



GWEN STEFANI

NEW MAN, NEW SOUND, NEW LIFE

"EVERYTHING WENT FROM SUCH TRAGEDY TO SUCH BLISS"

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AUSTRALIA'S BIGGEST GLOSSY

A DIFFERENT

ON THE EVE OF HER FIRST SOLO ALBUM RELEASE IN A DECADE, GWEN STEFANI TELLS NAOMI CHRISOULAKIS ABOUT THE MUSIC, THE MEN AND WHY SHE'S NEVER BEEN JUST A GIRL

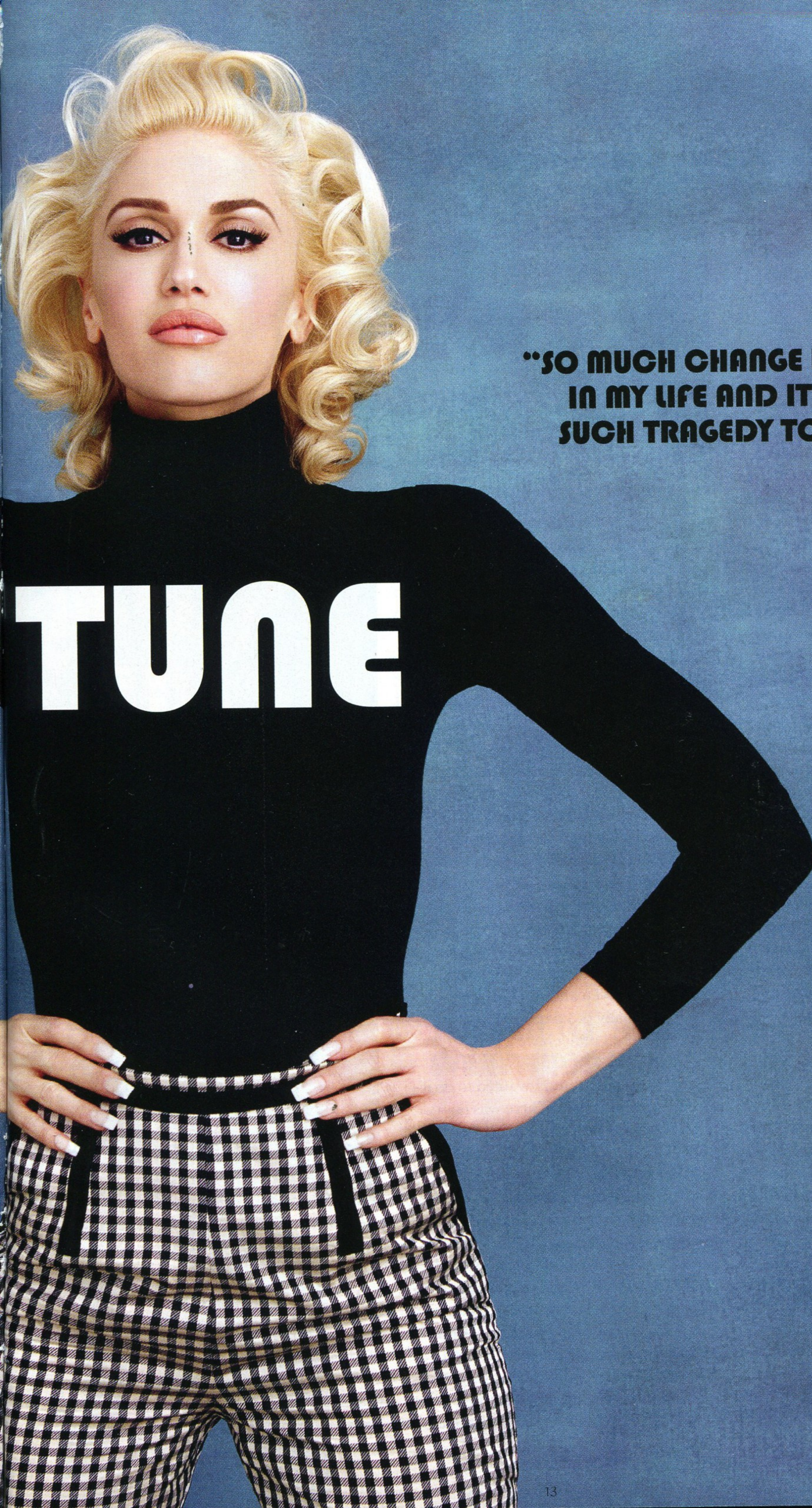
Gwen Stefani is putting on her game face. As she prepares for our interview to discuss the tumultuous last 12 months of her life, she peers into the mirror and confidently swipes on a coat of bold red lipstick. Along with her platinum hair, it's a signature look she's been rocking for longer than many of today's pop stars have been alive. And these days, it's also a form of armour she relies on – especially during a period when she's let her guard down more than ever before.

It's been a big year for the 46-year-old singer-songwriter, topping off almost three decades since she first burst onto the music scene as lead singer of the ska-rock band No Doubt. Born and raised in Orange County, California, Stefani inherited a love of music from her older brother Eric, who formed No Doubt in 1986 (but later left the band). While initial offerings failed to find an audience, mainstream success came when their 1995 album *Tragic Kingdom* sold more than 16 million copies worldwide.

The string of hit singles, combined with Stefani's powerful voice, commanding lyrics and trend-setting fashion (bindis, parachute pants, pink hair and baby buns), made them one of the biggest bands of the decade, and Stefani the queen of '90s style.

Songs such as *Just A Girl* and *Don't Speak* became instant anthems, with Stefani as their poster woman. Later, it was revealed she wrote *Just A Girl* (at age 25) after her dad wouldn't let her drive late at night, but she stops short of saying the persona was premeditated. "I wasn't trying to make a statement, I wasn't trying to be a feminist," she says. "When you're a little girl you just think, I'm human. You don't think I'm less or more, until you discover your sexuality: that it's limiting, but it's also powerful. That song I always felt would be outdated in some way for me as a woman. Like, how do you continue to sing that song? It's crazy how it continues to feel even more interesting as the years go by. I feel really proud of it." ►

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMIE NELSON



**“SO MUCH CHANGE WAS HAPPENING
IN MY LIFE AND IT WENT FROM
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TUNE

STANDING TALL After an emotional year, Gwen Stefani has come out on top with a new man and a new album.

By the noughties, Stefani was one of the world's most successful pop stars. No Doubt continued to produce hit records and she had a blossoming solo career on the side, bolstered by her own fashion line (L. A. M. B.), the ubiquitous celebrity perfume deal and her role as Jean Harlow in the hit 2004 film *The Aviator*. But for Stefani, who is speaking ahead of the release of *This Is What The Truth Feels Like*, her first solo album in 10 years, the glossy success story didn't tell the full tale. "I've never written a record that's happy in my whole life, until now," she says. "Go back and you'll be like, 'Wow, she's right.' There's always a line somewhere that explains that there were problems."

The problems – and her new-found happiness – come down to two men whose presence hangs over our interview: Gavin Rossdale, the frontman of UK rock outfit Bush and Stefani's ex-husband, and Blake Shelton, country superstar, former co-star on *The Voice* (US), and her current boyfriend. Stefani's split from Rossdale, her partner of 20 years, in the first half of 2015 (he allegedly cheated on her with their nanny) and her budding relationship with Shelton later that year, form the basis of her album – comprised of songs that alternate between crushing heartbreak and the headiness of new love. "The only thing that I could do to save myself was to go in and write these songs," Stefani says. "The album was written over a period of time where so much change was happening in my life and it went from such tragedy to such bliss. It's all captured in the music."

Like many artists, Stefani used her emotional upheaval as a catalyst for a new wave of songwriting. She'd actually started working on the first incarnation of a new solo album in 2014, but felt it was forced. "I couldn't go out and write for myself. I was nursing a baby, I had two kids, and I was on [*The Voice*], so I started to kind of curate a record like how most pop stars do, where people write for you and you tweak lyrics," she says. "Nothing felt right. It felt very pieced together, and then in February last year I found out about everything in my personal life falling apart."

While Stefani won't be drawn on the details around what happened with Rossdale, she recently told *The New York Times* it was a "really good, juicy story". Recalling how she felt at the time, Stefani



SASS APPEAL (clockwise from above) Gwen Stefani performs as part of No Doubt in 2001; with her ex-husband Gavin Rossdale; the singer still smoulders today.

said: "I'm gonna die. I am dead, actually. How do I save myself?"

The singer scrapped what she'd been working on and replaced it with the first iteration of *This Is What The Truth Feels Like*, which was written in eight weeks during her most tumultuous period. As rumours swirled about trouble in her marriage, Stefani was trying to make sense of what had happened, but also grappled with how to explain the reason behind this change in direction for the forthcoming album. "I was going through the craziest time. It's impossible to explain how hard it was, to get into a room with people you don't know – who don't know your story – and you can't say what's going on. I needed to protect the children," she says, referring to her sons with Rossdale – Kingston, nine, Zuma, seven and Apollo, two.

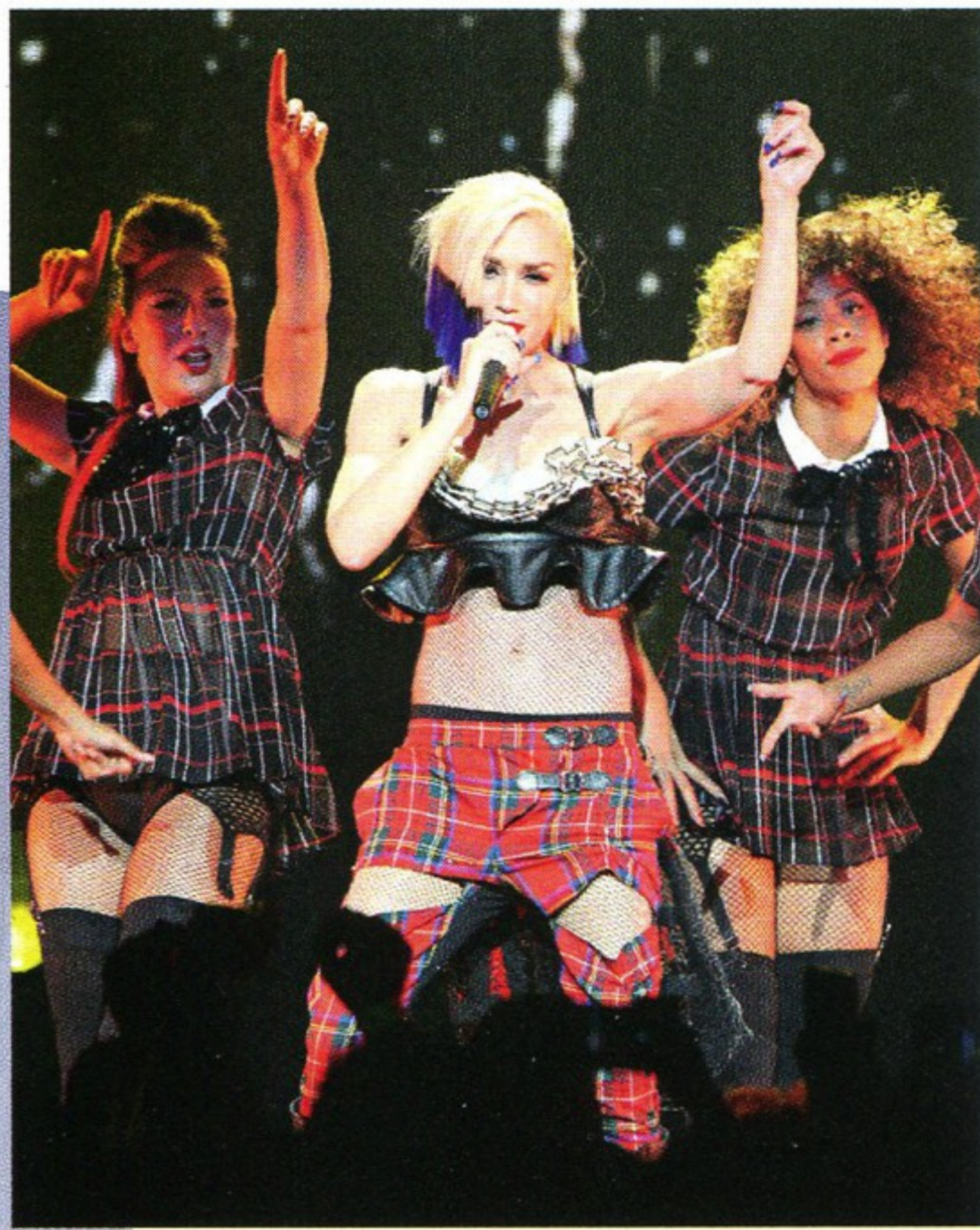
"It was really dramatic and it was weird because I didn't have a plan," she continues. "My plan was the truth, honesty, and purity and I wanted to do it for the right reasons... There was no style to be born out of this [album]. It was really about heartbreak and about emotions."

After years of struggling with self-doubt, the ease with which Stefani wrote the first half of the album renewed her faith in her songwriting abilities. "At that point I was like, 'Wow, I'm channelling God!' For me, being able to write again in that way – where you go in and you have a song like every time – was incredible. I had been writing in my journal a lot, so I was drawing from that, but it's such a weird thing. You have nothing and then within 10 to 15 minutes you can have this

whole thing and it's so powerful," she says. "When I was trying to make the last record that never came out, I was trying to cheat my way through by having people write for me. My gift is sharing my story and just being honest and performing and sharing stuff. I feel like that's what I do."

Getting into the studio was equally a form of therapy. "It was really depressing when I was like, 'OK, I guess I'm done writing,' because it was such an amazing therapeutic, healing process for me," she says. "And it's a little bit weird now to talk about it... [But] by getting up and saying I'm going to turn this into art, I'm going to turn this into music and share it with people and bring them joy, that took a lot of strength and I feel real proud."

Stefani says there were initial concerns from her record label that what she'd been working on was too personal to be



THE YEAR THAT WAS (from top) Stefani in New York in October last year; with Rossdale and their sons (from left) Zuma, Apollo and Kingston in June, 2015; stepping out with new boyfriend Blake Shelton at the 2016 Pre-Grammy Gala in February this year; as a coach on *The Voice*; at the *Vanity Fair* Oscars after-party with Shelton.



a commercial success. “But at that point, that first half of the record had a certain tone to it and it wasn’t until later, when things really switched over, that those songs made sense,” she explains. “I went in and I was like if they think it’s too personal, what are they talking about? I don’t know how to do anything, but just from my heart. So I was like, ‘Let’s write something super-personal and not commercial’ and then wrote *Used To Love You*. It was the first time in my entire career that a record company wrote me saying they thought I had a hit.”

At that point, Stefani went back to work at *The Voice* where a romance with 39-year-old country singer and co-star Blake Shelton blossomed at the end of last year – or, as she explains it, when she “started falling in love”. Enter the zen – and the second, crazy-in-love half of the album. “It’s fun to be in a new place, I feel like everything happened how it should,” she says. “I just feel so grateful. To be part of making music is such an incredible gift and to share it now is magic.”

Not so magical is the scrutiny Stefani faces as one half of the

No Doubt and continued designing for her label. And, she’s entering a bittersweet new chapter as a parent. “Now is really crazy with the kids because I have them half the time,” she says. “It’s depressing, but it’s also given me time to do creative things that I probably would have never done, like make this whole record. I just believe that’s part of my plan. I think being a mum is the hardest thing I’m ever going to do, so rewarding and incredible. I’m so lucky that I have three babies, but it’s hard. You really have to balance it.”

Tonight is one of those nights – a show that was cancelled was re-booked so her kids are in her care, but she won’t be able to spend time with them. “I’m writing the teachers to let them know that they’re not going to see me [at pick-up]... this is just one of those nights where I’m like a lot of people who miss their kids as they’re working.”

Being in demand goes hand in hand with success, and while Stefani relishes a dynamic life, the obligations can get “overwhelming”, she admits. “I got super-depressed a couple of days ago because I just felt trapped. It’s too much to have so many commitments when you’re a mum. You’re trying to do all those things plus feeling guilty and it’s too much, but somehow it always seems to work out.”

After her gruelling marriage split, 2016 is so far working out pretty well for Stefani. Most of all, she’s relieved to be expressing her story, on her terms. “It was a hard year, but look, many people had a way harder year than I did,” she says. “I feel like

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hottest new celebrity couple, seen recently at the *Vanity Fair* Oscars after-party. She is, she says, trying to take the attention in her stride. “I have nothing to hide. I’ve never been the type of person that had something to hide. The only responsibility that I have is to protect my children. When you are a public mum, it is mine to know how much to talk about, that’s why I don’t talk about them too much. I don’t want them to look back and be embarrassed.”

Her boys were part of the reason this is her first solo album in 10 years – as well as raising them, she toured extensively with

what I’ve gone through, so many people go through it, and for me to be able to share my story... I am just really grateful. I never felt like I had any impact on anyone, being just a girl from Orange County. I never thought that I was anything special or talented or anything, so it’s incredible to have a gift to write and be a part of making music. I don’t feel at all scared about sharing it. It feels like what I’m supposed to be doing and I’m doing it.” **S** *This Is What The Truth Feels Like* (Universal) is out now.

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