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STEFANI

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Multimillionairess she may be, but the singer Gwen Stefani is still given to moments of 'where's-this-all-going' self-examination. She tells John Preston why she's feeling so overwhelmed – and how she has seriously considered retiring

The hotel suite where I am interviewing Gwen Stefani is some distance away from the suite where she has been photographed. And so a small group of us – Stefani, several assistants and I – set off down a long corridor.

Stefani is wearing a black-and-white chequered trouser suit and has a little black cape round her shoulders. As she walks, her feet slip slightly out of her teetering heels. Halfway down the corridor, one of her assistants says to another, 'Can you make sure she has some tea during the interview?'

It must be a familiar enough scene to her, yet something about it plainly sticks in her mind. As we're talking later, Stefani says suddenly, 'You know when we were walking down the corridor earlier? Someone said something like, "Make sure she has some tea" – treating me like this diva. And I kept thinking, "This is so weird." None of it feels

real. Even though it's been going on for so long, it still feels like it's happening to someone else.'

By now we're sitting in the other suite. The black cape has gone and so have the shoes. Instead, Stefani is sitting shivering with a blanket round her shoulders and her feet tucked under her. She's sucking on a cough sweet. Meanwhile frantic efforts are being made to turn up the heating.

At 43, Stefani – even up close and in this half-frozen state – doesn't look any different from the way she looked 15 years ago. She has the same white-blonde hair, the same ruby-red lips and the same flawless skin. But it's not simply that she doesn't look her age. She doesn't act it, either. She has the mannerisms of a hyperactive teenager, talking at such a rate that her words tumble out of her mouth. At the same time, she keeps tugging distractedly at her hair with one hand.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATE PETERS



As she chatters hectically away, you have to keep reminding yourself that this is someone who has not only sold more than 40 million records worldwide – both with the band No Doubt and on her own – but who also runs a hugely successful fashion company, LAMB, with an annual income of \$90 million (nearly £57 million).

When I tell her I'm having difficulty matching up the private Gwen Stefani with the public one, she nods understandingly and says, 'I know what you mean. I often feel the same way myself. In fact, earlier today I was thinking how extreme and strange my life has been. We were listening to the *X Factor* contestants and one of them did a song of mine, *Don't Speak*. It was a really surreal moment. I'm standing next to Tony Kanal [No Doubt's bassist] and this guy is singing a song I wrote about Tony breaking up with me. That's

'How bizarre is that? The first song I wrote – which today seems so naive – and it ends up being one of the President's favourites'

also the song that broke the whole world for us and gave me everything I have right now. It felt like I had jumped 15 years into the future and was looking back on the way I was then.'

A lot may have changed for Stefani in the past 15 years, but in one sense she's come right back to where she started. No Doubt are about to release their first new album since 2001 and, although they never officially split up, it's been a lengthy lay-off even by resting rock-star standards.

Not that Stefani has spent it lounging listlessly by her pool in Beverly Hills. She doesn't do inactivity. As well as making two solo albums, going out on tour and running LAMB, she's raised two children with her husband, Gavin Rossdale, lead singer of Bush. She's also, it turns out, spent a lot of time worrying obsessively about whether being a mother was compatible with being a rock singer.

'I remember when I was in hospital after giving birth to my first son, Kingston [now six] and someone said, "You're a mom now." And part of me thought, "Don't say that!" Although I'd always wanted children, it was such an opposite thing to being a singer. Being a singer is all about me. About ego. Being a mom is all about being selfless – two different worlds.'

At first, she thought that everything could continue much as it had done before. 'Eight weeks after I had Kingston I was back in the studio

making a solo album. Then I went out on tour and by the time I came back I was pregnant with my second son, Zuma [now four]. Then I went straight out on tour again. On one level it was like the fulfilment of all my dreams: I was a mother, I was successful, everything was going great... The trouble was, in another way I was this real mess.'

It wasn't until she tried to write some songs for No Doubt's comeback album that she realised just how bad a state she was in. For months, she stared at a blank sheet of paper overcome with feelings of guilt and exhaustion. 'I kept thinking, "How can I

leave my two little boys and go off to the studio?" They weren't sleeping well at the time, and neither was I. All the time I kept thinking, "If this doesn't happen, you're letting everyone down: the band, my family, all the people who depend on me." There were occasions, she admits, when she was tempted to abandon the whole thing – 'but I just couldn't bear to give up'.

What's odd about all this drive, all this self-imposed pressure is that when Stefani was growing up in Fullerton in Southern California, she insists she wasn't in the least driven, or ambitious. 'No, no,' she says. 'I was completely passive. My mom always said I was the peacemaker

in the family. My older brother, Eric, was the leader, the creative one. I was just his puppet.'

It was Eric who in 1986 came home with a Madness album, decided to form a ska band and recruited his younger sister to sing backing vocals. Then he went off to become an animator on *The Simpsons* and Gwen, none too willingly, took over as the lead singer. She'd never been particularly musical and it wasn't until Tony Kanal ended their relationship that she ever thought about writing a song.

'I remember so vividly the first song I ever wrote. It was called *Different People*'. A celebration of human diversity – 'The most amazing thing that I've seen in my time/Are all the different people and all their different minds' – it is apparently one of Barack Obama's favourite songs. 'How bizarre is that? The first song I wrote – which, when I read the lyrics today, seems so naive and young – and it ends up being one of the President's favourites.'



Gwen Stefani performs with No Doubt at Newport Beach in California, 1989

But the moment she started writing, says Stefani, she became a different person. 'Before that, there was nothing I was good at, and, all of a sudden, here was something I felt really passionate about. I remember my dad listening to the first songs we recorded on his way into work and him saying, "This is really good. You need to keep doing it!"'

Stefani was still at college when No Doubt released their first album. They went on tour to promote it - and more or less stayed on tour for the next two and a half years. By the time they came back, they were famous. And in Stefani's case, instantly recognisable, too.

Soon she grew used to looking out from the stage and seeing thousands of young girls all dressed like her - like St Trinian's dominatrices with a bit of Minnie Mouse thrown in. 'That was the most amazing feeling. I'd always loved dressing up, even as a little girl. Even now, if nobody else was around, I'd still be putting on make-up and doing my hair. But seeing myself reflected in all these different girls... I don't know if you ever get over something like that.'

Yet in many ways, as Stefani readily admits, she was still hopelessly naive. 'I'd never been a bad girl, or a rebel. I was never into drugs, I lived with my parents until I was 25 and I'd only had one boyfriend - and he had left me. Then suddenly I had all this power.'

Just as No Doubt were taking off, they did the opening spot in a concert headlined by Bush. Backstage, Stefani met Gavin Rossdale. 'That's when my life changed,' she says. 'Here was this successful, good-looking English guy who seemed to be interested in me. I couldn't believe it. My dad actually predicted it, though. When he saw Gavin on TV once, soon after we met, he said to my mom, "There's your future son-in-law." But I didn't really believe it was going to happen until the day we actually got married.'

Stefani and Rossdale have been married now for 10 years - an eternity in rock-star terms. Not that there haven't been bumps along the way, most notably when Rossdale learnt that the model Daisy Lowe was not his goddaughter, as he thought, but his daughter.

'It's certainly been challenging for us at times,' Stefani says. 'We've had to spend a lot of time apart because of our careers. I basically spent all of last year on my own because he was in his band, touring the world. That was hard for me, being at home with the two boys. But now he's home we realise how much we all need each other.'

It was Rossdale who told her to keep calm when she couldn't write the new No Doubt album,

and that in the course of time something would come. As it turned out, he was right. 'What I realised eventually was that I had to write about something that I was going through. How I was trying to balance everything in my life and finding it hard, if not impossible.'

And did writing about it help you to balance your life a bit more? I ask.

'No,' she says, promptly. 'It gave me something to write about, but it didn't resolve anything at all. In fact, that feeling has become even worse.'

She sighs, pops another cough sweet in her mouth, then apologises in case the sound of it clicking against her teeth is bothering me.

'At the moment, I have to say that I'm spread so thin that it's almost not fun. I mean, how do you enjoy everything when you have so many plates

spinning at the same time? To be honest, sometimes I feel completely overwhelmed. Completely p— off that it's too much at once: the fashion, the records, the children, marriage... Everyone seems to be relying on me for something. And

I'm not someone who likes to let people down.'

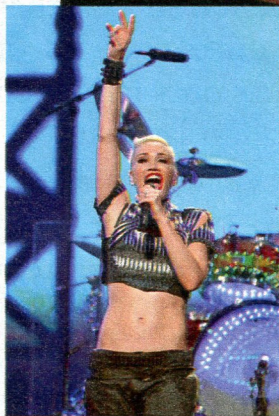
And then there's the fact that she keeps being asked for advice on how to stay fit, thin and healthy. 'That happens all the time,' she says, her voice rising plaintively. 'But I'm not a dietitian, or a nutritionist, or a trainer. The last thing I want to do is go round telling people how to live their lives.'

Nor does she claim to be able to offer advice on motherhood. 'I know that my children have completely different lives to the one I had. But I hope they have lots of love and stability. We both try to do as much as possible - pick them up from school, be there when they need us. And they seem happy, so far.'

It's time for her to go. The assistants are hovering outside, ready to take her to another appointment. Two nights ago she was in Los Angeles, she tells me. Tonight she'll be sleeping in the house that she and Rossdale have in Primrose Hill - and tomorrow she's going to France.

Then she stops and says, 'No, I think it might be Germany.' As we shake hands, she lowers her voice so that no one else can hear and says, 'You know what? Part of me just wants to eat a pizza and go to sleep.' ●

'I have to say that I'm spread so thin that it's almost not fun. Sometimes I feel completely overwhelmed'



Top: Stefani married Gavin Rossdale in London in 2002. Above: singing in Las Vegas in September this year

No Doubt's album 'Push and Shove' is out now