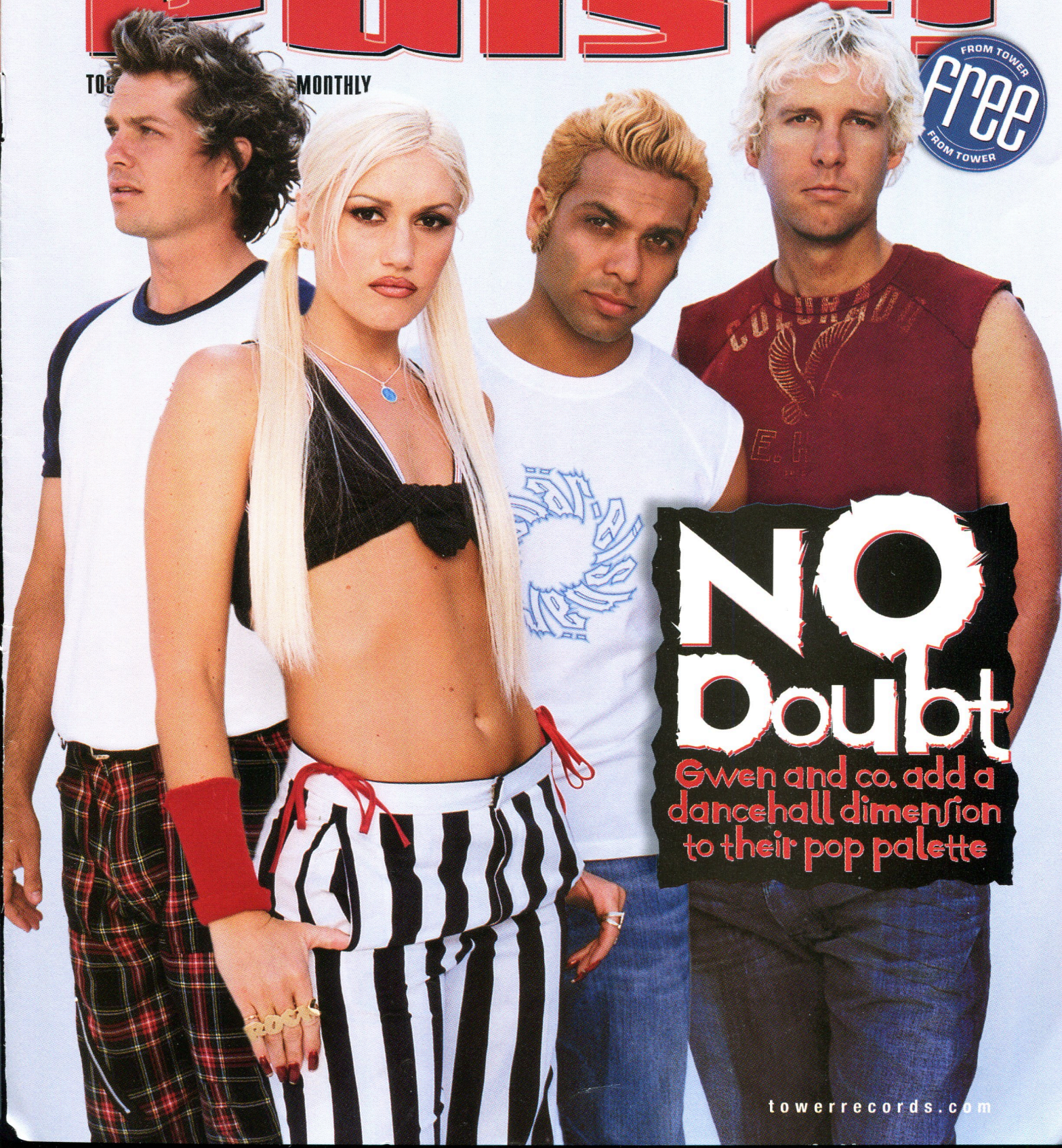


SPECIAL ISSUE: 200 RECORDS THAT MATTERED IN 2001

JANUARY 2002

DWLS

TOE MONTHLY



NO Doubt

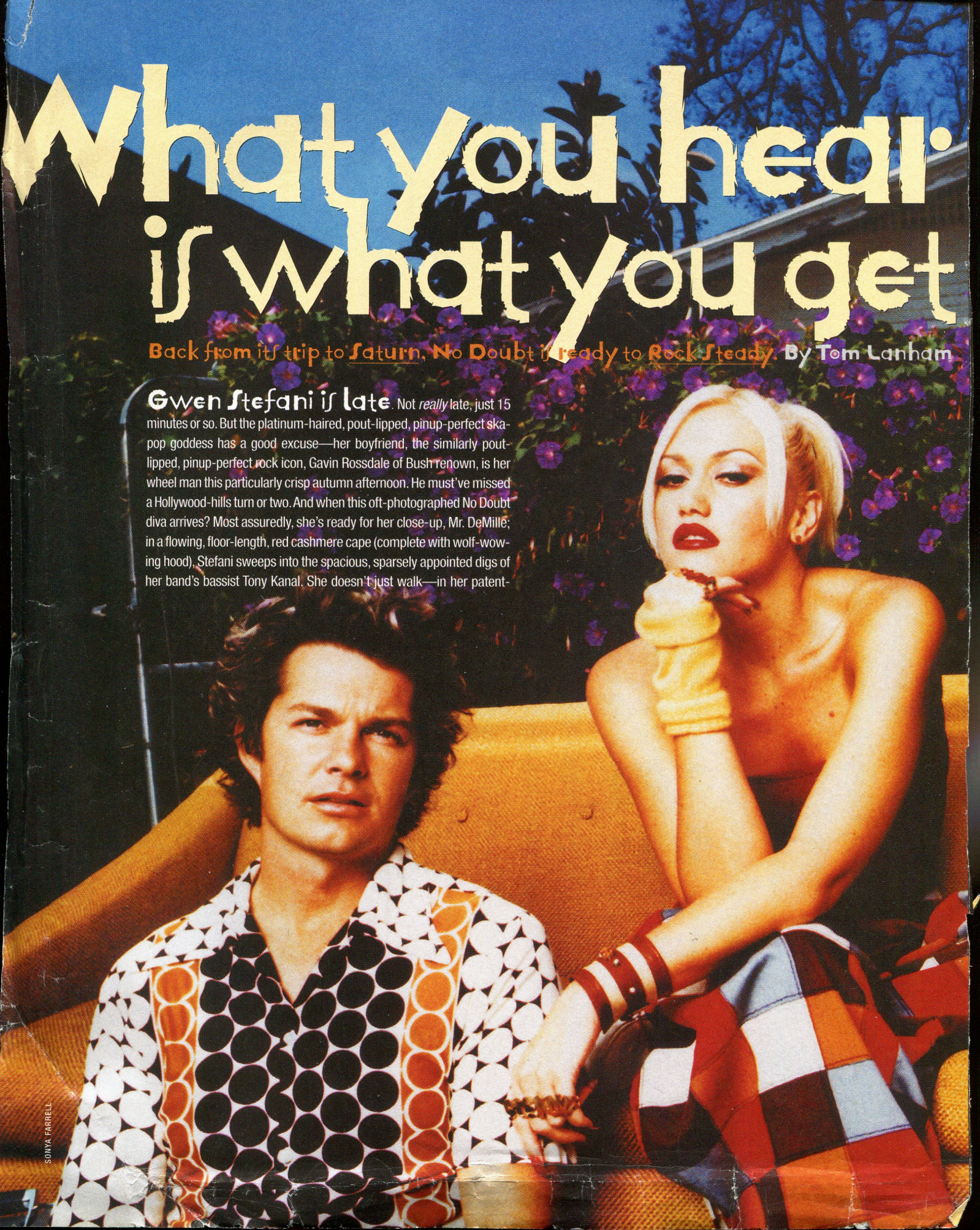
Gwen and co. add a
dancehall dimension
to their pop palette

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What you hear is what you get

Back from its trip to *Saturn*, No Doubt is ready to *Rock Steady*. By Tom Lanham

Gwen Stefani is late. Not *really* late, just 15 minutes or so. But the platinum-haired, pout-lipped, pinup-perfect ska-pop goddess has a good excuse—her boyfriend, the similarly pout-lipped, pinup-perfect rock icon, Gavin Rossdale of Bush renown, is her wheel man this particularly crisp autumn afternoon. He must've missed a Hollywood-hills turn or two. And when this oft-photographed No Doubt diva arrives? Most assuredly, she's ready for her close-up, Mr. DeMille; in a flowing, floor-length, red cashmere cape (complete with wolf-wow-ing hood), Stefani sweeps into the spacious, sparsely appointed digs of her band's bassist Tony Kanal. She doesn't just walk—in her patent-



From left:
Adrian Young,
Gwen Stefani,
Tony Kanal,
Tom Dumont



leather pumps, camouflage pedal pushers and baggy V-neck sweater— but *sweeps* as '40s film starlets must've swept on Oscar night.

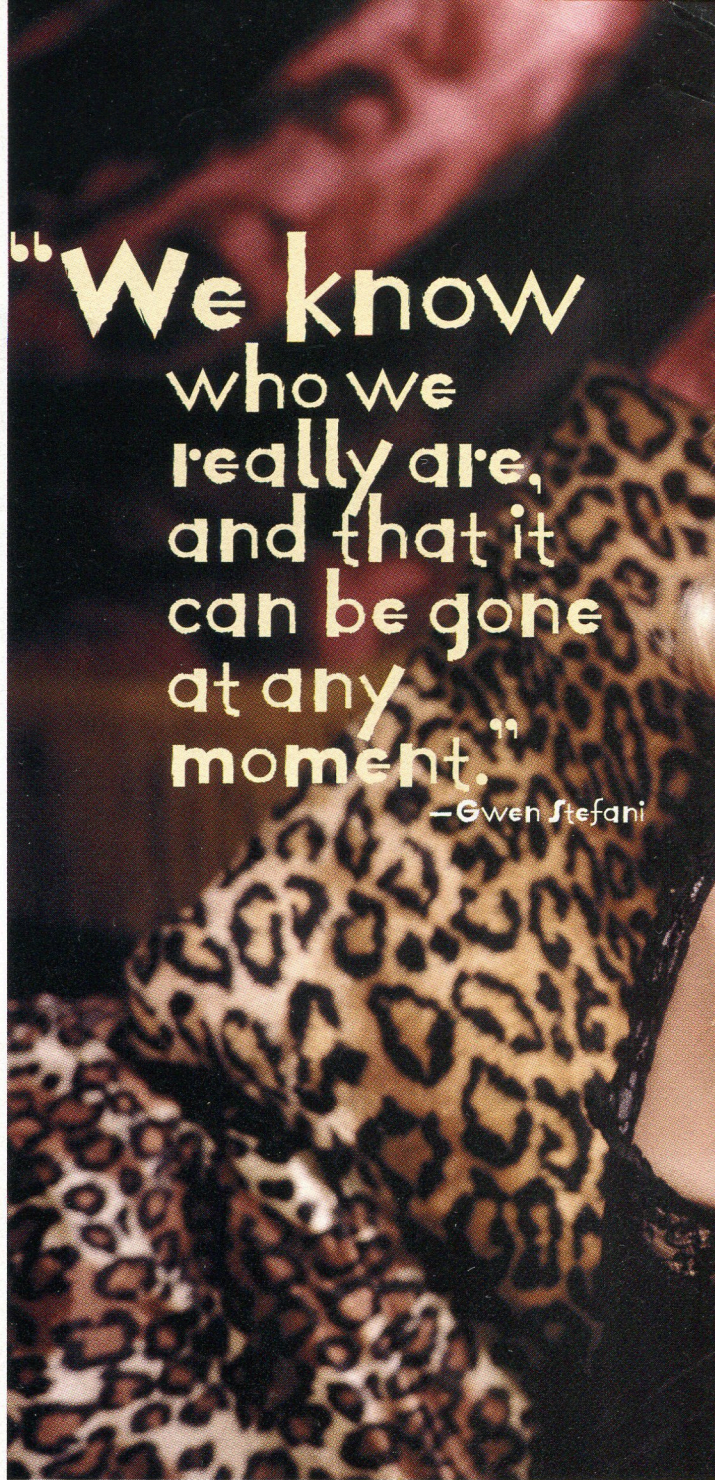
Stefani's trademark blonde tresses are clustered in a humble bun today. She let her locks down, she smiles, for the music-clip shoot of "Hey Baby"—the funk-punky first single from No Doubt's new *Rock Steady* comeback on Interscope. "In the video, I have *total* Veronica Lake hair," she purrs, curling into a wrought-iron chair on Kanal's back porch.

Stefani sported a self-designed hound's-tooth-jacket-and-golf-pantaloon number on VH1's recent Vogue Fashion Awards, where she won for Most Stylish Video, "Ex-Girlfriend" (from 2000's platinum *Return of Saturn*). Startling the calm Kanal, seated opposite her at his patio table, Stefani jumps up from her chair to demonstrate the surreal hands-clasped-in-triumph victory rumba she danced when her name was announced at the ceremony. "And when I got up to claim my Award, all of a sudden the single was on; 'Hey Baby' was *blasting!*" she informs Kanal. He's shocked; the song hadn't even hit radio yet, but he welcomes the well-placed leak. "So I was like 'What song is this? Hey baby, hey baby, *hey!*'" Stefani trills, shimmying around the concrete while her chum gives her the thumbs-up.

And sure, she rubbed shoulders with top-name designers like Patricia Field, Donna Karan and Stella McCartney at the event, she cedes. "But ever since puberty, I've always liked to get dressed up, and I've always made my own clothes. My Mom always took me to fabric stores like Jo-Ann Fabrics, House of Fabrics, and then with the band it was like Halloween every day. Like, 'Oh, cool! Now I have an excuse to dress up—it'll be fun!' And I spent a lot of time doing it, right, Tony?"

Kanal (no slouch himself in designer jeans, T-shirt and a meticulously blond-streaked, prickly-hedgehog 'do) nods, smiles sagely. And who should know better? He and Stefani dated for eight years, but broke up—with some irony—during the writing and recording of '95's *Tragic Kingdom*, their 15-million-selling sophomore breakthrough. He prepares to speak, but his ex is on a roll. Returning to her Veronica Lake theme, Stefani asserts that she did "just get so inspired by that whole starlet period of Hollywood. I'm fascinated by all that stuff; Julie Andrews and the whole *Sound of Music* thing, and musicals. And I definitely felt weird when *Tragic Kingdom* was coming out and the only girls that were around were the country or folkier style—the no-makeup singer/songwriters—or the really hard L7 or Hole-type rock bands. I didn't feel comfortable in either one of those areas, so I just decided to be myself. And it turned out all right."

Stefani is sporting tiny gold earrings shaped like plastic 45-rpm centers, her customary jungle-red lipstick, and huge knuckle-obscuring rings on each hand; one that reads GWEN, another that spells NO DOUBT. It's a defiant yet remarkably feminine persona, one that teenage fangirls around the world have been copying for at least a half-decade (even though No Doubt coalesced, to little fanfare, way back in '86); a style so distinctly Stefani that it—along with her velvety vocal talent—helped propel recent duet clips from techno-maestro Moby ("South Side") and Eve ("Let Me Blow Ya Mind") to the winner's circle at MTV's 2001 Video Music Awards (for Best Male Video and Best Female Video, respectively). "Without Gwen, the video wouldn't have gotten shown in the first place," Moby shyly assessed at the VMAs. Stefani is still dumbfounded—she almost turned down the artists' original offers, not wanting to be seen "as just a side dish." And she was pleasantly surprised when countless



"We know who we really are, and that it can be gone at any moment."

—Gwen Stefani

folks from the techno and hip-hop communities recognized her at the show, waved friendly hellos.

"But the thing about No Doubt is, we were a band for nine years before we had any commercial success," says Stefani, whose charming, self-deprecating humility can win you over in a heartbeat. "And that, in a lot of ways, has kept us really grounded in the sense that we know what's happening when they take our picture, that it's not the real thing. We know who we really are, and that it can be gone at any moment. And we feel lucky to still be making music without having to grow up, to just sit around with each other and go to different countries and record with legends and hook up with all these different, talented people." So many people, in fact, that it's a good thing phones are no longer rotary. Her



ROBERT SEBREE

"Spiderwebs"/"Just a Girl" from *Tragic Kingdom* probably cringed to hear her melt into uncertainty on such somber *Saturn* sonnets as "Dark Blue," "Too Late," "Simple Kind of Life" and the painfully blunt "Marry Me." Those same listeners will rejoice to rediscover Stefani on *Rock Steady*, writing and singing with newfound confidence and class. Any mistreating male who crosses her now will come to with a throbbing jaw and a ring indentation as a reminder of exactly who KO'ed him—GWEN from NO DOUBT.

By all accounts, the Glen Ballard-produced *Return of Saturn* was a real bear, a total emotional drain on the group. It posed a tough question: How do you go about topping a 15-million seller? Especially when your founder and key songwriter (Gwen's Svengali brother Eric Stefani, who first forced her to sing as a scaredy-cat teen) has just quit to sketch cels for *The Simpsons*? So yes, Kanal shrugs. "Making that record was a very laborious process. The headspace we were in for the whole *Saturn* phase was extremely serious." So, last November, he, Stefani, guitarist Tom Dumont and drummer Adrian Young "sat down and said, 'OK—we're gonna give it another shot, make another record.' We kinda made a decision to move ahead, but this time we were gonna remove some of the restrictions that we'd had previously. We opened ourselves up to trying anything for this record, just having fun with it. So last January, myself, Tom and Gwen sat down again and started writing."

nails never would've survived dialing all those long-distance numbers.

Set to a cheeky, off-kilter synth riff (even most of his basslines were performed on keyboards, Kanal swears), "Hey Baby" is Stefani's humorous study of backstage barnacles, acolytes dying to kiss the ring (either one). "I'm the one they feed upon," she vamps with neo-Norma Desmond drama, truly baffled to be confronted by "a stranger in my face who says he knows my Mom and went to my high school." Produced by Sly and Robbie—with raucous guest toasting from rude boy Bounty Killa—during a hard-partying, beer 'n' rum glugging stay in Jamaica, the track is a sassy, brassy leap forward from *Saturn*'s awkwardly insecure "Ex-Girlfriend" ("I kinda always knew I'd end up your ex-girlfriend ... Why'd you have to go and pick me?"). Fans of Stefani's spunky

The words and music flowed. On one of her London jaunts to visit Rossdale, Stefani paused long enough to co-pen a daffy dub-echoed ditty with Dave Stewart, "Underneath It All." For two Cars-kitschy compositions—"Don't Let Me Down" and "Platinum Blonde Life"—No Doubt (Kanal, 31, and Stefani, 32, are New Wave boosters from way back) enlisted the Cars' mastermind himself, Ric Ocasek, as producer. Madonna mainstay William Orbit oversaw the OMD-ish "Making Out"; Prince personally retooled the Paisley Park-polished "Waiting Room"; and Bristol Sound legend Nellee Hooper finished off five cuts, including the Lene Lovich-retro "Running." "Love is like a punishment/ Homegirl here to represent," Stefani deadpans in the dancehall title track, but tacks on an optimistic punch line: "Our love is rock steady, rock steady ..."



Stefani had suffered writer's block for *Saturn*. "But the thing I learned from my Dave Stewart experience is that you can write a song in, like, 10 minutes," she says. "I wrote 'Underneath It All' in an instant, just sat down and wrote it right then and there. And then Tony—who'd flown over to England, too—got super-excited about the idea of going to Jamaica to work with all these dancehall producers: Sly and Robbie, Steellie and Cleve. We only had maybe five songs written at the time, but Tony made it happen. Next thing we know, we're in Jamaica. It was magic."

"We found the balance on this album," is how Kanal sees it. "All of it came from a very organic place, it was super-spontaneous, but it was just *fun*. Every single song on it was fun to write; every time we sat down together to work on music, it was fun. And it's brought certain things to the band that we didn't have before, like a feeling that we're gonna be around a little longer. Whereas on *Tragic Kingdom*, I think people really thought we were gonna be one-hit wonders."

Sept. 11 found No Doubt mixing in London, where they'd rented a house next to Rossdale's. Stunned by the World Trade Center disaster—and trapped in Britain with no way home—the musicians wondered if such an effervescent, bubblegum-chewy effort would sound glib in light of such grim events. They got over it. "I mean, this is what we do, and what we need to continue to do," figures Kanal. "And you hope that the stuff you're creating will provide some sort of relief or a ... a ..."

"Diversion?" Stefani offers, helpfully. "Music is so powerful and it's such a gift that we have here; I'm actually thrilled to be creating it and I feel so excited to give it to everyone. Especially this record, because it's such an uplifting album. And whether this stuff happened on the 11th or not, people can still put their headphones on and have a little fun for a minute, maybe not take anything too seriously."

It's a sentiment that might appear Pollyanna-mushy coming from any other artist. But Stefani—with her big, innocent eyes and down-home delivery—somehow makes it sound earnest, honest, a heartfelt wish that the feel-good milestone of No Doubt's career will make a few despairing souls out there, well ... feel good.

A week earlier: Gavin Rossdale sits in a record company conference room, anxiously drumming his fingers on the table. Rossdale's got a new record himself to discuss (*Golden State*, with Bush), but Stefani is definitely on his mind.

He felt her pain in London ("It was really hard for her after the

tragedy—she was torn with being with me over there and being with her family in America"); understands the misgivings that fueled "Ex-Girlfriend" ("It's very difficult in this line of work to find stability, substance, because the demands are so great, coupled with the distance and the sheer loneliness—for anybody in a traveling band, you're incredibly alone a lot of the time"); and sensed her need for commitment, possibly a family, in "Marry Me" ("Although I don't know if now is a perfect time to be breeding—we'd be like 'Welcome to the world, kids! Here are your antidotes!'"). And you can hear it in the singer's voice—after six years together, his love for Stefani seems

genuine, unflagging. There is, ahem, no doubt.

And as most of *Rock Steady's* sugary poetry spins on a Gwen/Gav, enduring-love axis, Stefani's report card on their relationship is equally glowing. "Gavin's so sweet, and he has a great heart," she beams dreamily. "And he's had to prove himself to people his whole life, even to all my friends. But this has been a great year for me and Gavin, for the band, for everyone. We spent loads of time together because he did his record here in LA while we were working, then, when we went to London to mix, he was there the same time we were—it was perfect." Stefani suddenly startles Kanal again by stomping her spiky heel. "But I'm tellin' ya, *nobody's* fucking asked me to get married! *Ever!* It's weird. And everywhere Gav goes, everybody is at him about the ring, the ring. And there definitely is a baby boom right now—have you noticed that? Or at least all of our friends are pregnant. Adrian's having a baby, too. It's the first No Doubt baby, and it's gonna be on tour with us."

Stefani has heard all the No Doubt gossip. Or rather, the surprising lack of it—the general profile is of some nice Orange County-bred, Los Angeles-relocated kids who made good while offending the absolute minimum amount of bystanders along the way. "And I'm glad people think that," she says. "Sometimes I think we should roughen up and try to get a little more"—her scarlet nails slice through the air to designate quotation marks—"you know, 'cooler.'"

"It's true—it's really rare that people are mean to us," Kanal chimes in. "We're really lucky and blessed that way. And I think the reason we're somewhat grounded, as Gwen was saying earlier, is that it was nine years before *Tragic Kingdom* came out, which was when we first farted having commercial success ... Waidaminnut!" he stops himself, midthought. "Did I just say 'farted'?!"

Yup, Stefani nods, laughing hysterically while Kanal hides his face in his hands. "And people haven't heard *anything* yet!" she gasps, a not-so-veiled tour bus reference. "But we really do try and be nice to everybody, because we were the alternative to the alternative for a long time. It was so weird when *Tragic Kingdom* came out and all of a sudden we were like the mainstream, because No Doubt had always been the exact opposite of whatever was popular. And now, with *Rock Steady*, all we feel is lucky; really lucky to be able to try on all these different hats."

But it's a red-faced Kanal who gets the last word in. Sort of. "There was a really important point I was trying to make. But now I can't remember what it was!" ♦