

WORLD PARTY



*No Doubt suffered one of the biggest popularity drops in recent rock history. What makes Gwen Stefani and friends think their self-proclaimed party record, *Rock Steady*, will turn back the tide? By Andy Richardson*



It's a quiet Saturday in London, and a little relaxation seems well-deserved for the members of No Doubt. The foursome has just finished six weeks of final recording and mixing for its fourth major-label album, *Rock Steady*. In two days they'll fly home to cap the promotional work that's due before the album's Dec. 18 release. While they can, the bandmates catch some downtime, watching news reports from America, checking e-mail, or pounding tennis balls across a hard court, sending the squirrels diving for cover.

There's a real sense of accomplishment in the air this weekend. The protracted mixing sessions are the culmination of a daredevil recording year that spanned three countries, with nine major sessions in as many months. If that wasn't enough, the project features 10 star producers of widely varying specialties and covers nearly every major pop style.

A recording this audacious is bound to be a curiosity, but with a No Doubt release, there is always an added sense of uncertainty and anticipation. After all, the 15-year-old group from Anaheim, Calif., has experienced one of the most wildly varying audience receptions of any modern rock band. The group's debut album made little impact, but its 1995 follow-up, *Tragic Kingdom*, rode the video waves to unfathomable fame and 15 million in worldwide sales. Then, despite years of planning and two strong singles, last year's *Return of Saturn* suffered a bizarre commercial letdown, selling only 1.4 million copies in the United States.

Perhaps it's the even-numbered albums that bring the band good luck. But bassist Tony Kanal won't even venture a guess about what's in store for album No. 4: "I think we have all been around this band long enough to know that you can't predict what's going

to happen." Good answer, because few albums of this season will be as unpredictable as *Rock Steady*. The unspeakably ambitious set has a firm base in new-wave rock, but an equal portion of sweet reggae and Jamaican dancehall grooves. In addition, *Rock Steady* features propulsive dance-rock never before heard on a No Doubt record and some lover-girl crooning that shows cover girl Gwen Stefani in a new vocal light.

"It will change the face of pop music like *Star Wars* changed the face of cinema," says Kanal with obvious overstatement, though perhaps with a kernel of truth. No rock project in recent memory has united such a wide range of contributors, from gangsta-rap godfather Dr. Dre to ambient softy William Orbit. While it's not unusual for hip-hop artists to enlist an army of trackmasters and guest artists, no current rock band has fielded a production team from so far afield.

Having guided No Doubt sessions in February, June, and August, eclectic Englishman Nellee Hooper (Massive Attack, Björk) is the glue behind the global-scale project. But April sessions in Jamaica with reggae-rhythm gods Sly and Robbie and dancehall giants Steely and Cleve have given the album a strong undercurrent of island soul. Around the edges, there's a dose of eerie trance-funk from Prince, a little synth-pop push from former Cars frontman Ric Ocasek (Weezer), plus a hot-and-bothered house-rock workout by Orbit, Madonna's muse for her *Ray of Light* LP. Critics of cookie-cutter rock and formulaic Top 40 should have no beef with *Rock Steady*, which offers more variety from one group than an entire *Totally Hits* compilation. "It all makes sense to us," says Kanal, the driving force of the album's rock-and-reggae duality. "It has a bunch of different styles on it, but we've always mixed up styles in the past, so I don't think it's that much of a departure."



Steady for the world: Dumont, Stefani, Kanal, and Young

What *has* changed is the band's working method, in which fun and adventure take top priority. After two-and-a-half years of touring to support *Tragic Kingdom*, the band hunkered down in Los Angeles to search for new management, then sorted through numerous producers eager to get in on No Doubt's commercial ascension. It would be another two years of studio trial-and-error before the foursome would settle on the notoriously hands-on writer and producer Glen Ballard (Alanis Morissette, Dave Matthews Band). During the four-and-a-half years between albums, Stefani and the band slipped from being the spearheads of a smart, new-feminist ska rock to seemingly out-of-step adults on the verge of extinction.

The drop-off could have been the death of less unified groups, but as *Return of Saturn* descended last summer, this band of best friends—Stefani, Kanal, drummer Adrian Young, and guitarist Tom Dumont—made a New Year's resolution to take a new approach: Instead of waiting for guidance, the group was determined to take the wheel, even if its members weren't always sure of its destination.

"On this record, we decided to throw away the rule book," says Stefani. "We had a band meeting in October where we decided to call up all the people we'd ever wanted to work with. We didn't know whether it would work, but we decided it was a risk worth taking." She pauses and smiles. "When you listen to the songs you'll know how much we enjoyed this past year."

"We started the day after New Year's," Kanal adds, "because we were actually *really* excited to get back in there. All the pressure of following up *Tragic Kingdom* was off our shoulders. Now we were in a place where we could be much more spontaneous and creative without having to think about other things that really shouldn't play into making music."

Even longtime fans are in for a jolt when they hear how far the band has moved since *Return of Saturn*, an album of many slow, sad songs that bear the weight of Stefani's uncertainties and the band's pressures of that time.

"This is our party record," says Stefani. "I never like talking about lyrics too much because I feel they are so obvious. But the lyrics on this record are very positive. I wanted it to reflect myself. I didn't want to get into my Sylvia Plath-like depression again. I didn't get into my thesaurus or use any of the tricks I usually pull out. On the last record I was trying to learn how to be a better writer. I was taking people who I thought were really good, like Joni Mitchell, and I was learning. Just the way that they can take words and they are almost like colors and they just paint them. But on this record, I wanted to use everyday language. I tried to be more stream-of-thought."

The band's new confidence and creative freshness is evident from *Rock Steady's* opening moments: The dance-rock rouser "Hella Good" was born from a week of experimenting with hip-hop hotties the Neptunes (Mystikal, N.E.R.D.) back in February. The song was later re-recorded with Hooper, but it retains the Neptunes' intergalactic funk style, with a beat that sounds like INXS covering "Billie Jean." No Doubt may have done a better job of recapturing Michael Jackson's mojo than Michael himself.

"I wanted to write a dance song," says Stefani. "And I wanted to write a song with the word 'dance' in it and the word 'baby' in it. And those were two words I said I would never use. But I

remember when we were in New York one night in a club and they played some early Madonna, like 'Into the Groove.' And everyone got up to dance, all these people who were really cool. So I thought there was no reason not to do that, too."

Stefani's lyrics aren't completely vacant of social topics and gender politics. The first single, "Hey, Baby," is based around her observations about the lure of celebrity, the sexual world, and her place within it. It's a snaky slice of springy pop, produced by Sly and Robbie and featuring a saucy rap from Jamaican tough-cat Bounty Killer. "'Hey, Baby' is, like, my perspective of what I see after shows when we tour," says Stefani, beginning a telltale anecdote of life on the road and the sexual peccadilloes of her bandmates.

In addition to the new lyrical approach, the band's confidence to mix it up with living legends from all styles leads to some unusually flavorful musical backdrops. Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics co-wrote the love song "Underneath It All," but Sly and Robbie take the tune's sweet lyrics and turn them into a warm reggae ballad, replete with sunny horn charts and guest verses from Jamaican dancehall diva Lady Saw.

"With the dancehall stuff, well, that was down to Tony," says Stefani. "On the last tour we'd have these dancehall parties every night. So Tony thought we could get Sly & Robbie and Steely & Cleve to produce some songs, and they were so cool about it. They didn't think, 'Oh, white kids from Orange County, how embarrassing.'"

"We love Jamaican dancehall music, and we've been heavily influenced by it," says Kanal. "It's a much more dance-club form of reggae that straddles the fence between hip-hop and reggae. So we just thought we should go and record there. We just wanted to jet around, record, have fun, then get out and get on with the next songs in some other place."

It's clear the group's sound was influenced by its ever-changing surroundings. But the surprising strength of *Rock Steady* is the songs that seem to come straight from the heart (or other erogenous zones). There are plenty of songs inspired by Stefani's longtime, long-distance boyfriend, Gavin Rossdale, of British rock band Bush. She and Rossdale have reached an agreement that aspects of their relationship are not off-limits with the public. "We're so in love at the moment," she says. "It's great. Gavin has been out to see me in L.A., and of course we've been spending plenty of time together while we've been mixing in England."

This new, restless-romantic Stefani persona was sneak-previewed on No Doubt's remake of Donna Summer's "Love to Love You Baby" from the *Zoolander* soundtrack. That uninhibited hedonism also shines on one of *Rock Steady's* standout tracks, "Making Out," in which Stefani exudes a playful sensuality that transcends the bluntness of Britney Spears. If "Making Out" conjures Madonna, the tough-talking "Don't Let Me Down" recalls another famous blonde goddess, Blondie's Debbie Harry.

From the outside, it might appear that No Doubt is just covering all of its bases in hopes of a hit. But there's a method to the group's multinational approach. Little of the Neptunes sessions made the final cut, and a June session with Timbaland is still a work in progress. The much-in-demand Dr. Dre didn't seem to fit the album's vibe, either, and even Prince had to

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take a number to get a number on the new album. “Waiting Room,” co-written by Prince, is a band favorite that didn’t fit on the downbeat *Return of Saturn* but works on the more groove-conscious *Rock Steady*.

“That’s the cool thing about being a band for 15 years and having had the success we’ve had,” says Kanal. “We are fortunate enough to have these opportunities with people we want to work with, if for no other reason than just to do it. That’s all this whole experiment was. It was never ‘OK, we gotta come up with a cool hit with this guy, then that guy.’ It was more that we would be stupid to say no to these people. We decided we’d go for it, and if something cool comes out of it, it’s there. If it doesn’t, so be it. It’s such a cool way to work as a band, with music as the dictating force, as it should be.”

Just as home-recording technology has made it easier for single artists to do it all themselves, No Doubt found that home recordings also made it easier to work with a cast of thousands. Tracks recorded last winter in Dumont’s studio were the groundwork for most of the new album cuts. The producer sessions were used for adding new touches and interesting tweaks. Having the basic tracks more or less completed left more time for partying and socializing while on location.

“Jamaica was incredible,” says Dumont with obvious fondness. “Near the studio there was this pristine blue lagoon where we went swimming and diving. We’d have great nights in all these dancehalls and sit around eating incredible jerk chicken and drinking beer.”

Stefani preferred the big-city nightlife in London. Hooper

drove in from his home in Kilburn and took the band to all-night clubs in the city’s West End. “We have worked really hard on this album,” says Stefani, “but you can’t really say it was work with Nellee because we enjoyed it so much. We spent plenty of time going out together. Our own tracks are the basis of all the Nellee songs, but he added a real freshness to them. He took a sample, detuned it, then added to it, which was really Euro.”

The group is bracing for the best in the year ahead, with a second single and a headlining tour already in the works. Stefani’s proven rapport with MTV could be a boon to No Doubt’s video presence, or a bane if people have seen enough from her Video Music Award-winning appearances with Eve (“Let Me Blow Ya Mind”) and Moby (“South Side”). But *Rock Steady*, unlike its short-lived predecessor, could be an album full of singles. And with so many styles present and the dance-club energy running throughout, the remix possibilities are staggering.

Whatever the commercial success of *Rock Steady*, more importantly, the band (and Stefani in particular) seems to have gotten its groove back. The woman famous for bouts of writer’s block and creative anxiety has written and recorded a delightfully broad album in record time, with B-sides galore and new horizons visible for future projects.

“I think the studio is becoming more fun,” Stefani says. “The more you work with talented people, the better you become, so it’s more enjoyable now than it has ever been. I never would have dreamed we’d make this record. But I feel really confident now.” ●