

Ladies and gentlemen,

THE QUEEN OF ROCK 'N' ROLL

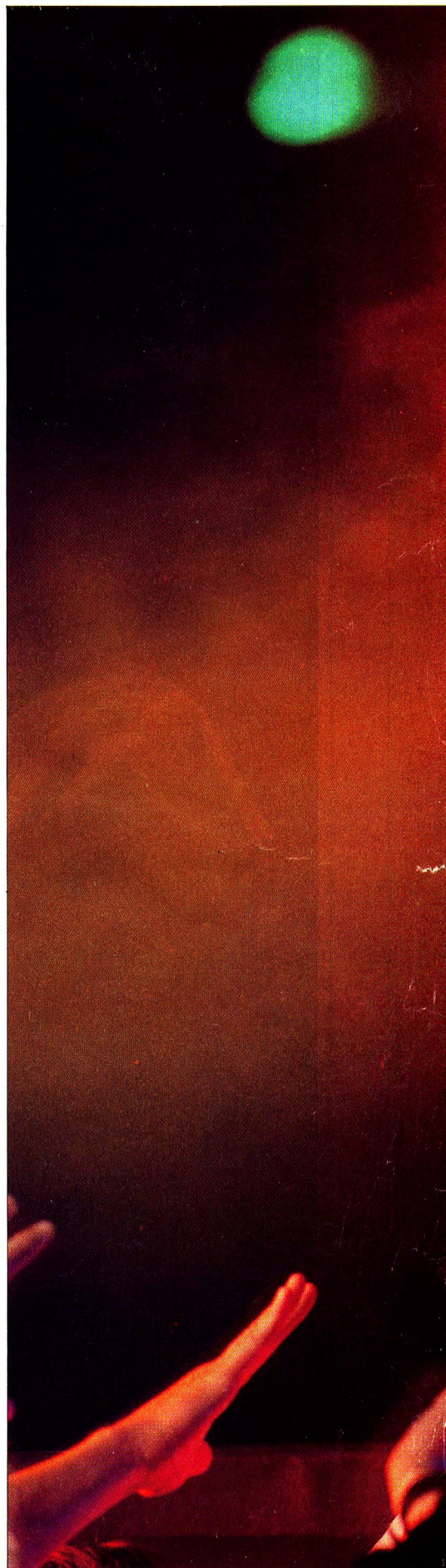
One woman's pop-star fantasy

LIKE MOST PEOPLE WHO GREW UP IN THE '60s, I HAD FANTASIES of becoming a rock star. Most of my contemporaries have cashed in their fantasies for investment portfolios, while mine have merely become more pathological with age. That things might be getting out of hand struck me in the fall, when I talked Sara, my 5-year-old daughter, out of dressing as a Smurf for Halloween. Instead I bought sequins and vinyl and begged her to go as Carole Pope. I knew for certain that I was in trouble when I started holding up Madonna as a role model. "So you want to be an astronaut? You want a job like Sally Ride's? There, there—it's just a stage you're going through." Then I'd force her to listen to *Like a Virgin* while I lectured that Madonna's work had more redeeming social value.

I should tell you about some of the specifics. In real life, the truth is that my voice stinks. In the fantasy, however, it's bawdy, sensual and gritty. I am Joplin, Midler and Rondstadt at once. But longing to work a crowd with my voice is really only secondary. What I crave are the black mesh stockings and the sleaze. Over the years I have invented elaborate variations, including one in which Annie Leibovitz photographs me for the cover of *Rolling Stone*, but this is usually how the scenario unfolds. First I give the downbeat, then drive my fans mad writhing on the floor. I prance around growling, moaning and emitting banshee wails. I also do sexually explicit things with the microphone. I have been fine-tuning the act for years, lip-synching in front of the hall mirror, cracking an imaginary mike cord like a bullwhip and that sort of thing, but I'm not getting any younger and it shows. The last time I zippered myself, prone, into my rock star blue jeans and belted out *Beast of Burden* à la Bette, I went into my usual come-on crouch in the chorus and threw my back out. One of the most pleasurable aspects of my fantasy is the climactic ending. It never changes. After several encores, I leave the stage to the crescendoing cheers of rioting fans while T-shirted, slim-hipped young men faint trying to rip my clothes off.

Unfortunately, not many people, besides my kid, truly understand the import of this obsession in my life. When she brought home a lovingly decorated poster tube from school one day, announcing it was a microphone so I could be a rock star, my career got a much-needed boost. But *The/Continued on page 78*

By Wendy Dennis



Singing Machine gave me my first really big break. With The Singing Machine I could cut a demo tape and fix it in the mix. I could, in short, go public. A weekend with this nifty new toy and I was dreaming double albums and North American tours.

Ah, brave new high-tech world. What is there left to buy when you're brain-dead from playing Donkey Kong and the kids are monopolizing the VCR? Why your very own personal, compact, state-of-the-art recording studio, that's what. This is the principle: you get a unit with an eight-track and standard built-in cassette player, mixing and playback controls, that all-important microphone, amplifiers and speakers. All for the scandalously low price of \$500 for the most popular portable home model, \$950 for a unit with input to mix your brilliant instrumentals, or \$4,000 if you want a commercial system you can play in Maple Leaf Gardens. Select a prerecorded tape from a 1,000-title library—we're talking everything from Sinatra to Cyndi Lauper here—whip out the appropriate songsheet and let it happen. The

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eight-track tape provides backup instrumentals. You come in with lead vocals and star quality. If you crave a classier production sound, just start playing with the echo chamber, pitch and noise-reduction controls. You want really fancy? Buy the \$3,915 four-mike unit and hire some lackeys to back you up with the "doo-wahs." In the end you wind up with a vocal-instrumental mixdown on standard audio cassette of your very own hit.

Now, given my serious rock star fantasy, this unit sounded like the chance to get a bullet on the charts and move some vinyl. So, I headed out for The Singing Machine Co. Inc. on Davenport Road. Strutting your stuff in the privacy of your living room, however, is by no means comparable to doing likewise in a trendy shop with all the sales help looking on. Still, I swallow my inhibitions. To start, I play it safe and pick Melissa Manchester's *Don't Cry Out Loud*. The first few cues literally gallop by, but eventually a few bars come around that sound vaguely reminiscent of the chorus, and I leap in. At

first, my voice and bearing are so wooden I wouldn't pass the audition for *Tiny Talent Time*. But then, miraculously, I get the feel of the pacing and the knack of the uni-directional mike, and by the second take I'm already abandoning myself—off-key—to both sides of the room. By the final chorus I'm registering real honest-to-goodness torture. This is not a particularly tortured song, but I don't have that broad a repertoire yet and torture I can do. We play back the tape. It's dreadful—but they swear to me that I'm a natural, that all I need is some practice, so I decide to blow the forty bucks and rent the system for the weekend. Then I get the idea to throw a Singing Machine party for ten of my most wanton female friends.

When I call to invite, I quickly discover that there is a veritable network of closet fantasizers out there. Not everyone, however, lusts to be The Star. Jocelyn's dream is to do backup vocals, "to wear one of those sequinned gowns and shift to the left and shift to the right." Ditto Fawna, who explains, when I'm skeptical about the thrill, that backup means "all pleasure and no pressure—you just get up there and groove." Judy, though, is on my wavelength. We arrange to meet at Malabar's after work to track down a Dolly Parton wig. Marsha has only one request, but the urgent tone in her voice suggests I dare not ignore it. "Get *The Rose*." Ellen is delirious. She and Lorraine, at the latter's insistence, spend several nights rehearsing *Girls Just Want To Have Fun* because "we don't want to look like fools, Ellen." The day before the gig I get a message in a bubble-gum chewing, pubescent voice on my answering machine. "Hi, um this is Ellen, the president of your fan club, and I was wondering, I mean could you, um phone, cuz I want to get your autograph. . .OK? Bye." It strikes me that this little fête is definitely going to beat a Tupperware party.

The Big Night arrives. Ellen, our promoter, has painted an eye-grabbing sign—Toronto Welcomes The Trendettes—with a watch-for-this-group-it's-clearly-at-the-cutting-edge new wave logo. Shortly before the Trendettes are scheduled to show, I'm in the bedroom refining my outfit. The girl at Malabar's had tried to talk me into something slinky, but several generations of Russian peasant stock in my genes preclude my showing up as a Supreme. Instead, I choose a cinched-in-at-the-waist floozy dress with a low-cut, wired bodice. Then I descend the staircase to ask Stephen how I look. I think I look like a middle-aged tart, actually, but I'm anxious for a more objective assessment. Stephen's our roadie. He's been invited strictly to assemble the video camera. You're nowhere without the video in the '80s. He sucks on his cigarette for what seems like an eternity, gives me the once-over and, deadpan, informs me that I need more belts—long

pause—and more tits. I head back upstairs to do something about the belts.

No rock concert ever began on time and this one is no exception. By this point I'm so keyed up I keep opening the front door half-expecting to be rushed by male groupies. Finally, Judy shows up. Apparently unable to resolve an identity crisis, she comes dressed from the neck up as Dolly and from the neck down as Cher. The outfit's a two-parter: on the halter top, metallic white, gold and neon-pink sequins form two strategically arranged bull's-eyes; the sequin motif repeats itself on the hip-huggers in a subtle V at the crotch. Mid-thigh, where the sequins stop, tinsel streamers begin. I will vacuum eighteen-inch platinum blonde wig hairs from the rug for a week after she leaves. Shortly thereafter, Ellen turns up. She takes one look at Judy, to whom she has never been introduced, and wonders whether they met once in a bar in Marseille. Ellen should talk. She has gone through a month's supply of hair gel. Almost everyone else is into black leather and chains,

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except for one lawyer in the group, whose Norwegian sweater prompts one smart ass to remark she'd always wanted to meet Anne Murray. Beyond these, the outfits run the gamut from early bimbo to heavy metal. This is an eclectic crowd.

Sara, my kid, is dressed in the tradition of Tina Turner. She's ready to roll with *What's Love Got To Do With It?* so I put the microphone in her hand, insert the eight-track instrumental, hit the record button and tell her to take it away. Her voice gets all raspy and gravelly and soulful, cracking on the "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" line with just the right mix of vulnerability and cynicism. It's pure Tina. The crowd gives her a standing ovation but you can feel their unease. Sara has Attitude. This is going to be a tough act to follow. For about a half-hour or so after she goes to bed nobody will venture near the machine. They prefer to ingest artificial stimulants, reasoning that artificial stimulants will almost certainly bolster Attitude.

Eventually, things loosen up. A few false starts—we bust on *Then He Kissed Me* because no one can figure out where to come in—but voices warm up fast, inhibitions dis-

appear, and pretty soon I cannot tear the microphones away from them. We play around with *Will You Love Me Tomorrow?* by the Shirelles, but the Muzaky arrangement leaves us cold. Then Marsha harmonizes with Judy on an achingly pretty rendition of *The Rose* and literally bring the crowd to their feet. Only Sarah remains cool through the high-pitched hooting and whistling, but you can tell the wheels are turning. "Well," she says, in a tone that makes you trust she knows about such things, "I think we've got a hit on our hands."

Next, we all crowd around the mikes for *Teen Angel*, and I send up the maudlin lyrics with an earnest talking counterpoint to the chorus. It's a keeper. Anne Murray goes solo for awhile, but everyone agrees that the act lacks charisma, so Dolly throws in wavy arm moves as backup, and I start singing captions for the deaf. It doesn't exactly work. "Nah—forget it," says Ellen, dismissively. "This group needs a new manager." Still, nothing can hold us back now. Ellen, Lorraine, Sarah and Fawna approach the machine to do *Light My Fire* and walk away with the hottest tune of the night. All I remember from this number is Ellen emitting Neanderthal sounds, making obscene gestures with the microphone and contorting her face in raunchy grimaces, Fawna and Lorraine swooning deep in a musical trance somewhere on Mars, and Sarah carrying the song with the most dissipated-sounding baritone I've ever heard. This group makes The Doors look like the Lennon Sisters.

We cut six polished songs in the end, including Sarah's steamy, tone-deaf rendition of *The House of The Rising Sun*. In one night we have cut the better part of the Trendettes' debut album. The air is rife with the giddy talk of million-dollar deals, but then we play back our video. We had planned to promote it like *The First Waltz*, but are forced to scrap the idea. It's too avant-garde, even for a rock video. The spaced-out crew has captured for posterity, dizzying, surrealistic close-ups of knees and the coffee table. Noticeably absent is the soundtrack. Undaunted, we label our cassette *The Basement Tape*, figuring it will fetch a pretty sum on the bootleg market one day. Finally, as The Girls are about to leave to waiting limos, Ellen, still hissing from *Light My Fire*, delivers a parting shot. "Men woulda taken over," she sneers. "That's true," retorts Marsha, "but they would have gotten the video camera to work." The concert was such a hoot, for a week afterward I could not bring myself to tear down our sign. One night, a 16-year-old showed up at the door to deliver a pizza and asked about it. "Is that a new group?" he wondered. "Yeah," I said. "Watch for them." ■

STYLING: MICHELLE BALOGH/HAIR: JAN OHM/MAKEUP: SUSAN DALE/JACKET AND CORSET: BELT: QUASI FOR METROPOLIS/EARRINGS (NOT SEEN): ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO