



## Music Meets Business

### Keeping the Dream Alive

#### The Gradual Blossoming of an Unfashionable Band

**It was hard to imagine the Byrdsy pop of the Gin Blossoms breaking into playlists recently taken over by Nirvana and Pearl Jam.**

When *New Miserable Experience* was released on August 2, 1992, it was hard to imagine the Byrdsy pop of the Gin Blossoms breaking into playlists recently taken over by Nirvana and Pearl Jam. The setup EP released in '91 had failed to generate much airplay or press. Indeed, the Blossoms' sunbaked tunefulness seemed so out of place in the Brave New World of Seattle grunge that you had to wonder why A&M's Bryan Huttenhower, who'd been involved in the signing of seminal Seattle band Soundgarden, had picked up the Tempe, Arizona-based quintet in the first place. "I don't think we knew *what* we were gonna do with it, frankly, at the time we were signing it," admits Jim Guerinot, A&M's GM at the time.

But the label's marketing team, deeply into the band and undismayed by the Blossoms' seeming unfashionableness, were formulating a long-term plan predicated on small victories and incremental growth. The premise wasn't to try to jam a square peg into the round hole of Alternative radio, but rather to put the Blossoms in front of people who were more likely to appreciate the group's earnest, song-centered presentation. The long-in-coming success of Toad the Wet Sprocket, whose "All I Want" (the third single from their third album) was climbing the charts at the time, indicated that there was a substantial, if hard-to-rouse, audience for melodic pop-rock -- if you could get their attention. And what better way to get their attention than to put this engaging, if imageless, band in front of some of them?

**The Blossoms:**  
**Robin Wilson (left), Jesse Valenzuela,**  
**Bill Leen, Scott Johnson, Philip**



## Rhodes



"When the Gin Blossoms started out," recalls Larry Weintraub, who's now A&M's VP of Artist Development, "we did one tour on the EP, which was one of the most miserable experiences anybody's ever endured. It was my first real project, and the agent, Tom LaPenna, and I booked some dates and put together this really difficult tour to support the EP. Those were the days when you just said, 'Put 'em out there and let's just see what happens.' So they did that tour and came back and finished the record. Tom and I routed a tour of the West Coast, including three or four dates in Los Angeles, just to get the company vibed about it. Then the Toad tour came up, and that was like the dream tour -- it seemed so incredibly perfect."

But would Toad see it that way? Fortunately, there were several interpersonal connections already in place to help make that happen. Toad manager Chris Blake was already well aware of the Gin Blossoms. Blake's other clients, the Odds (whom I'd signed to Zoo in '91), had become pals with the Blossoms after the two bands had shared the bill on a couple of ASCAP Best Kept Secrets shows organized by ASCAP's Tom DeSavia (now an Elektra A&R rep), who'd put Blake and the Odds together in 1989. Weintraub's challenge was to properly connect the dots. "We hit Toad from every conceivable angle," he says. "Tom DeSavia, myself, Warner/Chappell with Jim Cardillo [who'd signed the band to a publishing deal], Mariel [Pastor, [then the band's product manager] -- we inundated them with every tool we had. Toad came back and said they had a couple of different options, but they liked the Gin Blossoms."

## "When they got the [Toad] tour is when we went to work."

"When they got the tour is when we went to work," Weintraub says. "We had posters, cassette singles, fan-club cards, we were giving out product, taking ads out -- we did everything we could on that tour. It was an all-college tour for the most part, and it was one of the most brilliant tours I've ever seen booked. I'd go out on dates, and they'd be playing a 1,500-seat gym in the middle of the country, and the Gin Blossoms would come on and the kids would go crazy. For bands that can pull it off, a college-gyms tour is one of the best things you can ever do, because those kids enjoy music, they've got nothing else to do, they buy stuff -- and it's good money, for the headlining band, anyway."

Once the band was on the road with Toad (8/19-9/18), immediate and substantive feedback started coming back to the A&M Lot. It came in the mail from Toad fans who'd been sufficiently taken with the Gin Blossoms to fill out and return the fan-club postcards they'd picked up, and it came with the encouraging SoundScan numbers on the just-released album in the secondary and tertiary markets the tour had hit. So the small victories immediately started piling up, although hardly anyone outside of A&M and the Blossoms' brain trust took any notice.

The first high-visibility exposure occurred when A&M's Wayne Isaak managed to get the Blossoms booked on Letterman in September. The host liked the band so much he invited them back again. Altogether, the Blossoms played Letterman's show three times during the course of the project.



As the picture improved, product manager Pastor lobbied to expand the scope of the initially modest marketing. She had the support of the sales department, which was delighted to see the album selling without airplay, as well as the press sector, with staff publicists Diana Baron and Laura Swanson getting early coverage in such publications as *Musician*, *Request*, *Stereo Review* and the *San Diego Union*. Says Pastor, who's now

**Valenzuela, former A&M product manager Mariel Pastor, Johnson, A&M chief Al Cafaro**

a family and child psychotherapist in Portland ("I decided that if I was gonna be working with temper tantrums, they oughta be age-appropriate," she quips): "I always loved it when the sales department would get jazzed on something early, because if you don't have them, forget it. And there was enough good press for us to keep putting together clip packages."

"It wasn't that the Gin Blossoms weren't going to be worked," she clarifies. "There are some records where you know you're just pushing it out, and this wasn't the case with them. But I didn't have the money to back it up. I only had \$5,000 for a video -- that doesn't even pay for film stock. I could only do a small poster. Things like that. But little by little we had cheerleaders coming on board" -- and budgets were beefed up as the situation warranted. "Really, in hindsight, it didn't take that long before the whole company realized what was going on."

The label was getting enough encouragement to keep the Blossoms' van gassed up and the per-diem flowing. Touring with del Amitri (Sept.-Oct.), Toad again (11/19-12/11) and the Neville Brothers (12/26-1/17), the idea of new manager Morty Wiggins, put the band in front of a variety of audiences, at which point they went out on their first headlining tour, a four-month string of college dates (Feb.-May) sponsored by *Insider* magazine. "They'd do a noon show and a club gig almost every day," says Weintraub. Frequently the band would do an in-store performance and a radio-station appearance as well. It was arduous but effective -- still with very little airplay, the album consistently scanned 500-1,000 units a week during early '93.

Meanwhile, back on the Lot, Pastor was trying to juice the project by activating the growing data base with direct-marketing elements. "All along, we were couponing at the actual dates, and a lot of those coupons came back," she says. "We did a dollar off on the album on the back of a Gin Blossoms sticker. We'd had a bounce-back card in the del Amitri record, and I took all those names and sent them Gin Blossoms stuff. It's a pain in the neck keeping on top of it, and so time-consuming, but when you send stuff to people, they really appreciate it, because most of the time they sign up for something and never see anything come back to them. So we used those lists a lot."

So while the Gin Blossoms were hardly household names, they were showing distinct signs of life when they got their first big break. At the time L.A. rock station Pirate Radio was renaming itself 100.3 and going contemporary by mixing tracks by alternative bands with Van Halen and Guns N' Roses; among the cuts the short-lived but influential station championed was the Blossoms' "Hey Jealousy" (which initially had been worked at, and rejected by, Alternative radio in July '92). "It wasn't just airplay," Pastor points out, "it was airplay that very quickly translated into sales." The L.A. SoundScan numbers caused both emerging power KROQ and fading AOR warhorse KLOS to add "Hey Jealousy." For a while there, you couldn't listen to L.A. radio without hearing the song, and its brilliant merger of love lost, boozy escapism, slacker ennui and gigantic pop hooks had a dramatic cumulative effect.

KROQ put the Blossoms on their Weenie Roast bill, after which they went out with UB-40 on a summer shed tour. Finally, all the disparate pieces were locking together. The band was selling 50-100 T-shirts per date, up from ones and twos -- a sure sign that a band is catching on -- and the fan club had grown to 4,000. So it was that "Hey Jealousy" became the quintessential Single That Would Not Die, crossing from format to format, and eventually rising to the top of each, during the year it was worked.

The single's startling performance necessitated A&M to come up with an effective video; with KROQ all over the band, obviously, MTV was ready. But the video wasn't. According to Guerinot, now the head of Time Bomb Records, the initial clip had been put together for peanuts with no expectation of MTV acceptance, and the second was another low-budget production.

"We wanted to make a cheap video," Guerinot explains, "because we had no need whatsoever for a video other than it's occasionally useful, whether it's a sales presentation or in some remote local show. We

didn't think MTV for a second. The first time we did it, we didn't get it right at all. So we need to make cheapie version two, and it was a piece of shit too, but it was just a capable, cheap version of a video where you see the band sing 'Hey Jealousy.' It may have aired on MTV a handful of times, but we weren't about trying to get this band video airplay at the time. We knew that was a waste. But once things started to jell, when KROQ made such a big success out of "Hey Jealousy," it became clear that we would be able to work MTV on it. I remember having a specific conversation with MTV about criteria that we were setting for each other before we would come to them looking for video rotation. I believed we were gonna achieve those criteria, and that's when we made the decision to go back and make a real version of the song and spend some money on it." It was this third attempt that put "Hey Jealousy" in the Buzz Bin.



**Rhodes, Johnson, Pastor, Wilson, Valenzuela**

In June, A&M started working "Hey Jealousy" at CHR while simultaneously switching to "Found Out About You" at Alternative, and both were working. Later, "Until I Fall Away" would become an AC hit.

At this point, 10 months into the project, the Gin Blossoms snowball was about to become an avalanche. "So it really wasn't all that long before it was just full-court press," Pastor says. "But then it still took a long time because they were breaking on so many different formats." In August, a year after its release, *New Miserable Experience* was certified gold.

"It got on a roll there, but it took a year," Weintraub says, "and that record was over several times, and it came back several times. But because [positives kept coming back], Jim allowed me to continue giving them money -- I was into that band hundreds of thousands of dollars in tour support. I've been in that situation several times in the last few years, whether it was Sheryl Crow or Blues Traveler, where you know you're gonna get back the money you put into it. Unfortunately, not every band gets that, because it comes to a point in a project where you go, no matter how much money we spend, it's not gonna happen. But with these guys, it came at a time when I was able to do it, it wasn't so crowded and they were our road dogs. The Gin Blossoms could play anywhere, at any time. Some of those shows they had to do I wouldn't wish on anybody. But it paid off."

**"It wasn't just A&M's commitment that made the difference...They committed themselves too."**

It wasn't just A&M's commitment that made the difference, according to Guerinot: "They committed themselves too. The band was really super -- they did it in a van, they worked. It was a healthy commitment of cash because it took so long; relatively, on a per-week basis, it was modest. But when you have a band that's willing to go through that kind of ordeal for as long as they were willing to go through it, the cash added up. But it was modest in a lot of ways, because they toured very bare-bones.

"The thing that kept happening, though, that made it worthwhile, where it became clear to us that we needed to keep doing this, is there was growth," Guerinot points out. "We were getting growth in terms of, oh, 200 people at a show is now 320 the next time they'd show up. Then they'd go support someone, go back in that market again and it'd be 500 people, support someone, come back and it would be sellout. It was that kind of growth, which isn't measured on a sales chart. It was truly artist development at that point -- the band growing and developing an audience. Same thing with Blues Traveler, same thing with Soundgarden -- and we used those examples a lot. Develop the audience base and the record sales will follow.

"We stuck around long enough for lightning to strike. We hung out long enough to get the lucky break that you eventually need to break a band. It was all about the touring. It was keeping the band on the road until the radio climate started to change. The marketplace shifted a little bit in our direction, and we were still around. We hadn't abandoned hope."

In all, the Gin Blossoms played 302 shows over 27 months behind *New Miserable Experience*, appearing in front of 1.1-million people. The album wound up selling more than 2-million units. You can get a lot of mileage out of good tunes, a willingness to work and a little bit of luck.

On to Jewel

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