

Solid Gold

By Strawberry Saroyan

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Rilo Kiley wanted their bold, brassy new album to sound like a party. But with the prospect of mainstream success reopening old wounds and triggering self-doubt, can they find it in their hearts to have some fun?

From left, on Blake Sennett: Cosa Nostra jacket, Band of Outsiders shirt. On Jenny Lewis: Scout dress. On Jason Boesel: Kosmetique Label jacket and shirt, J.Lindeberg tie, Gucci pants. On Pierre de Reeder: D&G jacket, Boss Black shirt, Juicy Couture Men's pants.

Photographed for *Spin* in Hollywood, California, June 29, 2007. Hair by Jason Murillo for FrankReps. Lina Hanson using Stila Cosmetics at MagnetLA.

Jenny

Jenny Lewis' apartment is a disaster. One might expect the 31-year-old lead singer of Rilo Kiley to have scaled up by now. Nine years into their career, they are the model of the indie band made good—critical respect, decent sales, soundtrack exposure—while Lewis' solo debut, *Rabbit Fur Coat*, was a

modest hit last year, with 112,000 copies sold. She has a love of pretty things—I see her, over the course of two summer weeks, wearing, among other things, a sparkly little jacket, a gold-trimmed minidress, and Chanel-esque heels. Her consumer lust is so strong that she deadpans at one point about her breakup with the band's lead guitarist, Blake Sennett, “It was because of my shopping.”

Lewis' apartment is located on a slanted hill in the boho Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles. The palm trees are yellowed and dry here; the lyrics to Fergie's “Glamorous,” blasting from my stereo on the drive over, suddenly seem ironic. Inside, the one-bedroom looks, in a word, seedy. The carpet is dishwater gray and the Venetian blinds are drawn to keep out the heat, but they keep out the light, too. There is a silver and yellow floral brocade couch that looks like something a dotty grandmother might have thrown out decades ago. A piano sits against a wall with a Judy Collins songbook on its mantle; Lewis shells out an extra \$29 a month to use it. There are occasional dashes of wit and charm—a heart-shaped pillow emblazoned with the words *SUSPICIOUS MINDS* occupies the couch—but even at \$800 a month, the place is hardly a steal.

Lewis thinks her home has been good to her, though. “I haven't really wanted for anything else in the last eight years,” she says, bouncing into the kitchen. She opens the refrigerator door. “Kombucha?” she asks. I decline the fermented, yeasty iced tea, but she grabs a bottle for herself and takes a gulp.

The rest of the band—Sennett, 31, drummer Jason Boesel, 29, and bassist Pierre “Duke” de Reeder, 34—overrun the apartment like Ritalin-starved schoolkids. Sennett leafs through a magazine, Boesel checks out photos on the dining room walls—Lewis with her mother and siblings, as a tot, and in a silk dress during last year's solo tour—and de Reeder wanders into a back room. A tanned, muscular guy with shoulder-length blond hair wanders in from the bedroom, looking as if he just woke up. This is Johnathan Rice, a singer/songwriter who is Lewis' live-in boyfriend and sometime collaborator. He speaks to her quietly in a Scottish accent—“Hi, babe”—and walks over to the vintage Stack-O-Matic record player to put on an LP. A live version of Elvis Presley's “Impossible Dream” starts up. “To dream the impossible dream / To fight the unbeatable foe...”

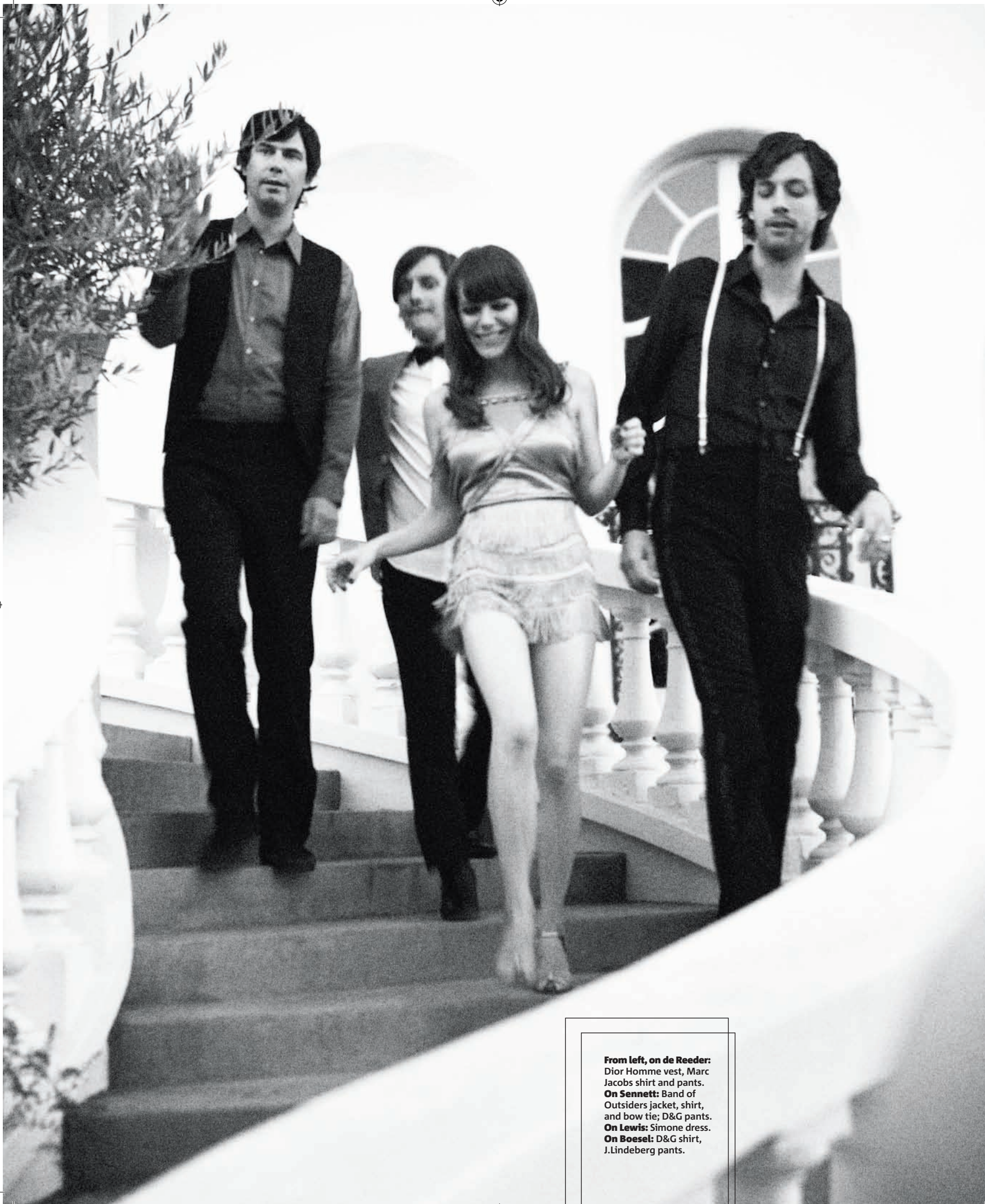
The subject turns to Hawaii, where the guys are dying to play—but Lewis steadfastly refuses to subject her fair complexion to the island climate. “I will tell you why,” she says, suddenly kittenish. “Because redheads will be extinct in the year 2100.”

Lewis has brought me over, initially, because she wants me to see a first edition she has of my grandfather William Saroyan's book of short stories, *My Name Is Aram*. She says she loves his writing because she recognizes her own native California in it. “There's something about when you realize your surroundings are





On Lewis: Simone dress.



From left, on de Reeder:
Dior Homme vest, Marc
Jacobs shirt and pants.
On Sennett: Band of
Outsiders jacket, shirt,
and bow tie; D&G pants.
On Lewis: Simone dress.
On Boesel: D&G shirt,
J.Lindeberg pants.

So, have Rilo Kiley ever gone to therapy? “No,” Sennett replies. “This might be it right now.”

At the core of Lewis and Sennett’s relationship is a love that neither can easily define. Their backgrounds are remarkably similar: Lewis’ complicated relationship with her possibly drug-addicted, possibly trust-fund-raiding mother provided fodder for much of *Rabbit Fur Coat*, while Sennett was raised by an independently wealthy mother and a stepfather “whose job was to spend her money and embezzle it as well as he could until they got divorced.” And they both got into acting at a young age. “I thought of Jenny as child-star royalty and me as one of these San Diego hacks,” he says with a chuckle. Indeed, Lewis has appeared in roughly 150 commercials, starred as Shelley Long’s daughter in the film *Troop Beverly Hills*, stolen Betty White’s teddy bear in an episode of *The Golden Girls*, and tried to comfort—offscreen—a devastated Lucille Ball when her ex-husband, Desi, died as the comedienne was shooting her last sitcom, *Life With Lucy*. (“She was inconsolable,” Lewis says.) Sennett’s roles, on shows like Nickelodeon’s *Salute Your Shorts* and ABC’s *Boy Meets World*, were fewer and further between. By their late teens, when they met, Sennett was having panic attacks on set. “I started to freak out, writing lines on my hand,” he recalls. “That’s not professional.”

Lewis’s situation was even worse: “I was incredibly depressed, having grown up doing one thing and suddenly finding myself not interested in that. I really had no idea what I was going to do with my life.” Meeting Sennett, she says,

“It’s about the freedom to do what I want. I can’t do that in Rilo Kiley because it’s a band.” —Jenny Lewis

saved her. “I think he just wanted to hear what I had to say. And this thing that we were creating together felt more special than anything we had done in the past professionally.”

A few months after forming the band, they started dating. “We were touring together, and we were best friends, and we were songwriting partners, and everything was together,” Sennett says. Lewis admits Sennett was her first boyfriend. But he broke up with her in September 2001. He looks annoyed that Lewis has divulged this intimate detail. “I started to feel a little smothered,” he says. “I also felt like we had both gotten a little complacent. Writing had really slowed down. I felt like we were either going to get married or we were going to break up.”

The split led to Lewis writing more on her own—motivated, she says, by more than a little anger, which revealed itself in her songwriting. “I was like, ‘I’m going to get him with these lyrics, and he’s not going to know. It will be a little secret every night on the road.’”

You have to light a bottle rocket. It’s very easy. You have to,” Sennett is telling me this in the near dark of his backyard, the lawn and deck lit only by a few garden torches and the flames of a barbecue.

I tell him I’m afraid to set off firecrackers.

“I’ll do one first,” he tells me, “and you can see what happens.”

Sennett’s place, a 1920s bungalow, feels decidedly more grown up and cozier than Lewis’ home. For this last-minute July 4th get-together, he’s put out a spread of veggie burgers, hot dogs, salad, and a big bowl of cherries. Iraqi music—from the ‘60s,” Sennett specifies—blasts from a small outdoor stereo. He stabs a tube into the manicured grass and strikes a match. Silence, then—*pow!* A spray of lights bursts in the sky. *Pow!* Another spray of lights. *Pow!*

“This is epic,” Boesel says from his perch at the picnic table on the patio. The rest of Rilo Kiley are here too, along with Rice, the band’s manager, and a few friends.

“Don’t make her do it!” Lewis yells to Sennett. By now, Sennett is giving up on me and offers me a round firework called a Star Ball Contribution (“That sounds like a ‘70s band,” someone chimes in) to take home.

Throughout my time with the band, I get the feeling that Sennett is keeping things very close, and when we sit down on the steps in front of his bright-red front door that evening, I tell him I think the Elected albums are great, as is “Dreamworld,” his ethereal track on *Under the Blacklight*. I say, “I was kind of like, Blake is—”

“Not shitty?” he interrupts, pulling up the hood of his sweatshirt and fiddling with its zipper. He tells me the past year has been “humiliating,” and when I ask why, he says, “Because she’s meteoric and I’m...mediocre?” A truck pulls up and Michael Runion, who has played bass with the Elected, gets out and walks over to us. “The Onion Man,” Sennett says warmly.

I shake Runion’s hand, which is cold and clammy, and I jokingly let him know. As Runion laughs, Sennett tells him, “She’s very intense. She’ll criticize you instantly.” Runion heads inside the house, and Sennett tells me, “I do that too. But don’t you hate yourself for it? I hate myself for it.”

Self-loathing seems to be something Sennett indulges in a fair amount lately, and it has put stress on the band. At *Spin*’s cover shoot a week earlier, Lewis, de



From left, on Sennett: Costume National Homme jacket, Band of Outsiders shirt and bow tie, Gucci pants, Persol sunglasses. **On de Reeder:** Sixty vest, Juicy Couture Men’s shirt, Ray-Ban sunglasses. **On Lewis:** Nonja McKenzie blouse and shorts. **On Boesel:** Boss Black shirt, Juicy Couture Men’s pants. For details, see *Where to Buy*.

Reeder, and Boesel instantly found clothing they liked, while Sennett descended into silent hysteria. “Nothing ever is small enough for me,” he whispered to me as he scanned the stylist’s racks. (It was hard not to empathize when Lewis instantly glammed up into a rock goddess and the one jacket Sennett liked had been misplaced on the women’s rack.) At Sennett’s house, Lewis tells me she felt an “immense amount of guilt because my record was doing well” over the past year, but Sennett won’t cop to any conflict—even the pedestrian and obvious kind. “Do you like to read about us fighting?” he asks her pointedly.

I pose some questions about this to Lewis when I get her alone at Sennett’s. She holds a sparkler that Sennett has just lit. “I think I realized that [*Rabbit Fur Coat*] is the kind of music I want to be making,” she says. “I guess it’s just about the freedom to do whatever I want. Like, if I wanted to come out and play a new song that I had written—just me and an acoustic guitar—I could do that. I can’t do that within Rilo Kiley, because it’s a band.” So, does she see herself continuing with Rilo Kiley? The sparkler has burned out. “I honestly don’t know.”

Later, Boesel tells me it’s something that has crossed all of their minds: Will their breakthrough record be their last gasp as a band? He discusses this in a relaxed manner, as though he wouldn’t mind, and keeps strumming on his guitar. Before I leave that night, de Reeder and Sennett show me a mock-up for a potential cover of the new album, featuring a photo of the band members looking at one another. Lewis, in a conversation with Sennett and me a few days after the barbecue, concedes, “It’s an uncomfortable shot in a lot of ways. The whole concept of the record is—I don’t know if you know this, Blake—it’s kind of based on our relationship. Because it’s not always as it appears. It’s not always pretty. When you put things under a blacklight, you see these things.”

“It’s not always ugly, though,” Sennett responds.

“No,” she says softly. “Things just look different.”



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“I wasn’t pissed, I was terrified. Jenny’s the lead singer but she had this solo project, so it was like, ‘What does she need us for?’ So, yeah. I was scared.”—Blake Sennett

valid,” she says. “And that happens when you read books that relate to you.”

It occurs to me, as the band members discuss “The Moneymaker,” the porn-obsessed video for the first single from their new album, *Under the Blacklight*—shot in the San Fernando Valley smut capital, where Lewis was raised—that Rilo Kiley’s songs accomplish the same thing. They reflect a very particular Los Angeles, one that isn’t often portrayed in pop—or, for that matter, pop culture. It is the L.A. of dark, starless nights and post-breakup loneliness, of cool Eastside kids wondering if their fashionable lives are all that there is. “I think if I grew up in Flint, Michigan, I might be writing about the auto industry,” Lewis says. “It so happens I grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles. So I write about the things that I observe around me.” She pauses. “For better or for worse.”

Lewis may be the face and de facto leader of the band these days, but this was not always the case. Sennett—like Lewis, a recovering child actor—decided to form a band in 1998 with high-school pal de Reeder. “Oh, I know this great girl,” Sennett remembers saying to the bassist, “but I don’t know if she could be in the band because she’s not the most reliable.” Sennett and Lewis had already written around 60 songs together after meeting in 1995, but then Lewis disappeared for a year. (Neither she nor Sennett will go into why, but she does admit she suffered from depression.) When Sennett called Lewis up with an offer to sing background, “She said, ‘Fuck you,’” he recalls, then smiles. “Well, she said—not that exactly. She was like, ‘I want to sing lead, too.’”

Sennett initially tells me this story without mentioning that they had written songs together, and it’s one of many power moves I observe between the two: “Look, she was a flake!” “No, I was your creative equal and you tried to screw me!” It is a dynamic that runs throughout their relationship, and when I meet them, it’s at a boiling point. Last year Sennett put out a second album with his side project, the Elected. If her solo effort was hailed as the work of a bright new light on the pop/rock scene, his was unjustly ignored.

This must have made for some awkwardness, no?

“I think you have to go back to when Blake did his first Elected record,” Lewis says later, as the band members pick at tofu scrambles at a local café called the Coffee Table. “That kind of changed the dynamic of our band, because he was suddenly so excited about the music he was making that had nothing to do

with me.” (The revealing 2004 album’s title: *Me First*.) Lewis’ necklace, a tiny cash register suspended on a chain, shakes as she talks with her hands. “At that point I was scared, and I wasn’t that cool with it. So I started writing more on my own.” This led to a steady shift in Rilo Kiley’s songwriting duties, once split evenly between Lewis and Sennett. Starting with 2004’s *More Adventurous* and continuing with the latest album, Lewis wrote or cowrote with Sennett nearly every song, while Sennett has only one of his own tracks on each.

Lewis’ face goes flush and her lips quiver as she continues. “But I think it’s important to ask Blake, when my record came out, how he felt about it and how he reacted. Because I’m sitting here saying that I was not as cool, and”—she turns to him—“I feel like you were fucking pissed.”

“I wasn’t pissed,” Sennett responds. “I was terrified. Because Rilo Kiley had started becoming... Jenny was the lead singer. But now she has a solo project. ‘What the hell does she need us for?’ This is my thought. So, yeah,” he stutters. “I was scared.”

This continues until de Reeder chimes in, “Did I mention I have a solo project?” He actually does—an as-yet-untitled album—and gets an uncomfortable laugh.

A slick departure from their usual country-tinged sounds, *Under the Blacklight* is a collection of tight, ’70s-tinged, mostly upbeat pop songs. “They wanted it to feel like a party,” says Mike Elizondo, who produced half the record (Jason Lader helmed the other half) and has worked with 50 Cent, Fiona Apple, and Maroon 5. *Blacklight*, which is also Rilo Kiley’s first album recorded for Warner Bros. (the label had picked up *More Adventurous* for distribution), is as exhilarating as it is surprising: The raunchy guitar chords in “The Moneymaker” make you want to writhe like Lewis does in the video, while the playful “Smoke Detector” (“I took a man back to my room / I was smoking him in bed”) oozes sex appeal. (The disco-ish “Breakin’ Up,” with its “Feels good to be free” refrain, is equally revealing, if for different reasons.) But there’s no way around the fact that the record is also a naked stab at the mainstream. It’s not hard to do the math: Lewis needs the album to break through to rationalize staying with the group despite a burgeoning solo career, while Sennett needs the success to compensate for the increasingly smaller role he has in the band he founded.

“There’s definitely been a power struggle between Blake and Jenny,” says Mike Mogis, who did production work on 2002’s *The Execution of All Things*, as well as *More Adventurous*, *Me First*, and *Rabbit Fur Coat*. “It felt like two singer/songwriters going head to head; then they’d call in Duke as the mediator.”

THE EX FACTOR BREAKING UP WITH A BANDMATE DOESN’T HAVE TO MEAN BREAKING UP A BAND

Fleetwood Mac

COUPLES: Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham; Christine and John McVie

WHAT HAPPENED: When it comes to turning intraband emotional dysfunction into creative fodder, no one touches these SoCal pop gods, circa 1977. The disintegration of the two relationships during the recording of the career-making *Rumours* was hastened by Nicks’ rebound romance with drummer Mick Fleetwood and, of course, truckloads of cocaine. Don’t try this at home

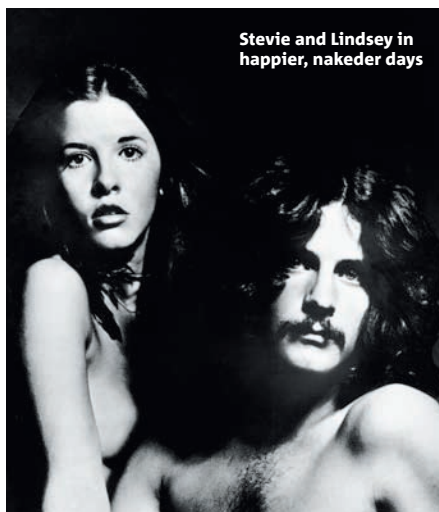
No Doubt

COUPLE: Gwen Stefani and Tony Kanal

WHAT HAPPENED: The perky singer and the bassist ended their eight-year relationship before recording the 1995 ska-pop breakthrough *Tragic Kingdom*, providing enough drama to inspire Stefani to cowrite the album’s monster ballad “Don’t Speak,” but not enough to send either party packing.

X

COUPLE: Exene Cervenka and John Doe
WHAT HAPPENED: The



Stevie and Lindsey in happier, nakeder days

leaders of this pioneering L.A. punk quartet married in 1980, just as their debut album was released, then divorced five years later. Exene then (briefly) married actor Viggo Mortensen, while the band played on.

The White Stripes

COUPLE: Meg and Jack White

WHAT HAPPENED: A testament to the healing power of denial and color-coordinated couture, the duo thrived critically and commercially following their 2000 divorce,

stubbornly insisting that they were merely rockdom’s most sexually conflicted siblings.

Sleater-Kinney

COUPLE: Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker

WHAT HAPPENED: Even the most avid fans of this feminist-punk trio may not have known that its fiery but discreet coleaders had a secret relationship that imploded around or after 1996’s *Call the Doctor*. The band lasted for five more albums and nine more years, while Tucker eventually married...a man.
STEVE KANDELL