

My love life story

Text: **Kitty Empire**

Aaaaargh!" howls the Kelis video from a monitor in the Blue Room of London's Sound Republic, where this week's *Pepsi Chart Show* is being taped. Stereophonics and Tom Jones toy with Thai food, read *NME*, and await their slot.

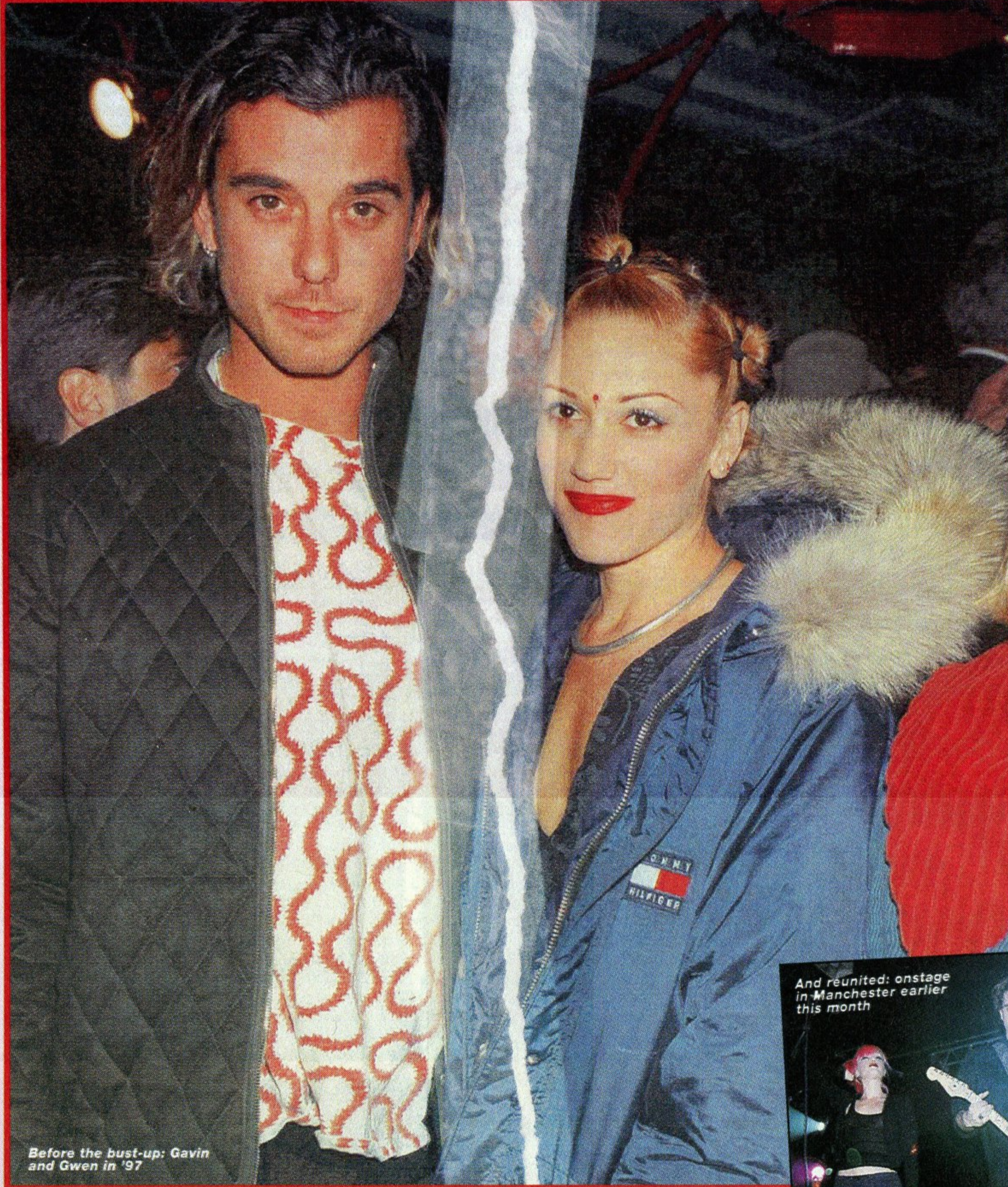
Up next, though, are a brand new entry, No Doubt. You know, *No Doubt*, dude! Happy-go-lucky Californians who became the toast of 1996 by dint of ska, heartbreak and bhindis. A band missing in action for three years, only glimpsed in the occasional gossip column and on records by The Artist Formerly Known As Prince. Yes, strangely enough, 'So Far, So Pleased' on 'Rave Un2 The Joy Fantastic' features Gwen Stefani's vocals – her only recorded outing since the rampant success of 'Tragic Kingdom'. Until now.

No Doubt may still look like cartoons made life – drummer Adrian Young's devil's horns replaced by a leopardskin buzzcut; Gwen Stefani's bleached starlet ponytail turned a violent punk-doll pink – but their new single, 'Ex-Girlfriend', is all about reality, like a sharp stone in a snowball. "I kinda always knew I'd end up your ex-girlfriend", sneers Action Gwen huskily as guitarist Tom Dumont riffs, bassist Tony Kanal rumbles and the band's terrific trombone section skank their way back onto pop's radar, "It's gonna kill me to see you with the next girl". It's not quite as bunny-boiling a sentiment as, "I hate you so much right now", but 'Ex-Girlfriend' is another kicking tale of contemporary love gone sour, of a girl who's been done wrong, but re-righted herself. A little bit of self-esteem you can jump around to.

According to Tom, mellow surfer dude guitarist, the success of singles like 'Don't Speak' and 'Just A Girl' kept No Doubt on tour for 26 months. They got home, took Christmas off, then started writing the songs that would become 'Return Of Saturn', No Doubt's forthcoming LP. It took two years.

Like 'Tragic Kingdom' before it, 'Return...' is fuelled by the loss of love. But it's an altogether more grown-up record. 'Simple Kind Of Life' wonders where true happiness lies; 'Marry Me' revisits little-girl dreams and weighs them up against experience. And no,

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT (ARF!), GWEN STEFANI SURE IS UNLUCKY IN LOVE. BUT HAS THAT ALL CHANGED NOW SHE'S BACK WITH GAVIN BUSH? DARE WE ASK? OH YES.



Before the bust-up: Gavin and Gwen in '97

"We're still together. It's been four years, but it's hard." – Gwen on Gavin

it's not influenced by Goldie, who borrowed the same astrological metaphor for his 'Saturnz Return' (*Saturn*, apparently, takes 29 years to return to the position where it was at the time of a person's birth, and its passage symbolises the reassessments that take place in late-20-something lives – *Astro Ed*). Although you'd be hard-pressed to hear it, it's actually influenced by Prince, Tricky, Joni Mitchell and Sylvia Plath.

"All the songs are just snapshots of things that have happened to me in the last couple

of years," begins Gwen, hair aglow. "They've definitely been challenging, not my favourite couple of years."

The band's adjustment to fame, the reality check of home, and turning 30 all contribute to 'Return Of Saturn's more thoughtful bent. Most significantly, though, in the years since 'Tragic Kingdom's success, Gwen became one half of US rock's most gilded couple. It may not have been the psychodrama that was Kurt n' Courtney, but the union of gorgeous ska-pop queen

Gwen and dishy grunge-lite king Gavin Rossdale was big news in the pop goldfish bowl. Especially when the relationship hiccupped momentarily and he was seen on the arm of jet trash like Kate Moss and an All Saint. Pop, however, hath no greater inspiration than emotional fallout, and so 'Ex-Girlfriend' bristles with hurt, resolve and chunky guitars. And so it is that *NME* finds itself in the prickly situation of trying to discuss a great record without descending into the gutter.

It's very hard to talk about this

record without mentioning the name 'Gavin'.

"It's not a big deal, y'know?" shrugs Gwen resignedly. "Everyone knows. It's been a long time. It's old news."

The lyrics on 'Ex-Girlfriend' – on the whole album – are very naked. Do you wish you could disguise your feelings more?

"I'm really new at this, to be honest. On the last record, I was just blossoming. My brother (*Eric*, the band's former songwriter) had left the band, he was the main creative force. Then Tony (*Kanal*)

broke up with me. I was amputated from someone's life. So I wrote all these songs. We were just this little band in Orange County, and we became, like, huge! It's crazy. I still can't believe I'm fucking sitting here right now." She shakes her hair.

"So what do you do? Do you edit yourself? Do you try to be creative, knowing you're in a fishbowl? I don't know how to do it any other way. This record's all about the confusion. These were a confusing couple of years for me. I always considered myself a pretty happy, passive kind of

person. Tony was the one who would always get depressed. I'd be like, 'Dude, eat some ice cream! You'll be fine! Get out of it!' And this time, I came off the tour, thought I was fine, and then suddenly I thought, 'What the hell am I?'"

Is the confusion resolved now? Isn't your love life OK?

"Well, you know – how's your love life? Everybody has ups and downs in their lives, in their love lives, and mine's definitely had a difficult route. We're still together. It's been four years, but it is hard. It's hard to be a girl in a band and have a boyfriend. Because I'm so passionate about what I do, and the band takes everything out of me. So there's other things that definitely suffer, and one of them is relationships. So I write about it. I don't know what else to write about. I was watching this interview with Michael Stipe on the plane, talking about how he just creates these stories, and I was thinking, 'Wow – that would take a lot of talent.' I'm not that imaginative. I know how to put words together, to describe what I'm feeling inside."

But so many of the songs on the album are so sad.

"I think that a lot of times, the songs bring much more happiness than anything else. 'Don't Speak' was written about my amputation from my best friend's life, and it brought me so much joy – it let us travel the world, it affected so many people. I think sad songs can bring a lot of happiness. They have for me."

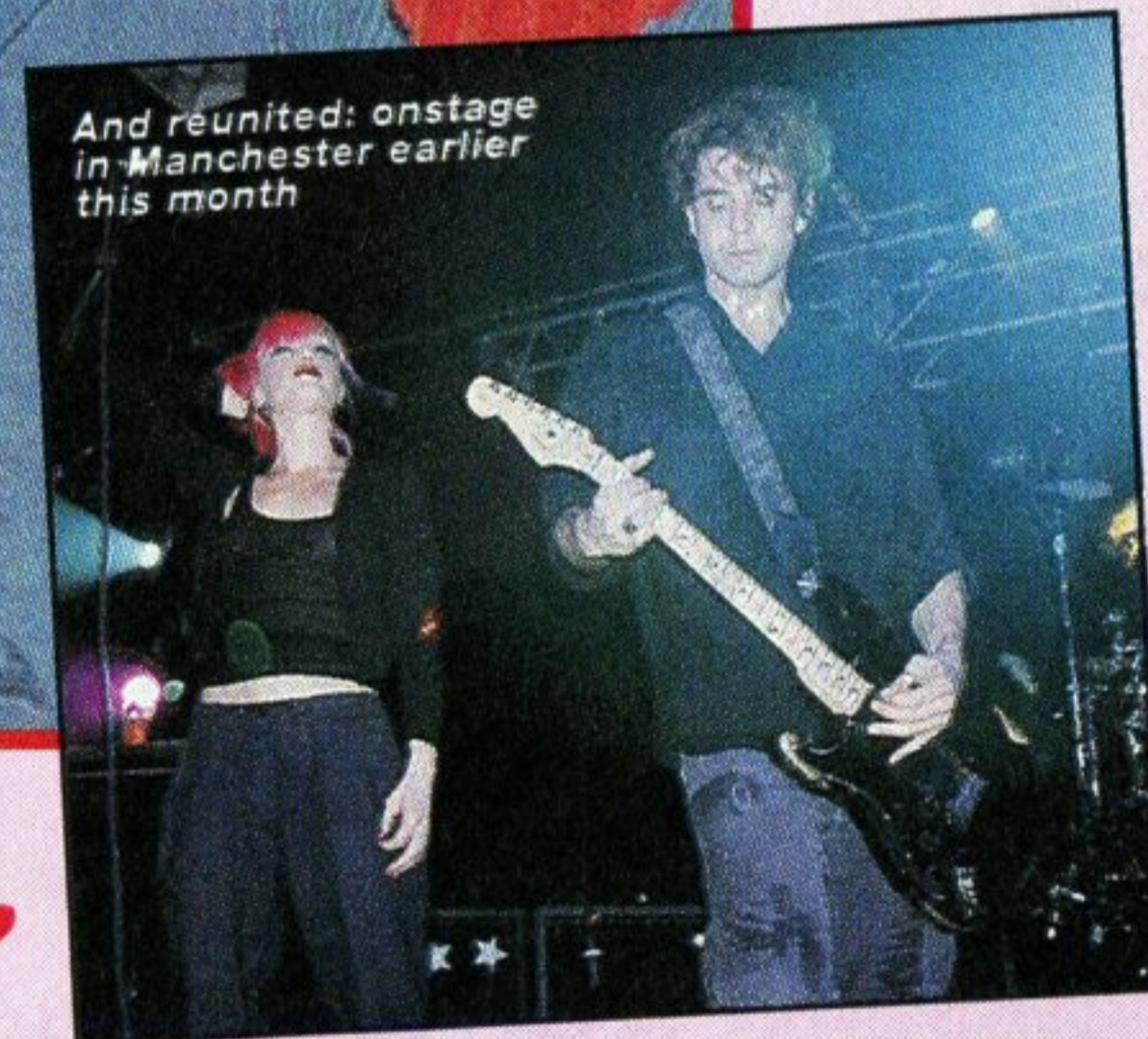
But the conflict in the record has a happy ending...

"Yeah. I think, yeah, definitely. Gavin has been a huge inspiration for the record and in my life and he's been very supportive."

Did it hurt when he was seen with other women?

"Whatever. You can put whatever you want to put about that. Everyone does anyway. It's my own business! *What do you think?*"

We think that sometimes, what doesn't kill us, or make us kill, makes for really good pop music.



And reunited: onstage in Manchester earlier this month

While they are here, No Doubt are taping a performance of their next single, 'Simple Kind Of Life', because, let's face it, it'll probably be a hit too, by which point they'll be rocking

Singapore. Wouldn't it be nice to have a simple life, Gwen, rather than life thru a lens?

"I don't think there's any such thing as the simple life," she says. "I don't think you ever figure things out. I just think you exchange problems for new ones. Humans are weird – they always want what they don't have. As soon as you get the next thing, you're gonna want to go back, or get the next thing after that."

And with a final shake of pink, she's whisked off by a minder, to get ready for the next thing on the itinerary. And the next after that.