

PERFORMERS



Blondie



By Barbara O'Dair



A Blondie classic is hard to characterize. The group has produced both hits and experiments in multiple musical genres to dizzying and dazzling effect – raw punk gems; goofy homages to girl groups, comics, and B films; hard, fast rock; and gorgeous mélanges of disco, rap and techno pop. “Hanging on the Telephone,” “One Way or Another,” “Heart of Glass,” “Call Me,” “Rapture” – the songs that charted in the U.S. or U.K. were staggeringly different from one other. Yet they each had the Blondie stamp – deadpan, savvy, sexy, and tough – personified best by its lead singer (and cofounder), Deborah Harry, but always accomplished by the whole group, including cofounder and guitarist Chris Stein, drummer Clem Burke, keyboardist Jimmy Destri, bassist Nigel Harrison, and guitarist Frank Infante, as well as early member bassist Gary Valentine.

Blondie shared the limelight with such seventies “downtown” acts as the Ramones, Talking Heads, Television, the Dictators, and a few other seminal groups. It was the first group issuing from the New York underground, though, to take its sound to new audiences, crossing over into the mainstream as early as 1979, while maintaining its punk-rock cred.

In 1975, when the band took the stage at CBGB and Clem Burke hit the drums, the level of excitement was intense. “She looks like the Sunday comics!/She thinks she’s Brenda Starr/Her nose job is real atomic/All she needs is an old knife scar!/Ehhh, she’s so dull/Come on, rip her to shreds . . .” Catty and weird lyrics alike were compelling coming from Debbie Harry, who did her awkward little dance in front of the rest of Blondie, four dark-coiffed men with instruments. It created a striking juxtaposition – this faux dumb blonde with her haughty demeanor, wearing high-heeled boots and black stretch pants or a minidress against the macho backdrop. A

Bassist Gary Valentine, drummer Clem Burke, keyboardist Jimmy Destri, vocalist Debbie Harry, and guitarist Chris Stein (from left), 1976





ABOVE: On the cover of *Rolling Stone*, 1979. BELOW: Destri, Frank Infante, Harry, Burke, Stein, Nigel Harrison (from left), c. 1978. OPPOSITE: Harry struts her stuff, 1978.

detached (bored? numb?) sex kitten, Harry otherwise seemed a throwback to numerous past female entertainers, from Betty Boop to Jean Harlow to Nancy Sinatra.

Blondie's talent for pulling kitschy and cultish curiosities from the pop junk heap, and both celebrating and transforming them, set the band apart from its more minimalist peers and gave its shows a peculiar pleasure. Above all, Blondie had a great sense of humor – irreverent and sly.

Blondie released its first album, *Blondie*, in 1976, with such tracks as “Kung Fu Girls,” “The Attack of the Giant Ants,” and “A Shark in Jet’s Clothing” signaling the band’s predilection for offbeat cultural detritus. The knowing and idiosyncratic “X Offender,” “Rip Her to Shreds,” and “Look Good in Blue” stood out most. Released on indie label Private Stock, *Blondie* showcased Harry’s infectious vocal style, in parts seductive, angelic, and indifferent, as it wended its way around Jimmy Destri’s Farfisa organ fills, Clem Burke’s powerful drumming, Gary Valentine’s propulsive bass, and Chris Stein’s precise guitar and penchant for stylistic mixing and matching. It featured an arrogant, snarly punk attitude while also auguring, in its musical ambition, the advent of new wave.

The group toured with Iggy Pop and David Bowie, eventually creating an international fan base that would garner it regular hits in the U.K. as well as thirteen other countries. During the summer of 1977, Valentine departed to start his own group, Gary Valentine and the Know. (Valentine settled in England and became a writer.) Blondie moved to Chrysalis Records for







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Onstage at CBGB, 1977; Harry, c. 1979; in Hollywood: Burke, Destri, Stein, Harry, Valentine, c. 1976.

its sophomore release, *Plastic Letters*, which included guitarist Frank Infante on bass. After *Plastic Letters*' release, Nigel Harrison joined as the bassist, and Infante moved to guitar. Thus began a rigorous and prolific artistic period that lasted until 1982, during which time the band issued four more albums, plus a greatest-hits release, and played live shows constantly.

BLONDIE IS A GROUP, stated a decal distributed by Chrysalis around the release of *Plastic Letters* – perhaps to set the record straight. The album's single, "Denis," a reworking of Randy & the Rainbows' 1963 chestnut "Denise," made an impact when it was released in February 1978, reaching Number Two in the U.K.

That summer, the band enlisted producer Mike Chapman to help create *Parallel Lines*, Blondie's first commercial smash. Several singles spun out of these sessions, including "Picture This," "Hanging on the Telephone," and "Sunday Girl," all of which made bigger impressions in England than in the United States. The fourth of five singles, however, was a different matter. "Heart of Glass" captivated mainstream America, giving the group its first Number One in the States. The disco-crossover hit, with its danceable rhythms and soaring vocals in the mode of Donna Summer, helped Blondie sell more than twenty million copies of *Parallel Lines* worldwide.

At the time, "Heart of Glass" seemed like sacrilege to punk purists, who had drawn a firm line in the sand between punk and disco. With the song's success, Blondie staked out its position as contrarians, the musical confounders of expectations who resisted being pigeonholed, a stance that gave the band a freedom not enjoyed by their close friends the

Ramones. Only Talking Heads, with its world-music aspirations, would in any way equal Blondie for transcending its roots without losing its way.

In October 1979, the band's fourth album, *Eat to the Beat*, was released, yielding a Number Two hit in the U.K. with "Dreaming." Another single, "Atomic," soared to Number One in England in February 1980. Two more singles, "Union City" and "Hardest Part," were issued; then "Call Me" (cowritten by Harry and Giorgio Moroder) was released, topping the U.S. charts in April 1980. An urgent plea, as well as an ironic comment on the Me Decade, "Call Me" was the theme to the film *American Gigolo*, starring Richard Gere. By way of Harry, the song gave the band a new allure as it straddled Hollywood glamour with humor intact.

Blondie paused long enough to allow for a historic appearance by Debbie Harry on *The Muppet Show* in August of 1980.

Three months later, in November, the fifth Blondie album, *Autoamerican*, was released. Its "faux reggae" track, "The Tide Is High," another cover that the band transformed, rapidly hit Number One in America. More distinctively, the disco juggernaut "Rapture," which also featured a groundbreaking rap by Harry, captured the airwaves and became the definitive summer song of 1981. In addition to its album-length excursions, Blondie was now certifiably a great singles band that also showed an unerring instinct for choosing songs to cover.

Harry released her first solo album, *Koo Koo*, in August 1981. Produced by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards of Chic, it featured a cover illustration by H.R. Giger, the Academy Award-winning sci-fi artist who created the Alien

creature. *Koo Koo* was an inspired collaboration, and the lack of interest that greeted the record was surprising. In the fall, Harry made a statement to the British press that effectively silenced the buzz that Stein was her Svengali: "That's just sexist shit," she said. "That's people not wanting to believe that a woman can be powerful without a man telling her what to do. We've always shared things equally."

In 1982, Blondie's sixth album, *The Hunter*, spawned the band's last U.S. hit, "Island of Lost Souls," but was perhaps marked most distinctively by Harry's "War Child" and "Little Caesar." ("War Child" became another chart hit in the U.K.) *The Hunter* would be the last album the band would record for Chrysalis. It was made under duress, as dissension from within the group had begun to eat away at it. In 1983, when the band chemistry had definitively cooled, Chris Stein was afflicted by a rare genetic disease, pemphigus. With the band at odds and an essential member down, Blondie fell apart. Harry took time off to care for Stein, who eventually recuperated in 1986.

The next decade and a half was quiet for Blondie. Harry went on to release *Rockbird*, which included the modest hit "French Kissin' in the USA," in 1986. Three years later, another Harry solo album arrived, the Euro-dance-music-influenced *Def, Dumb and Blonde*. *Depravation* appeared in 1993. Harry's best work came more recently – as the main vocalist for the avant-garde jazz group the Jazz Passengers. Harry also stepped up her acting efforts in numerous films and plays. Both Stein and Destri produced various bands, and Destri released a solo album, *Heart on a Wall*, in 1982. Burke continued to record and tour with top acts, including Eurythmics and the Romantics, and more recently Nancy Sinatra and Wanda Jackson. He also played with Harrison and Infante in the group Chequered Past, which included former Sex Pistol Steve Jones. Harrison eventually moved into A&R for such labels as Capitol and Interscope. Infante toured

as the guitarist with Iggy Pop and with the Divinyls and has since focused on writing and recording songs for a solo project.

Sixteen years after *The Hunter*, in 1998, Harry, Stein, Burke, and Destri came together to play a concert on request – a reunion that afterward saw the group re-form and release their seventh album, *No Exit*. Widely hailed as innovative and fun, it signaled the triumphant return of a beloved band. The album's single, "Maria," saw chart action in several countries.

In 2004, the band issued its second "comeback" record, *The Curse of Blondie*, which featured, on "Shakedown," Harry's first rap since "Rapture," as well as a litany of other musical explorations of different styles and genres.

Depending on who you ask, Blondie originally got its name from either the catcalls Harry frequently attracted or the comic strip "Blondie." Either way, it fit. The bombshell at the center proved to be far more than her startlingly good looks would suggest. She was, in fact, the first woman to challenge the mainstream expectations of female frontwomen while playing a sex icon. Madonna, of course; Gwen Stefani; and even Courtney Love have to varying degrees modeled Harry's pop intelligence, sex appeal, and gift for manipulation – though none of them can touch the knack for ironic humor that Harry possesses.

Blondie lives outside the limelight now, save for occasional shows and appearances, but it created a niche for itself that surpasses its status as a seventies/eighties group. It's a historic band for the very fact that Blondie launched an assault on rock convention – and survived. The group introduced a vivid and intoxicating reinterpretation of pop music, remaking rock in the same way as has the music's other great pioneers. Blondie's induction into the 2005 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has been well-earned.

One way or another, Blondie is a group . . . forever. ←



Blondie having a ball: Harry, Stein, Infante, Destri, and Burke (from left), c. 1977