IN CONVERSATION:

# DEBBIE HARRY AND SANTOGOLD


# 'You can't live here and just be an artist unless you're gonna be so broke.' —Santogold

Rock stars past and present on the invention, influence, and half-life of New York punk.

INTERVIEW BY BEN WILLIAMS

*Photographs by Dan Winters*


Santogold and Debbie Harry.

DEBBIE HARRY IS STILL a young punk: Dressed in a loose floral dress and Converse sneakers, she pouts a little while waiting for Santogold to put on an elaborate purple leather jacket and lime-green hot pants, then carefully pack up a suitcase's worth of clothes after her photo shoot. But the classic rock icon and the flashy emcee have more in common than meets the eye: Both make power pop out of the hip sounds of their era, both became famous in their early thirties, and both, they discover, are ambivalent about the way New York's music scene has changed over the years.

***New York*:** Blondie is beloved for classic pop singles, but in the mid-seventies the band felt like an upheaval, right?

**Debbie Harry:** Yeah, before our time the trend was toward bigger bands, like Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Eagles, and you didn't hear a lot of pop music with girls in it. It was a man's world—the good ol' boys chugging their guitars. So we were really counterculture. And urban. We were incorporating new technologies, sounds, ethnicities—just jamming it all together.

**Santogold:** It was the music from the late seventies and early eighties that moved me to make music in the first place. Punk just stripped all that big, theatrical rock from bands like Led Zeppelin and the Doors. It was just raw energy. And that's what I relate to—bands like the Ramones who can hardly play anything. I can hardly play anything!

## THE WHOLE LOWER EAST SIDE LOOKS LIKE A PRISON FARM TO ME.

**DH:** You know, that's all art is: a gradual build and layering of influences and tastes. It's like pollination.

**S:** I feel like out of the whole punk thing, you did what I've been striving to do, which is bring a pop element to it. You wrote real songs, with melodies. When I listened to your songs when I was younger, I felt like they were fifties-esque, but twisted into a stripped-down, raw thing. You did that with fashion, too. You've got that total punk thing, with the Sex Pistols and stuff, and then the whole glam-rock thing, with David Bowie and everybody. You made a tough, badass, not girly but still feminine look.

***NY*:** Debbie, you helped create room for women in pop music. How have things changed since then?

**DH:** There've always been two schools of thought when it comes to female artists. There's the serious guitar players who have stuff to say, and they're called "women." And then there's the producer-driven, girl-group, hair-toss, flaunt-your-tits-and-ass kind of act.

**S:** The producers phenomenon is one of the reasons music has gone downhill. When I was a teenager, every hip-hop artist had their own D.J., who was their producer. From Public Enemy to A Tribe Called Quest, everyone had a different sound. Now? Now it's only hip-hop, pop, and rock. You've got three producers who do everything. And as far as the women go, I think there are very few big-time women right now who are running their own show, like Björk, M.I.A., and Karen O. It's all *American Idol*.

**DH:** The best part about *American Idol* is when they have the auditions.

**S:** I agree.

**DH:** That's all they should do.

***NY*:** Has New York priced itself out of a music scene?

**S:** I'm from Philly, but I've lived in Brooklyn for about eight years. It's funny: It wasn't until I moved here that I met a lot of my really good friends from Philly. Because everybody comes to New York. It's just where stuff jumps off.

**DH:** That's always why people would come to New York. It's a communications hub.

**S:** Totally. But you can't live here and just be an artist unless you're gonna be so broke. I moved back to Philly for a while and would come to New York three times a week, because I don't want to be that broke. A lot of artists do that these days—they start off elsewhere, then move to Williamsburg, and then keep moving because it's so expensive. In fact, most of the people in the scene I'm said to be in don't really live here. There's not a scene like there was back in your day.

**DH:** I don't think the economic conditions permit it.

**S:** And the city doesn't value it. I mean, look what they did to CBGB!

**DH:** The whole Lower East Side looks like a prison farm to me. All those dorms that NYU put up—they've gotten away with murder.

***NY*:** Is there still a distinctive New York sound?

**DH:** The thing that's sad about the role New York now plays in the world is that everything is everywhere, and it's becoming very much the same. All the major cities in the Western world have become gentrified and homogenized. There's nothing you can buy only in New York. Back in the seventies, the city was chaotic and poor. My clothes came out of the garbage—I went shopping on the street. Nobody had dough to afford their own equipment. You would borrow a guitar and amp, and if you had them you fucking held onto them like there was no tomorrow.

***NY*:** So that made it easier to create a unique identity?

**DH:** I don't want to see everybody dressed the same. I want to see somebody who's got some color, who makes a statement about who they are, and is prepared to be sneered at. When I used to go uptown, before punk became acceptable and fashionable, it was a rough trip, with people staring and making nasty remarks.

**S:** It's not necessarily enjoyable.

**DH:** They're the ones who are wearing the stuff now, man. That's all I can say.

**S:** Last winter, when I toured with Coldplay, I got this e-mail that said, "I hate your lesbian techno rap!" People are afraid of women who aren't, like, naked onstage. People are afraid of anybody who looks different or has anything to say. The key is to understand the mainstream enough to open a door for yourself. To make a record that people can get on the underground level, and that somebody who just hears it on the radio can say, "I love this song!"

***NY*:** There was a big drug element to music back then, too, right?

**DH:** At first, no one had any money for drugs. They came later, in the late seventies. We always thought it was political, because all of a sudden there was this flood of unbelievably cheap, strong drugs. It felt like the sort of thing to keep everybody quiet.

**S:** No, it's documented that they were doing that. Anybody who was anti-American, communist, or, like, anything—give them some heroin and keep them over there. And now, honestly, I think hip-hop is suffering from that. It's the "keep the people a mess" idea. Let them stay in their little area and be all fucked up and destroy themselves.

**DH:** But even before then, everything was stripped down, and the music reflected that struggle to survive. You were forced to be creative.

**S:** Unfortunately, I don't think that struggle makes it into music much anymore. Something happened where the industry

got so big that it started dictating what music was allowed to be heard, and people gave up on making honest, real music.

**DH:** I think that's what the Internet has maybe opened back up.

**S:** It is. Now people don't have to pay a lot for a studio, and they're doing more creative stuff. There's no longer the feeling that, "Man, what's the point in making it, 'cause no one will ever hear it?" Now you're like, "I don't care if I ever get a record deal; I'm going to make it, put it up on MySpace, and people will hear it." Most new bands do this now. The whole way that A&R people find new bands now is based on their MySpace hits.

***NY:*** So the Internet makes it easier to get your music heard. Does it make it harder to get paid?

**S:** They keep you broke. The first year of touring, you're doing festivals and stuff that don't make any money. Even when you get an advance, you have to spend it on touring. Plus, do you know about the 360 deals?

**DH:** What's 360?

**S:** When you sign with the major labels, they get a percentage of all your ancillary income—your tour, your merchandise, your publishing.

***NY:*** New York could be at the beginning of a seventies-style financial crisis. Would that be good or bad for the New York music scene?

**S:** I'm not sure how that would affect the music scene. But I assume if everyone was broke and struggling and really feeling the effects of all the bad decisions that have been made, it would make it harder to hide from things that are a mess in our world. And that sense of urgency would most likely find its way into art.

***NY:*** In the first half of this decade, a lot of New York bands explicitly mimicked the seventies punk sound. Was that just nostalgia?

**S:** I think bands like the Strokes, the White Stripes, and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs were more straight-up retro than people are doing now, but they started something. The really grimy amps and the stripped-down rock sounds. And as bands like myself, LCD Soundsystem, the Death Set, and Late of the Pier tried to twist it into something new, we moved into adding more electronic sounds alongside the grime.

**DH:** Punk is sort of irrelevant today. As a style of music, it still has relevance, but not as a social trend. Originally punk was about going against the mainstream grain. These days bands like Goon Squad, who tip their wigs to old styles, stand out as new, mainstream punk.

***NY:*** Who is truly punk today?

**S:** I'd say Lil' Wayne.

**DH:** There's a difference between someone who's really thinking about music and living it and someone who is basically just a cover band. But I just saw a band called Creature at the Mercury Lounge the other night. They were on at 7:30, completely unheralded in any way, and they were fantastic.

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***NY:*** So you still get out and catch a lot of current bands?

**DH:** I try, yeah. I mean, it's not easy, but I drag my sorry old ass out.

**S:** I feel the same way.

***NY:*** What's your favorite band right now?

**S:** I really enjoyed Vampire Weekend's record.

**DH:** I've been listening to a lot of songs by MGMT.

***NY:*** Do you think that hipsters evolved from punks?

**DH:** Hipsters?

**S:** It's what everyone calls young guys now.

**DH:** Really? I just want to say grunge.

**S:** Hipsters, honestly, there's nothing there! Everyone wears the exact same thing. My song "L.E.S. Artistes" is about fakers, people who are self-proclaimed artists but really just go out in the Lower East Side and Williamsburg to be scenesters.

**DH:** The point of being punk was to be an asshole and not to be put down for it.

**S:** You mean like embarrassing yourself, not being good?

**DH:** Not being the best. Being a fool. Making a bad decision and saying, "Oh, God, why did I do that?" And then saying, "Okay, but I could do this, and I could save some of that." That's when you really absorb it, and it becomes a signature, and audiences want it. I can't imagine what they would have done with Nina Simone today.

**S:** Yeah, that's what artist development is meant to do: make quality, lifelong artists. And we don't have a lot of those anymore.

**DH:** Well, it's also because record labels, at one time, actually were into artist development. That doesn't really exist anymore.

**S:** I think a lot of artists discover it's bad that the media grabs things right away. You just get thrown out there, on the spot. There's no time to prepare. If you're a perfectionist, you're worried about all the press and having everything plastered online. The turnaround for everything is quicker. Even outfits—you wear an outfit twice, and it's like, "Put that one away." You wear it in France, and you think you can wear it somewhere else? No. The photos are online.

**DH:** It's absurd.

**S:** Plus, you have to do way more press, so you're always running through everything. Nobody knows what's going to be important because blogs like Stereogum and Brooklyn Vegan have so much power. Every artist I meet now has lost their voice. Also, if you get one hit, you might not be ready to sustain it. So bands come and then they're gone immediately. No one cares. No one says, "This is an artist that's going be around for ten years or ten records."

**DH:** There has always been a disposable culture, but the turnover now is just so fast.

**S:** You used to go on the road before you had a record out. So you'd learn how to perform, and you'd start to build a fan base.

**DH:** Yeah, I don't know what you call most groups these days. They're not really individuals, they're just like producer-driven cookie-cutter things. It's just showbiz. And it has nothing to do with...

**S:** Art.

**DH:** I mean, where's Suicide when you need them? ■