

## 1999: The Year Bubblegum Snapped by Mike McPadden

Where were you the first time the Spice Girls' fat asses knocked you on yours?

I was up way too late, scratching mine, and I'll never forget how my fingers froze. It was 1996, and I'd flicked on MTV only to immediately be screeched at by these five stocky-bootied shock-trooper go-go sirens insisting that I tell them what I want, what I really really want, and that they, in return, would tell me what they wanted, what they really, really wanted.

Whoa.

Utterly overpowered by the cheeseball power chords, Coleco drum-machine bombast, and (in)humanly impossible studio harmonies (to say nothing of the doughnut-laden eye-candy), all I could think was, "Uh . . . I guess the '80s are coming back."

But I wasn't thinking right. The '80s were gone forever. And good riddance to them. What was really coming back was the Beatles. Only this time they were going to be siphoned through some really dopey '80s gunk.

Now let's remember the most fundamental fact of life, folks: everything good is the Beatles, everything awful and bogus and pretentious and gross and condescending is the Rolling Stones.

Okay?

Mainstream pop has routinely offered two paths that you can go by (to paraphrase Led Zep, who played bloated Stones to Black Sabbath's horned mop tops). One is all about happy times and hanging out and getting lucky and being *not miserable*, while the other, at its most fruitful, might lasso you something venereal in the East Village if you yap about it long, loud, and boringly enough (and you should trust your reporter on this). But if you're past age 23 and the latter is still your idea of fun, then you probably also thought Will Self's *My Idea of Fun* was fun too and, pal-o-mine, all your ideas are wrong. About everything.

The music that matters today is the same music that mattered yesterday and 15 years ago and when your parents were not yet your parents: crap for the kids. Top 40. Pop. Fluff. The *real* Classic Rock.

In the apparently deathless battle between bubblegum tunes and narco-n-ciggy-flavored twaddle that is somehow supposed to be "good for you"—like liver, only it's all about ruining your liver!—worthwhile combatants reach for their Bazooka every time. After all, who among the following ultimately turned out to be worth fighting for—Herman's Hermits or Jimi Hendrix? The Osmond Brothers or the Allman Brothers? ABBA or Zappa? The Knack or, jeez, I don't know—Tom Verlaine? Paul Westerberg? King Diamond? The only way to answer is to be honest and acknowledge which column you'd choose more from when whipping up a mix tape. Today.

And yet for one freak moment earlier this decade, music that was supposed to be "good for you" actually did manage to sound pretty great, too. This came as a direct result of the Beatles, who relocated to the Pacific Northwest and took on the name Nirvana (those sly devils), soundly trouncing the most disgustingly Stones of neo-Stoneses, Guns N' Roses.

Yay for Nirvana! (And, "Hi, Axl! Hi! Hieeee!")

But more on that in a minute.

At Spice Girl ground zero, the Nirvana-spawned "alterna"-(domi)nation had just commenced its not-slow-enough death spiral. A glorious (and now forgotten?) art-pop confection called "Lovefool" by the Cardigans was inescapable in both its audio and video formats, and everyone was happy, largely because such a self-aware Swede-honey make-out shuffle was obviously art first and pop second. The Spice Girls would switch that order in short enough order, but it would be a while before we'd get what

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"Owh, BYE-buh! BYE-buh!"  
Duh-DUM-DUM-DUMB.

They're stomach-turning, those sounds. But in a good way.

Britney Spears' "... Baby One More Time" is a flat-out (if silicone-emboldened) awesome thing: a sonic youth tonic (for real) that sweeps and booms and dizzyingly builds a heaven-scraping pyramid of Clearasil-smearing emotion higher and more powerfully than should be mathematically possible. Is there a mammalian nervous system capable of not swaying to the chorus? Is the sudden emergence of the extra "still buh-lieve" not as astounding as anything the chariots of the goddesses have ever rolled across our skies? And the plea, "Give me a sigh-high-high-hein" that is answered by a call for an improved poker hand or violence or cock or all three ("Hit me, baby, one more time") is breathtaking in its execution alone, and mind-blowing in its context: this is a record by a high-school kid intended for consumption by other high-school kids. And/or their juniors.

"... Baby One More Time" is nothing less than a before-and-after musical moment just like "That's All Right Mama," and "Good Vibrations," and "God Save the Queen," and "Smells Like Teen Spirit."

Well . . . almost.

"... Baby One More Time" actually bears the most in common, anthemically, with Mudhoney's "Touch Me I'm Sick," the Sub Pop seven-incher that set in stone—I mean, *rock*—the table of contents for grunge.

Both "Touch Me I'm Sick" and "... Baby One More Time" crystallized, by generally improving upon, the scenes from which they arose (Sasquatch-scented, Stooge-metal lumber punk in the case of Mudhoney; billion-selling pseudo-castrati boy-groups-for-girls with Britney). Both songs hit hard and hit often and hit you in places you didn't know you were supposed to feel anything so deep, and lyrically each cries out in desperation for a frantic laying on of hands, the better to move masses—and units—with.

## Disco, Dance Pop and Bubblegum

by David Smay

Where does bubblegum go when it's not on the charts? Two of the most prominent figures in Disco began in bubblegum: Neil Bogart and Giorgio Moroder. Bogart, of course, ran Buddah and founded Casablanca Records, home to the Village People and Donna Summers. Moroder began his career with Eurovision-type ditties like "Looky Looky" and "Moody Trudy." After a brief pitstop writing one glam rock hit, "Son of My Father" by Chicory Tip, Giorgio gave the world a 20-minute sonic orgasm with "I Feel Love." A number of other bubblegum producers and singers made the very easy transition into disco, including Ron Dante (Dante's Inferno—"Fire Island") and Kenny Laguna ("Dario, Can You Get Me Into Studio"). Even the Maestro D'amour, Barry White, provided songs for the Banana Splits ("Doin' the Banana Split") before unleashing the Love Unlimited Orchestra. And if the Village People aren't exactly bubblegum, they're not too far from it either.

Bubblegum's ill-kept secret is that it's dance music for pre-teen girls. So if you want to know where bubblegum goes when it's not called bubblegum, think about Paula Abdul, early Madonna, *Thriller*-era Michael Jackson, Ray Parker, Jr. and Shalamar, and perfect throwaway singles by Stacey Q and Nu Shooz. Think about Stock-Aitken-Waterman and Kylie Minogue. Dance pop, that's what they call it now—Post-Disco, post-new wave and incorporating elements of both. What happens is that every underground dance trend eventually works its way to the surface of pop music. Pop absorbs each new dance rhythm and swaddles it in a simple melody, and sells it to the next generation. Duran Duran desperately wanted to look like Roxy Music Jr. and sound like Chic (culminating in *Power Station*, where they got Tony Thompson to play drums for two of the boys). New Jack Swing put over hip-hop rhythms, and even Tiffany's singles are little more than Hi-NRG makeovers for the mall. Not all dance pop is aimed at kids and shouldn't be presumed to be disposable anymore than bubblegum. Erasure, Pet Shop Boys, Lisa Lisa & Cult Jam, even Janet Jackson belong in this category, and that's a good pedigree. ●

In fact, "... Baby One More Time" even echoes "Touch Me I'm Sick" in its aftereffects, serving to both unify and empower its entire musical peer group for, golly, what's going on two whole semesters now. Foremost among the bozos in Britney's wake are the *Tiger Beat* cover humps who beat her to the charts: the Backstreet Boys, 'N Sync, and 98 Degrees. Each is a queerish cash-making creation of the same mad media-manipulating scientist, and each functions (more or less respectively) as a modern equivalent of the Chili Peppers, Jane's Addiction, and Faith No More, in that they pull off their mortifyingly Caucasoid shuck-n-jive shtick with a fair degree of inventiveness and melodies way more memorable than they have to be. As for telling the "bands" apart, all I know is that one of the Backstreet Boys has a creepy, ink-black Kewpie-doll curl on his kisser, and that one of the 'N Syncs wears shoelaces in his hair (which is thoughtful, like tying a flower to your car antenna so it'll be easy to find in a crowded parking lot).

Like even the most mighty monsters of early-'90s indie rock, the artists who inspire and whose images enhance locker doors and first-ever lip-lock sessions today are primarily singles artists. It's just that the Disney Channel's *The New Mickey Mouse Club* is actually the new Seattle.

It's impossible to predict, for instance, whether the even blonder-than-Britney Christina Aguilera will ever release a 45 compilation as completely kickass as Superchunk's *Tossing Seeds*, but her "Genie in a Bottle" packs at least as much wallop as "Slack Motherfucker," and I still sing "Slack Motherfucker" two hundred times a day. The even better news is that, at present, there are two more growed-uppish Mousketeers slaving over what will be the sugar rushes of this year's Christmas break, and somehow I just know that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Seth Green is about three seconds away from a Dreamworks record deal. Who knew the mousketakeover of everything we do, see, and experience would be so groovy?

As for growed-up Menudo Ricky Martin, he immediately brings to mind former Soundgarden frontman Chris Cornell—just another pretty-boy wail machine giving voice to music way more ambitious than is necessary. Do you think Cornell's newly released *Euphoria Morning* will move as many copies (or asses) as "Livin' La Vida Loca"? Think it'll be one one-millionth as good?

Further solidifying the bubble-grunge connection is the wholly unexpected Top 10 resurrection of now-old New Kids on the Block Jordan Knight and Joe McIntyre, eerily mirroring the way sludge grandpappies Iggy Pop and Neil Young scored hits with "Candy" and *Ragged Glory* in 1990. It's always good to see the brothers and sisters honoring the Old School (though, this time, the application of that term is pretty much literal).

And there may be no more intriguing or hilarious figure in today's faux-smooth muck-pop roster than the recently rechristened Colleen Fitzpatrick. You know her pressed-hair-laden pout from massive record store displays emblazoned with the moniker "Vitamin C." In this current guise, Ms. Fitzpatrick is allegedly responsible for a reggae-scented "hit" titled "Smile" that she has waxed theoretic about in *Rolling Stone* (and elsewhere), but which no one I've met has ever heard outside of a RealPlayer soundbite on CDNow. As it stands (hacking and bleeding through so many tiny iMac speakers), Vitamin C's "Smile" is a rather brilliantly phony whip-up aiming for a world-encompassing sellout, starring an über-blonde deep-throater in Marvel-Comics-tight lycra, rasta puff-minstrel backing vocals ("Watchoo-gon, watchoo-watchoo-gon doo, MON..."), back-to-school release scheduling, and even a built-in Brian Wilson nod for hipster geeks who suspect something deeper afoot as they fall a-flutter before Fitzpatrick's knowingly widened, Otter-Pop-blue peepers.

The yuks erupt when it is revealed that Fitzpatrick is literally old enough to have breastfed the entire New Mickey Mouse Club, and that she was the centerpiece of a similarly desperate-to-hit-the-money-geyser combo called Eve's Plum in the early '90s. With its retro-hep name, an appearance in the high-minded Hollywood youth movie *Higher Education*, and an (attempted) pissed-off, pseudo-riot-grrl, dance-metal

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guitar pop sound, Eve's Plum must have looked, on paper, like the right band at the right time. And in a sense, they were: their legacy is two separate videos that were fabulously (and accurately) goofed upon by Beavis and Butthead. It is now likely that Ms. Fitzpatrick, who tellingly belted "I WANT IT ALL!" in Eve's Plum's closest thing to a hit, is bound to be left in that position. Again.

So now all of this leads us back to the Beatles or, as I stated earlier, Nirvana, or in their most present incarnation, Canadian brother-and-sister white-rap mess-makers, Len.

Len's "Steal My Sunshine" single from the *Go* soundtrack (the one that samples "More, More, More" by the Andrea True Connection) is enchanting and sweet and heartbreaking in the *exact* same fashion as "The Wagon" by Dinosaur Jr. in 1991, only Len just released an entire album that makes good on the song's promise, whereas "The Wagon" was the last (and, really, only) great thing Dino Jr. ever pulled off.

That stated, Len's *You Can't Stop the Bum Rush* could be the cusp-of-the-millennium avatar of Nirvana's *Bleach*, meaning, boy, does it rock in its own right, but look the fuck out for what these clowns produce two years down the pike. Song by song, *Bum Rush* plays like a post-everything-'90s reworking of vintage Sub Pop Singles Club singles, only set in the present and aimed much higher.

Cooler still is that unlike other "moment-in-a-blender" acts such as Camper Van Beethoven and Beck, "cutesy" is never mistaken for bona fide "cute," and Len's not-terribly-secret weapon is a knee-weakening embodiment of the very concept. Sharon Costanzo's voice—likened elsewhere to the ultimate pussycat of Josie's posse—is used sparingly on *Bum Rush*, simply because it is too brilliantly sweet, too powerful and, all around, too perfect. Like the sun, we get just enough to play outside and bake in happily, but the lack of excess exposure, however disappointing at the time, insures that nobody gets burned.

In a society that looks to, say, Courtney Love for any reason other than to induce vomiting in someone who just accidentally swallowed poison, it should be remarkable that Len's level of originality and excitement is aimed squarely at the *Total Request Live* demographic. But, really, it's not a surprise. Because what else is there?

Today's underground is all generic techno, which is okay in and of itself, but will never split open the heads on Mount Rushmore (just like the okay movie *Rushmore* tried to and didn't). Loudness-wise, Limp Kid Kornorgy's take on moron-metal might score slightly higher on its GED than past versions (maybe), but David Lee Roth's belly-up-on-arrival Las Vegas revue offers a snapshot of their collective best case future scenario. And, no, *Spin* magazine, what the world needs is for Axl Rose to keep up the exact same pace in outputting his ongoing solo effort . . . or is it a new Guns N' Roses album? . . . and if it never comes out, will the whole world finally accept that there is just and loving God looking out for us?

The next *Sgt. Pepper*/*Sex Pistols*/*Nevermind* juggernaut is about to explode via some cuddly pin-up combo (just like—hey—*Sgt. Pepper!*). The suburban kids shimmying to the computer-generated commodities on Contemporary Hits Radio today are the same goofs who would have set up rockestra pits in their suburban garages, but now have overloaded suburban PC workstations to conquer the universe from. The revolution's coming in on Candies-clad feet. Because the little girls automatically understand.