

19th Annual Guide To Recording Studios & Engineers

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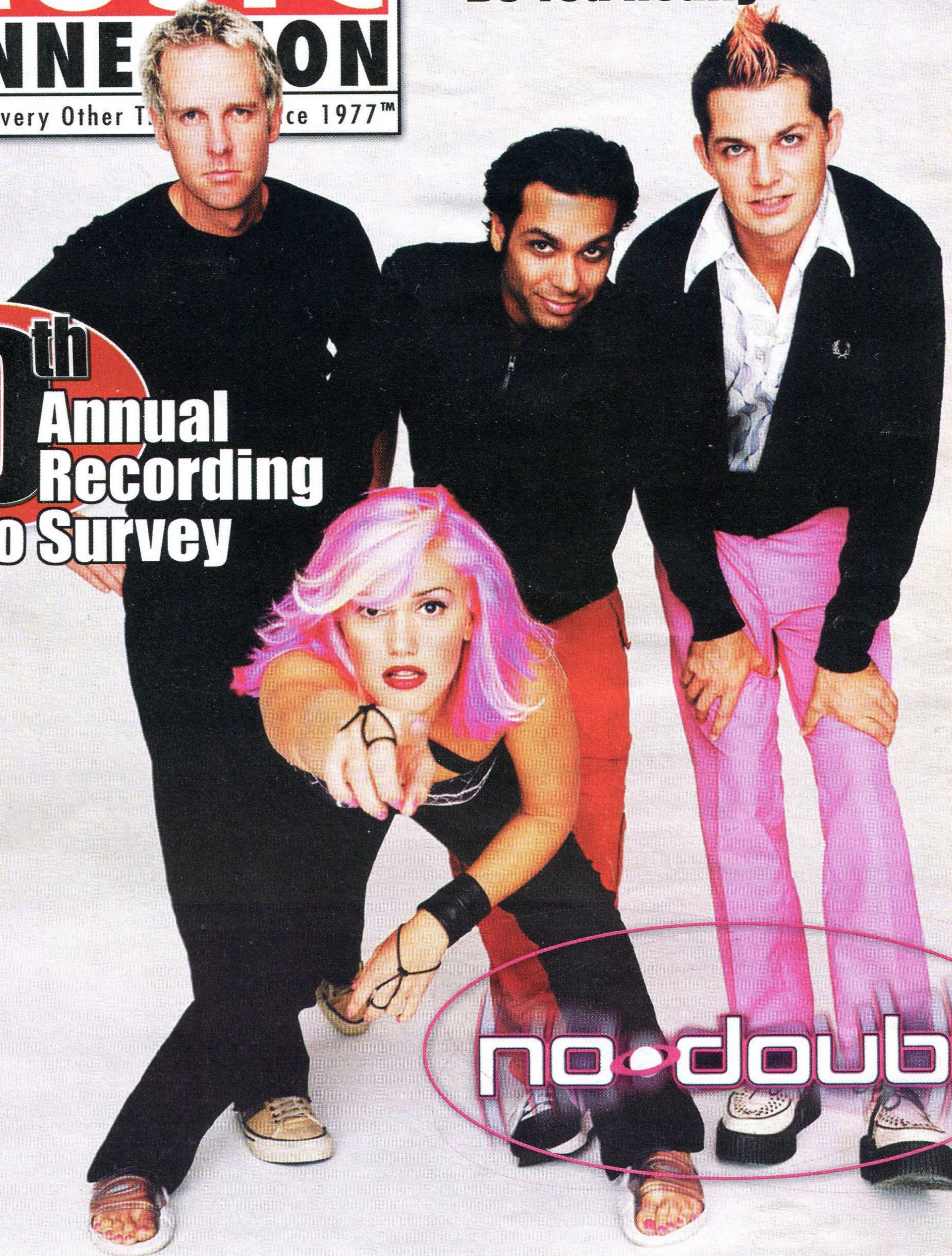
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Special Report

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After five years, and despite dramatic changes in the public's musical taste, this Southern California quartet have returned with a top-selling, critically acclaimed new album, *Return of Saturn*, their fourth, which shows how a band can grow and mature with its audience.

By
Gary Graff



Adrian Young

Tom Dumont

Tony Kanal

Gwen Stefani

Good things, they say, come to those who wait — and No Doubt is proof of that dictum. The Anaheim quartet was together for nine years before breaking bigtime with 1995's *Tragic Kingdom*, which sold 15 million copies and launched the hit singles "Don't Speak," "Spiderwebs" and "Just a Girl."

Since then, however, we've had to wait for No Doubt's next creative statement. The group (singer Gwen Stefani, guitarist Tom Dumont, bassist Tony Kanal and drummer Adrian Young) deliberately took time off to get away from the grind and re-establish their lives outside the tour bus. Young, for instance, got married. Keyboardist Eric Stefani left the group to pursue other interests, and sister Gwen furthered her relation-

ship with soulmate/Bush frontman Gavin Rossdale, even turning in a cameo vocal on his band's latest Trauma Records album.

When No Doubt slowly began working on their all-important follow-up album, things did not go smoothly. Initial sessions with *Tragic Kingdom* producer Matthew Wilder were ultimately scuttled, and Glen Ballard, who actively collaborated on big hits for Alanis Morissette and Wilson Phillips, was brought in to helm what became *Return of Saturn*.

It proved to be worth the wait.

A rollercoaster of sounds and emotions, *Return of Saturn* chronicles No Doubt's past five years, a period of experiencing success on the macro level and of discovering life — and intimacy — beyond the floodlights.

Stefani shares herself generously on this album, alternately pining, provoking, celebrating and questioning as she mines her romantic life for unchecked inspiration (although she has cautioned that not everything is necessarily about her relationship with Rossdale).

Meanwhile, the musician-ship of Dumont, Kanal and drummer Adrian Young frame her thoughts with a wide array of settings, from the frenetic rock-reggae churn of "Ex-Girlfriend" to the rich melodies of "A Simple Kind of Life" and "Too Late," to moodier pieces such as "Suspension Without Suspense" and "Dark Blue."

With a title that draws an analogy between the 29 years it takes Saturn to orbit the earth and Stefani's own progress as she approaches the big Three-Oh, this is a record that shows how a bunch of punky school kids can indeed grow up without losing their bite.

Music Connection recently caught up with Stefani and drummer Adrian Young for the following conversation.

MC: After being so successful with *Tragic Kingdom*, did you feel a lot of pressure while making *Return of Saturn*?

Gwen Stefani: I think everything after the release of *Tragic Kingdom* has been kind of a bonus for us, because we all kind of felt like we were going to have to stop the band at [that] point because we'd already been a band for nine years and we were starting to get those guilty feelings, like "What are we going to be when we grow up?" kind of thing. And then [*Tragic*

Kingdom] came out, and nobody thought that thing was ever gonna come out — let alone get on the radio — or that we'd be on tour for two and a half years around the world.

So this record's kind of all about taking advantage of the opportunity to make a record after all that experience. The success afforded us the ability to be a band. I don't think anybody had any expectations except the ones that were on ourselves to try and become better songwriters and make a record that we could be really proud of and go out and play for people over and over again. I think we feel like we did that now, and it feels really good.

MC: Was it a different experience making this album?

Adrian Young: It was more or less an opportunity to make a record without going to school and working jobs at the same time, and having money and being able to have good instruments and go to good studios.

We got a house in the Hollywood Hills to work — in the beginning, anyhow — for the first six months, which was nice. But then that proved to not be that necessary, 'cause after that we were at each other's houses and various rehearsal studios, and we came up with our best stuff sometimes just sitting in a room.

Stefani: I don't think any of us expected the album would take that long, but it would have been premature if we'd tried to bring this record out any sooner. We definitely didn't put a time limit on it. We took that

pressure off ourselves right away; it wasn't about trying to make a record to kind of get on the wave of success we had, like "Hurry up and get something out so we can bank on that."

We felt totally fulfilled on [*Tragic Kingdom*]; I was just starting to kind of blossom and feel my way in terms of songwriting, lyrically and melodically, and everything. I'd never traveled outside of Orange County, pretty much. So to be able to travel the world for two and a half years and become my own person and do something, finally, in my life and realize, "Wow, I'm kinda good at this," it finally feels right. There was a lot more information to put into this album. We had all that experience behind us.

MC: Was it a rough re-entry into the real world after you were finished touring for *Tragic Kingdom*?

Stefani: It was a big adjustment and something I didn't even realize at first, that I was off a bit. I came home and I was like, "Wow, I'm totally normal. It didn't even phase me." But slowly and surely, I found myself in a hazy kind of space that I'd never really felt before, like a real confused state. I don't know if that had to do with coming off the tour or just my time in life, like the late 20s, which is a time to grow and face reality.

So the record's kind of about that time period; it's a big kind of transitional phase for me, a kind of growing spurt and growing pains and the confusion of getting to a certain point in your life where you go, "Oh my God, I'm nothing that I thought I would be, but thank God, 'cause I'm so much more — but, whoa, who am I?" That's kind

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I'm sure for a lot of people, they thought it's a weird thing for No Doubt to hire Glen Ballard. I mean, at first I was a bit apprehensive, too; I don't listen to the records he's made in the past. But it ended up being a beautiful thing for us 'cause he didn't try to change us. He let us be us; in fact, the first thing he said was he wanted to embrace the quirkiness and the weirdness that we have. He didn't want to take that away from us, and that made me real happy.

—Adrian Young

of what this record's about. And it's about the personal goals of songwriters and, as friends, to see what kind of chemistry we could still have after 13 years.

MC: You're certainly wearing your heart on your sleeve on these songs. Was there a temptation to pull back and edit them and maybe not give away so much?

Stefani: You know, it's interesting being on the other side of success. When I wrote [*Tragic Kingdom*], I was just stumbling into songwriting for the first time, and it was all written naively. I didn't think anyone was



going to hear that album; I didn't think everyone was going to hear "Don't Speak," you know what I mean? This time around, when you know people are going to hear this, probably, and people are waiting to hear this, you do say, "Do I edit myself?" For me, I don't think it's really possible.

MC: How was your approach to the writing process this time different than it was before?

Stefani: I kept a journal; I've never done that before. I read a lot of stuff that inspired me, like Sylvia Plath and Joni Mitchell and different poets and books that really helped me to try to get deeper inside and express how I'm feeling. I really wanted to be honest and real.

But, you know, people keep asking me, "Gee, it's such a personal album. Isn't it strange?" or whatever. If you look at it, I'm writing about the most normal things everybody goes through — confusion, life, death, birth, marriage, all these issues we all have to deal with. So if people can relate to that, that only brings more comfort to me. It just reassures me I'm normal like everyone else.

MC: Everybody wants to know, of course, whether all these songs are about you and Gavin.

On this record we were much more aware of the idea of trying to make the music reflect the lyrics. To us it felt a bit more melancholy, or slower. But I think that's what came out of us naturally. We tried to write happy, No Doubt, upbeat songs, but they just really didn't come out. We just get

what we get, you know?

—Gwen Stefani

Stefani: Of course Gavin was a huge influence on me. He's all over [the album] in certain ways. But I think that people are gonna get whatever they're gonna get out of these songs. I feel like I've given a lot of myself already, and at a certain point, when people start asking me about the lyrics and stuff like that, I kind of feel like I need to draw a line. Otherwise, I might spoil it for them, especially if they're getting more out of it than I intended. I just don't want to take that away from them.'

MC: Was the group dynamic changed very much, creatively and personally, by multi-platinum success?

Young: I don't know what kind of impact it's made on us, creatively. It's hard to pinpoint that. Personally, we definitely feel like it's time to grow up. We've got a lot more responsibilities now with houses, and I just got married about a month and a half ago. So there's definitely new responsibilities. At the same time, we still have one foot in childhood 'cause this band is affording us the luxury of not having to check in for work or to have to get up Monday morning to go to work. We can still live the rock & roll lifestyle a little bit.

Stefani: It sounds so silly to say 'I'm a star.' I guess I am; people know me. But my life is so normal in a lot of ways; I still have the same family, the same friends, and the only difference is when I go out, I can be buying something and someone at the register goes "Oh, by the way, when's your record coming out?" or "Hey, I really love your band," or whatever.

It's weird, 'cause I think, "Wait, you don't know me..." It's so weird to me. I don't think it's something you can really get used to. I'm just trying to enjoy the strangeness, 'cause it's not gonna last forever. It's just something I try to enjoy and experience as much as I can.

MC: There were some false starts in making the album. How did you settle on Glen Ballard as the producer?

Young: Just from looking at and thinking about a lot of [producers]. I'm sure for a lot of people, they thought it's a weird thing for No Doubt to hire Glen Ballard. I mean, at first I was a bit apprehensive, too; I don't listen to the records he's made in the past. But it ended up being a beautiful thing for us 'cause he didn't try to change us. He let us

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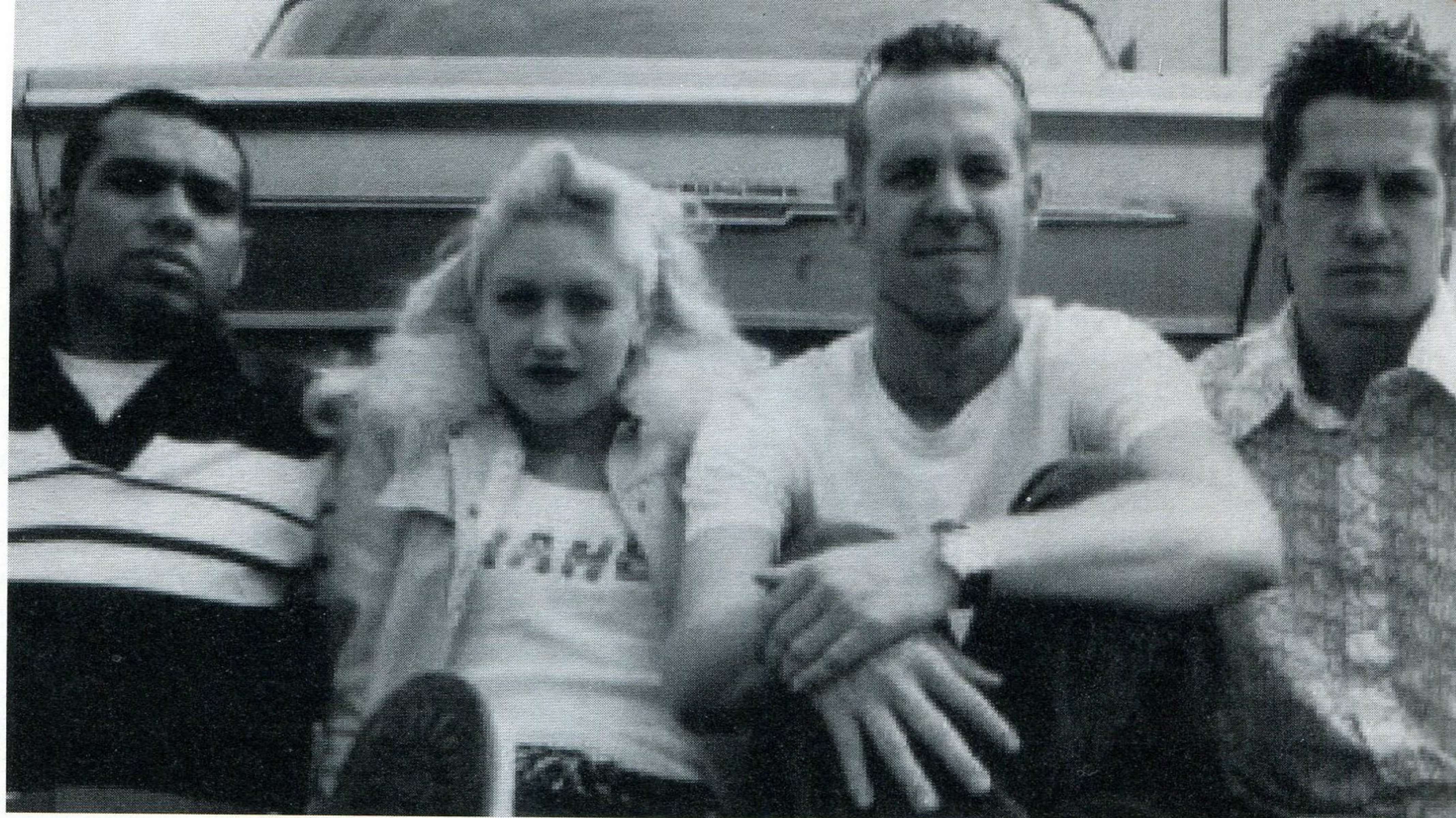
MC: Did you shoot for the kind of wide stylistic range that shows up on the album?

Young: Yeah. Sonically and stylistically, we've always been across the board on all our records; we've never been able to focus on one sound or one style of music. In the past it kind of worked against us; definitely before *Tragic Kingdom* people were telling us we needed to focus and to not be so

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—Adrian Young

diverse 'cause it was hard for people to grasp what we were doing. Fortunately, they did grasp it on *Tragic Kingdom* and we proved to ourselves again that we can't hone it down to one sound or one style, and I'm fine with that. It makes it more interesting. I think it sets us apart, also, for better or for worse.

Stefani: I would say [*Tragic Kingdom*] was lighter than this record; the lyrics weren't necessarily really happy songs, but I think the music was a lot more upbeat. On the new record we were much more aware of the idea of trying to make the music reflect the lyrics. To us it felt a bit more melancholy, or slower. But I think that's what came out of us naturally. We tried to write happy, No Doubt, upbeat songs, but they just really didn't come out. We just get what we get, you know?

Young: I think it's definitely a product of what we listen to. We're all so open. I think there's a lot of bands out there who are probably either afraid, or within the politics of the band they kind of restrict each other. I don't think we have a lot of that. I mean, in elementary school, Tom and I, we didn't know each other but we were listening to hard rock. Tony...I think his first influence was Prince, possibly. And Gwen was listening to *The Sound of Music*. Then in junior high and high school, I think everyone got a dose of ska and punk and new wave.

MC: There's definitely a pronounced new wave influence on *Return of Saturn*.

Young: Yeah, I think you're right. I think the Nineties were definitely a big backdrop for all of us. We were all into new wave at some point, either by one band or many bands, and we can't get away from it. The formative years, musically, for a lot of people are when you're 13 or 15 years old. It just stuck with us.

MC: So, are you expecting to sell another 15 million copies with *Return of Saturn*?

Young: (laughs) Not even close! We don't think we're gonna even come close to that. I think if we do a third of that, we're gonna be happy. I mean, it's tough to repeat yourself like that.

Stefani: When we were making the album, we were making it purely for ourselves. I don't think any of us were thinking about targeting any kind of teenagers or anything like that. There's all these bands and solo artists now, manufactured things that basically have these songwriters who figure out what the best lyrics would be to trigger some 13-year-old girl to buy the record.

For this band, we've always been about finding our own way. We've never had a boss. We never had anyone put us together. We're just a group of friends who decided to do music, 'cause we were sitting around Orange County and didn't have anything else to do. Now it's like, "Wow, we've been given this opportunity to get better at it."

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MC

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