



Kate Schellenbach:

Electric, Honey

"What are we going to have to do to



PHOTO BY ALI PRICE

BY JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER

“Luscious Jackson officially confirms break up,” read the March 31st, 2000, press release, and a 34-year-old native New Yorker named Kate Schellenbach officially went from being Kate, the drummer of a successful and groovy band, to being, simply, Kate Schellenbach, drummer.

Not that her identity *sans* band is anything to sneeze at. Schellenbach began playing drums when she was 13. By her late teens, she was the girl in the Young Aborigines, a proto line-up of what was to become the Beastie Boys. The Beasties was her second band, back when the prescient group of hipsters was a hardcore punk act. A few years and five bands (including Hagatha and Kitchen Beautiful) later, she and Vivian Trimble joined old friends Gabby Glaser and Jill Cunniff to form Luscious Jackson.

When a band breaks up, especially one with enough success to have managers and multiple boxes of T-shirts, it falls somewhere between divorce and downsizing. There are emotional issues, financial issues,

“Yahoo/Smashmouth” tour—she didn’t really want to do this anymore.

Were you surprised?

Kinda. It had been a weird year. Since we released *Electric Honey*, everything had been difficult. We talked about the possibility of “ending” but no one ever said “breaking up.” We said “stopping” or “getting off the road.” I can’t remember if it was Jill or Gabby, but somebody likened the time we were having with the label to feeling like we were prostitutes. We were doing all this work to sell our record and ourselves, and we certainly weren’t getting rewarded or even treated in a respectful way.

Was Capitol asking you to shill for the record in ways you weren’t comfortable with?

Not even that. *Electric Honey* was our fourth release, our third full-length album. We knew what was expected of us as artists, the amount of work you have to do as far as publicity or radio shows, and we were prepared to do that. The problem was, any work we did had

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and identity issues. On a rainy July afternoon, Kate talked candidly about life after Luscious.

What led to the decision to break up?

We were all at my apartment last fall, supposedly to work on a project we were doing. There was a succession of annoying news from the record company. We were all bummed out and instead of working on the project we were supposed to be working on, we started talking about what was coming up. Jill said that after the February 2000

no effect on whether or not the label pushed our album. We released a single [“Ladyfingers”] in May, which had a moment and then it died out. The label committed to releasing “Nervous Breakthrough” in the fall, and making a video. Slowly but surely, they balked at all the promises they made.

They do these testings now where they call up people randomly and play ten seconds of a song and then ask the person, “Would you buy this?” They tested our song like this, then came back to us and said, ▶

"You don't have a radio song here." We were like, *What are you talking about?* We had delivered a very commercially-viable record—intelligent pop. At the time, however, we were competing with very successful unintelligent pop. Britney Spears was rampant through the airwaves, as was Jennifer Lopez. They were the only two women being played. The rest were boy bands and guitar rock, like Kid Rock or Limp Bizkit.

Was this a change from how you were treated before?

Yes. Capitol always marketed us to college radio and independent records stores. Gary Gersh, the president of Capitol when we signed on, was a big fan and he was committed to providing us with a long career in the business. We were looking for a long run as opposed to hammering people over the head with one big hit. The radio department was committed to us too. We played Lollapalooza in 1994. By the time *Fever In/Fever Out* came out in 1996, alternative radio was playing a lot of women and more rhythmic, rather than grunge, stuff. Beck and the Beastie Boys were big in '96. We made more sense to alternative radio and ended up having a top-40 hit with "Naked Eye."

After *Fever In/Fever Out*, everyone at Capitol who supported us had left. You don't realize how good you have it until you have it bad. We had total confidence in our manager, but he was banging his head against the wall trying to communicate with Capitol. He couldn't even get the president of the label to speak to him. It was totally horrible and insane. We were very happy with our album, each other, our live band, and delighted with our live show, but we could barely make a living. We were just breaking even on tour.

So the breakup was not due to your relationships with each other, but your relationship with the label and the industry?

Yeah. The climate has changed. It seems worse than ever. Wrestling and strippers are your only choices for a female icon now. Even magazines have changed. We'd joke about doing our press stuff, "What are we going to have to do to get noticed? Maybe we should kill someone and then do a naked photo spread."

The break up didn't hit home until we had a meeting with our new business manager in LA during the Smashmouth tour. We were in a private room at Capitol Records, ironically. He said, "So, what are you going to do after this tour?" Jill said, "We're going to break up." I was like, "Oh, *wow*, I guess that conversation we had last fall was for real." Everyone had made the decision that unless some amazing offer came up, we'd break up.

After the tour, it started leaking over the internet, so we had to issue a press release. That month I felt shell-shocked. You get so used to having fire walls between you and the rest of the world. Not in an obnoxious way, but you have your publicist and your management and all of these people at the label who filter information to you. At first I felt vulnerable, an unreasonable fear of being left open to people calling me for business reasons. Now I realize that it is normal to pick up the phone and call someone directly.

Are you interested in starting your own band?

I am grateful that I made a lot of contacts over the years. I have toured a lot, met a lot of managers, had side projects. There are always people looking for musicians and plenty of people have seen me play. But I would rather step into something established than start over. I'm still frustrated from the last couple of years, and I know how much work it is. Luscious started out like any other band, sleeping on floors with equipment loaded on top of the car. We worked our way up. It was very gratifying to get to each new level—"Oh, we can rent an RV," or "We don't have to all stay in the same hotel room, we can have two rooms!" You feel like you deserve it because you work your butt off.

Did you notice a difference between the first year of the Lilith Fair in 1997, when women were on the radio in good numbers, and this past year?

Oh, yeah. The first two years of Lilith were during the peak of women on radio. Lilith proved to booking agents that women could sell

out shows for big scale tours. It was great. But by the final year, even people like Sheryl Crow were saying, "I can't get played on the radio."

Do you see anything that can be done in the face of this?

It's not just a problem for women, it's anyone innovative or cutting edge, too. There is so much competition for people's entertainment dollars—between the internet, movies, and wrestling—that record labels are not willing to take chances. They'd rather put 13 million dollars behind one artist who is guaranteed success.

That must be even more depressing to you since you all came out of a totally vibrant music scene.

Yeah. Jill and I grew up in the same neighborhood and went to a lot of the same schools, including dancing school, from the time we were really little. We didn't become friends though, until high school. We were out in New York, going to nightclubs and hanging out on the streets at age 15. I don't think our band would have existed—nor the Beastie Boys or a lot of other bands—if we hadn't had the freedom we had as kids in New York.

After college I stayed here. I was in various bands. Jill and Gabby moved to San Francisco and started playing music together. They moved back and hooked up with this guy who had a studio and started using a sampler. In 1991, Jill and Gabby gave me this demo tape they had done, and I was really impressed. It became the first few songs on our first EP, *In Search of Manny*. It was kind of like Neneh Cherry—singing and rapping and live music and samples all coming together. It was unique. I could totally relate to it because I understood—it was the music of my experience growing up in New York.

Jill asked if I was interested in being in an ESG cover band. ESG was this really great minimalist funk band from '80s that we were all fans of. They were three sisters from the Bronx whose mother bought them all instruments—kind of like the Bronx Partridge family. The whole idea was heavy bass, scratchy guitar, simple drums—funky, simple, danceable—with singing. This basically became Luscious Jackson.

Jill met Vivian at a teaching job, and pulled her out of the dance/performance art world. Viv bought a keyboard. It was all very hap-hazard, great and easy.

What roles did you have once you started getting more serious shows, a record deal, and touring?

Initially, the band was Jill and Gabby's thing, and we were hired to fill it out as a live act. I was the only one who had any live experience, so I took on the role of showing them how to do a show, what a monitor is and how you do a sound check. This is where you plug in. Don't put your hand on the mic—that kind of stuff. I was used to performing and I knew how to tour. Jill and Gabby were the producers and the writers. It was their thing in the studio. Viv was probably the most studied of all of us, and she was good at money stuff. Eventually, we had managers who took on different aspects of our career.

Did you ever gang up on each other?

We never ganged up. If someone was dissatisfied with something, she'd retreat—put a walkman on. We were together eight years and we changed a lot during that time. I had no problem saying no and setting boundaries, but it wasn't like I knew how to say no in the best way. I had to learn to not be obnoxious. If I needed to have a day off, and something was thrown in there, there would be tears and screaming. Off tour you don't want to hang out and have tea all the time, but you have to stay in touch or you'll make bad decisions when offers come up. I am glad that we didn't break up over anything personal.

Have you kept in touch since the break up?

Not so much, but I really feel like I need to check in. I have different relationships with Jill and Gabby. All the business stuff is all put to bed, which is weird. We still have a tax year that we haven't dealt with and eight boxes of shirts sitting in a storage locker that I guess we could donate to the Salvation Army. I can picture the whole recovering alcoholic population of New York city wearing Luscious Jackson T-shirts. 🎸