



A BEAUTIFUL STRUGGLE

Pain is what Gary Louris sings about best. But with a new record and a happy family, the wounds don't hurt as much these days. by Adam Wahlberg

GARY LOURIS isn't the most approachable guy in the world. Musically, he's generous—his lyrics are direct and heartfelt, his guitar lines expressive, his voice full of ache and wonder—but offstage Louris seems like he'd rather be left alone. Perhaps that's why the middle-aged man standing before the former Jayhawks frontman and me at Cuppa Java in Bryn Mawr is so nervous. His left hand shakes as he speaks.

Sorry to interrupt. You were with the Jayhawks, right?
Right.

I just wanted to say, the American flag upside down on, I can't remember which album...
They all had it.

I thought maybe that was your decision?
It was the label, Def American's.

You know what that means, right?
Uh, not exactly.

Nation in distress.
Oh, does it?

It's a call for help.
Oh.

So anyway, I think it's great it's on there.
We're actually not on that label anymore, but we were a long time.

My cousin was Katie O'Brien.
Oh, yeah?

I thought you knew her, but I wasn't sure.
Yeah, she was a friend of mine.

We all miss her.
Yes, we do. Well, good to see you.
What's your name?

Gabe.
Gabe. OK. I'll keep Katie in my thoughts.

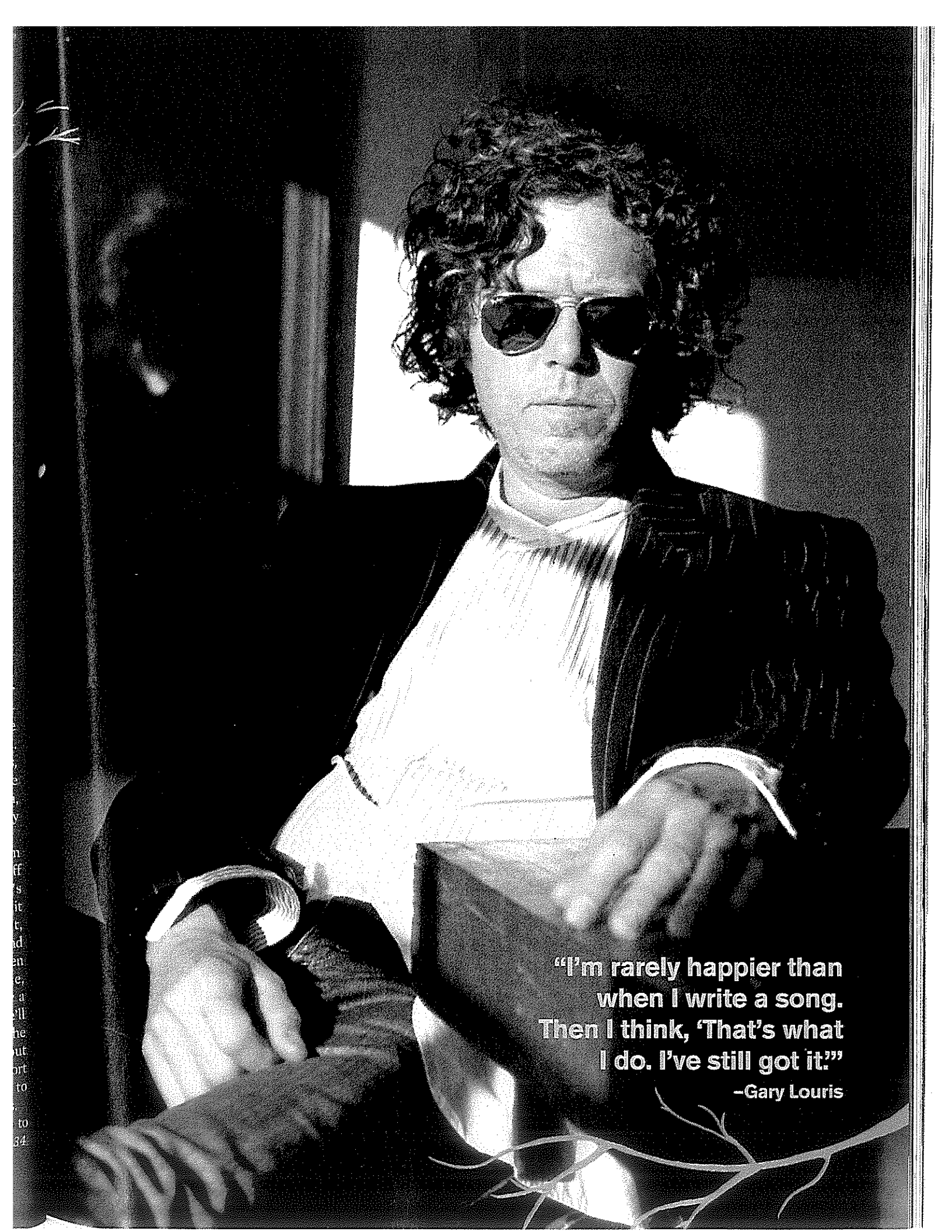
With that, Gabe is out the door. "Katie was a musician. She was in a band called Dutch Oven," Louris explains. "She killed herself." He takes a sip from his latte and pauses for a couple seconds. "Where were we?" he asks.

AT FIFTY-THREE, Gary Louris knows about calls for help; it's what most of his songs are about. In twenty-five

years as a professional musician, twenty of them with the Jayhawks—a band that has always had an influence far greater than its commercial footprint—Louris has focused relentlessly on one subject: pain. *His* pain, to be specific. He's got a new album out, *Vagabonds*, his first solo effort since leaving the Jayhawks three years ago. More pain, beautifully textured and exquisitely produced, but pain nonetheless.

In some hands, this preoccupation with personal agony might come off sounding like a ninth grader's MYSPACE page. But in Louris's hands, it transcends, more often than not, thanks to the evocative conviction and richness of his distinctive voice. When he sings "We stranded on the vine, destitute and shaken, looking for a sign" or, from the new album, "We'll get by, but we don't know how," the lines don't come off as mawkish, but rather healing. It's a neat trick, the sort of emotional alchemy that leads to awkward encounters in coffee shops.

"Whenever somebody comes up to
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-Gary Louris

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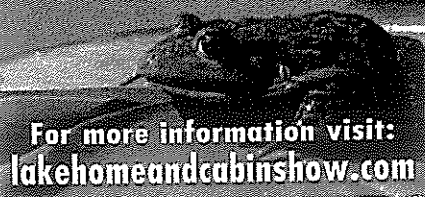
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me and shares something, that's rewarding because I always feel like I don't do enough," says Louris. "I don't get out in the community, work at Sharing and Caring Hands, like I should."

Instead, he writes songs. Louris's music has been categorized as alternative country, a hybrid movement he and the Jayhawks are credited with spurring—but that association has never worked for him. Louris considers himself primarily a soul man. "Not necessarily soul music in the sense of Al Green, but music with soul, that's always been my goal—to make pop music that had some weight to it, some meaning, some feeling," he says.

Vagabonds, for example, is filled with soul, or at least plenty of feeling. It finds him reflecting once again on his place in the universe and wondering what it's all about. Jayhawks fans will find plenty of Louris's musical calling cards—soaring vocals, pretty melodies, moody guitar, killer bridges—but this time there's something new: a sense of acceptance. "The theme of the record is a certain searching for meaning, whether it's within a relationship or a search for spirituality and realizing that you're never going to find the answer, but the struggle is beautiful," he explains.

It hasn't always been.

LOURIS WAS BORN into a Greek-Irish Catholic family in Toledo. He learned the liturgies at St. John's Jesuit High School during the day and worshiped the gods of AM radio at night.

An excellent student but a social loner, he learned guitar at his mother's suggestion as a way to make friends. She put a classical guitar in his hands when he was fourteen, and he loved how it felt from the start. "Playing guitar just came easy to me," says Louris.

He never thought he'd make a living playing it, though. That wasn't the plan. Notre Dame, job, wife, kids. That was the plan.

Then his sister, who lived in Minneapolis, invited him to visit. He buzzed on what he found here, especially the music, and it was so long Fighting Irish. "I wanted to try living in a big city," recalls Louris. "I was also interested in architecture, and

the University of Minnesota had a top-five program."

He enrolled, got his degree, and landed a job with a small design firm. He found some satisfaction in the work, but he didn't excel at it. "I just wasn't that gifted," he says. "I was good at drawing, I was good at math. But I was destined for a life of being the office guy instead of a great architect."

When he started pursuing music in earnest, Louris hit the clubs and eventually worked up the nerve to talk to people about playing together. He joined the groups Schnauzer and Safety Last and had a ton of fun, but he wanted more.

One evening in 1985, he ambled into the Uptown and found it. An acquaintance, Mark Olson, had invited Louris to come by and check out his new band, a twangy roots outfit called the Jayhawks. The group sang rustic Americana as if they meant it. After the show, Louris chatted with Olson, who asked him if he knew of any available guitar players. Louris said he knew of one.

LOURIS, OLSON, bassist Marc Perlman, and drummer Norm Rogers, who would eventually be replaced by Thad Spencer, coalesced quickly. They were good, but nothing special. Then their eureka moment came.

"We were running over some of the songs at Spencer's house," remembers Olson, talking from his home in Joshua Park, California. "Gary and I started to sing the songs together and I was like, 'Wow, that sounds really, really good. And it sounds different.'"

Louris felt it too. "It was just very natural."

Olson's voice, direct and scratchy and slightly nasal, and Louris's sweeter, higher tone, blended into something gorgeous. They wrote and recorded a batch of songs, and started playing gigs wherever they could, keeping their day jobs. It was thrilling, but exhausting. Louris, ever the architect, started to wonder, Were they building something?

His patience was tested even further when he spun through an intersection in October 1988. "I got knocked over a concrete bus bench into a brick wall," says Louris matter-of-factly. He lost his spleen, punctured a lung, broke some ribs, bruised his heart, crushed his pelvis. More pain.

THE WRITING OF A CLASSIC

Gary Louris loves the color blue. It's in the title of the Jayhawks' second album, *Blue Earth*, part of the first song on his new album, *True Blue*, and, of course, it's the name of his most beloved song, which he remembers came together fairly quickly.

"I had the basic idea of the chords and melody, and I remember Mark [Olson] was living above Day by Day Cafe in St. Paul, and he helped me finish it. It didn't take very long."

Olson remembers it the same way. "I thought it was really good," says Olson. "It's hard to, you know, to go on about it."

It's proof that in artistic endeavors, hard work doesn't necessarily yield the desired results. "You have to take a Zen approach," Louris says. "You have to try without trying. It's one of those songs that if you try to write it, it wouldn't work. I've certainly tried to write another one like that, and you can hear me thinking, you can hear me trying, and that's not the way you should write a song." —A.W.

Louris knew he had a long recovery in front of him and, if he rejoined the band, a future filled with fast food and nights spent on friends' floors. So he quit. "I just thought we weren't going anywhere," he recalls. He was gone six months.

Then things started happening. Local label Twin Tone took an interest in their music and asked for some tracks, and the band members asked him to return. Louris couldn't resist. "We worked on some demos, and I came crawling back," he says.

In 1989, they released *Blue Earth*. Critics flipped. "It was one of those records that was clearly important," says Greg Kot of the *Chicago Tribune*, cohost of Chicago Public Radio's *Sound Opinions*. "It was just beautiful. The harmonies, the songwriting, the sensibility, you just had the feeling that people would be able to put it on twenty years later and it wouldn't sound dated."

The band landed a major label deal with Def American and took off. In 1990, Louris felt confident enough to quit his day job. He also got married. The band was still not bringing in much income, but he figured that would come.

Two years later, the band released *Hollywood Town Hall*, which featured contributions from Louris on the standouts "Settled Down Like Rain" and "Waiting for the Sun." They toured and wrote songs for two years, and in 1995, after several expensive months in a studio (an article in *Worth* magazine estimated they owed their label close to \$1 million), they released *Tomorrow the Green Grass*. It was the first and last time in their careers they

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heavily promoted an album, but *Green Grass*, featuring the masterpiece "Blue," was solid. They played it on *Letterman* and killed, and signed up to support their buddies, the red-hot Soul Asylum, on a major national tour. This was it. They were ready. He was ready. Then everything fell apart.

OLSON HAD FALLEN in love with songwriter Victoria Williams and wanted out of the band. Louris had fallen out of love (he divorced in 1996) and was clinging to the band. Two paths diverging at exactly the wrong time.

Louris was devastated. "To be honest, I don't know how I got through it," he says. He went looking for answers. When he didn't find them, he did the one thing that always made him feel good: He wrote and played music.

The resulting album, *Sound of Lies*, which the remaining band members recorded under the Jayhawks moniker, was a source of bitter dispute between Louris and Olson for a long time. It's a little frightening. There's no folksy back-porch vibe; just blistering, angry pop. Many long-time fans were mystified. "I think some people found it interesting and others thought, 'This is not the Jayhawks.' At the time, I just thought, 'What the hell, they can love it or hate it.'"

LOURIS LIMPED INTO the twenty-first century with a chip on his shoulders worthy of Victor Hugo. His goal at the time was simple: land a hit. On the band's sixth album, *Smile*, he tried his hardest to write one with "I'm Going to Make You Love Me." Didn't happen. The most exposure it got was in a Ralph Lauren commercial.

He reevaluated. Only this time it was different. Instead of approaching life as a results-oriented architect—form follows function, stardom follows great songs—he began to view life as a process. His wife, Julie—they married in 1999 and have an eight-year-old son, Henry Wilson—proved to be pivotal. "She'll say, 'Look at what you have and what you don't have. You have a wonderful life and it's not about chasing the almighty dollar,'" he says. "I mean, money is important to a certain extent, so that you can afford to live and have a decent

house and send your kids to a good school, but that's not the be all and end all." Louris also found comfort in *Tragic Sense of Life*, a book by the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, which taught him about the universal and relative nature of pain. You can accept pain, he learned—you can also let it go.

In 2003, the Jayhawks recorded their most relaxed album ever, *Rainy Day Music*, which, with little promotion, debuted higher than any of their previous records. Go figure.

Two years later, Louris let more of it go. He left the band. "It was a tough decision," he says. "There is just a lot that goes into day-to-day travel. It started to feel like a job."

"WITH THIS RECORD, I wasn't trying too hard," Louris says of his new album, *Vagabonds*. He wrote the songs as they came to him and recorded them in eight days in a studio in LA, with a band that producer Chris Robinson of The Black Crowes helped pull together. The focus was all on "vibe and inspiration," not obsession. "At this point in my life I'm not thinking about getting on the radio," Louris says. "I'm just trying to do something that sounds good to me."

Vagabonds will sound good to his fans. The instrumentation is spare and tasteful—the choral fills on "She Only Calls Me on Sundays" are particularly stirring—and he gives the songs plenty of room to breathe. Musically, the album isn't tremendously ambitious—it's heavy on moody, folk-tinged tunes with lazy, loping tempos—but Louris does stretch his palette a bit, most notably by introducing some Nick Drake-style folk picking on the closer "Meanderings." There may not be a "Blue" on *Vagabonds*—that's a high bar—but there are no obvious clunkers either.

Louris says he's excited about launching his solo career, although he misses being part of a band: "I'm still learning about that. There are positives and negatives. When you're a band guy, you know who's going to play on your record, you know who's going to be on tour, you have a sound, you have an identity. But you're also kind of beholden to everybody, and if they feel like they need to make money and go on tour, you feel like you have to go. I don't want to be as responsible as I used to be."

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He will play dates, though, starting in mid-March. Just don't expect the T-shirts to list a ton of cities. "I'm not going to be the guy who goes out on the road 280 days a year," he says—especially not with so much going on at home. Louris has a studio in the basement of his house in Bryn Mawr and has farmed himself out as a producer and writer for hire. He gets plenty of calls, from such artists as the Dixie Chicks, The Sadies, and even from Hollywood (that's his song during the closing credits of the crossword-documentary *Wordplay*).

What's burning up the fan pages these days is the announcement of a new album and tour later in the year with the man he still considers his musical soul mate: Mark Olson. After many years of not speaking to each other—"It was just [long pause] misunderstandings," Louris says—the two started playing together again in 2005 to see if they still had their chemistry. They did. They got together last year and wrote four-teen songs in five days.

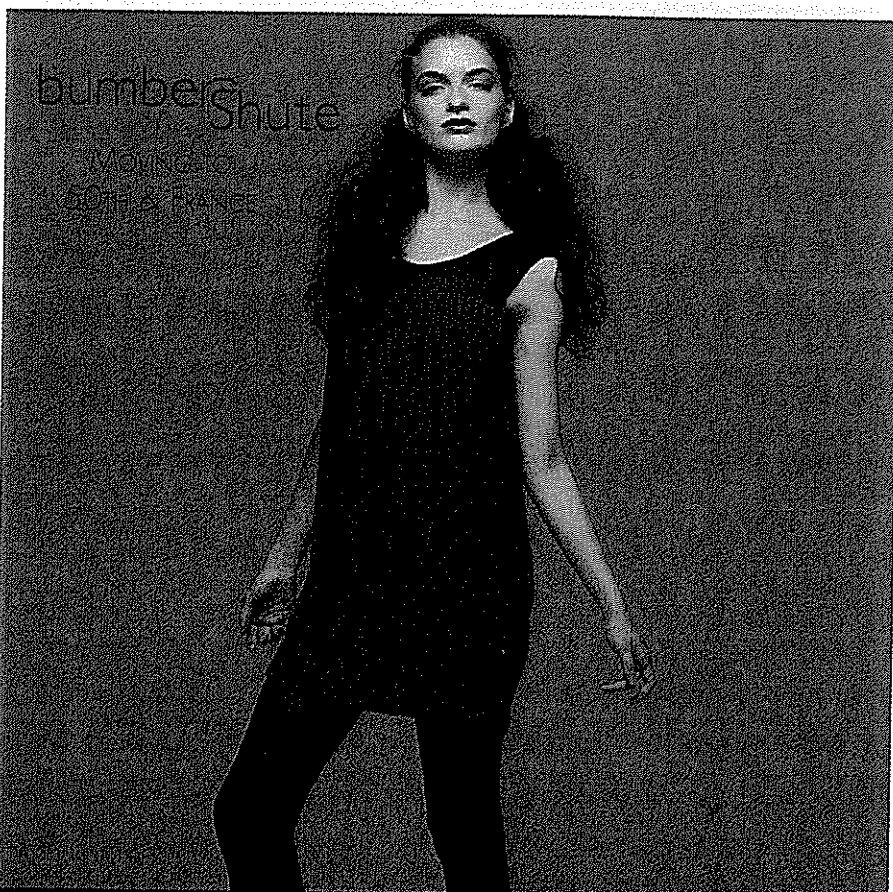
"It happens quickly for us—it's effortless," says Louris, who has been enjoying their new collaboration, although he can't help but wonder what might have been. "Looking back, I wish Mark had stayed in the band," he muses. "It would have been interesting to see what we would have done."

But life goes on. He's learned that. On *Vagabonds*, Louris sings early in the album about the need to "strip life down to what you believe in." For him, that's family, the Twins and Vikes (he's a KFAN junkie), reading, Spain (he has a getaway in El Puerto de Santa María), and music. That's it. That's plenty. "I'm rarely happier than when I write a song," he says. "Then I think, 'That's what I do. I've still got it.'"

Louris never got the big payoff that he believed was due him, and that used to drive him nuts. But now, he figures. He gets to do what he loves on his terms, and occasionally someone will come up to him and stammer something personal. He'll take that.

He may prefer to be left alone, but Gary Louris is not ready to be forgotten. Not yet.

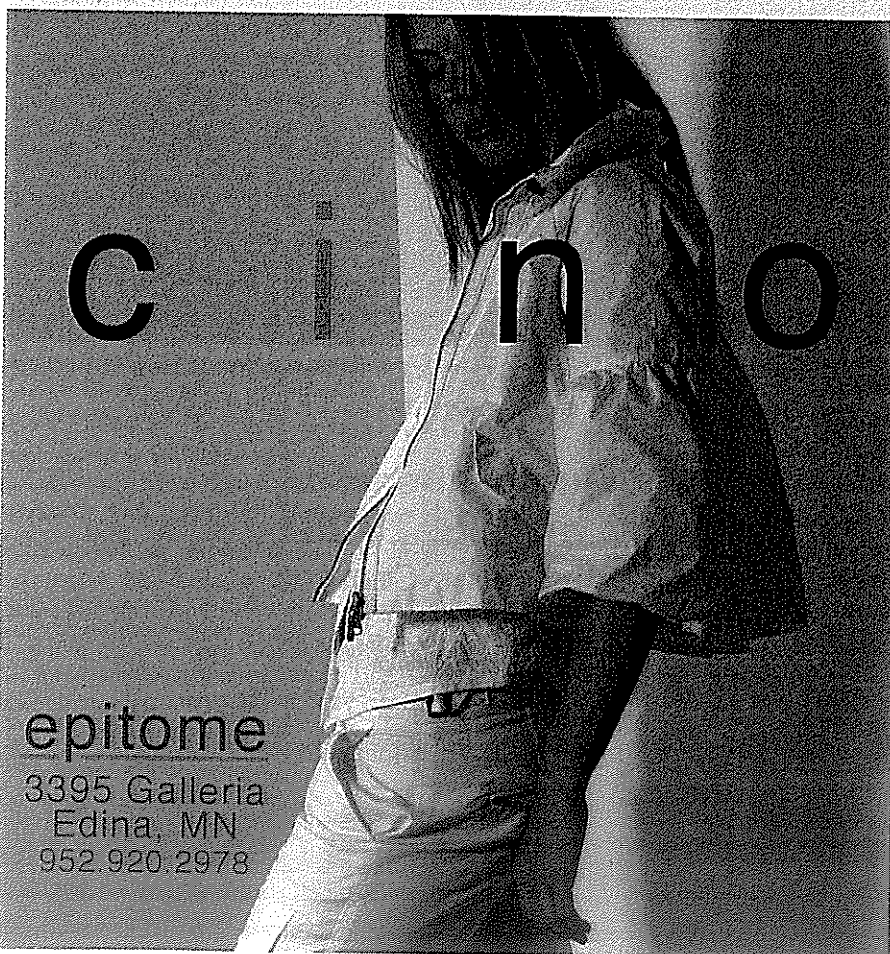
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