

# SMART SEXY FUNNY COOL

*Blondie frontwoman  
Debbie Harry is a pop  
culture trailblazer who  
influenced a legion of  
female artists—and she  
isn't done yet.*

*by Deborah L. Martin*

**DEBBIE HARRY IS A MEMBER OF** that famed group of people known as icons. It's a word that is overused, but sometimes accurate. She was an influencer before the social media onslaught, and she remains so today. She is inextricably linked to a period in New York City that was a fertile ground of creativity in music, fashion, film, art, and photography. But she isn't resting on her laurels or living a nostalgia trip. Harry and bandmates Chris Stein, Clem Burke, Matt Katz-Bohen, Leigh Foxx, and Tommy Kessler released their 11th studio album *Pollinator* last year, and they are currently making new music, all while continuing to influence a whole new generation of musicians. Harry is also working on a book that is scheduled to be released at the end of the year. "I already want to write a second book," she says. "I'm turning into a real freak about it. I didn't do a lot of anecdotes because I had to get through the timeline, but there are so many stories I would love to tell." And believe me, we *all* want to hear them.

We sat down for the interview on the day Karl Lagerfeld died, so fashion was front-of-mind. In addition to her music, Harry has long been known for her distinct fashion sense; in the 1970s she famously cut holes in a pillowcase and wore it as a dress, with duct tape as a belt. "Don't think I'm being modest," she says, "but I think this whole thing about me being a fashion influence is kind of inadvertent and slightly ridiculous, or maybe totally ridiculous." She is modest, but it's genuine.





**FOREVER BLONDIE** Debbie Harry wears a dress by designer Alejandra Burguette and boots by Jean Michel Cazabat; Styling by Angèle Blank; Hair by David Cotteblanche; Makeup by Brian Duprey for Makeup Forever at Judy Casey.

"I don't think I was seen as a fashion person until I started working with Stephen Sprouse." Harry met Sprouse in 1975, when he moved into the apartment building on Bowery where she lived with Chris Stein, then her partner. At that time, Sprouse was working with Halston, so he would bring her slip dresses, which she frequently wore with thigh-high boots and a trench coat.

"With the punk logic and the combination of punk, new wave, and 1960s revitalization, our style did become a strong statement, and it was a time when that was really important. We had just come out of all the flowered floor-length skirts and tie-dye, so it really was a totally different thing, which was remarkable for the time." Harry credits their international influences for some of their style aesthetic. "We definitely talked about it. We were sort of a blend of Euro punk pop and New York punk rock." Economics were also at play in defining the band's style.

part of that community. "We were very fortunate. Basquiat and Warhol were there, of course, but we also had Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring, they were younger but their energy was being felt. They were bringing in a graffiti-like element that was so fresh. There was a lot of change and when that happens in any culture it's very exciting and people want to be a part of it. They want to live it, they want to feel it."

But the music business, and indeed, the world has changed. "I do think that part of the reason that it has shifted so much is because our communication has accelerated so much. So it's now a worldwide stage—it's just massive. We are all learning something because of the horror of how our electoral system has been corrupted. It's a tool that can work for us or totally against us."

Does she miss the old days? "Well, today it's more about touring and publishing than an actual physical product. One of the charming benefits of having an album is that you get to hold a piece of artwork in your hands and listen to music. On the other hand, I like the convenience of being able to look something up or have a piece of music instantly—that is genius."

Harry is still excited about the work, even though the business has changed. *Pollinator* is a collaborative album that took shape when Johnny Marr of The Smiths gave them a song called *My Monster*. "He's a wonderful musician and writer and we loved the song right away. And because we have a relationship now with BMG and they are nurturing a lot of young talent, we felt like it was a natural progression for us. *Pollinator* as a name came about because we are in the position of having pollinated or influenced a lot of bands, and in turn we have also been pollinated." The album includes collaborations with Sia, Charli XCX, Dev Hynes, and even old friend Joan Jett makes an appearance.

And even though *Pollinator* is a collaborative effort, it still carries that distinctive Blondie sound. Harry says she discovered they really had a sound when she, Chris Stein, and Clem Burke

decided to put the band back together in the 1990's. "Chris has a very distinctive style of playing that is very musical and lyrical, and Clem has his throbbing and driven kind of drumming. We were in the studio and I thought, 'Oh my god, we have a sound. That's really us.'" She doesn't mention it but of equal importance is her voice, which ranges from breathy and warm to a torchy, cat-like snarl. Harry offers some advice to bands trying to make it now. "Hold on to what each individual brings to the sound and don't mill it away because you want to sound like something else. Cohesiveness really carries through. You have to be brave and tough and you have to stand your ground."

She reflects on her success and on being a woman at a time when expectations were very different. "I came from a very middle class life and girls weren't expected to go out and do anything, but I did. We came out of this kinky little fucked up world, this small little strange world. And the older I get the more I realize how extraordinary my partnership with Chris Stein was, and is. He's a genius, and we bounce off each other in such great ways. There was certain amount of desperation [when we started] but that is ultimately good for an artist. We used to run out on stage all kinds of terrified and full of angst, and then it worked."

She laughs that Debbie Harry laugh. "What do they say? Necessity is the mother of invention, right?" **DT**



**LEGENDS** Photographer and Blondie co-founder Chris Stein photographed Andy Warhol photographing Harry. The photos Warhol shot that day were used to paint the portrait at right, which is part of Harry's private collection. It is currently traveling with the Whitney's *Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*.

"We used to go to a great vintage store in Hoboken—it had tons and tons of peg-legged and shark skin suits. There was also a place on 14th Street that had wild colored suits and jackets. We lucked out because they were getting rid of stuff that had probably been in storage for 10 or 15 years. Some of those suits cost five dollars."

Harry admits that the bands in the punk world were all different, both in their sartorial style and in their music. "I think those labels came later. Even the idea of punk being a style of music came later because we were all so different from one another. But we did have an idea or unity in the fact that everything was a little more stripped down and perhaps more international." She cites The Ramones, who both Harry and Stein counted among their friends. "Some of our musical influence harkened to the 1960's so the little boots and minis and pegged pants made sense. For The Ramones it was even more defined and more refined—it was jeans and t-shirts and leather jackets and that was it. It worked for them."

Harry is appreciative of certain aspects of the current musical culture but she also understands why people are nostalgic, particularly for New York in the 1970's and 80's. "I think the scene was much more closely knit between the painters, the sculptors, the photographers, the musicians, the actors—we all had more influence on each other. It was a smaller world and there was a lot more interaction." Like many of the other artists living and working in New York at the time, she knows how lucky she was to be

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS STEIN (WARHOL AND HARRY); PAINTING COURTESY OF DEBBIE HARRY.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TEEKAY



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