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BLONDIE

PLATINUM HUNTERS?
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BLONDIE HUNTERS IN AN URBAN JUNGLE

by Toby Goldstein

Chris Stein, Deborah Harry and I are sitting in an office of Blank Tapes Studio, catching up on the recent past and future prospects of Blondie. At the same time, the duo are hustling through a last-minute blast of errands before taking Chris's historical photo exhibit to London, where they'll promote their book *Making Tracks*, the new Blondie album, *The Hunter*, Deborah's forthcoming film role in *Videodrome*, a worldwide tour set to begin in midsummer, Stein's own independent label, Animal Records, and whatever else they're planning for their spare time.

It's obvious from a deceptive calm filling the room that 25-hour days are familiar landscapes to Chris and Deb. Stein, congested and weary from a bad case of flu, deftly jockeys conversation with phone

calls and instructions to engineers, just as he'd earlier chatted in between concentrating on the mixing board where he finalized a new, outrageous Iggy Pop album. Chris's wheels might have been turning at double speed, but the only outward evidence of his compulsiveness was the breathless torrent of words he unveiled, indiscriminately spouting rage, hurt, ironic humor and personal philosophy.

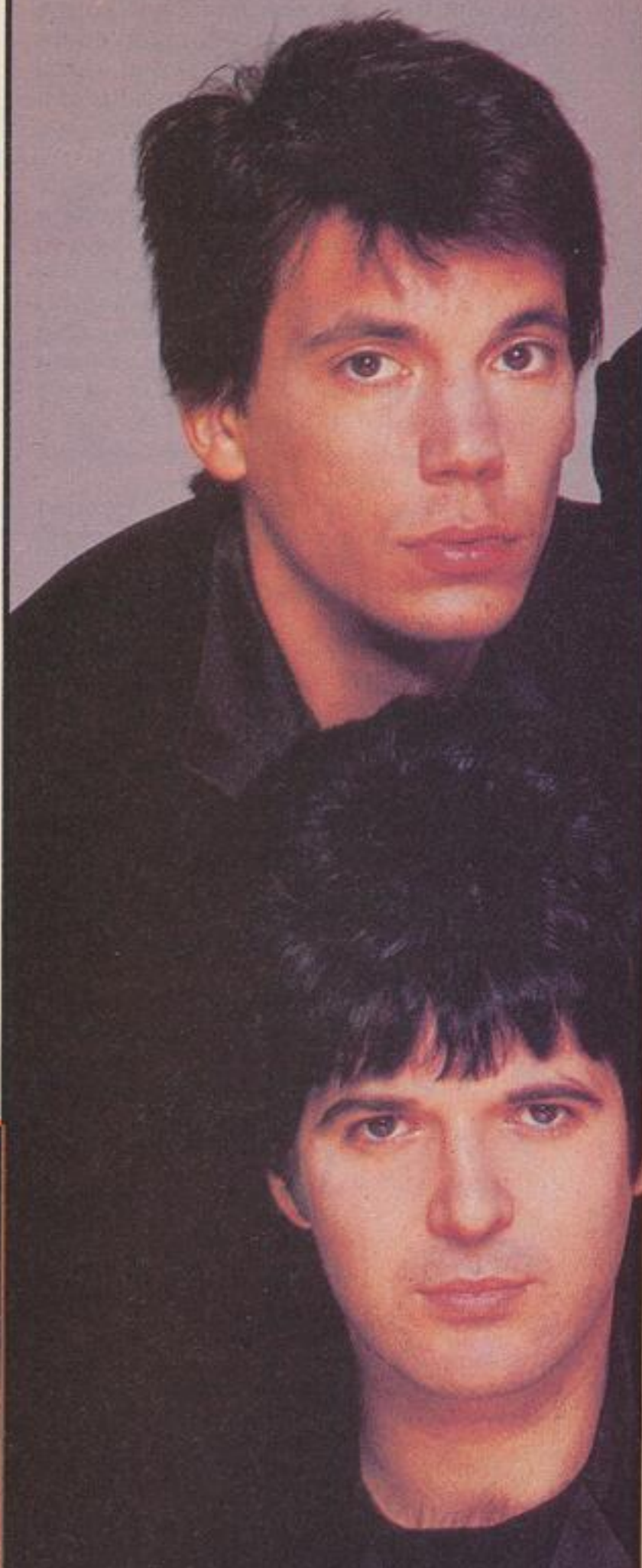
Deborah balances Chris's outpourings with studied calm, unforced laughter and few words unless directly addressed. Under the interviewer's gaze, she leafed through a book of Gahan Wilson's alien-flavored cartoons, pointing out favorites in the volume. Next, she switched to a book of *New York Times* crossword puzzles, which was tagged in bold letters on the cover as her personal property, not to be removed from the studio under dire penalty. Keeping one ear to the conversation, she flips to a puzzle called "Off and Running" and busies herself in the un-star-like recreation.

"Is this media overkill or what?"

Ebet Roberts



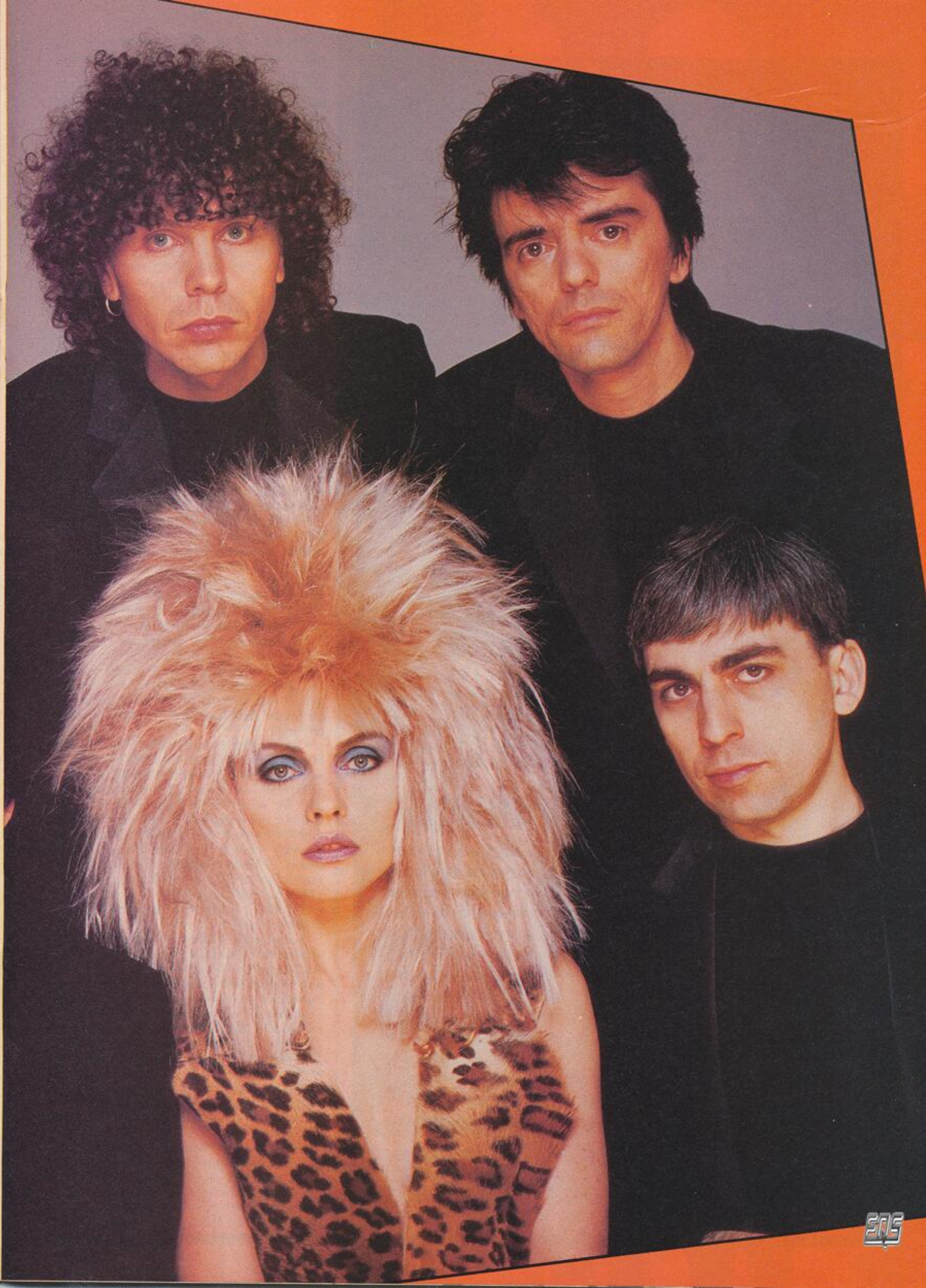
"Damn! The creem rinse didn't work!"



“Ninety percent of all pop music in the world, comes out of black music so no matter what you're doing, you're playing black music.”

--Chris Stein

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This wasn't the first time I'd come to speak with Blondie and discovered Debbie occupied in mundane pursuits. She'd previously tossed out comments between telephone calls, answered questions while reading letters, responded to pleas for facts after joking with the rest of the band. Debbie briefly departs to move her car before it gets towed off the street and I ask Chris why she's always doing something instead of thinking about her responses. Are my queries so bad even my best friends won't tell me?

"She's relaxed around you," explains Stein. "When she's nervous, she pays more attention. She thinks they're gonna get her." Oh, yes. It was only a matter of time before Blondie's on-again, off-again relationship with the press came up. We're not here to debate whether or not one of the world's best-selling bands is justified in their anger against certain reporters. But the fact that I have had access to them for a long time, maybe because I've kept my mouth shut when they released an album or did a show I didn't love, makes it important for me to try to separate the Blondie myth from reality.

As they prepare for the release of and judgement upon *The Hunter*, Blondie's first album in two years, the band exhibits genuine confidence, definitely tinged with relief. Nigel Harrison and Clem Burke, the group's rhythm section, who were most caught unaware when various Blondies began solo projects, are excited at the thought of touring. Although Clem, especially, spent the past two years working in a variety of line-ups, and both musicians took lengthy busmen's holidays in Europe, Nigel optimistically describes Blondie's current status as "strong and in focus."

"I was lost at first. I wrote songs, but my first love is playing and any other thing but gigs is just a drag for me. But that's my particular problem and I'm not blaming anyone."

"We'd record songs like 'The Tide Is High,' 'Rapture' and 'Call Me'—which is one of my favorite Blondie tracks, and the only time we ever played that song was the day we recorded it. I spent 15 minutes learning the song, and it was weird to hear that it's number one a month later. (Not playing) almost put me off going to shows," Harrison admits. "I didn't like to see other people do their hits onstage. That's just me being selfish. I'm sure when we do 'Call Me' this time I'll probably break down in tears."

According to Clem and Nigel, the group was never in danger of splitting up after *Autoamerican*. They might not have had any immediate plans formulated, but Deborah's solo intentions were no secret. Says Nigel, "we were conscious that we'd all do solo albums, movie soundtracks or whatever. It's part of the group's growth. The only thing that made me jump a bit was when I found out Debbie was doing it with Bernie (Edwards) and Nile (Rodgers). There are two players I really respect and when they came along, it was a little paranoia."

Burke certainly has no regrets about the group's temporary dispersal, because he got involved in almost everything anyone did. "One night I sat up thinking I was in pretty interesting circumstances. With the Blondie layoff, I wound up doing 'Come

Oh, no! Still hungry for Tri-X, Chris takes one last shot of what's-her-name.

Back Jonee' on *Saturday Night Live* with Debbie and Chris, a Michael Des Barres English tour with Nigel, some tracks on Joan Jett's *Bad Reputation* album with Frankie, Jimmy's solo album, and I played on Iggy Pop's tour last year with Gary Valentine. I guess that's the luxury of being a drummer, especially if you're a very damned good drummer," he says straight-faced. Clem takes his work seriously, has often been called the best musician in the group and, I'm told, worked things out with Jimmy Destri so that he'd be doing this interview.

Negotiation amongst band members is consistent with Blondie's self-assessment. Debbie and Chris have always been the group's chief songwriters and front people, but the rest of the band solves ego problems by meeting the press in shifts. While no band member can compete with Deborah's many fashion magazine layouts or expanding film career, Burke, for example, has made sure that his experiences away from Blondie are worth repeating. His plan is so obvious that he knows I know it, and the fan tells his story convincingly.

"When I was in Britain, I gave Zak Starkey drum lessons. That's a real scoop for you," he says coolly. "I got to play Keith Moon's drums and Zak got drum lessons and it all took place on Lennon's estate, which Ringo had bought in Ascot. I met Zak in Dingwall's (a notorious late-night London music biz hangout). He knew who I was and said, 'I'm a drummer and my dad's a drummer.' I said, 'oh yeah, is it anybody I ever heard of?' 'I'm Zak Starkey,' and I just went numb. He's about 15 and has a heavy metal band; he's into Cozy Powell and that style of drumming.

"Then he goes, 'by the way, this is my mum Maureen over here.' That's the great thing about England, those people do exist. The rock star thing in America, it's so inflated, it's become Hollywood. But in England, everyone's out on the street."

Within one week's time, but the legendary and ordinary Deborah Harry would be visible in New York City. Chris's photographs were introduced at a massive party in an "establishment" 57th Street art gallery. Music and arty types pressed flesh with Lou Reed, David Johansen and Iggy, while Chris and Deborah (who wore long hair for the occasion), were continually blinded by flashbulbs. It was an event better described than experienced.

When she ambled into Blank Tapes carrying a loaded canvas bag on a warm late spring afternoon, Debbie, the Blondie centerpiece, was nowhere in view. Deborah's hair was its natural middle brown color, grown shoulder length and casually side-parted. She wore no makeup, allowing anyone sitting close to plainly see that, at the age of 37, her face is totally unlined and stress has not marred its surface. Debbie does have an enviably curvy, petite figure, but on that day, she concealed it with a stretched-out t-shirt, old dark green stretch pants and a plaid jacket that looked like the top half of a polyester pants suit. She wasn't ugly, just normal, so that maybe she could walk down the street and not get ogled or propositioned by three dozen delivery men, their dubious gifts



Debbie signs a Bond-o-can for an admiring whelp.

offered to any woman who attempts a midtown Manhattan side street wearing anything more revealing than a burnoose.

As soon as she arrived, Debbie checked on Chris's health, then produced peach lollipops from her satchel. The twosome are completely in synch with each other, befitting their 10-year liason. Even those who have decided that Blondie's music has little importance can poke no holes in the Harry/Stein alliance. Their bond is so strong that *Making Tracks* includes a hefty share of photos of the duo in long hair and outdated clothes, usual subjects for "superficial" people to hide in the closet.

"We've learned that the foundation of our relationship was established during a time when we didn't have anything and we were struggling. When we got successful it made it easier and more positive. I feel that we're supportive of each other's projects. I

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"It's great when Chris has these flashbacks," smiled Debs.



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BLONDIE

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can't write music."

"Yes you can," interrupts Chris, "but it's not like a competition between us, it's always been mutual. It's just lucky." We are all three of us children of the 60's, so I'm not surprised to learn that Chris and Debbie put some credence in astrology, at least to the extent of agreeing that their relative birthsigns of Capricorn and Cancer co-exist well. Stein's January birthdate is only two days away from my own, and I have to agree with Debbie's assessment, made while Chris is busy on the phone, that we goat-people are a bunch of worry warts and nervous cases.

Chris had begun the afternoon by railing against the Blondie biography Lester Bangs wrote in 1980, and went on to challenge *Rolling Stone* or the *NME* to print pictures of their critics. "If the readers saw what these people look like, they would shit in their pants to know the advice of these creatures they're following," he says diplomatically. Stein obviously feels that Blondie has been deliberately wronged by much of the press, excepting CREEM, for whom he's both written and been profiled. This presents a problem. Chris and Deborah like CREEM and seem to trust me. I like them, believing them to be honest people who've earned what they've received from a tough business. They've made plenty of stupid mistakes, in choosing their managers early on, in sporadically encouraging the marketing of sex-oriented promotions, in speaking first and thinking later. However, they admit their shortcomings, as when Chris acknowledges Blondie isn't the world's most confident live act and when Debbie wryly sums up the financial bottom line of *KooKoo* as "shit."

On the other hand, I don't want to merely bob in agreement for the tirade concerning Lester's book, because he was also my friend and isn't around to confirm or deny whether he really did visit Chris and Debbie after the book was published and apologize for it. Good advice from a sympathetic observer suggests that it's best to assume neither side owns the truth.

A much easier argument to battle against the accusation that Blondie is racially exploitative. How come when Paul McCartney teams up with Stevie Wonder and writes a song like "Ebony And Ivory" that's so bland and calculated it makes me hate everyone regardless of color or creed, it gets rave reviews and will probably win the Nobel Peace Prize? How come when I went to a Blues Brothers press conference and asked John Belushi if he wasn't profiting off recording black music I got yelled at by a roomful of other writers? Where do the same people who fawn over Mick Jagger's rubber-lipped shuck 'n' jive get the nerve to tell Chris Stein, as happened to him in Britain, "Blondie plays reggae music and that makes me ashamed to be white...?"

Belushi's response is applicable to Blondie's success with "Rapture" and "The Tide Is High"—that mass popularity can only increase interest in the original singers, not hurt them further. Says Chris, "I never knew how to deal with my anger,

but now that I realize it's there, it helps me to fight and keep going. But it drives me crazy when somebody says to me, you're being exploitative playing black music. That's bullshit—90% of all pop music in the world comes out of black music, so no matter what you're doing, you're playing black music. It's a shame that we have these alternative charts and the music industry is fucked; that doesn't mean I'm not gonna do what I like. If you want to direct negativity, why do we have to have an r'n'b chart next to a white chart. That's racist," which, far from coincidentally, is exactly the same remark Terry Hall of Britain's racially mixed Fun Boy Three said in a recent conversation.

"Plus, we made an album with a bunch of black guys," continues Chris, referring to *KooKoo*, which was produced, largely written, and played by the two principals of Chic. "Nile's working title was *The Niggers And The Bitch*, which we decided not to give to Chrysalis. Doing that album really brought home to us how much fucking racism there is. We were getting—you can't do that, it's too r'n'b. The inverse of that is when Chic started out, they were a rock band and they'd send their tapes to the record companies and be invited up. And they'd walk in and when the companies saw what color they were—forget it. 'Why don't you play soul music?' I miss the days of early FM," Chris sighs, "where they'd play the Temptations and then play Donovan. It's all gone."

Naming the latest Blondie album *The Hunter*, after Smokey Robinson's classic slice of drama, "The Hunter Gets Captured By The Game," is just one of the ways Blondie is fusing those so-called polar opposite worlds. Clem Burke recalls with equal pleasure the challenge he faced learning to play r'n'b rhythms on *Autoamerican* with jazz bassist Ray Brown, and amusement at hearing about Brown, whose jazz credentials are second to none, getting stopped by a Macy's salesgirl and asked if he was "the Ray Brown who played with Blondie." When Chris Stein's own Animal Records—an independent label that will be distributed by Chrysalis—gets launched, its roster will include Talking Heads vocalist Dollett MacDonald side by side with Iggy, James Chance, the Gun Club, Snuky Tate, kiddie group the Brattles and the soundtracks of *Polyester* and *Union City*.

Chrysalis Records asked Clem if the new album "wasn't gonna be like *Autoamerican*, will it?" He answered, no, it'll have three number ones instead of two. But the label, which couldn't force rock radio stations to play rhythmic music even by a platinum-selling white group, can release its corporate breath regarding *The Hunter*. Recorded at New York's Hit Factory with Mike Chapman producing, the album blends Blondie's rhythmic adventurousness with enough traditional pop devices to keep the purists happy.

With Debbie's transition from the underground films of Amos Poe to the above-ground but low-budgeted *Union City* and David Cronenberg's scarifying *Videodrome* on the horizon, a new set of critics has gotten into the act and Chris is getting his dander up about the latest press manifestations.

Union City was a darkly textured, low-key murder mystery, with more than a touch of the surreal. Deborah wore a brown wig which was actually quite close to her real hair color, and dressed in dingy wrapcoats, correct for a 30's housewife. The film was understated, and demanded a delicate performance. The Chicago team on *Sneak Previews* on PBS didn't agree.


Says Chris gently, "those two idiots who do film reviews, fric and frac, came on and said, 'Well, we didn't think Deborah Harry demonstrated the energy she's known for onstage.' I suppose she should have leaped into this 1930's kitchen with a microphone." Debbie: "Maybe I should have served his pork chops and apple-sauce YAAHH!" She sing-screams loud enough to jiggle the furniture. "I was being directed. That's the important thing. I was someone else's creation, not my own."

Image was what got Debbie to Toronto to read for Cronenberg when he cast *Videodrome*, but reality won her the part. Deborah enjoys talking about making movies largely because of where the responsibility for image ultimately lands. In the music world, she is held accountable for what everyone perceives as the sins of Blondie-girl, although her stage persona bears about as much resemblance to her daily life as does David Bowie's glitter clothes to his off hours. However, when she acts, Debbie's happy to leave the driving and the excuses to the director.

"Cronenberg was interested in using me, but didn't think I could act. He used his idea of what I was like as he wrote the part, but he wasn't sure. So I read for him and it went from there.

"I don't know what's been left on the editing floor. Again, I'm not responsible for the finished product, I'm not responsible for the motivation or the words or anything. I'm a tool, I'm an actress. An actress is propelled. It's another discipline."

Chris: "I've never walked away from a record thinking it was finished, but one thing I've learned from producing all these other people is to let Chapman do it." Debbie: "With *Videodrome*, I'm so removed from the final product that it's fine with me. What else can I do? Am I gonna go crazy? Why should I go crazy?"

Blondie has been around for long enough, seen enough victories and failures, gotten ensconced in enough battles not to follow anything other than themselves for leadership. Where the protagonist of Smokey's song does get himself taken prisoner, it's as a victim of love. And that's about the only game this group is willing to play. 

ROSANNE CASH

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that record I came to a crisis of identity. I spent three hours trying to get one line in "I Can't Resist." We'd spent two days on the song and I could not get it, absolutely could not get it. I threw my headphones down and I stomped out of the studio crying and I ran into Brian Aherne (Emmylou Harris' producer/husband). He said, "How's it going?" and I said "I'M NOT A SINGER. I WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE A SINGER. I DON'T WANT TO