

# Rock & Roll

**GWEN, AGAIN**  
Stefani onstage  
in September

## Stefani Strikes Back

How the singer reconnected with Pharrell, discovered emojis, and jump-started her career By Patrick Doyle

**I**HAD A COUPLE OF HARD YEARS," says Gwen Stefani, looking back on the sessions for No Doubt's 2012 album, *Push and Shove*. It was the band's first LP in 11 years, and Stefani recorded much of it while her husband, Gavin Rossdale, was on tour with a reunited Bush, which left her to handle her sons Kingston, now 8, and Zuma, 6. "I would get my kids ready for school, drop them off, go in the studio and be home by four [Cont. on 14]

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**GWEN STEFANI**

[Cont. from 13] to make dinner." The record scored no hits, and the band didn't tour after its release. "I'm sad it didn't connect," she says.

Stefani, 45, has channelled the turmoil into her new solo album (due early this year), her first since 2006's *The Sweet Escape*. She had been thinking for years about going solo again, but struggled to write material on par with hits like 2004's "Hollaback Girl". "I wasn't gonna bring back the Harajuku Girls," she says, referring to her former Japanese backup dancers. "You kind of run out of ideas. After a while, you're just competing with yourself."

Stefani points to the birth of her third son, Apollo, in February, as the turning point. After a rough pregnancy ("I was throwing up all the time and couldn't do anything"), she took a job as a judge on *The Voice*, partly to be close to Pharrell Williams, who helped write and produce several of her hits. Williams was determined to get Stefani back in the studio. "It was time for her to really express herself and not have a bunch of people telling her what to do," he says. "I held up the mirror and [said], 'Do you know who's in there? Do you know how many people respect that person?' The more she saw, the deeper she reached, and the crazier the stuff came out."

They recorded two songs, the frenetic dance-pop cut "Spark the Fire" and a punkish track on which Stefani sings about emojis. "I went, 'Oh, my God, it's the evolution from what I did before,'" she says. After that, Stefani started recording in her living room with producer Benny Blanco. "She's an open book," says Blanco. "She's cuckoo, she's a superhero, but there's vulnerability there." Stefani also wrote with young hitmakers like Calvin Harris and Charli XCX ("I don't usually want to work with other girl writers - but she had my vibe"). "Even the biggest people [she worked with] were star-struck," says Blanco.

Most of the album came together within six months - unusually fast for the obsessive Stefani. "It's addictive," she says. "I can put this out, and do another No Doubt record." She probably won't tour behind the LP, but has already worked with No Doubt on a Pharrell-produced song for the *Paddington* soundtrack, and the band will play festivals this U.S. summer. "I'm shocked people still care," she says. "Doing another solo record and recording No Doubt music and being on *The Voice* and having three boys all at one time, that just wasn't something I could dream up in my mind." **RS**



**ROAD-TRIPPER**  
Ronson drove from New Orleans to Chicago looking for singers for his new album.

**IN THE STUDIO**

# Mark Ronson's Uptown-Funk Extravaganza

**Producer scours the South for vocalists, recruits Bruno Mars and Stevie Wonder for new LP**

**I**T'S NEARLY 10 A.M., AND MARK Ronson has just arrived 40 minutes late to a session at a midtown Manhattan studio. But it's not his fault - it's Stevie Wonder's. Ronson had been trying to get his hero to play harmonica on his new album for months, and was even thinking of browsing YouTube for a Stevie impersonator. But the day before, Wonder finally cut his part in a Chicago studio, and Ronson stayed up most of the night listening to the takes. He cues up a track, and Wonder's unmistakable harp floats through the room. Ronson gets a little misty. "It's probably the peak musical highlight of my life," he says. "I'm fine if I never top it."

Wonder's cameo is the final piece of *Uptown Special* (due January 30th). "It's my best record, for sure," says Ronson, the dance-pop guru whose past LPs have featured everyone from D'Angelo to Boy George to Amy Winehouse (Ronson co-produced her *Back to Black* LP). Ronson says he went through a "musical identity crisis" after 2010's *Record Collection*. He started writing with producer Jeff Bhasker (Kanye West, Bruno Mars) - craft-

ing tracks that he imagined being sung by "a young Chaka Khan". Bhasker suggested they take a road trip to hear gospel groups in Southern churches. "I just thought he was talking shit at two in the morning, drunk," says Ronson. "But it became a reality." They spent 10 days driving from New Orleans to Chicago. In Jackson, Mississippi, they found Keyone Starr, a preacher's daughter, singing in a club. "I had the voice in my head, and she embodied it," Ronson says. They took her to

Memphis' Royal Studios (where Al Green made his best work) and recorded cuts like the deeply funky "I Can't Lose". "It breathes music," Ronson says of the studio. "You want to start playing the minute you walk in."

From there, Ronson recruited Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Chabon to write lyrics and vocalists like Bruno Mars and Mystikal to deliver them. Tame Impala's Kevin Parker sings "Daffodils", a psychedelic epic about a made-up drug. "I started it, but he developed it further to this weird, progressive disco, great pop track," says Parker. Mars flew to Memphis to write "Uptown Funk", which is getting heavy radio airplay. "I got in an Uber last night, and I was like, 'That's... holy shit, that's me!'" Ronson says, laughing. "The driver was probably like, 'Who the hell are you?'"

**"Getting Stevie is the musical highlight of my life."**

PATRICK DOYLE