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LET'S DO THIS

Gwen Stefani on taking back control when your life falls apart

“Everything
got f***ed
up... and now
it's not”

New album, new attitude. After a self-confessed
“crazy year” the unstoppable
Gwen Stefani talks to *Stylist's* Anna Hart

PHOTOGRAPHY: TERRY RICHARDSON







GWEN VISITS GRAHAM NORTON'S RED CHAIR...



THE VOICE JUDGES: (FROM LEFT) ADAM LEVINE, BLAKE SHELTON, PHARRELL WILLIAMS AND GWEN

If I didn't know that this was Gwen Stefani's living room, I'm pretty sure I could have worked it out in under 20 seconds. There are the three oversize baby portraits of her sons, Kingston, nine, Zuma, seven, and Apollo, two, dominating one wall. Monochrome decor clashes with splashes of hot pink and cherry red. Painted black lines snake across the ceiling. A row of Harajuku Girl plaster busts adorn another wall. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, I glimpse an infinity pool stretching out to the vast lawn. But it's not all Hollywood Hills glamour and pop art; there are also telltale signs of a functioning family home – the bright primary hues of children's toys, and a puppy playpen for Ginger, the family's adorable new pet cavoodle.

The sprawling, personality-filled home – which was previously owned by Jennifer Lopez – is something of an anomaly in Beverly Hills, where many residents ensconce themselves in neutral, hotel-like surroundings. What's more illuminating is that Stefani is letting me into said home at all. These days it's vanishingly rare to be admitted in to a celebrity's inner sanctum. Most prefer to host reporters in hotel suites. There's something rather old-fashioned about such a move. It's also a gutsy act for an oft-papped A-lister who has just come out of what is – by anyone's standards – a transformative year when her 13-year marriage to British musician Gavin Rossdale sadly came to an abrupt end. But here I am, on her vintage leather sofa to talk about Stefani's year ahead, which includes a new album. I'm greeted with a warm "Hi, I'm Gwen," from the woman herself as she flops onto the sofa next to me, legs sprawled. Introducing herself is a cool move; as if I seriously wouldn't know who she is.

All this is a world away from the relatively rough suburban city of Anaheim in Orange County, where 46-year-old Stefani grew up and joined her brother Eric's fledgling ska band, No Doubt in 1987. She's since sold more than 30 million albums worldwide – as both a solo artist and singer of No Doubt, won three Grammy awards, joined the US version of *The Voice* alongside country star (and new boyfriend) Blake Shelton and also runs a successful fashion line, LAMB, with an annual turnover of around £60million. She's also created her Harajuku Lovers perfumes, and last year collaborated with Urban Decay on a make-up line. Today she's wearing her fuchsia lipstick shade Firebird – I tell her I'd feel cheated if she wasn't wearing a bold slick

of lip colour and she laughs in agreement. In case you were wondering if she ever has a dressed-down day behind closed doors, well, I'm not sure she does. Her platinum hair is slicked back in a modern twist on a Fifties victory roll, and she's dressed in a Reebok bomber jacket, basketball shorts over black opaques and polka-dot wedge trainers.

As you'd imagine of one of the hardest-working women in rock, she's a bundle of nervous energy, fidgeting girlishly and talking nonstop. I'd expected distance, coolness and badassery from Gwen Stefani, but in fact,

"I never felt comfortable being a sex symbol. I never, ever saw myself as that. That might be why I have more longevity"

there's a touching vulnerability to her. She admits to feeling anxious before every recording session, and when conversation does stray into the realms of her private life, she doesn't try to hide her feelings, but sighs, rolls her eyes, looks me in the eye and says, "But I'm good now." For now, it's all about her new album which has taken over her life for the past six months; a project that has "healed" her, and which she hopes will kick off a new chapter in her life.

I'd like to talk first about your image; you always look very current but also

have such a consistent look. You've been a blonde, for example, since you were in ninth grade...

We all have our DNA of what we love. It goes far beyond hair colour, your overall taste. It comes from how we're brought up, what we're exposed to. The kids like different things even though they're exposed to the same stuff. It's who you are.

What is your style DNA? You've always played with femininity...

Well, I've always been very girly. When I was a little girl I loved dolls and make-up and animals. I wasn't a tomboy at all – but weirdly I ended up working almost entirely with men. This is something I'm really grateful for. I got to inhabit a man's world. I got to be a fly on the wall in No Doubt, on *The Voice*, with the studio guys...

Do you feel that being the only woman in the room – and a powerful woman at that – puts you in an interesting position?

The way my parents brought me up was Catholic. I had very conservative parents, and I was raised to be very true to my morals. Thank god! So it was a weird thing to be that girl and in a band with all guys, and all of a sudden being in this weird music world with a bunch of punks doing

drugs. I was putting on make-up and sipping a chamomile tea. But I always felt, 'Screw you guys, do you think I can't go out there just because I'm not doing what you're doing? Well, watch this.'

It's interesting you never felt pressure to tone down your femininity. Do you think this motivated you to scale it up?

I never felt comfortable being a sex symbol. I never, ever saw myself as that. That might also be a reason why I have more longevity than other performers. If you're playing that card, there's nothing unique about it. But I think there is something unique about being honest, turning your personal tragedies into music. Embracing who you are, and not being ashamed of it.

When it comes to the influences you felt growing up, what can you now see formed part of your DNA?

Well, many of my influences have stayed the same. When I was growing up in Anaheim, I was into ska music – and as you'll know, being British, a lot of ska music fans were skinheads.

I did just read about a Ku Klux Klan rally that took place in Anaheim...

Yes, that's weird. What I saw in Anaheim was pretty much Mexican gangs. Eastside versus Westside with Disneyland in the middle. It's a weird place to grow up. I only realise that now. It's very transient.



→ Sometimes you don't know how weird the place you grow up in is, until you travel the world.

Did you work at Disneyland?

My parents wouldn't let me! I worked at Dairy Queen. I was also a lifeguard teaching children to swim. And I worked at the mall aged 20, helping old women in the casuals [leisurewear] department. I really enjoyed it because they needed help. I had an eye for that. And then I graduated up to the make-up counter.

Do you think that back then, you were honing styling skills you'd use later?

Perhaps. But that mall was so ghetto! I lived at home with my parents until I was 25. I went to school, and I did No Doubt. I moved from my parents' house straight on to tour.

And how does that compare to your life in LA now?

Now I live up here in the hills; I sold out! [Laughs] I've been on such a crazy journey to get here. It still doesn't make sense to me. This last year has been particularly crazy.

What are your current influences?

I depend a lot on other people – I couldn't do what I do without having the right team around me. The past year has been so crazy.

“This [album] was going on during the most intense time. My family fell apart. But I always try to see the positive”

I know, it has – I'm sorry about what you've been through.

Thanks, I know. It's awkward to talk about it. But things feel good now, and I'm excited about the album [called *This Is What The Truth Feels Like*], but I also feel pretty protective over it.

Are there any life lessons that you have learnt that you share on the album?

I've now got more experience than I've ever had before in my life, and I've put all these experiences into the record. We wrote four songs in two days – I wrote *Where Would I Be* in four hours because I needed to be at one of the kid's basketball games. This [album] was going on during the most intense time. My whole family fell apart. And my kids are now being taken away from me half the time. Just imagine. But I always try to see the positive in the tragic, and I guess I tried to be grateful for having 50% of my time back. Otherwise I'd never have been able to make my record that way. You have to, right? You have to look for the good.

Your outfits have always been a big part of your performances. Has it ever felt like putting on a suit of armour?

I never really saw it that way. But I was always so easygoing about everything. The old me, I look at her, and I think... we all go through this as girls: you're born, don't feel that you're any different to anybody. Then all of a sudden, in your teenage years, you're walking down the street and someone whistles, and you think, 'Hmm, I got some power here.' But it's also

Update your music radar

The other albums, by equally excellent women, to get excited about in 2016

BEYONCÉ

It's been 824 days (we're counting, yes) since we had a new album from Beyoncé. But with her Formation tour kicking off on 27 April, it's almost certain her sixth opus will arrive next month too.



PJ HARVEY

Friday 15 April will be a happy day for fans of the ever cool and enigmatic songwriter as she releases *The Hope Six Demolition Project* recorded at London's Somerset House in a studio open to the public.

LADA GAGA

Gaga has been working hard with Nile Rodgers and Mark Ronson on her album, due this year. She has said of it: "This record is like – my old self as a cadaver." Confusing, yet intriguing...



TINASHE

Fresh from touring with Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj, the American R&B firecracker will be everywhere in 2016.

Her second album *Joyride* features collaborations with Skrillex and Diplo.

IGGY AZALEA

During a Twitter chat, the outspoken Australian rapper revealed her second album, out sometime this year, will be called *Digital Distortion*. We suspect there won't be many ballads.



a disadvantage sometimes. It's weird as a girl, because you have to figure it out for yourself, your own sexuality, how it makes you vulnerable but also powerful, and how best to deal with this. You have to figure it out in high school. I wrote *Just A Girl* not because I wanted to be feminist or anything, but because, 'Oh my god, I can't drive home at this time of night because I'm a victim. People prey on people like me.' This was a realisation. It's an interesting thing about being a female. Because in the band,

I was able to live in the man's world and express myself. And my vote, my creative input was equal, if not more important.

It's encouraging you feel this way about your own creative input. Kesha's lawsuit [asking that she be released from her Sony contract and claiming that her producer Dr Luke "sexually, physically, verbally, and emotionally abused" her – Dr Luke denies the allegations] has highlighted the experience of some young female artists. Do you think they have enough autonomy, respect and creative control?

Well, I'm female and I haven't [experienced that]... I can see that it's artists generally. It's just the way it's set up. My label respect me and love me, but I still get told that it's 'too personal'. Everybody has an opinion. Even though I've proven that I can have clothing lines and style and impact and all these years of longevity, they're still questioning me. But it's not because I'm a female.

So it's less a male-female issue, and more an artist-industry issue?

That's it. It's because everyone in the music industry is trying to do their thing and make money. I mean look at Prince, with slave on his face! [During a lawsuit against Warner Bros, Prince appeared in public with the word "slave" written on his cheek]. I honestly don't think it's a male-female thing, I think it's an artist-industry thing.

Have you ever felt like you had to stick to your guns in a room full of industry men, or you weren't taken seriously?

Well, first of all, I should say that my record company, they're my homies. But when they heard [early tracks from] my new album, they were all, "We think your record is too personal." I felt like somebody had punched me in the stomach. I was hovering with hope. But it was good, because the next day I thought, 'F*** those guys, let's write the most uncommercial, personal record.' For a while, I was going to make this album how every other girl makes her record: getting other people to write it.

And is this your most personal album ever?

Well, as you know, last February is when my life fell apart [Stefani's split with Rosedale came amid media allegations that her husband was having a relationship with the family nanny]. For six months I didn't know what was going to happen. It was so horrible, I was thinking about the children, and just trying to fix it. And I clearly remember sitting with my girl friend, feeling so embarrassed, and then thinking: I can't go down like this! I'm not going to. I've been given this crazy tragedy that I need to turn into music. So I booked some recording sessions. And I still remember waking up that first morning, and I was like, 'F***, why am I doing this to myself? I'm exhausted. And now I need to drag myself to the studio to sing with a bunch of people I don't know and totally embarrass myself!'

Do you still feel this sort of anxiety? I thought if anyone was immune to imposter syndrome by now, it would be you...

Of course I still feel like this! Because



→ I'm human. I'm real. I told everyone, "I don't care about hits, I don't care about record companies. I just want to use my gift." They were like, "Woah, OK!" There was nowhere else I could be. If I wasn't in that studio making music, I was destroyed, just dead.

Do you find it easier to write about heartbreak than happiness?

Yeah, I feel like I've always done this – taken tragedy and turmoil and turned it into a song. I've always had so many blessings, but also had this unlucky-in-love, tragic thing going on.

Rolling Stone once called you 'the queen of confessional pop'. Confessional is a word Joni Mitchell famously hated – what's your relationship with that word?

People just apply labels and now I'm like, whatever. I know what the truth is. I did this record to heal myself. God gave me a gift. He gave me this crazy tragedy that I was meant to turn into music.

I'm not sure 'confessional' is always a negative description necessarily...

No, I'm not sure it is either. I like it. But I'm not confessing anything, just telling literally – this is what happened. Everything got f***ed up, and now it's not. Everything went wrong, and then I fell in love. This album really captures that.

The music industry is a tough place in which to stay relevant. Do you ever feel uncool?

It's funny, no matter how successful you are, you're still swimming. You're still trying

to stay afloat. Always. So it is a big deal to get the right crew in. Like [hip-hop star] Fetty Wap – I finally got him in on the last day, right before I had to turn the record in [to her label].

So how do you make sure you evolve?

Well, nobody is ever in their comfort zone are they? I feel so empowered that I can be so broken, and be like, 'No, I'm going to do something with this.' Music helps. I was just this passive girl from Anaheim. I don't understand how I've got so far, and am having the impact

"I feel so empowered that I can be so broken, and be like, 'No, I'm going to do something with this'"

that I have. And doing *The Voice* was such an incredible experience. It helped me recharge, get confidence back. When you're doing it for as long as I've done, I can feel like I'm competing with myself 10 years ago.

Has having kids made you more creative, because you have less time?

They have! They inspire me in so many ways. I find that if I'm not being creative, I feel quite useless. Kingston said, "When are you going to write a hit, Mom?" They got to that age where they understand. I try not to quote the kids too much, though, because when he's 15 he's going to hate me for it. The kids have changed me. Because I am naturally the

opposite of this. I'm super-unorganised, a real procrastinator, time management is non-existent. When I had them, I realised I couldn't be selfish anymore. My time away needs to be productive, and my time with them needs to be productive. It's a lot of depending on a lot of other people. I had to interview 67 nannies alone, in this room, to get the people I have now.

So do you, at least, get to feel like a cool mum?

Oh no, they don't think I'm cool. At all. I'm so embarrassing, I'm sure. They all love music but they don't want you to be anything more than their mom. They don't want to see you on stage. That's not my role to them. My role is to say, "Woah, look at you!" They're the stars. They don't want to hear me come to them with, "Hey, here's this song I wrote." My most challenging role, for sure, is being a mother. That is so crazy, and so intense. But being a mother is also really fun after being as self-centred as I've been able to be from 17.

What else do you find helps to keep you sane these days?

You know, I feel like I'm in the middle of so much. This is the first week of me really thinking about all this, and talking about it. I feel so weird about it. But if this music helps people, that would make it all worth it.



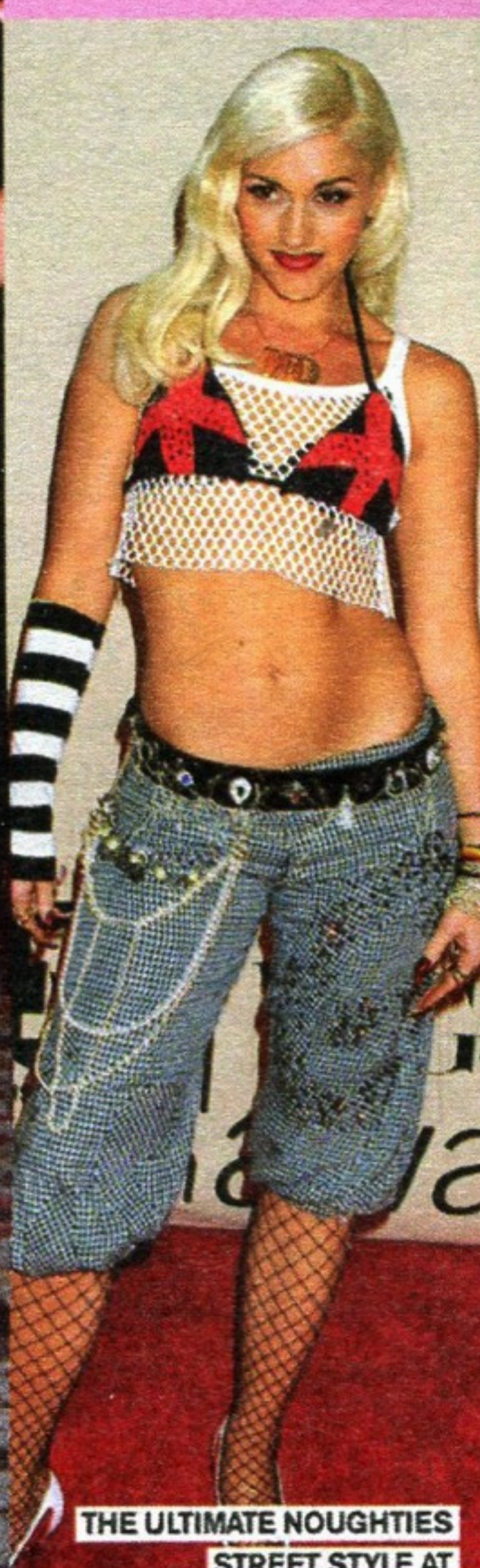
Gwen Stefani's album *This Is What The Truth Feels Like* is out on 18 March

The subtle evolution of Gwen Stefani

Her platinum hair and red lips have always been her calling cards, but Gwen's style does inconspicuously change with the times



GWEN NAILS NINETIES BOHO WITH A SARI SKIRT AND MINI HAIR BUNS, AT A CHARITY EVENT IN 1997



THE ULTIMATE NOUGHTIES STREET STYLE AT THE 2001 VH1 VOGUE FASHION AWARDS



BOLD COLOUR BLOCKING AND A BARE MIDRIFF EQUAL IMPACT AT THE 2004 PREMIERE OF ANCHORMAN



GWEN EPITOMISES FIFTIES PIN-UP STYLE IN A LAMB DRESS AT THE 2005 VMAS



A TOUGHER LOOK FOR KIIS FM'S 2014 JINGLE BALL, WITH SHARP HAIR AND AN OUTSIZE BOILER SUIT



STILL WITH HER SIGNATURE LIP BUT NOW IN A GROWN-UP GOWN AT THIS YEAR'S VANITY FAIR OSCAR PARTY