

# Debbie Harry interview

Kate Wellham

"I think time marches on. It would be wonderful if it could just stay there and be this fabulous place, and I think there will be an empty spot when its gone, but maybe it will move somewhere else and be even better".

In discussing the possible demise of legendary New York venue CBGB, Blondie frontwoman Deborah Harry has unwittingly hit the nail right on the head. And where the head in question was once a wild bleached mane, it now sports a sleek red bob. Time, after all, marches on.

The return of Blondie after a 15-year absence was always going to be a controversial move - what could such an iconic band possibly have left to prove? And how would they fit into an industry so altered since their 1982 split?

Problems within the band, combined with guitarist Chris Stein suffering from the potentially fatal genetic disease pemphigus, originally signaled that it was time for Blondie to call it a day. "We just had a lot of problems," explains Deborah. "And with Chris being so sick it had just reached a conclusion all on its own, there really wasn't much to decide about it."

Reuniting for a concert in 1997, Blondie returned to the studio with original band members Deborah, Chris, Jimmy Destri and Clem Burke.

Deborah reveals her decision was guided by a sense of providence rather than a desire for the kind of limelight she had enjoyed the first time around. "I didn't want to do it," she says. "But then it seemed that all the things were in position to happen nicely and so it did, but it really wasn't my idea. I took some persuading".

Giving the very convincing impression that she can't quite understand what all the fuss is about, Deborah's laid-back attitude has helped her to deal with the daunting prospect of living up to Blondie's own, now legendary, status. "I wasn't really aware of it and I don't think it happened until we got to the end of the 80s," she says. "Then all of a sudden there was this undercurrent of attention and credibility given to us, it was like 'ok, you're an icon'."

The name Blondie was apparently inspired by the things New York construction workers would shout at former Playboy Bunny Deborah in the street. So what were the other possibilities? "Let's not go into that", she laughs, "let's just say it would probably be less principled".

Where the band were initially forced to fight concerns that her overt sexuality and stunning looks might detract from their music, this time Deborah, now 60, was scrutinised by a media which expected its passive pop princesses to undress for their press.

"It seems completely ridiculous now - it seemed ridiculous back then too," says Deborah. "I think the industry's changed radically, female images and sexuality have certainly changed drastically, but we have a lot more experience now and we're more chilled out about things. "I really enjoy what I do and I try to focus on that and I try to give people something they enjoy, and I think that they appreciate that. It would be stupid to try and do exactly the same thing as I did before, I would look ridiculous."

And somehow, in those intervening years, unease about Blondie's eagerness to embrace any sound that took their fancy had changed to fears that they would now be irrelevant and stubbornly stuck in the past.

But the band, thankfully, showed no such sentimentality, and Deborah reveals that often it is their longstanding fans who are reluctant to look forward instead of back: "They do fall in love with a certain aspect of what you're doing and it's hard for them to move on. I guess it's human nature and we're fulfilling something in their psyche.

"We try to pay attention to that and to do things that are logical progression so that our fans can understand it, and many of them do. However they still want to hear songs of the past and we still have ways of dealing with that. Since some of our material is so old we try to update it and rearrange it and to modernise it."

Comeback album 'No Exit' also featuring a collaboration with Coolio, which for another artist might have been seen as a cry for credibility. But for Blondie - who presented radio with its first rap in an original song in 'Rapture' - it was a partnership that simply seemed to ask 'and why not?'

Embracing punk, pop, rock, new wave, reggae, disco and whatever else took their fancy, their open-minded approach paid off and bang-up-to-date single 'Maria' made a smooth landing at the top of the UK charts in 1999. Taken from follow-up 'The Curse of Blondie', 2003's 'Good Boys' is a tune Kylie would be proud to call her own if she didn't have the pre-teens to think about. Fitting additions to a repertoire of hits like 'Denis Denis', 'The Tide is High', 'Hanging on the Telephone', 'Heart of Glass' and 'Atomic'.

Imposing limitations on themselves has never been something Blondie have felt the need to do, and Deborah is at a loss to understand why they should: "I've always said that because we come from such a melting pot and such eclectic surroundings with all these influences in New York City, it's part of our lives. It's just in our nature and it's something we've got praise and criticism for."

Distinctive but changeable, Deborah's image and Blondie's sound seem to follow the same experimental guidelines. "I enjoy it, it's part of what I do, I like to be my own canvas.

"I think it's really important for all bands. Part of the Blondie identity was the 60s thing to begin with. Identities are really crucial, you can't just be faceless."

In fact the face of Blondie was so effective that it was often assumed their moniker referred only to Deborah. Were they victims of their own success in having such a striking singer? Or was it a price worth paying to attract attention? "It was a combination. Some people slagged us off [NB: hearing this Brit slang from Harry is just as thrilling as you'd think it is], but there were also people that really liked what we were doing and saw through all that."

So where does someone who inspired the likes of Madonna, Courtney Love and Shirley Manson look for her inspiration? "I think one of the things I did that was unique was to bring the images of the silver screen to rock. I was very influenced by actresses, but I've tried to make it very much my own."

Deborah's interest in all things cinematic has led to a quietly successful and constant acting career between musical projects, with roles in 80s cult flick 'Hairspray' and a host of other quirky, independent films. Rather than taking advantage of her profile, she has always been more interested in "not traditional vampy things, but character parts, oddball kinds of things."

Perhaps it is this B-Movie aspiration in everything they do which has safeguarded Blondie's legacy; trashy is timeless as well as tasteless.

Performing at the Fashion Rocks show last month, both Blondie and Deborah demonstrated their elusive power to transcend trends. While blank-faced young things in disposable fashion strolled back and forth in front of them, the band belted out 1979's 'One Way Or Another'; a tune older than all of the models, and far more entertaining.

Debbie - clearly having a great time in a classic white dress and shades - didn't look like a star from the 70s, 80s, 90s or even the present day; she simply looked like a star.



