

Gwen's L.A.M.B. Grows Up

Superstar Gwen Stefani gets her collection ready for New York's Fashion Week.

Photograph by SOPHIE OLMSTED

The sun's trying to eat me," says Gwen Stefani, dragging her patio chair under a giant umbrella perched in the middle of the courtyard of her Los Angeles house. Even if she wanted to indulge in a little sun worship, though, the pale, platinum pop icon has no time for such idle pursuits. With less than three months to plan a massive show, the lead singer of No Doubt is finding herself in bizarrely unfamiliar territory.

On September 16, amid the Sturm und Drang of New York's spring Fashion Week, Stefani will take her collection, L.A.M.B., to the runways for the first time. So besides polishing up the clothes themselves, she has to figure out hair, makeup, models, music, front-row seating and all those myriad mundane details that go into a runway production. It's no wonder that she's a little overwhelmed.

"I feel like I've taken on way too much," Stefani says. "There are certain days when I'm like, What have I done?" But she knows the angst is of her own creation. "Nobody said, 'You have to do a show.' I was the one talking s---, the one who said, 'So we're doing a show in September.'" She launched L.A.M.B., an acronym for "Love. Angel. Music. Baby," in September 2003, and since then the line has delighted such retailers as Saks Fifth Avenue, Henri Bendel and Barneys New York with its healthy sales.

As she juggles both fashion and music, Stefani's to-do list is only getting longer. There are trips to producer Pharrell Williams's Miami studio to finish recording her second

In the kitchen of her Los Angeles house, Gwen Stefani sorts through samples from the L.A.M.B. sneaker line. Getting the ready-to-wear finished is next.

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solo album, due out by year's end, and rehearsals for a national tour that kicks off in October in support of her first solo effort, also titled *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* Clearly, a holiday isn't a top item on her agenda.

"I always get sad when I take time off," she says. "I'm addicted to the rewards I feel when I accomplish things. If I don't do things, then I start feeling self-hate. I feel worthless." Part of Stefani's charm, reflected in her music and in person, is a candor about her insecurities that immediately puts her on common ground with fans. It's proof that this 35-year-old woman, despite a perfect figure, cool friends and multimillions, is just as self-conscious as anybody else.

Today, however, the only sign of nerves is that she tugs constantly on her bright-red knit cap. But all signs of worry disappear as soon as she starts chattering in her frank, friendly, Valley Girl stream-of-consciousness manner about L.A.M.B. It's one of her favorite subjects—after music and, first on her list, her husband, Gavin Rossdale. (With Rossdale, former lead singer of Bush, about to tour with his new band, Institute, time is tight for the two, who will celebrate their third anniversary just two days before L.A.M.B.'s show.)

Since No Doubt broke out in the mid-Nineties with its *Tragic Kingdom* album, Stefani has crafted a quirky, mix-all personal style. It indicates an enviable instinct for the eclectic, one she has translated to her living space, done in an assortment of globe-trotting flavors. The *mélange* starts in the wisteria-covered courtyard, where she takes her English tea with honey and chocolate-covered biscuits. The faint smell of sandalwood wafts through the hanging Chinese paper lanterns, while gothic crosses and antique chimes adorn the walls around an English-style metal patio set. A thick, dark wooden bench, the sort that might be found in a maharaja's garden, sits by a Mediterranean-style fountain centered with a silver statue of a Hindu goddess. Rather than looking like one horrible jumble of cultural references, it reads more as a homey collection of everything Stefani loves.

And with the help of her L.A.M.B. teammates, designer Zaldy and stylist Andrea Lieberman, she applies a similar this-and-that approach to the collection. For spring it is split into four themes: black and white, Gatsby Rasta, Yardie Rasta and Pirate Trooper, the last mixing a buccaneer motif with paratrooper-style pants and jumpsuits. Paler versions of rasta's red, gold and green palette mark the Gatsby lineup for day and night, while track-suits, some featuring chrysanthemum prints hand-drawn by photographer Miguel Villalobos, make up the Yardie group—named after the UK's Caribbean mafia. For the show, hair maestro Danilo and makeup artist Kathy Jeung, who also create Stefani's personal look, may transform the models into Twenties *chola* girls. Eclectic, indeed.

"If anyone can mix it up and have it look cute as hell, it's Gwen," says Zaldy. "Why does it all go together? I don't know."

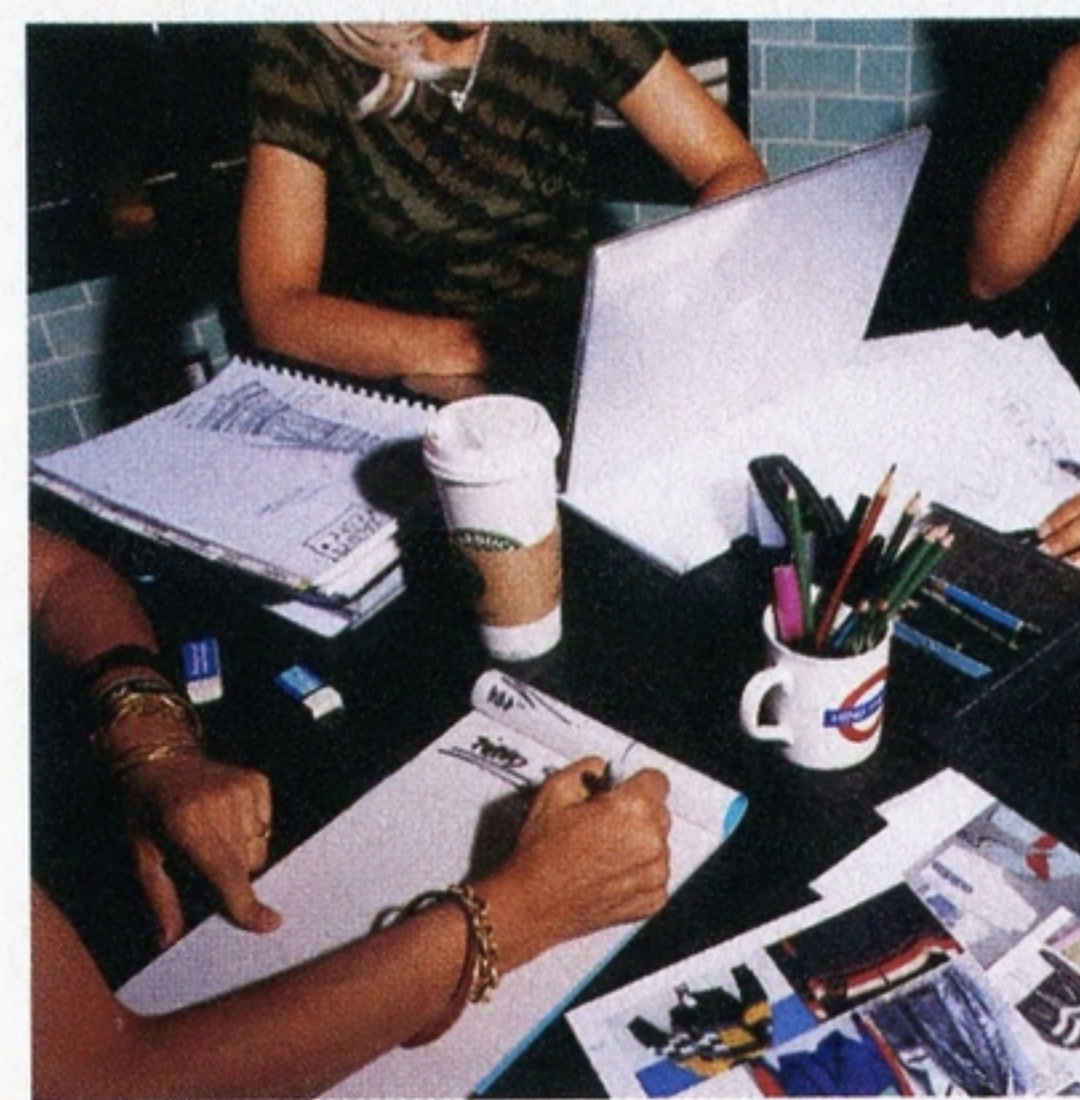
That said, the process of producing a show for the entire fashion industry to see and judge doesn't come naturally. "I love being part of this whole *Fashion Week*, but at the same time, I don't feel like I'm part of it," Stefani says. "It's too much pressure to try and fit in. I'm not going to; I'm a singer who makes clothes." Thus she and her runway producer, Alexandre de Betak, the man responsible for some of the grand productions for Dior, Viktor & Rolf and Jennifer Lopez's Sweetface line, decided to forgo the very traditional venue of the Bryant Park tents in favor of Roseland, where Stefani has performed countless times.

What she lacks in confidence about her place in the industry, however, the pop star more than makes up in ambition. "I was like, 'Is it okay to do high-heeled tennis shoes that don't look like tennis shoes?'" Stefani relays coyly how her sneaker line evolved into shoes. And now, with her accessories and apparel established and her first show nearing, she is already branching out. In the pipeline: costume jewelry, lingerie, luxury bags and, eventually, a fragrance.

Aware that leaks, often via the Internet, have derailed entire albums for musicians, Stefani tries not to divulge too much about her future plans. "I don't want someone to steal my ideas," she says. "Seriously, you work so hard on something..." she trails off. But another part of her wants, in her excitement, to share the news like a juicy bit of gossip with her best pal. Right now, it's about the costume jewelry she's working on with Lieberman, slated for a fall 2006 launch. "It's really rad; it's our dream jewelry—everything you would think that I would have," Stefani says of the enameled, vintage-looking pieces with Old English, religious, gothic and medieval undertones. And it's a short, straight road from costume to fine jewelry, another interest. "I've been looking online, 'cause I want to buy myself some freaking bangles that I've always wanted," she says, noting her passion for traditional Indian artisanal work. "But I kind of want to wait now, since I'm doing it myself."

Stefani knows, however, that she couldn't do any of it without her design team. "All this stuff isn't easy, but having all these talented people around me, it is," she says. "Having a Zaldy, having

an Andrea. All I do is make it up, and then make everyone who's really good at what they do do it, and it all works out." Picturing herself as a mini dictator, she adds, "I'm so bad."



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From top: Stefani and designer Zaldy a few months ago in New York; stylist Andrea Lieberman (in hat) and Zaldy in moments of calm; and recently, the team in L.A.

You'll hear no complaints from Lieberman or Zaldy. "Gwen's an amazing person to work with because she's incredibly encouraging and inclusive," says Lieberman, who has also styled Madonna and Jennifer Lopez. "She sees an opportunity to do things she's always dreamed of, and she's going for it."

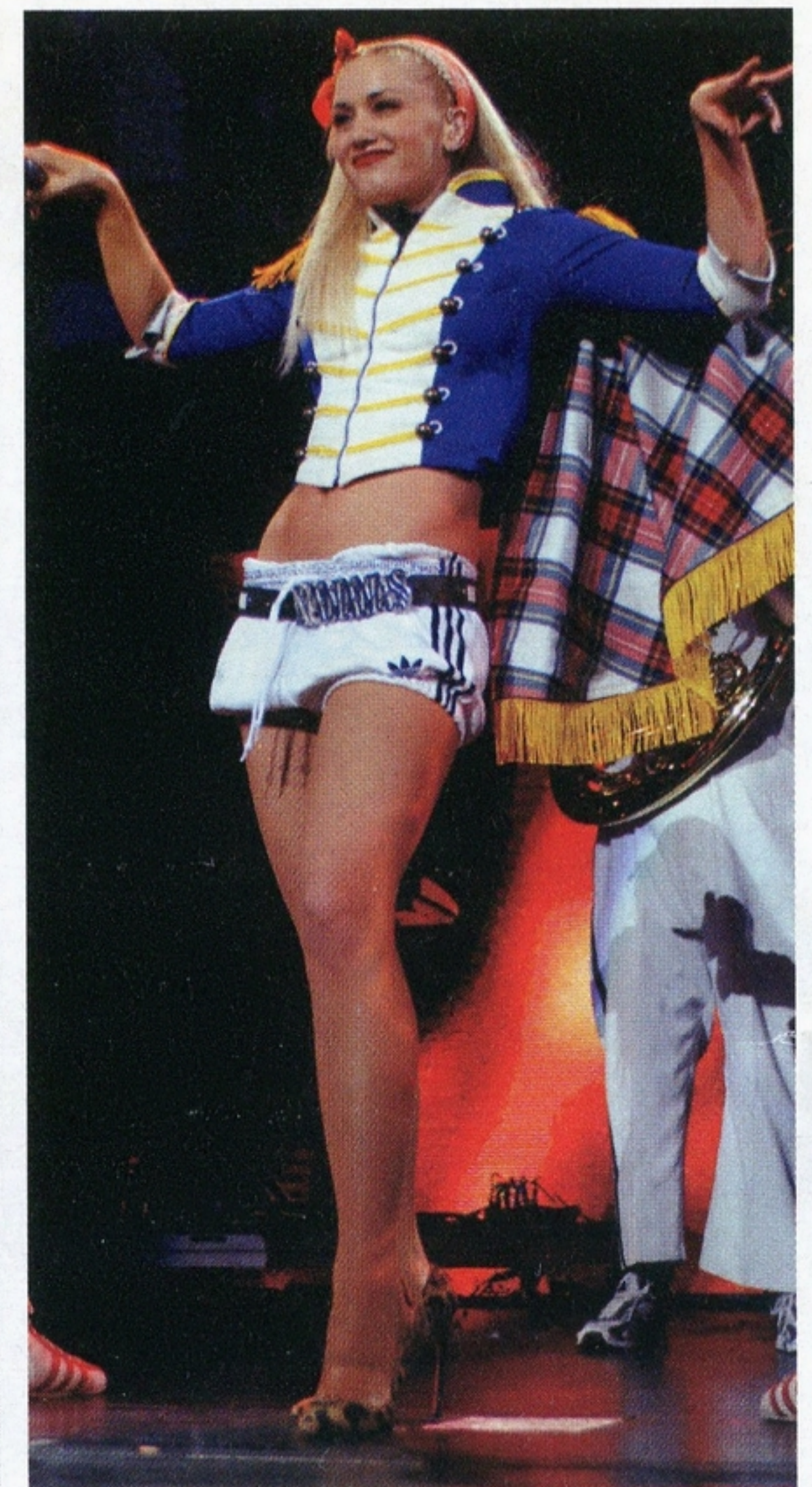
Meanwhile, Zaldy's stock as a designer has risen as a result of his work for L.A.M.B., though he has shown his own dramatic, architecturally inclined collection—a darling of editors but not necessarily retailers—since 2001. Since he's built his career on making custom stage costumes for Mick Jagger, Mary J. Blige and Christina Aguilera as well as Stefani, L.A.M.B. has offered him his first taste of retail relevancy. "I've been meeting all the buyers," he says, "and they're like, 'I gotta come see your show too.'" (He also plans to show during the New York collections if he can find a sponsor.)

"We're really meant to be together," Stefani says of the partnership. "I don't know what I'd do without him." She's just as effusive about Danilo, Jeung and especially John Copeland, the New York fine artist responsible for L.A.M.B.'s signature Old English font and other lyrical graphics, including the beautiful, giant wisteria print that will crop up here and there throughout the collection.

But she doesn't only rave. Rather, Stefani airs her concerns when things don't get done her way. For example, she admits that the limitations of seamstresses, printers and fabric mills frustrate her when they break her creative stride. "I have to keep explaining, because people don't understand that I like a low crotch. I don't want the butt to show—that's not the look," she says of L.A.M.B.'s pants and jeans. "You've got all these traditional people working on the patterns who think it needs to be perfect and I'm like, 'No!'"

Such day-to-day worries aside, however, she displays no jaded fashion-diva behavior, and even takes great pleasure in one of the industry's most basic items—the look book. Flipping through the pages of L.A.M.B.'s glossy fall pamphlet, she gushes in swear word-sprinkled speech, "That s--- is stupid, it's so good."

In New York this past winter, Stefani also got a taste for a designer's daily grind of market appointments with editors and retailers. She says that the



From left: A sketch of one of L.A.M.B.'s more glamorous gowns for spring 2006; Stefani onstage in custom-made L.A.M.B. gear, promoting her solo album

Retailers certainly believe Stefani's on the right track. "It isn't just her signing her name to something," says Michael Fink, senior fashion director of Saks Fifth Avenue. "It's thought through—designed, researched and developed."

"We never buy lines because of celebrity," maintains Kal Ruttenstein, senior vice president of fashion direction at Bloomingdale's. "The clothes have to stand on their own." Also carried at Nordstrom, Holt Renfrew,

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social angle of it was fun, "but at the end of the day, what I really enjoy is baking the cookies and eating the batter"—meaning that she'd rather be poring over sketches and fabrics.

Perhaps that's because with fashion, inspiration comes more quickly than it does, say, in the music studio. "I can sit there and nothing comes to mind," Stefani notes of the songwriting process. "I don't have one thing to say. But with designing, there's no problem. Just throw me in a freakin' costume house, and I'm set."

Like many designers, Stefani combs vintage stores regularly, but often finds ideas in odder places. "Tony [Kanal, No Doubt's bassist and Stefani's former boyfriend] just broke his finger and he sent me the X-ray," she says. "So I'm doing a T-shirt that says BROKEN and it's going to have his X-ray on it." The Turner Classic Movie and American Movie Classics channels got her going for fall 2006. "I'm stupidly crazy for old movies. I Tivo them so that when I'm doing my makeup in the morning, I have them on," she says. "I can be like, 'Look at Jane Russell in that shiny leopard dress—I'm copying that.'"

While the show's deadline looms and the samples and soundtrack remain unfinished, though, Stefani isn't losing sight of the long-term goal she has set for L.A.M.B.: to develop a contemporary market brand that exists independent of her celebrity. "That cut, that look, it'll be something you rely on, that's gonna be around for a long, long time," she says.

Marshall Field's and Harvey Nichols, L.A.M.B. starts at \$55 retail for a printed cotton T-shirt, jumping to \$525 for dresses and as much as \$925 for coats.

Right now, everyone relishes the idea of a rock-style Stefani spectacle on the runway. "I think it will give New York Fashion Week a terrific burst of adrenaline," says Scott Tepper, Henri Bendel's fashion director. It will likely be one of the hottest tickets of the season. Unfairly or not, Stefani will also be lumped together with the other shears-wielding pop stars showing in September: P. Diddy with his Sean by Sean Combs line and Beyoncé Knowles with her House of Deréon collection.

But Stefani draws a distinction between herself and the rest. When she's asked if she keeps track of their fashion goings-on, she says pointedly, "I don't have time to think about someone else's career." By the same token, she doesn't know what her idol John Galliano is up to either, afraid that any comparison of design or business approaches will magnify her insecurities. "I kind of don't want to know. I kind of want to do it my way."

"I have such a far way to go to be able to compete with some of my favorites," she acknowledges. Like joining the design echelon of Galliano or her other hero, Vivienne Westwood? "I would never even consider that in my head."

She will, though, happily let anyone call her a fashion designer by profession. "I put enough hours in so at least I should definitely get that title," she says. "It is so real for me, and it feels like people are responding like it's real. It's yummy."

—NANDINI D'SOUZA