "Orange County Girl" are full of Disneyland metaphors, among them "From

the West Side of Anaheim / a small world after all." The music video for this track is yet to be produced. Perhaps the real "sweet escape" will take place when Stefani rows her boat through her proverbial small world, and helps the Harajuku dolls in the tunnel escape to the real world. It remains to be seen.

The Harajuku girls are in the new "Wind It Up" video wearing blond wigs: "Showtime worked with me on the last record and is the choreographer for the Harajuku girls," says Stefani. "We had done this song on tour, but we redid the whole choreography and brought in some of the elements from the Sound of Music. If you watch the film, you can kind of pull out some of the bits, but it has a bit of a little bit of a robotic, kind of futuristic version of it."

The costumes for the one music video that is out, "Wind It Up," were in part, from the creative mind of Stefani with help from her stylist: "Andrea Lieberman, who, again, is another one of my closest friends and my stylist who I've been working with now for six years or something. We were doing like a lot of kind of rompers and lederhosen."

Stefani says "It's really weird because I found out I was pregnant when I was on tour. And I had done the record a year ago and really wanted to put it out last Christmas; so, it's kind of been sitting for awhile. It's been like a race to try to get it done for Christmas and then, all of a sudden, here we are."

"And it's, oh, so different from the last album and all my inspirations were completely different on this record. I mean, the last record was all about kind of '80s-inspired music, the music I kind of danced to when I would go dancing growing up, and stuff like that. But this time, I kind of was over all that and felt like I was in a whole different place."

She is aware that she has a following of young girls who see her as a role model: "The last album was just mind-blowing to me," she says. "It felt like I got just a whole new group of people looking at me, which was really, really fun. And I think the thing that saved me when I got pregnant and I was on the tour and I thought, 'Oh, my God. How am I gonna get through this tour?' was those girls from age eight to maybe thirteen; it's their first concert, and they're just looking up and they're singing every single song off that record. I mean, it was just the most beautiful reward of all the hard work

of going in and writing the songs. So, yeah, it was a really spectacular experience, making the record and, and being able to go on tour."

Stefani says that motherhood has affected her as an artist and in her view of everyday life: "I dedicated the album to Kingston. I want him to grow up and look back and just know how important he is. And he was in so many studios. He's been in every studio in LA, every studio in New York, every studio in London. So, to be able to go into the studio and put the time in and the hours...I didn't have the luxury that I had before where I would just stay up all night. I was really condensed and focused. But it was definitely scary for me because I don't want to miss any of it because it's just the greatest thing that you could ever experience. And it goes so fast. He's been on a jet, he's been on a helicopter - he's been everywhere. He's seen me do my make-up four thousand times but I got very, very blessed because he just, is such a chilled guy. He likes to hang out, and he's just very easy."