





THE CHANGELING

Hockey isn't the first thing that comes to mind when discussing Avril Lavigne, but this blonde punk star from Ontario knows a thing or two about hitting the ice hard. BY JORDANA DIVON

Before the sold-out tours, before the 30 million albums, even before the YouTube-era accolades that declared her the "sexiest woman alive," Avril Lavigne was just your typical small town teenager getting busted for drinking and thrown off her high school hockey tournament.

"We had an OFSAA (Ontario Federation of School Athletics Association) tournament in Toronto, which was a really big deal," Avril recalls, suddenly breaking into a fit of giggles. "We got there and it was my first time having a beer, but then I got busted and kicked off the tournament and then I got suspended from school. Oh my god, my parents wanted to kill me! But I was like, whatever. It was a beer!"

The idea of Avril Lavigne rocking a Bauer stick and a helmet may confuse those who can't see past the 26-year-old's punk princess image. But make no mistake: Avril Lavigne is just as scrappy on the ice as she is on stage. "I have full on hockey pictures from when I played on a guys' team for a few years, but then when it got to Pee Wee – which was body contact – because I was probably 84 pounds everyone was like, you're going to get hurt. So I switched to the girls' team in high school," she says.

Like any responsible Canadian parent, Avril's dad put his three kids on skates almost as soon as they could

walk. "We have a pond in our backyard and he would make a rink in there," she says. "That's the one thing I'll brag about. I'll be, like, I'm a really good skater because I've been doing it since I was little. I played right wing and centre. And I was pretty good."

But a pro career wasn't in the cards for the hockey-loving teen; as much as she excelled on the ice, Avril showed even greater promise with a mic and guitar. In oft-repeated accounts of the singer's formative years, Avril's mom recognized her daughter's talent early on, when the two-year-old would belt out pitch-perfect renditions of popular church hymns during Sunday service. Also, like most singers, Avril admits she would constantly sing around the house, much to the annoyance of her siblings. "My brother used to knock on the wall because I used to sing myself to sleep and he thought it was really annoying," she told *Digital Spy* in February.

In an age of TV-manufactured pop products, Avril's old-fashioned discovery on the coffee shop circuit makes her a bit of an anomaly these days. Her first foray into the spotlight came in 1999, when, after winning a local radio contest, the 15-year-old shared a stage with country superstar Shania Twain at the latter's Ottawa concert. "You're going to be a famous singer," Twain told her in front of 20,000 screaming fans.

★ Twain wouldn't be the last to make that prophecy; it wasn't long before a few savvy individuals snapped up the Napanee-based teen and whisked her away to New York, whereupon Arista Records impresario L.A. Reid signed her to a million-dollar contract.

The rest has become a part of Canada's pop cultural lore: the hit singles, the ties and wife beaters, the songwriting controversy, the marriage – and subsequent divorce – from Sum 41 frontman Deryck Whibley, the reinvention from bratty kid into a polished, feminine career artist. And that's just on the music side. Recently, the singer has set her creative sights on the fashion world, designing and overseeing the production of rock-inspired clothing line, Abbey Dawn. "I'm very visual and I want to do other things as well, so it's really fun for me to have a clothing line. Fashion is such a big part of what I do: all the photo shoots, video shoots, onstage, offstage. I also have a really hard time finding clothes I like (laughing), I literally design things I want for myself and then I make them," she says.

There's also the fragrance line (Black Star and Forbidden Rose being the first two offerings), the promo deal with Sony (there are more product placements in her latest video than a shelf at Best Buy), and more recently, the establishment of her own philanthropic organization, The Avril Lavigne Foundation, which assists young people with serious illnesses and disabilities.

It's a wonder she even has time for music anymore, but with the release of her latest album, *Goodbye Lullaby*, it's evident she dredged it up from somewhere. Still, the album, Avril's fourth studio offering, came out last March to less fanfare than usual, and had reportedly been delayed several times by studio execs who weren't exactly thrilled about the record's stripped-down sound.

"My record company [was] trying to tell me to do a more pop, dance, radio direction [album], but that wasn't what I wanted to do, so I had to fight with them. But I made the record I wanted to make and this record's really special to me," Avril says. "I know they're going to be saying that in a couple of months (laughing). I played them the record and they were kind of like, 'Oh, we want you to do this,' (mocking voice) and I was like, are you f***ing joking? But keep in mind, they're not the people who signed me."

With the exception of insanely catchy first

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single *What the Hell*, the album represents an artistic shift from the singer's typically boisterous, anthemic pop confections. Songs like *Wish You Were Here*, co-written with Swedish pop mastermind Max Martin, reflect a slowed down, more introspective Avril, and while her vocals haven't always projected a lot of depth, she's as vulnerable here as she's ever sounded. "This album I really just wanted to sing. I just really want to go back to how songs begin in the writing process, where it's just me and a guitar, me on the piano. It's just more about me as a singer, me as a musician and a songwriter really."

Critical reception for *Goodbye Lullaby* has been mixed, but then again, when is critical reception ever not? "Mediocre Avril Lavigne remains more compelling than many artists, but *Goodbye Lullaby* feels a bit like a wasted moment in time," opined About.com critic Bill Lamb, while Rolling Stone's Jody Rosen was a little more

generous, declaring the album "lovelorn and introspective, full of gusty tunes with a surprising message: Avril cares."

Whatever your personal take on the album, Rosen is bang on about one thing: Avril really does care. Despite the carefully constructed irreverence behind *What the Hell* – sample: "All I want is to mess around/and I don't really care about/If you love me, if you hate me" – there's been a marked change in the way Avril presents herself to the public. Past interviews with the pop star, even when she was well into her 20s, read like studies in practiced teenage ennui. The new Avril is more open, easy-going, and dare I say ... absolutely delightful. She has the sort of giggly, high-energy enthusiasm that makes it impossible not to like her, and this quality, when effectively translated into her music, is part of the reason she's managed to consistently capture our attention. "Everything I've ever done has always been me and the music I've made is music I've wanted to make," she declares, assertively.

It's hard to predict how well that youthful energy will transition into the more adult sound she's after, but with the glut of blonde, over-processed, auto-tuned fembots currently stinking up the charts, Avril may find herself in prime position. The more Ke\$has the labels inflict upon our eardrums, the more genuinely talented singers like Avril start to sound like our holy saviours. ■