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GWEN STEFANI
PHOTOGRAPHED
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GWEN STEFANI
ON MUSIC,
MOTHERHOOD
AND FASHION

PLUS
GOT NOTHING TO WEAR?
DON'T CRY. WE'VE GOT ALL
THE CLOTHES YOU NEED...

IN OUR AUTUMN HIGH STREET SHOP SPECIAL

'I'm like every other woman. I'm super-vain. I have issues'

She's got style, she's got songs and, in her leopard-print jumpsuit, she's got balls. At 37, with a one-year-old baby, Gwen Stefani has finally found pop stardom. She tells **Craig McLean** about motherhood, self-obsession and her fashion label

She might be wearing her sparkly leotard-cum-dungarees ensemble. Or a pair of sequined red hot pants. Or a tartan schoolgirl's uniform. Maybe she'll have slipped into one of her favourite outfits: armpit-length black leather gloves and monochrome horizontal stripes (imagine an escaped convict hiding out in a burlesque joint).

If you're reading this on Sunday morning Gwen Renée Stefani will be on stage in Australia, performing her idiosyncratic version of disco funk in front of thousands of tweens, teens and twentysomething pop fans in the Adelaide Entertainment Centre. For 90 sweaty minutes there will be no let-up in the costume changes, choreography – part Broadway show, part cheerleader rally, part hip hop face-off – and belting pop songs.

The ex-No Doubt frontwoman-turned-solo star is midway through a world tour. So far, Stefani has completed a run of 15,000-seater arenas in North America, Central America, South America and New

Zealand. Next week teamStefani – six musicians, a squad of female dancers known as the Harajuku Girls, and a bunch of male breakdancers – move into the Far East and then Europe.

Finally, towards the end of October, following a final bow on the stage of Prague's Sazka Arena, Gwen Stefani returns home. The only question then will be which home: the Los Angeles mansion or the huge townhouse that she and Gavin Rossdale, the British singer and guitarist, keep in the north London celebrity enclave, Primrose Hill?

The Sweet Escape Tour 2007 would be tough on a bunch of fresh-faced lads with guitars. Imagine how hard-going it must be on a 37-year-old multi-tasking pop singer, fashion designer and first-time mother who, when I met her in London before the tour's launch, was still breast-feeding her son Kingston, born in May 2006.

'I don't know when I'm going to stop breast-feeding,' Stefani chirps as she motors into the hotel suite, fresh from another feed. 'I'll just keep going ▶



while I can – like, he’s getting his teeth so it is a little bit scary. He’s bitten me a few times!’

Gwen Stefani doesn’t do anything by half. Breast-feeding, she gushes, ‘is just obviously really convenient with my lifestyle’. Baby Kingston was ‘genius’ on the flight from Los Angeles to London. ‘He nursed then went to sleep. But he doesn’t sleep through the night,’ she says brightly. ‘He’s up every three hours to feed.’

Nonetheless, today Stefani looks as glamorous as ever. The colour scheme is black and white: vertiginous YSL heels, skintight Balenciaga trousers, Azzedine Alaïa sweater, crisp shirt (‘I can’t remember the designer’) and chunky, diamond-encrusted pendant.

I could put her speedy chat down to sleep deprivation and jetlag. But I’ve met her before and she chewed my ear off then, too. Imagine a torrent of Valley Girl and not much regard for punctuation. But don’t be fooled by the ditsy blonde you might have seen dolled up as Alice in Wonderland and goofing through lavish videos like the one for her Grammy-nominated ‘What You Waiting For?’ single. On her own and with No Doubt, the Orange County band that California-born Stefani joined when she was 17, she’s sold 30 million albums. That includes seven million copies of her solo debut from 2004, *Love.Angel.Music.Baby*. It featured four top-10 hits and won her the 2005 Brit Award for Best International Female.

Just 13 weeks after giving birth, she hired Keane songwriter Tim Rice-Oxley, producer Pharrell Williams, Depeche Mode legend Martyn Gore and released her second solo album *The Sweet Escape*. Even her acting debut was in an epic, playing Jean Harlow in *The Aviator*, Martin Scorsese’s biopic of Howard Hughes. ‘I’m vain enough to want to do a movie again,’ she admits, but right now more roles ‘are the last thing on my list’. There’s too much else going on.

The initials of her first album gave her the name for her fashion label, L.A.M.B. When the line debuted on the New York catwalk in Fashion Week of September 2005, Stefani described it as ‘a little bit *Sound of Music*. A little bit of Orange County. A little bit of the Rastafarian rasta girls. A little bit English *Great Gatsby* garden-party girls. Pretty much the same thing I always do, but different versions of it.’

A Gwen Stefani fashion label made brilliant business sense. She’s become one of those pop stars whose innate style – a sort of streetwise haute couture – means that she wields influence beyond the stage. Women watch what she puts on the morning in the same way as they do with Madonna or Kylie.

‘I think Gwen is the ultimate 21st-century pin up,’ says Stefan Lindemann of *Grazia* magazine, which features Stefani time and time again. ‘She’s modern-retro – she plays on the pin-up thing with her vintage aesthetic, but she’s also ultra-modern. Like her music, her style is sexy but also out there – eclectic, almost aggressive. She’s no victim, and certainly no fashion victim. With someone like Victoria Beckham, you can see that a stylist has decided what she’s going to wear and put it together piece by piece, but Gwen’s style always seems organic.’

Sales of her label in the smarter department stores of New York, London and Tokyo have been healthy and Nicole Kidman and Teri Hatcher are fans. However there was a hiccup earlier this year when Stefani’s designer, Zaldy, left her to concen-

trate on his own lines, notably for Scissor Sisters.

‘It was unfortunate timing,’ she says. ‘I was like, “Don’t just plop this on me!” Now it’s just me and my stylist doing the Spring 08 collection. But I’d love to have a bigger design team. Someone like Marc Jacobs, I wonder how many people are working there, just feeding him ideas, feeding feeding feeding... I have, like, maybe five people in my entire team. I’m very hands on with it, but it’s got to change, I’ve got to get more people.’

She does if L.A.M.B. keeps expanding. She’s recently moved into handbags and launched a diffusion line, Harajuku Lovers. And what celebrity franchise is complete without a perfume? Her latest venture is a bespoke scent called L. ‘I would never have done a fragrance as ce-leb-ri-tee...’ she maintains, tapping the syllables out on her tongue, ‘just to do one for the sake of it. But because I have L.A.M.B. it’s really the most milestone, prestigious kinda moment. Basically, you have an inspiration of a perfume that you like, whether it’s a flower or a certain direction.’

Gwen Stefani’s first stage appearance was at a school talent show, wearing a self-made copy of the drop-waist tweed dress that Maria wore while singing ‘I Have Confidence’ in *The Sound Of Music*. She grew up with three siblings in a comfortable middle-class household in southern California. Her father worked in marketing for Yamaha motorbikes. Her housewife mother was a seamstress, and teenage Gwen made her own clothes, too.

‘My parents always pushed creativity on us, but they made it seem like the fun thing to do.’

Aged 17, at her older brother Eric’s invitation, she became the singer in his ska-flavoured new band. No Doubt was influenced by Madness and the Selector, British bands who were curiously popular in California in the early Eighties. No Doubt released their first album in 1992 but it wasn’t until their third, 1995’s *Tragic Kingdom* – which featured the huge single ‘Don’t Speak’ – that they found success. The two-and-a-half-year-long tour that came next put paid to Stefani’s college career. *Tragic Kingdom* sold a staggering 16 million copies and launched the front-woman into the rock and pop stratosphere.

But 20 years since starting out in music, and a decade on from her arrival on the world stage, there’s another facet to Stefani’s appeal: women identify with her. She’s a pop goddess with a deluxe lifestyle but who experiences the traumas other women suffer too. For an A-list star she’s remarkably candid. ‘I try not to be but I’m super-neurotic about diet,’ she says. ‘I’m neurotic about trying not to be neurotic! I’m like every other girl. I have to try really hard my whole life to try to be fit. And I’m super-vain. And I want to wear cute clothes. You know, I was chubby when I was a little girl. And I have all those issues everyone else has. But I try not to. And I’ve learnt over the years that it’s such a waste of time. And people like me whether I’m a little bit fatter or not.’

Her personal life has had its fair share of dark moments too. For seven years she dated Tony Kanal, the bass player in No Doubt. Their break-up was traumatic, although it did inspire Stefani to co-write the best-selling ‘Don’t Speak’.

In 1995 she met Gavin Rossdale, then the singer with Bush, when the two bands toured together. In 2003 they were married, twice: in London and again in LA. But the relationship was, as the tabloids say,



POP STAR ON TOUR, 2007



MOTHER WITH HER SON IN 2006



STYLE ICON
RED CARPET DIVA 2005



FASHION DESIGNER
STEFANI'S DESIGNS FOR
HER LAMB LABEL, 2007
(above and below)



'rocked' the following year by the discovery that Rossdale was the real father of the model Daisy Lowe. She's the teenage daughter of Pearl Lowe, the singer, best friend of Kate Moss and partner of Supergrass drummer Danny Goffey. Until then Rossdale, an old friend of Pearl Lowe, had thought he was only Pearl's godfather. The gossip magazines had a field day with the news, reporting that the upset had caused ructions between the newlyweds.

How, I wonder, does she and Rossdale's relationship work these days, what with so much going on in their lives (he's also just embarked on a solo career, after the failure of his post-Bush band Institute)?

'I don't know,' Stefani sighs. 'It's one of those mad love affairs that you can't live with and you can't live without, and you just keep going and going.' Her smile is wide now. 'And time goes by and you get the rocky times then you get the intense love times, then you get the reward of having the baby. It's just this ongoing saga. I don't know,' she repeats. 'I'm interested to see what's going to happen next, you know?'

I ask her what's on the horizon. 'Make babies, make music,' she grins. 'I'm on repeat mode.' Just before flying to the UK she had lunch in Los Angeles with the rest of No Doubt. 'It would be ridiculous to say there was no tension. Because my solo career has been going on and on. It was never supposed to be this long...' But at last, having delivered two albums in quick succession, she's 'really inspired' to go back and work with the band.

But before all that, the Sweet Escape Tour 2007 must travel around the world. If she was apprehensive during our London rendezvous she didn't show it. For one thing, it won't be as tough as her first solo tour, which she undertook even though she knew she was pregnant. Extra panels were sewn into her costumes to disguise the bump.

'It was hell on earth,' she confesses. 'But to look out and see girls from the age of eight to 15 in the front row – who obviously didn't know that I was pregnant even though I was feeling like a big fat huge whale – they were looking at me like I was Cinderella. And it was so... amazing. So rewarding.'

'But it's really going to be easier this time, because I have two whole records to choose from, and I have the experience of doing a more theatrical show. And I won't have a baby in my stomach!'

Her desire to start a family was well known – so much so the 'tick tock' motif in 'What You Waiting For' was widely believed to represent her biological clock going into overdrive. But what, I wonder, was her biggest fear about motherhood?

'Hmm,' she ponders. 'How I would fit him into my life? Would I be too self-obsessed to be able to care about him enough? I have a really extraordinary life and I obviously have a lot of passion about the things that I do. So I didn't know if I could be selfless enough. But obviously I can! It's the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me.'

Around about now, Gwen Stefani will be coming offstage in Adelaide and Kingston James McGregor Rossdale will be waiting for her on the tour bus. 'If I had to leave him at home and not bring him with me everywhere then I wouldn't do this,' Gwen Stefani told me. 'I know that's not going to last, and he's going to get more demanding and there will be school and stuff. But for now I get to do it all.' ■

The Sweet Escape album is out now