

GEORGE BENSON | KORN | JOE NICHOLS | DREAM THEATER



AVRIL LAVIGNE

Does it her way

LORDE
Queen bee

AVETT
BROTHERS
Double duty

CELINE
DION
Gets gritty

+
APP HAPPY
GEAR GIFTS
STAR MAKER



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A REBEL RETURNS

**Punk-pop princess Avril Lavigne makes
a fresh start with a new romance,
new label and new album**

By Russell Hall



Frustrated by disputes with her record label over the direction of her last album, 2011's *Goodbye Lullaby*, Avril Lavigne found herself at a low point in the wake of its release. "I wasn't going to make another record unless I could do exactly what I wanted," she recalls. But suddenly a new path emerged. "I got to partner again with L.A. Reid, who first signed me," she says. "He's always given me creative freedom. Moving to a new label and working with him re-inspired me. I never want to do something unless I'm having fun with it and being true to myself."

Determination and a strong sense of self have been Lavigne hallmarks since she exploded onto the scene 11 years ago. Raised in a small town in Ontario, Canada, she began playing guitar and writing songs in her early teens. Signed at 15 to Arista Records—where then-CEO Antonio "L.A." Reid took her under his wing—she dropped out of school and settled in L.A., working with the famed Matrix production team. Unlike her teeny-bopping peers—Britney Spears, 'N Sync, the Backstreet Boys—Lavigne wrote songs, played instruments, and infused her melodic pop-rock with a punk edge.

"I wasn't the girl baring her midriff with backup dancers and a headset microphone," she recalls. "I came out and had a lot to say with my lyrics, and I played guitar. I had my world and they had theirs—totally different music scenes. I was just doing my thing."

Lavigne's 2002 debut album, *Let Go*, was a smash. Propelled by the hit singles "Complicated" and "Sk8er Boi," the record sold an eye-popping 17 million copies and established Lavigne as a pop-rock icon. She also proved to be a charismatic performer, sporting a counterculture skate-themed wardrobe that included tank tops, neckties and Converse sneakers. "I wasn't focused on image," she insists, "but that's why it worked. I just dress how I feel, in whatever way makes me comfortable. It's natural—not calculated."

Lavigne followed with 2004's *Under My Skin*, which debuted at No. 1 on Billboard's Top 200, and 2007's *The Best Damn Thing*, featuring the No. 1 single "Girlfriend"—her biggest single to date and the top digital track of 2007. The success of those albums solidified Lavigne's position as punk-pop's reigning princess. By the end of the decade, she had won eight Grammy nominations and seven Canadian Juno Awards, and sold more than 30 million albums.



Onstage in Toronto, 2011

'Be yourself, believe in yourself, and don't worry about what others think of you.'

On *Goodbye Lullaby*, however, Lavigne ventured into darker, more introspective waters. Coming on the heels of her divorce from Deryck Whibley, singer for rock band Sum 41, the record eschewed much of the artist's exultant spirit in favor of melancholy ballads. "I wanted to make something a little more artistic," she says. "I wanted to go down that road. I wasn't trying to write a big radio record."

Creative integrity has its price: The album's failure to achieve platinum success triggered distress among label execs—and Lavigne emerged exhausted by the experience. "I wasn't really sure where I wanted to go, moving forward," she admits.

Lavigne's latest, the self-titled *Avril Lavigne*, marks a fresh start on several fronts. Newly signed to Epic Records—where Reid had been recently named CEO—the 29-year-old singer spent months in the studio, working as much as 14 hours a day with a tight-knit team of producers and co-writers. Chief among these were composer-keyboardist David Hodges and singer-guitarist Chad Kroeger, frontman for Nickelback. As sessions progressed, Lavigne's friendship with Kroeger blossomed into a full-fledged romance, and the two married in July. "We had like six months of hanging out, just working in the studio, goofing off," says Lavigne. "Our guards were down and we got to see each other's real sides, so it was very natural. I wasn't expecting it."

Anthemic pop rock, a Lavigne trademark, powers much of the album, but detours and surprises abound as well. "Hello Kitty" ventures into manic electronica. "Bad Girl" features scorched-earth thrash guitar and backing vocals from shock-rocker Marilyn Manson. Lush moments include the beautifully orchestrated "Hush Hush," and "Let Me Go," a soaring ballad-duet with Kroeger.

"This is probably the most diverse record I've done," observes Lavigne. "It goes from hard rock to ballads to an indie vibe to electronic. It's kind of a mixture of different moods and styles." Lavigne spoke with us about the making of the album, her creative process, and the importance of commercial success.

Did you have specific goals in mind?

Normally I have a vision, but this time I didn't know what I was going to do. I did know I wanted to work with new people, so I got with Chad and David and started writing—just for myself, trying not to overthink anything. We wrote a ton of songs. The label loved the record. At the very end we wrote "Rock N Roll" and "Here's to Never Growing Up," something they would have for radio.



All portraits by Mark Liddell. Performance image by Mike Cassese/Routledge/Landov.

Did an overarching theme emerge?

It represents all my different sides and styles from all the previous records, plus some new stuff I'm trying out. There's growth, but it still sounds like me and it's still familiar to fans. It's important to keep your sound, but it's also important to try new things and to change. My favorite songs are "Hush Hush," "Give You What You Like," and "Bad Girl."

How hands-on were you with production?

The people I write songs with are typically producing as well. I sit with them and tell them how I want a song to be—by referencing certain sounds. If I don't like something we start isolating instruments, taking things out and adding in new tracks. I worked closely with everyone on the majority of the tracks. Since it's my song, we're right there talking about it, and sharing a vision. And I have strong opinions—after all, it's my album. It would be different if someone else wrote a song and gave it to me.

What do you mean by referencing sounds?

It could be a drumbeat, a piano tone, a guitar tone. Sometimes I prefer acoustic guitars for rhythm, because they're warmer and thicker and have more body than a clean electric. And I often like the acoustics to be very strummy. If I hear a track and I'm not feeling where it's going, we'll go through it and toss around various ideas. We try things as many times as we need to. "Hello Kitty" is a good example. It was more of a pop-rock track in the beginning, but then I went back to the drawing board and told everybody I wanted to bring it up a notch, make it more interesting. We brought in a new producer and I kept getting the writing team—Chad, David and myself—to keep going back to the song, over and over again. We worked on that one a lot to get it to where I wanted it to be.

Were you pleased with it?

Yes! The track is kind of electronic—different. I was a little afraid of it, but at the same time I felt that approach suited the song. It's not the

typical structure I go for, not the standard song you would expect to find on an album of mine. It's track-driven—all about the track. It was nice to challenge myself and do something different.

Why bring in Marilyn Manson?

The tone of "Bad Girl" made me think of him. I met him when I was 18—went to one of his concerts and hung out backstage. Over the years we stayed in touch. I asked him to come to the studio to listen, thinking it would be awesome if he laid down vocals. He loved the track and recorded his vocals on the spot—really took it to the next level.

You documented the recording process in a scrapbook. Do you usually do that?

No. I've always wanted one of those Polaroid cameras—the old-school kind with the big pictures. I was taking lots of photos and scribbling in my notebooks, so I asked one of my managers if she could find a scrapbook and one of those Polaroid cameras. We were spending as much as 14 hours a day in the studio, and I had a great time documenting it. The scrapbook even has the proposal from Chad. He took a picture of himself holding the ring and put it in the book, so I would see it when I opened it.

Does mixing personal and professional with Chad work well?

It's nice. That's how our relationship started. We worked together for six months before we began dating. After that I was just hanging out with my boyfriend as we worked. We spend a lot of time

together now. He's out traveling with me while I tour and promote the record. It's especially nice having the duet. He'll always be able to come onstage and sing with me if he feels like it.

What's your songwriting process?

When I write alone it's usually at the piano. I start playing chords, hearing melodies, and begin singing—the words sort of come—with the melody. And then I just go. I don't begin with an idea or a

concept, where I go into the studio and decide to write a song about something. Most of the time it's writing with others, and it begins with someone playing guitar or piano, and we all start singing. If we're not feeling it, we're like, "Hey, let's change the chords—go more 'major' or more 'minor.'" We might try a faster tempo or toss around different melodies until we find something we like and it comes together.

So typically you write lyrics last?

We find our melody and chord progression—and that's when the words start coming. I might shout, "I've got this idea! Everybody stop!" The best stuff comes pretty quickly.

Ballads or rockers—which are easier?

Ballads are easier when I'm writing on my own. With others I like to do more uptempo stuff. Writing alone, it's sometimes hard to concentrate on all three things at once—playing the instrument, writing the chords and melody, and coming up with lyrics. When I'm writing with others, I sort of walk around the room talking with whoever's playing a particular instrument.

How do you take care of your voice?

On the Best Damn Tour—my third tour—I lost my voice at the beginning and at the end. It scared the crap out of me. If you don't know what you're doing, your throat muscles rub against each other and become tired. I was singing incorrectly. I started seeing a vocal coach who taught me how to warm up properly. I warm up for an hour before concerts, which is

a pain. I also had to learn how to *talk* correctly. Talking is the worst thing you can do for your voice. I learned to use my "head" voice instead of my throat. I also try to conserve energy throughout the day before a show.

Who influenced you most?

I don't have that one person. Growing up I didn't listen to all that much music. The stuff I heard when I was really young were the



'It's important to keep your sound, but it's also important to try new things and to change.'



things my parents listened to—Creedence Clearwater Revival, the Beach Boys. And at Christmas we would bring out all the holiday albums. I would sit on the floor and play those records over and over, singing along. When I was old enough to start buying CDs, I got into bands like Blink-182, Green Day, NOFX and Pennywise. Just before that I was into the Dixie Chicks.

Were you prepared for fame?

It was weird at first to hear people saying mean things. I didn't get it. Suddenly you have people who love you and people who hate you. Dealing with that was the only challenge, the only surprise. I was young and didn't understand it. It took me a moment to learn that it doesn't matter—that not everyone is going to like you. I had to remind myself that I was living my dream. People around the world were listening to my music, and I was touring and going to all these wonderful places. In life, you can't go around worrying about what other people think about you. You've just got to be yourself and do what makes you happy.

Do you feel a responsibility as a role model for young women?

I am a role model—whether or not I choose to be, and whether I like it or not. And so is every other singer—every female—who's in a position like mine, although some insist they aren't. When I was younger I didn't know what that meant, but now I hope to be a strong positive influence. My motto and message over the years has been, "Be yourself, believe in yourself, and don't worry about what others think of you."

How vital is commercial success?

I'm proud of what I've accomplished, and I want my music to do well in the marketplace. But you can't kill yourself over that. I don't focus much on the numbers. That's not always fun. I want to make quality music and remain who I am as an artist—not change to fit in with new styles or whatever genre is getting played on the radio. I'm humbled and grateful to still be making music. It comes from the heart, and it continues to be exciting. **M**