

Arts + Features

Platinum Blondie

By Sergey Chernov

Staff Writer

In strange circumstances, Deborah Harry and Chris Stein, formerly of the seminal New York band Blondie, spent two weeks in wintry St. Petersburg in 1996, having arrived to perform at the opening of a shady nightclub that has since then folded. The following year, Blondie reformed, and now it is time for the proper Russian debut for the band, which, apart from singer Harry and guitarist Stein, features original drummer Clem Burke. He spoke to The St. Petersburg Times by phone from New York.

Q: Have you heard anything from Deborah and Chris about being in St. Petersburg?

A: They were there with one of Debbie's solo records. We actually stopped at the airport [in Moscow] in about 1979, but it was very different then. We were refueling, so we were just at the airport. We sent postcards, though. We were certainly there; I have friends who have the postcards, still. I can't believe that after all this time we've never been before, we're looking forward to it, that's for sure.

Q: The tour celebrates the 30th anniversary of the album "Parallel Lines."

A: Well, you know, first we wanted to remind everybody how old we really are! It's hard to believe it has been 30 years. But we're very proud of that record. It was our third full-length album and it was a breakthrough record for us in the United States, because prior to that we really had only been sort of an underground band in the U.S. We were more commercially successful in Europe primarily, and Australia. "Parallel Lines" is a different type of record; it was made by a band that had spent years touring the world, and also there was a change in the band prior to that, with the addition of Frank Infante and Nigel Harrison. They had been touring with us about a year before. And also "Parallel Lines" was the beginning of our relationship with the producer Mike Chapman, it was the first record that he produced for us and he also produced all the rest of the



For The St. Petersburg Times
Chris Stein (l), Deborah Harry (c) and
Clem Burke (r) of Blondie perform on
Tuesday.

Blondie records. He was a major contributor to a success of this record.

Q: Why did they like the band in Europe, rather than in the U.S.?

A: We were all living in Manhattan in New York City, and New York City may as well have been another country compared to the rest of the United States at the time. So our whole outlook on music and art and culture was more continental, if you will. The kind of music we liked was Ennio Morricone or Nino Rota or the Stooges or the Velvet Underground or the Shangri-Las. Those bands weren't very popular in the U.S. That music was more special. You know, the bands that were popular in the U.S. at that time were The Eagles and bands like that. We didn't really fit into that mold of the contemporary music in the States...

And I think Europe, they were a lot more open in a way. You know, a glam rock band, with Debbie's image, and the sound and the look of the band, was more appealing ... a more continental aesthetic, if you see what I mean.

Q: Was it a similar story with the New York Dolls?

A: Oh yeah, absolutely! Well, you know, the New York Dolls were a very big inspiration to us, as well as the Velvet Underground were, and, you know, neither of those bands have ever achieved any commercial success, although today they are seminal influential bands. And I would like to think... If I think of Blondie, I would like to think of Blondie as carrying on that sort of tradition of the Velvets and the New York Dolls. You know, Blondie and Ramones, those kind of bands.

I think the influence of, for instance, of the Velvet Underground can still be heard today in modern rock music, as well as the Dolls and Blondie.

Yeah, that would be the case. The New York Dolls may as well have come from outer space as far as appealing to the rest of the United States, the rest of the country. People weren't ready for this kind of thing. I think society is a lot more sophisticated now, for better or worse. Everybody's hip now!

Q: Do you hear Blondie influences in modern bands from New York or elsewhere?

A: I think with Blondie we had this "do-it-yourself" thing going on, and I think any band that's really kind of doing it from the heart, and doing it themselves, they look to Blondie and maybe they think, "Oh, that band, they kind of achieved success on their own terms."

I mean, granted, we had a great frontperson in Debbie, very glamorous. That was for sure our foot in the door, getting into the whole business of music.

But, you know, without us carrying on with music and everything, we wouldn't be as successful as we were. You know, I hear a little bit of Blondie in the Killers, I hear Blondie in the Strokes.

Q: After Blondie became a success some people stopped listening to the band thinking it had gone commercial. How did you deal with that?

A: When we made “Parallel Lines,” when we made “Heart of Glass,” we were being experimental, because we were influenced by the band Kraftwerk, so we were trying to incorporate some electronic music into Blondie. So we thought we were being experimental when we did “Heart of Glass.”

Do you know producer Conny Plank, who produced Kraftwerk and Devo? We worked with Can... Do you know German band Can, Holger Czukay? I worked with Conny and with Holger with the band Eurythmics. And when I first met them they were really responsive to the fact that we were innovative with “Heart of Glass,” they looked at it and they could feel a German influence in “Heart of Glass.”

So we didn’t look at “Heart of Glass” as being a big sell-out song. We were surprised when it was a big hit.

And the thing about dance music... Punk rock was a bit of a “tunnel vision” for us. We never really wanted to have one sound. We liked the way that with the Beatles and the Stones, you know, you would never know what to expect from one record to another, and those were the groups we grew up on.

So we were never one particular style. We weren’t what you would call punk rock. We were more influenced by AM commercial radio in the 1960s in the United States, where you had the Beatles next to Frank Sinatra next to the Rolling Stones next to the Supremes, things like that.

So all that sound is assimilated into Blondie. And, you know, with dance music, with disco music... Disco music is a little more of a liberal type of music, it encompasses all people, you know, gay, straight, black, white, young, old... Disco music wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, it kind of brought people together. And punk rock sort of alienated a lot of people. So we were a combination of a lot of things, more of a “people’s band.”

Q: Blondie was very different from both mainstream music and CBGB punk scene.

A: Well, you know, at CBGB no-one really... When we played CBGB along with bands like Television and Patti Smith and Talking Heads and Ramones, no-one referred to themselves as “punk.”

If we referred to ourselves as anything, we thought we were like beatniks, like bohemians. It was only the media that really put the “punk rock” label on it later. And every band at CBGB at that time was different from the other.

So there wasn’t really one particular CBGB sound, if you want, although I think with Blondie once again, we were able to soak up influences of all those various bands, whether it be the Ramones or Television and incorporate that as we were expanding our sound, as we were able to find our way musically. We were able to be around all these great artists, and kind of soaked up what they were doing at a very early stage. And that really helped us to form our sound as well.

You know CBGB was like a handful of people, all of whom were mostly in bands, and they were supportive of one other in the early days, I'm talking about the mid-1970s. And it was really just a bunch of beatniks, there were no punks at CBGB back then.

But we did stand out for a lot of reasons even at CBGB. But we did stand out for a lot of reasons even at CBGB. Obviously with Debbie we were much more a glamorous band.

We wanted to achieve commercial success, but we wanted to achieve it in our own way. And I think also Andy Warhol was a very big inspiration for Blondie in the way he merged commercialism and art. Art and commerce coming together and kind of making people aware of very simple things.

You know, when Andy said, "Everyone will be famous for 15 minutes," I mean in the States now, with all this crazy reality TV, "Pop Idol" and all these shows, obviously it's what he said, it manifested itself.

I like to think that Blondie have made a cultural contribution in general to music and culture. The whole CBGB thing is the beginning of that.

Blondie will perform at Oktyabrsky Concert Hall on Tuesday.