



Dennis McGuire

A COOL BLONDE AND A HOT BAND

The group: (left to right) Clem Burke, Debbie Harry, Jimmy Destri, Chris Stein, Frank Infante, Nigel Harrison.



Debbie Harry singing on a television show in London, where Blondie first won popularity.

By Ann Bardach and Susan Lydon

July 13 is a hot and airless Friday in Philadelphia. Inside the sold-out Tower Theater, tempers and temperaments are running high among 3,100 young fans eager to see the hottest new presence on the pop-music scene — the six-member rock band Blondie on its summer-long national tour.

A foot-stomping, standing ovation greets the band and, in particular, lead vocalist Deborah Harry, the blonde of Blondie. (Friends and fans call her Debbie; it incenses both her and the band when she's called Blondie. She speaks of the band as "Me and Blondie.") Debbie's drop-dead brand of glamour coolly evokes — and satirizes — hallowed images of Hollywood sex queens and Blondie's sophisticated "new-wave" music does the same for early 60's "girl-group" rock-and-roll,

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characterized by elaborately harmonious love songs sometimes exaggerated to a point of hilarity.

A year ago, most of these kids probably never heard of Blondie, but by now the album "Parallel Lines," Blondie's third, latest and best, has sold more than five million copies worldwide; and sales of the album's hit single, "Heart of Glass," exceed two million (at a time when the record industry reports slumping sales for the first time in 25 years). "Heart of Glass" is the most significant example of a song by a new-wave band crossing over to capture both the disco and MOR ("middle-of-the-road") audiences. Record-industry seers expect equal success for Blondie's new album, "Eat to the Beat," scheduled for release in mid-September.

Now, in the Tower Theater, when Debbie sings, the audience responds with familiarity to every song. Debbie stalks across the stage like a tigress staking out her territory. Dressed in a one-piece strapless white cotton jump suit, she smiles and blows kisses, camps and vamps her way through Blondie's hit repertory. Her movements, in the words of the Times critic John Rockwell, reflect "the awkwardly endearing klutziness so charmingly

On a spring tour of England, Debbie obligingly signs her autograph for a milling huddle of fans.

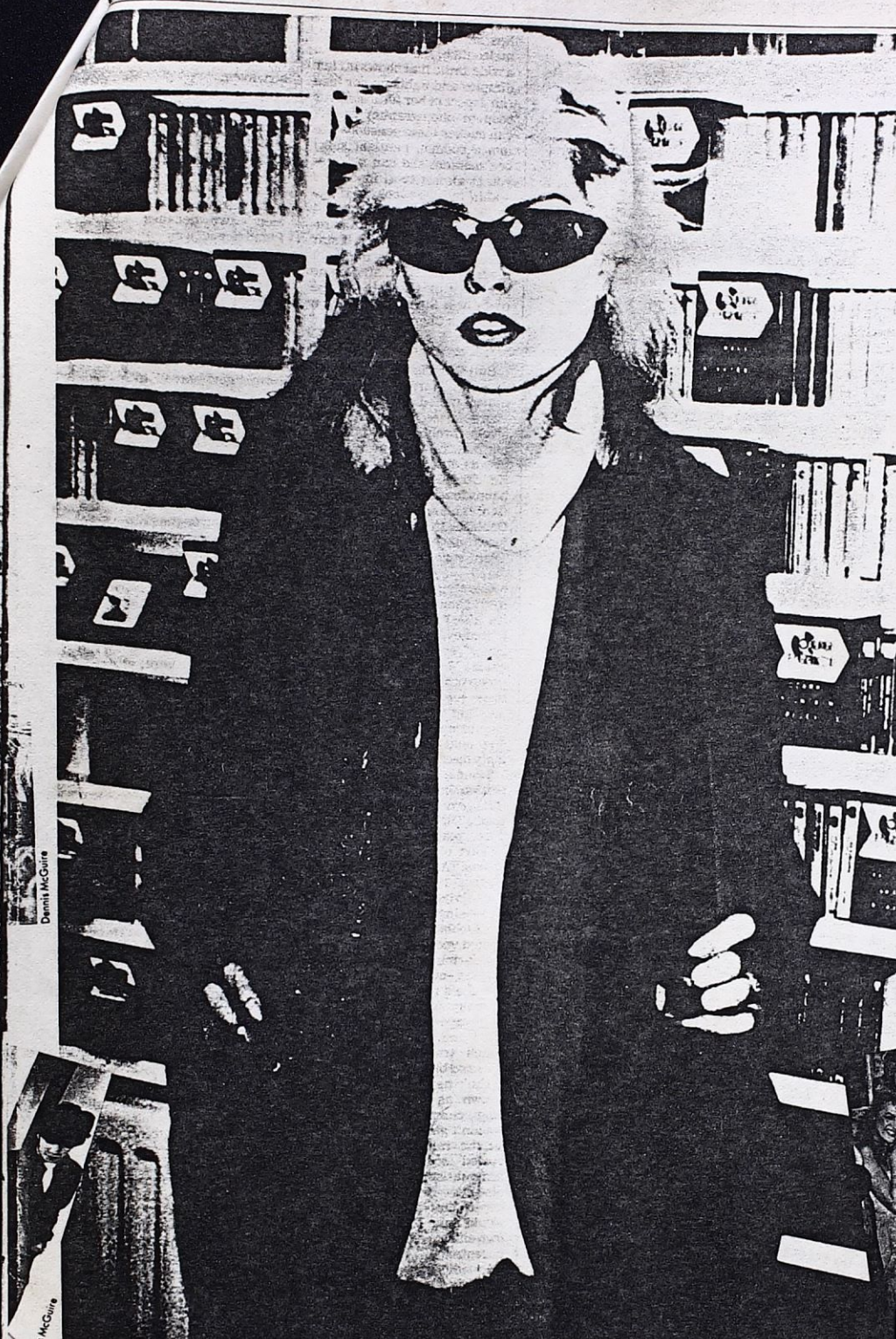


Lynn Goldsmith

Hammockmates, Debbie Harry and Chris Stein founded Blondie in 1973. Now they share their music and their lives.



Blondie's members troop into a TV station in Germany, where they have a big following.



at odds with the glossy sexuality of her photos," and her voice, which critics agree has steadily strengthened and improved, belts out the ending to "11:59," now on almost every jukebox in the country. "I'm still alive, still alive," she exults, the band punctuating the phrases with staccato bass riffs, "still alive, still alive, bomp bomp, bomp bomp."

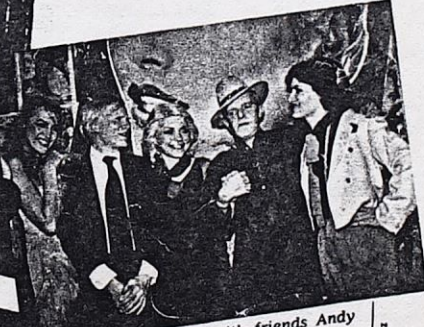
It's even hotter onstage than in the audience and Debbie's disregard for underwear soon becomes evident as sweat soaks through her jump suit, turning it semitransparent. The band swings through the synthesized, subdued, not-quite-disco strains of "Heart of Glass," their platinum hit ("platinum" being a flashy industry term signifying more than a million units sold), priming the audience for the show's climax. On the next number, the band rocks out as Debbie, snarling and sneering, eyes growing big and demented, her gestures predatory and provocative, bites off the words that half-threaten, half-promise her hungry fans: "One way or another, I'm gonna find ya, I'm gonna getcha getcha getcha getcha."

She is, too. This 5-foot-3 powerhouse who gives her age as 34 (insiders place her on the other side of 35) shows no signs of an energy crisis as she blasts off into mainstream celebrity. But backstage she collapses on a sofa after the show, her head wrapped in a towel. Here she looks tired and somehow vulnerable, not quite up to greeting the well-wishers who crowd around her. Chris Stein, Blondie's 29-year-old, prematurely graying lead guitarist and Debbie's live-in friend and collaborator, still dressed in the Doctor X T-shirt, black leather pants and dark glasses he wore onstage, wanders about the scene, videotaping everything. Recovered, Debbie clowns for the camera, slipping a carrot and celery stick in her nostrils and guzzling Perrier from a giant bottle until it drools out of her mouth. "As you can see," she announces solemnly, "I'm a health-food freak."

Described variously by trade and national publications as a "punk Garbo," "the Marilyn Monroe of punk rock" and "the most photographed woman in rock-and-roll," Debbie is a strikingly good-looking woman. Her broad face,

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Debbie at a disco with friends Andy Warhol (to her right), Truman Capote, Jerry Hall (far left), Paloma Picasso.

Sonia Moskowitz

Debbie Harry, transcending the punk label, projects an image that is an amalgam of those of hallowed Hollywood sex queens.

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with its high cheekbones, boasts translucent skin, big blue eyes and the most perfect lips since Clara Bow's. Chameleonlike, she can break into a wide smile that shows off her dimples and lights up her face (an aspect of her almost never seen in photographs) or she can pucker those sensuous lips into a sudden, petulant sulk; one moment she can stare at you in almost total innocence and in the next look as if she had just stepped out of the cast of "Marat/Sade." Quite simply, she has old-fashioned star appeal. Some entertainment moguls believe that Debbie has what it takes to go the route of a Streisand, a Diana Ross, or a Cher.

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But Blondie is more than Deborah Harry. The band's music, melodically diverse, is characterized by a compulsively throbbing beat, ululating guitars and celestial keyboards that sound like futuristic carousels. Unlike other bands in which every member flaunts his ego, Blondie flaunts Debbie, the obvious visual focus of each performance. Their repertory includes updated versions of "golden oldies," sci-fi and horror-movie songs and original satire like "Rip Her to Shreds" ("Red eyeshadow, green mascara/Yecch! She's too much!"). Each member of the group is a talented songwriter, their supply of catchy melodies and commercial "hooks" — musical devices that catch and hold attention — seemingly inexhaustible.

Blondie began to receive attention in this country early this year when news spread that "Parallel Lines" had gone platinum. By spring, "Heart of Glass" topped the charts. A cynical love song ("Once I had a love/and it was divine/ soon found out I was losing my mind"), featuring Debbie's dreamy, disembodied vocals over a hypnotic, roller-rink organ background, "Heart of Glass" appalled Blondie's fans and fellow musicians on the underground new-wave scene. But it got the band the AM radio airplay which translates into more fans and big bucks.

The new-wave (formerly known as punk) bands had long complained that they couldn't get their music heard on the radio; although they voiced scorn for Blondie's pragmatism in "selling out to disco," they subliminally hoped that its breakthrough would pave the way for their own entrance into mainstream acceptance.

Blondie grew up with punk, which began in the mid-70's as a loose movement of bands wanting to recycle the raw, high-powered energy of 50's and early 60's rock-and-roll. They were reacting against

the overproduced, too-slick sound of most pop music — the mindless, repetitive rhythms of disco and the bland creaminess of studio-created pop, both of which monopolized the airwaves.

Bands like the Ramones toured England, where their punk attitude — they behaved onstage like truculent street toughs — was adopted by English pub bands as a vehicle for the political outrage expressed by the theater's "Angry Young Men" two decades earlier. Punk music was minimalist, some said chaotic; its lyrics emphasized alternating currents of nihilism and sentimentality. When more musically and cerebral groups, such as Talking Heads, came onto the scene, English music writers invented the umbrella term "new wave" to encompass all late-70's groups, however disparate, which were aiming to restore gut feeling to rock-and-roll.

American music critics also touted new wave as an intelligent alternative to disco and the music flourished in the suburbs and on the Lower East Side's avant-garde art scene. Blondie was one of the first and flashiest New York new-wave bands, although Debbie never liked the "punk" label. "Punk is a time signature," she says. "Punk to us is a time in New York, a time in the world. Acid is before; glitter is before; R 'n' B [Rhythm and Blues] is before, and now it's punk. But it's all rock-and-roll, straight down the line."

□

Blondie successfully toured Europe, where the new wave has wider acceptance, before "Heart of Glass" broke open the American market last spring. Debbie's face has appeared on the cover of almost every European magazine. Careful packaging and promotion helped the success of "Parallel Lines" in the United States. So did the unusual pairing of the band with a "bubblegum" hit maker, the producer Mike Chapman, a wizard at capturing the teen-age audience — a move engineered by Blondie's former manager, Peter Leeds. Leeds also paid \$500,000 to buy back the group's record contract, shifting Blondie to the Chrysalis label, which he felt would serve the group better.

The emergence of Deborah Harry in her own right is due to her special personal style. Playing clubs like CBGB's and Max's Kansas City in New York in the early days of punk, Debbie created a unique blend of what she called "trash, flash and freak chic." Against the prevailing mode of black leather, safety pins and chains, Debbie stuck with her miniskirts, spike heels and teased beehive hairstyle, exploiting every successful femi-

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nine stereotype of the 50's and 60's. Making it as a female rocker in a man's world, she presented herself almost as a cartoon character with a blatant, ironic sexiness that proved surprisingly unthreatening, even winning, to the women in her audiences. "I wish I had invented sex," she told an English interviewer. "Sex is everything. It's Number 1."

Sex sells and the new-wave bands — despite their rebellious stance — did want commercial success. And so the punk attitude manifested itself in New York as a psychodramatic fashion show, emulating the Andy Warhol-dominated world of pop art and art rock. A friend introduced Debbie to Warhol years ago. Last June, after she had appeared at Max's, Warhol gave a party in her honor at Studio 54. Although Debbie's face was then gracing the cover of Warhol's Interview magazine, and although the disco's huge sound system played her records, few there over 25 knew who she was. Near the rear door, Deborah Harry smiled faintly to appease the paparazzi. The reason she was at the rear door was that she was trying to find a way out of her own party.

"She is shy," Debbie's mother told a Rolling Stone reporter. "When she's not performing, she's quiet, with a very pixie sense of humor. She's not real outgoing or loud. She's sort of retiring." Richard and Catherine Harry adopted Debbie in New Jersey when she was 3 months old. They raised and schooled her with their other daughter in the quiet, middle-class suburb of Hawthorne, N.J. The Harrys are modest Episcopalian people who have since moved to Cooperstown, N.Y., where they own a gift shop. Debbie sang in church and acted in school plays. "I used to always mimic everything I saw," she says. "Whatever was there, I was copying it."

Debbie's adoption has perplexed and disturbed her. In the summer of 1978, she was asked by the photographer and film maker Sam Shaw to provide biographical information for a one-hour documentary film on Blondie. Interviewed by the screenwriter/novelist Ted Allan, Debbie mentioned liking a play, "Fame," loosely based on the life of Marilyn Monroe. The conversation continued:

ALLAN: Do you have an affinity for Marilyn Monroe?

HARRY: Tremendous. I always thought she was my mother.

ALLAN: Did you ever seriously think that you'd go and meet her and say, "You might be my mother."

(Continued on Page 36)



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BLONDIE

Continued from Page 22

HARRY: No! God! Well, you know, there's that kind of admiration, I guess. They say that most adopted children now, in their adult life, look for their real parents... I sort of have my wild imaginings. Like she [Monroe] had wild imaginings about Clark Gable being her father... See, my mother did keep me for three months, and I have memories, a visual memory of when I was 3 months old when I was adopted.

Such fantasies percolated through Debbie's adolescence. She says that she felt "different," worried about being crazy. As late as last year, Debbie reminded a reporter that "Marilyn was also an adopted child."

At any rate, the suburban rituals of Hawthorne and its public-school system left much to be desired for the adolescent Debbie. Early on in high school, she says, she embarked on weekend sojourns to New York's Lower East Side, where she eventually moved after two years at a finishing school — "a reform school for debs" which she "wasn't rebellious enough to leave."

On her own finally, Debbie tried writing, painting, acting, singing, waitressing and, not least of all, drugs. Asked if she took a lot of acid in the 60's, Debbie replies, grinning, "I can't remember." In 1968 she was a backup singer in a folk group called Wind in the Willows. In photos from this period, she is almost unrecognizable, dressed in loose Indian-bedspread clothes with her mousy brown hair hanging straight from a center part. When the band broke up, she went through a difficult period, ending up with a heroin habit. Drugs weren't all that new to her; she recalled taking "speed and ups all through high school," but this was worse.

"For a while I was so pent-up inside I couldn't sing," she recalls. "Like, everytime I would sing I would cry. It was really horrible." Debbie credits her abandonment of drugs to a "semireligious experience," which she does not elaborate upon except to say that at the time she was "studying Indian music, working as a Playboy bunny, and doing yoga." When her doctor observed that she was in exceptionally good health for an addict, she attributed it to the yoga. "I'm glad I did it," she says now of her drug days, recalling that she ended up "coming back to life, wanting to live, developing faith. I mean not faith in God, but just faith, generally."

Debbie knocked around the art scene for a while, appearing in underground movies and plays, eventually teaming up with an all-girl singing group called the Stiletos. At their second show, in 1973, a friend brought Chris Stein to see the group, and Debbie recalls sensing "this guy staring at me real intensely. I couldn't see him, but I could feel his eyes looking at me." Chris is the son of intellectual parents who were radical activists in the trade-union movement in the 30's. He attended New York's School of Visual Arts. He and Debbie became friends; he joined the Stiletos' backup band, and after their relationship became romantic, they formed Blondie.

Despite success, all is not well in the Blondie camp. Many fans who were loyal to them in their lean years are deserting because they resent Blondie's "commercial sell-out." In addition, the group has spent the last year in acrimonious and costly negotiations (Blondie gave up a share in its future gross, plus an undisclosed sum) to break from its first manager, Peter Leeds. Shep Gordon, Alice Cooper's manager, was chosen to replace Leeds, and he took over on Aug. 1. In the interim, Debbie and Chris were managing the band themselves and on occasion — because press attention seems naturally to focus on Debbie — that proved to be a can of worms. When asked for interviews, Debbie and Chris tactfully insisted that the other members of the band be interviewed first.

The marked internal discord in the band expresses itself in the well-distributed button declaring "Blondie is a group," an irate reminder that Blondie has six members. However, many people in the industry agree with Rolling Stone's judgment that Debbie Harry is "the only one in the hot new rock package who can't be replaced." A possible exception is Stein, lead guitarist and Blondie's principal composer, who has been described as Debbie's *eminence grise*. The boys in the band — Clem Burke, drummer; Frank Infante, guitarist; Nigel Harrison, bass; and Jimmy Destri, keyboardist — all want their place in the sun, too. For the time being, Debbie and Chris are trying to appease them.

While the band members are telling reporters how each joined the group, Debbie, who has changed into a black dress slit up the sides and high-heeled backless mules, stares uninterestedly at the television set or the wall. Her hands fidget nervously with her room

key and her face is suffused with despair and boredom. Stein, who speaks with a slight lisp, mutters about the "misquoting and distortions" of the press. When the reporters suggest shifting the focus to Debbie, the normally reasonable Burke, declaring the interview "irrelevant and boring," dumps the contents of a wineglass and an ashtray on a reporter's head. ("I'm not surprised," a record company executive at their label,

Chrysalis, commented later. "It's happened before. It could have been worse.")

Because Blondie's rise was a long time in coming, Debbie — a survivor — is not about to jeopardize it now. This seemingly spontaneous, casual performer takes nothing lightly. Alone in her room later in the evening, she relaxes, begins to talk: "I was

singing at a time when Janis Joplin was really out there, and then she died. I kept thinking about Janis and Billie Holiday and blues. It just kept going through my head — all that sadness and tragedy. I love the blues, but I didn't wanna sing them. I wanted to be up and happy and entertain people and have a good time. Those blues singers were forced to live out the reality of blues. I had to make sure that I was strong enough and felt good

enough about myself to avoid that."

Debbie speaks with a street accent, redolent of Brooklynese and punctuated with flat, nasal "yeah's" and "y'know's." As a performer, she has remarkably broad appeal; her campy sexuality attracts young and old, homosexual and heterosexual, men and women. Asked if it is hard to keep herself together on the road, she replies, "It's hard. Life is hard. It's hard to get up at 8 in the morning and type 60 letters in a day. It's hard to work at Woolworth's. Everyone's life is hard." She feels that many people can relate to Blondie's music because "all of our songs aren't about love and hate relationships and broken hearts and stuff like that. We have songs that are about cars and minmovie themes and different subjects — the gas shortage, everything."

Deborah Harry, the singer, delivers her songs in a flat, almost inflected manner, but the actress in her infuses the songs (which she characterizes as "high-energy music") with theatrical drama. "Part of a singer's job is to make a song believable," she says, "to make it come alive and to transmit a story. If I'm singing about surf's up, I'm in the sun and I'm waiting for my wave, and while I'm really in New York, it's believable. It's so much easier with music than with acting. Different tonal qualities express different emotions and get different feelings going, and the beat and the excitement and all the electricity just make it that much hotter."

For the past six years Debbie has maintained a stable relationship with Chris Stein. They live together in a penthouse apartment above Sixth Avenue and are described by themselves and others as inseparable. Their life together, except when touring or recording, is quiet, and Debbie has even described herself to the press as "a housewife." Stein has his own brand of radical anarchist politics, strongly based on the belief that "we are entering an age of apocalypse to be followed by an age of enlightenment."

Debbie, like Stein, has been interested in making films since her East Village days. Though she may now speak of having only a casual ambition to be a film star, few believe it to be so. Only a year ago she spoke of "maybe breaking out on my own, definitely toward film."

In the meantime, Debbie is staying ready for the future, whatever it may be. She tries to take care of herself, for one thing. Now she neither drinks nor smokes, often leaving rooms of smokers to protect her throat and sinuses from inhaled irritation. She has no strong antidrug stance, but says she doesn't much use them anymore. "I like to get high, but I don't like the hangover. That's what it amounts to." Offstage and on, she exudes a rare wholesomeness, all the more startling in its juxtaposition with the brassy bleached hair (she has a beautician's license, but she deliberately lets the dark roots show) and 50's downbeat clothes. She has intelligence, wit and resolve. One thing she has resolved not to be is "some kind of a victim." Deborah Harry has better things in mind for the 1980's. ■

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