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Front & Center

Onstage, onscreen, in-person – the limelight looks good on Gavin Rossdale

Words by Vanessa Pascale • Photo credit: Joseph Llanes

Gavin Rossdale is intoxicating.

Those who grew up with me know how much I adored Gavin at the height of Bush's reign in the mid-90s. (My schoolgirl affections yielded the frosted message: Happy Birthday, Vanessa Rossdale—atop my 14th birthday cake.) Considering the abovementioned, it's fair to presume that a tête-à-tête with the man himself might be an overwhelming experience. Surprisingly, soothing is more like it. But should I have expected anything less from the "Everything Zen" creator?

From his English-spiked intonation, which pours out in an even, smooth cadence that is categorically lulling to his kind, brown eyes and 6'1 stance (taller than I imagined), Gavin's presence, like a dirty martini drunk too fast before dinner, elicits the same warm, exciting and intrepid sensation. In a casual blue vest over a fitted white T-shirt and dark jeans, accompanied by the requisite chain slung from his belt loop to his back pocket—the rockstar veneer is pulled off with understated ease. And those legendary disheveled chin-length locks that now skim his shoulders are tied into his trademark ponytail.

"Thank you so much. I hear that six times we've rearranged," Gavin says as we take a seat in the spacious conference room of his publicist's Los Angeles office. Not six, only twice. "I hope it's not the first line. *Nice record. Really tricky. Slippery fish,*" Gavin playfully suggests in the first of several witty one-liners. Swept up in his affable manner, the daunting fact that he is the lauded front man of Bush, with 14 consecutive Top 40 hit singles on the Billboard charts and more than 16 million albums sold, and the husband of Gwen Stefani—dissipates.

"Nice record" scarcely justifies the compilation of gripping songs on Bush's latest album, *The Sea of Memories*, released September 13 through Gavin's label, Zuma Rock Records (named after his 3-year-old son). The album whisks listeners away, reminding us why the world cannot live without his music, notably songs: "The Sound of Winter," "All Night Doctors" and "Be Still My Love." A world absent of Gavin Rossdale's soulful serenade of sage, self-written lyrics aloft the enrapturing pound of moody percussions and heady strings would leave a void quite difficult to fill. And to think, this was almost the case.

"I never thought I was good enough... I was always on the edge, the precipice to play the bass he [his sister's boyfriend] gave me... But then, when I left school I went right into it. I was like, *that's it for me*. I loved it," Gavin pensively recalls. The fusion of several elements compelled him to hone his proclivity for music—the basis beginning in his aunt's house where he grew up, exposing him to the great and influential sounds of Bowie, Zeppelin, The Beatles, Motown... from the record store down the street. Couple that with his frequent presence at his sister's bass-player-boyfriend's punk

band rehearsals at the age of 13 and his need to compose lyrics that meant something to him and others, and you can see how his budding passion developed into the powerful career he has today. "I spent so long making so many mistakes... and then found a way to make something work for myself. Still trying to figure it out," he says modestly. "I like it. I think I want it to remain a mystery to me."

At the astute age of 46 now, Gavin has come a long way from that self-doubting lad. The avid practitioner of Bikram yoga enlightens me with an excerpt from a yoga tape he listens to, which touches on a common, hindering problem people have. "He's quite annoyed in it half the time. It's really funny. He's not yogi-like," Gavin says amused, "and he says, the problem with most people is they have self-realization. So, you're too old, you're too fat, you're too short, you're too black haired, you want blonde hair. And really, it's about accepting yourself and finding empowerment in what you have. I think that's a really essential element and tool." Practicing what he preaches, Gavin didn't allow any hang-ups to stop him from taking on the massive feat of creating an album independently.

To divert from the major record conglomerates and produce *The Sea of Memories* independently took chutzpah. The stakes were high, but the outpouring of freedom it anointed Bush was relieving and rewarding. "It's really liberating since you can move so quickly and you don't have to go through a really huge committee... To make a record you have to wait 18 months before it comes out... fucking sick of it," he says with a laugh. "You're not, but you take my point. It takes away. You rush to finish it. There's all the excitement. It's a big machine, those major labels, so it takes awhile to plug it in. Five of the songs on the album were written maybe three, four months ago, which is pretty unusual. If I finished that album as I did now, it wouldn't come out till next year," Gavin points out ardently.

A TIME TO CHILL

How does Gavin spend his spare time?

"Music, obviously, is a huge part, so I'm always interested in who has records out that I like. Hanging out with my friends, going out to eat—going out to drink is something we're used to doing in London. Here, it's hard to go out to drink. Who drives back? How do you get back? They don't have pubs and bars like they do in London, and I love that you can pub all the time; to me it's just normal—so most of my life I've been doing that. It usually revolves around my family and friends and just spending time with them—usually finding out whatever everyone else wants to do," he says with a laugh.

Nine years have past, since Bush's hiatus in 2002—the band never officially broke up, rather went their own ways to focus on other aspects of life. Since the recent reigniting of the fire that is Bush, (which reprises original drummer Robin Goodridge, and welcomes newcomers Chris Traynor on guitar and Corey Britz on bass) Gavin has found solace in familiar territory. "It's being at home with myself. Whenever I'm doing anything else, [he also fronted the band Institute (2004-2006) and a solo career (2008)] I'm always trying to get out of the way of me sounding like Bush, which is quite hard, ya know, to avoid that." Gavin lowers his voice, "I sound like *that guy*." His light injection of comic relief rolls off his tongue effortlessly and makes me laugh. An endearing trait, as he doesn't even seem to be trying to elicit laughter—it's organic. "In doing Bush, it's fun because I can kind of indulge in it. I can let go. And having my own studio [Kingston Sound, named after his 5-year-old son], you can be quite prolific and you don't have to use all the songs. You can chuck stuff out. You can just be," Gavin expresses with contentment.

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Touring in the United States began early September, while November has the band heading overseas to tour Europe. “The shows are all set. We have a really good, rough sketch of what we’re doing till probably a year from now.” If you haven’t yet seen Bush perform in concert, I advise that you do so. Gavin and the band give an amazing performance. Beneath the glow of the spotlight, Gavin is in his element. Whilst expressively crooning, he dominates his guitar with finely tuned precision. Gavin unleashes all inhibitions when onstage —head-banging, jumping onto platforms — wholeheartedly giving his all. Such was the case with his Anaheim performance. Gavin started out the show in a long-

sleeved camouflage button-down and his hair slicked back into a ponytail. As the show went on, his hair fell free and the shirt came off —leaving him in a deeply cut, sleeveless shirt that exposed his sweaty well-toned torso and arms. The crowd went wild. In the past, his family has accompanied him on tour, but this time it’s just the band and him. “I’m going to be just really happy to be home,” says Gavin about his return to his family for the holidays, “and really hoping I’m all in one piece and my throat still likes me and my body does what I want it to.”

Drop in on the Rossdale homestead this winter and you’re likely to find this multifaceted entertainer banging away on some pots



and pans. Gavin tells me that if he hadn't been a musician, he would have been a cook. "You can tell I cook, see," he smiles, "arm burns," he says as he extends his forearm to reveal a recent battle wound. "I love it! Miles Davis said that every musician should be able to cook because it's the culmination of the timing of things." Gavin is the real deal — preparing savory Italian fare, English roasts and recreating dishes from his past. His epicurean escapades are large in scope too, undertaking Thanksgivings, Christmases and feasts fit to accommodate twenty guests. Now that's impressive. "It's like a bizarre passion of mine. Well, not

ROCKIN' JOCK

In addition to Bikram yoga, this athletic, extreme-sports enthusiast is an adroit tennis player. Good friends with tennis pro, Roger Federer, Gavin kept up with his friend's progress in the US Open, which was going on at the time of our interview, and was hoping to catch a game when he reached the finals. I ask if he's as good as Roger on the court, Gavin laughs, "No one is as good as him. No one is as good."

DID YOU KNOW? Gavin tells me that "Machinehead" is the 8th most played song at sporting events in America and that he loves to hear his song played when he's out somewhere fun like a basketball game.

bizarre because we eat everyday," Gavin laughs. Not bizarre, but definitely unexpected. This year, the family-Christmas-card-perfect brood will be awaiting St. Nick's arrival from their Los Angeles abode. "We normally trade off between London and L.A. each year for Christmas... I look forward to a warm Christmas and just being at home," Gavin says sanguinely.

Married for about ten years now, I ask Gavin what the secret is to Gwen and his successful union. "From my side, marrying up, you'll have to ask the other side..." Gavin says dotingly with a smile. Gwen is quite the stunning platinum blonde powerhouse with her thriving music career and fashion lines, exuberant energy, and eye-catching features. But, I think many would concur that this humble Englishman is the complete package too. And when you see the two together, there doesn't seem to be a couple more suited for one another. The beautiful couple's paths serendipitously crossed in 1995 when Gwen's band, No Doubt, was touring with Bush. Unable to deny what was written in the stars, Gavin and Gwen spun their meet-cute into a rock steady relationship spanning 16 years and counting. The lead singer-songwriters have joined forces musically in the past, with Gwen singing backup on his songs, "Can't Stop the World" and "Afterlife." "She sings fast, like, she's good and she's free and available —sometimes," Gavin adds about his busy wife. Does the couple foresee more collaboration in the near future? Now that they have their own bands again, Gavin tells me that their future collaborations will be "just on kids," he says smiling. "Just on kids." Ahhh, they're best creations yet. It's no surprise that the combination of their stunning genes produced two of the most adorable children ever.

As cute as they are, Kingston and Zuma have no problem garnering much of their own media attention with their stylish mom-and-dad-emulating-garb and trend-inspiring hairstyles. Will the boys follow in the family business? "We just, same as anyone, want them to be happy and safe and cool, and after that, let the chips fall where they may," says the easygoing dad. The tiny tykes are accustomed to the paparazzi consistently snapping their photo and Mom and Dad getting loads of attention as this has been the norm since birth, but do Kingston and Zuma know that their parents are bonafide rockstars? "I think they have a distorted



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sense of what it is we do. Obviously they understand, but it's — definitely must be unusual to be like, hear on the radio and say that's my mom. Must be weird. They get it with me..."

Gavin's penchant for performing reaches beyond his "natural home base" in music and into another creative arena— acting. Keen on the idea of musicians popping up in movies to blow audiences away, Gavin specifically notes Tom Waits and Marc Anthony in *Man on Fire* as inspiration. "He's fucking brilliant in it! Amazing," says Gavin about Marc Anthony's performance. Gavin has appeared in several films, including *Constantine*, *Zoolander*, *Little Black Book*... as well as on the television show *Criminal Minds*. This past summer Gavin jetted over to Coconut Grove to shoot what will hopefully turn into a recurring role on USA's *Burn Notice*. "That was real fun. I love South Beach. Miami and I have a great history. I spent a lot of time there. One of my first big shows outdoors was in Miami near the beach..." says Gavin wistfully. "When I first stayed at The Delano, I couldn't believe hotels were like that, that's like the sexiest place on Earth..." Return visits to Miami normally involve Gavin hitting up Deuce Bar, visiting friends and him patronizing Cuban-food-touting hole-in-the-wall restaurants. He hopes to return to Miami to shoot additional episodes of *Burn Notice* as there seems to be unfinished business between his character and Gabrielle Anwar's.

Though a part of me (the 14-year-old me) would like to come up with a dozen more questions, only to prolong our conversation, the professional in me draws the interview to a close. Gavin's gaze falls to *Miami Living's* latest issue, that I set out on the table for him, featuring his former co-star from the film, *How to Rob a Bank* (2008), Erika Christensen "She's a great girl, by the way," he says genuinely. He poignantly describes his first day on set as the new person and how Erika invited him over to join them during the catered lunch break. "It was that simple, random act of kindness that sort of resonated for me... Such a pleasant thing when people are graceful. I think of her, I think of like super top class. She's a really good actress," says Gavin fondly. Evidently, the smallest of gestures does not go unseen or unappreciated with him. Erika had high praise to speak of Gavin when I asked her what it was like working with him. "Gavin is lovely —really grounded and charismatic. He has enthusiasm, which is kind of an underrated tool as an actor, I think." There's no dearth of nice things to be said about the guy— lovely being a recurring word, and the word his wife used when she wrote the song, "Underneath It All" about him.

My musings on Gavin's character are further validated after speaking to Joseph Llanes, who has been photographing Gavin and the band the past few months. "It's often said that you're not supposed to meet the people you admire the most [so they don't disappoint on the perception you built up of them]. I'm going on 15 years of loving this guy, his music and everything he's put out —but this wasn't the case with Gavin. The minute I met him he was very responsive and just wanted to be accommodating. There are not a lot of people I can say are as accommodating as Gavin. It was a very giving thing. As a photographer, you always hope and want people to be engaging. He was just naturally that engaging..."

He is a natural. Had Gavin not overcome those damning insecurities that encumber dreams, we would not have been graced with enduring hits: "Glycerine," "Machinehead," "Everything Zen," the alternative-music-sensation that is Bush or the sexiest English musician to take the stage. Close call. This astounding entertainer was made for the spotlight. **ML**

FOR THE LOVE OF MUSIC

Where did the inspiration for *The Sea of Memories* come from?

"Just inspired by music. Music is so magical. I love this job because it's so ancient and yet it's so modern —the forms of distribution, the forms of making it, the instruments at your fingertips, computers —it couldn't be more modern and up-to-date. And yet, this same job as been done so long ago. People riding into town, sing a bit, get fed a bit of dinner, move on, play somewhere else, sell you a potion, sing you a song, it's kind of no different. It's ancient and I love that. It brings people together, it divides people. Music is so powerful... There are like eight notes, but it's infinite. It's so strange. There's so many styles of music, so many different ways that music sits together. I still cannot believe how it comes together. I'm like in awe of it and yet it's my job. It's weird."

What is your favorite song on the album?

"Probably the first song and the last song. The first song is "The Mirror of the Signs," which I like because it was built on a guitar motif, so it's something different to approach song writing like that. And the ending song, "Be Still My Love," which is all moody and double entendres —its just super atmospheric. I like those dark weird songs."

Who is on your iPod?

"I have to think —PJ Harvey, Skrillex, James Blake, The Kills, Portishead, Roberta Flack, Tool, Perfect Circle, Radiohead, My Bloody Valentine and every version of every song I've recorded over the past five years."

Everyone is jumping on the house music bandwagon, will you?

"Junior Sanchez has done the most killer mix of "The Sound of Winter." It's better than mine. I'm telling you! It's quite good. You're going to be out one night and be like, *wow, this weed's great.*" (You can hear this version on the album's bonus CD, along with other great bonus tracks.)