

SKA DEFACE

● What's with America, eh? First they make Bush megastars, then they take our beloved ska, add saccharine to it and sell it back to us as NO DOUBT, a band that are too cute'n'cosy, too suburban, hell, just too nice to be cool. STEPHEN DALTON thinks it doesn't matter. State of confusion: DEREK RIDGERS



No Doubt (l-r) Tom, Gwen, Adrian and Tony: they're ska'd for life

Sometimes America just seems like another planet. The huge US success of Bush, The Offspring and Alanis Morissette are cases in point. And how the arse can any self-respecting British rock fan ever see eye to eye with our US cousins over the merits of Marilyn Manson, for goth's sake?

And now we have No Doubt, currently America's biggest pop sensations with six million copies of their ska-inflected rock-lite album 'Tragic Kingdom' flying out of stores last year. A kooky peroxide pin-up singer, Gwen Stefani, who is rapidly shaping up to be a Cyndi Lauper for post-Courtney mall kids, and three Californian Sleeperblokes with nine years of obscurity behind them. Just how awful can they be?

But here's the twist: No Doubt's spring-loaded singalong stadium anthems are a genuinely freakish phenomenon which signals a real change in the US pop mainstream. Because this sunny party quartet are the anti-Nirvana, bred in the unlikely ska-punk hothouse of Anaheim, southern California, galaxies away from Seattle's rainy gloom. They are also America's first Britpop band.

You heard. See, much like Blur and Supergrass, No Doubt's prime influences are late-'70s British ska and new wave filtered through 15 years of chart pop. Despite frequent comparisons with the likes of Green Day, they are guilty of neither cartoon punkery nor laboured wackiness. Instead they grew up wearing Union Jack parkas and 2-Tone hats, listening to Madness and The Specials and, erm, Duran Duran. Creating a corner of southern California that is forever England, they developed a pick'n'mix pop style radically different from the sloppy-shirted rawk dirgery of their post-grunge

peers. They were those rarest of creatures, mods with suntans.

But hang on – these dudes are from Bill and Ted's heartland, Orange County. They grew up in the shadow of Disneyland, for Walt's sake. How come they're not big-shorted mullet-heads who say 'rad' and 'neat' and 'intense' and think England is a sleepy village just outside France, Idaho?

"Maybe I'm not as tough a girl as Courtney Love and I'm not singing about heroin or whatever, but this is my life and if you can relate – cool! Let's hang out! Let's have fun!" – Gwen

Where did it all go right?

No Doubt's decade-long history is an epic saga of suicide, tragic love affairs and heroic endurance in the face of failure. It all began when Gwen's older brother and band founder, Eric, brought a Madness record home in the early-'80s. Gwen instantly became a die-hard Nutty Girl, with no time for any other music.

Eric now works as an animator on *The Simpsons*, but Gwen's vintage Britpop obsession survives to this day. Even the video for No Doubt's recent global mega-smash 'Don't Speak' is a parade of Madness and Jam T-shirts. It's a disorienting culture clash, rather like finding a lost Amazon tribe with a full collection of Frank Sidebottom Peel sessions.

"A lot of those bands, like Madness, The Jam, The Specials, The Clash, The English Beat, they had a lot to do with our early years," says bassist Tony Kanal, who was born in England to Indian parents but left for California at age 11. "But in those first

few years, we all brought our own influences to the band. I didn't grow up listening to ska, I was into funk. Back in '87 we were already experimenting and moving out of that traditional 2-Tone thing. I mean, listening to 'Tragic Kingdom', you could perhaps tell it has ska foundations, but we'd be the first ones to tell you it's not a ska record."

All the same, No Doubt were delighted that the A&R man who signed them once worked at Stiff, original home of Madness. And, in preparation for this British visit, where *NME* catches up with them in a London hotel, Gwen spent her first holiday in 18 months exploring Camden, former haunt of the Nutty Boys.

"The first thing I did was buy some Smarties candies because they always used to talk about them. And Primrose Hill is rad."

Oh alright, Gwen actually does say 'rad' quite a lot. And 'neat' and 'intense'. And yes, she seems to subscribe to that romantic tourist's view of London as a nostalgic theme park instead of the overpriced, unfriendly shithole it really is. She also doesn't realise you're more likely to bump into Oasis than Madness in Primrose Hill these days.

"We played with Oasis at this big festival," gushes Gwen. "Me and Tony had never seen anything like it, the guy up there just acting so f—ing stuck up! Tony immediately goes, 'That's my idol', ha ha! But it was weird for us to see that attitude, it's so different from us. We're more, 'Hi! We like you and we want to have fun with you'."

Oh dear. No Doubt clearly aren't that well-versed in Britpop etiquette after all.

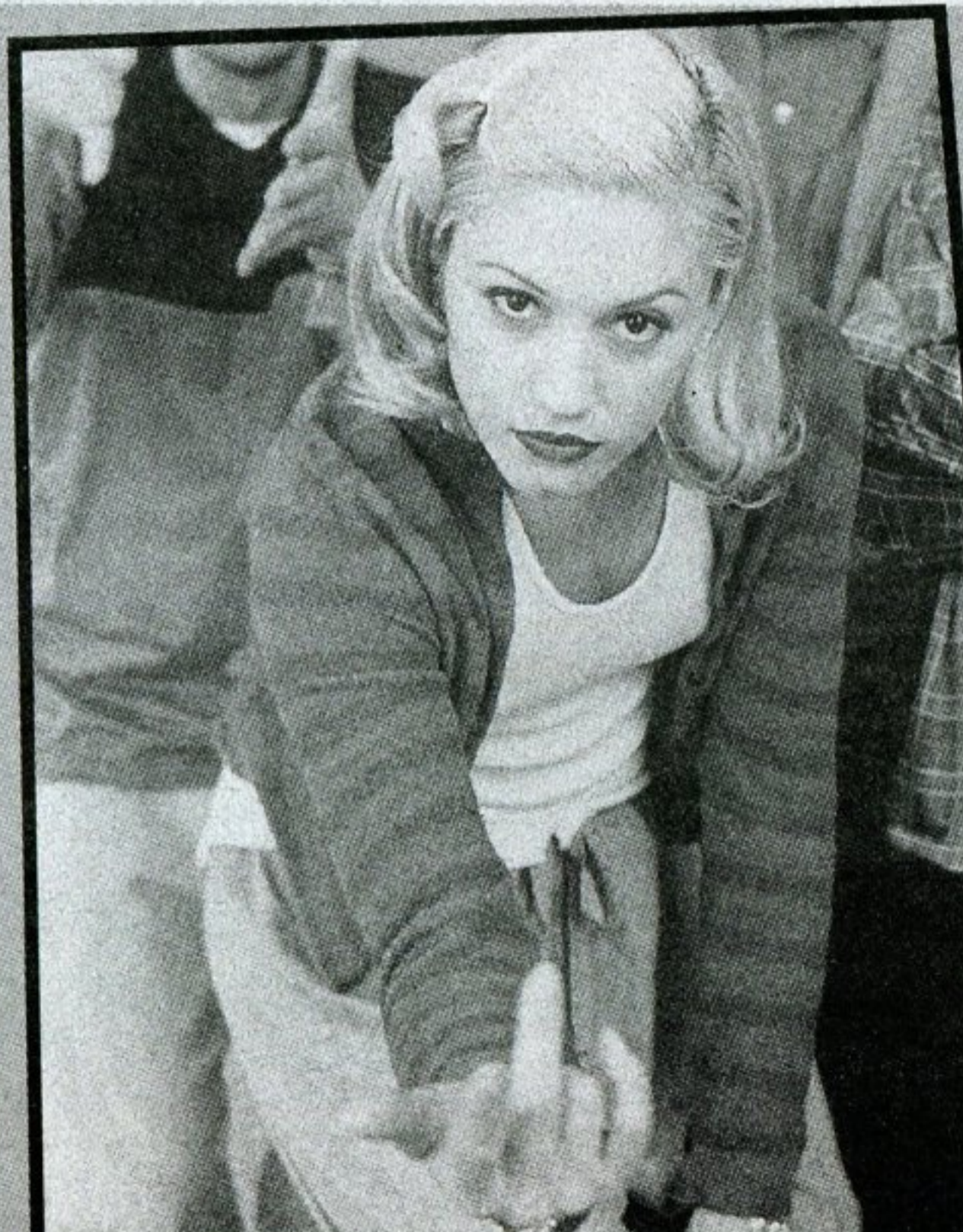
"Well, we were thinking maybe," nods guitarist Tom Dumont, "because British people like that attitude so much, that we would try to be real snotty in our press interviews..."

Go on then, you've got five seconds. Say something outrageous.

"OK. Are you all bummed out that we won the war?"

Which war, Vietnam?

"Er... no, we lost that one." Pathetic. Try again.



Gwen still hasn't got 'giving the finger' quite right

"OK – we tried to get Oasis to open for us but they said they were busy buying houses and shit."

Sorry. Not even mildly annoying. You're just too bloody soft and well-mannered, aren't you?

"My friend Sophie, who directed our videos, says Americans are too nice and open," nods Gwen. "She thinks Americans show their best side first, then you get to know them and they show their dark side. Whereas English people automatically show their dark side first, then you figure out later that you're friends for life."

Sounds plausible.

"English people suck," scowls drummer Adrian Young.

Sorry, Adrian, your five seconds are up.

IN CASE you haven't twigged by now, No Doubt don't 'do' attitude. Although they're all in their late-20s, there's a peachy keen teenage naiveté to their sunny Californian ways. Gwen and Tony are probably the only multi-million selling megastars to still live at home with their parents, and they seem genuinely baffled that armies of pop kids mob them at their local mall.

Sweet suburban souls, No Doubt are the anti-Nirvana. Their first album, released at the peak of grunge, sank without trace. But last year's 'Tragic Kingdom' tapped into everything US rock had been lacking for years: everyday emotions, feel-good fun, chirpy tunes. Result: six million sales and rising. Oh yes, 'Tragic Kingdom' is the 'Nevermind' of the late-'90s.

In a bizarre mirror image of Nirvana's grisly ending, No Doubt's career began with the suicide of their original singer, John Spence. Spence shared vocals with Gwen, but shot himself dead nine years ago, just as the band were finding their feet.

"It's weird because it's important to show respect to him, but you have to also look at it in perspective," says the pragmatic Tony.

"That happened at the end of the band's first year and we've been together nine years since. We were a completely different thing at that time. We were just kids."

Indeed, No Doubt have endured plenty more storms since Spence's death. Probably the biggest was the end of Gwen and Tony's seven-year relationship, which almost split the band two years ago. But they obviously remain on fond terms, even though Gwen wrote some pretty bitter lyrics about Tony for 'Tragic Kingdom'. Isn't it weird for him to play those songs every night?

"I told myself I wasn't going to talk about this any more," Tony sighs. "We just play our songs, the

relationship was a long time ago. It's a dead issue."

Most bands start as mates and end in acrimony and pain, but No Doubt seem to be living their lives in reverse. Early misfortunes appear to have strengthened their friendship and determination to be feel-good entertainers.

"We've always been about just getting up there and having fun," Gwen agrees, "not shoegazing and being cool. We always put on a show."

And you don't air smack-addled depressions

onstage.

"Yeah, but then again 'Don't Speak', which is a totally sad song, for some reason made lots of people really happy. Sad and angry songs make people feel good, like 'Just A Girl' – 'F— you, I'm a GIRL!'. Maybe I'm not as hard and tough a girl as Courtney Love and I'm not singing about heroin or whatever, but this is my life and if you can relate – cool! Let's hang out! Let's have fun!"

Yeah! Totally rad! And about as far from grunge's



"Hey, you wacky Britishers tell me now we ain't just the craziest thing on eight legs"

morbid negativity as you can get without actually turning into The Smurfs.

"I think all of us appreciated that music and recognised Nirvana as probably the most important band of the '90s," argues Tony. "Nirvana changed the world forever and made it possible for a lot of different bands to get in the limelight, but we didn't get caught up in that whole grunge scene."

"Nirvana were definitely an influence," nods Gwen. "But we're like a salad, we steal from everybody."

So you're a salad and Nirvana were a raw bleeding steak?

"No," muses Adrian, "Pantera would be a raw bleeding steak."

Tom's not so sure. "I always think we're more like dessert – you know, that sweet thing you like that's not really good for you, and we're not going to help you out much at all."

Right. But what if No

"We've always been about just getting up there and having fun, not shoegazing and being cool. We always put on a show." – Gwen

Doubt are just a snack between meals, a transitional filler between the bloody banquet of grunge and rock's next main course?

"Personally, if it all ended tomorrow I'd be like, 'Alright! Good ending! Ten years! F—ing A!'" beams Gwen. "Because this is way more than I thought I would ever do in my life."

Bloody hell. You lot are far too humble to make it as planet-shagging rock monsters.

"Yes, but I'm showing you my nice side," quips Gwen. "Everybody has a dark side. Adrian has a dark side up his ass."

Pardon?

"That's always dark," smirks Adrian.

"But I guarantee that the dark side of my ass is darker than yours," deadpans Tony.

Hoorah! Juvenile arse-related humour ahoy! At times America might seem like another planet, but sometimes it feels just like home.