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Music: A Sweet Sensation

By David E. Thigpen

The rap on 17-year-old dance-pop star Britney Spears is that she doesn't write any of her own songs, that her voice is sweet but slender, that just a few years ago she was wearing Mouseketeer ears on Disney's Mickey Mouse Club TV show. But if any of that matters to you, well, take a look in the mirror; you must be a grownup.

With its voracious appetite for the new, teen pop can be blissfully nonjudgmental. Unconcerned with matters like artistic credibility that can make rappers and alternative rockers so self-important (Remember how Alanis Morissette ran from her disco-diva past?), teen pop is a universe unto itself, with its own strange laws of gravity. A record that tanks with Generation Xers can rise like helium in the teen market.

Spears' sudden rise to the top of the record charts is proof that she's got what young pop fans hold dearest--energy, cool dance moves, looking good in a bare midriff. In January her debut single and debut album, both titled ...Baby One More Time, hit No. 1 simultaneously, the first time any artist has done so since kiddie rappers Kris Kross in 1992.

Spears is getting a big push from the snappy new video for ...Baby One More Time, in which she dances in a West Side Story-style routine set in the halls of a Los Angeles high school. She is an excellent dancer in a Paula Abdul kind of way, and projects an innocent allure that is a welcome break from the world-weary irony that has seeped into so much of today's pop. The video doesn't bother looking past the surface of teenage life, nor does it aim to. Instead it casts its eye on such touchstones of female adolescence as cutting class and daydreaming about cute guys.

Jive Records signed the then 15-year-old Kentwood, La., high school student after the Mickey Mouse Club was canceled, and cranked up the same intercontinental assembly line of imagemakers and tunesmiths that made stars of the Backstreet Boys. Swedish producer Max Martin, who has also worked with Ace of Base, came in to write Spears' signature song. American Eric Foster White, who produces Boyzone and Hi-Five, wrote three of Spears' catchiest tunes, including the frothy Soda Pop. British director Nigel Dick, who shot the Backstreet Boys' video As Long as You Love Me, was hired to add what he describes as "fun, life, color, energy and a bit of sex, I suppose."

In the face of such success, it's almost churlish to bring up the question of longevity, but some have already raised the name of Tiffany, the 1980s one-hit wonder whose career rose to great heights and then abruptly plummeted. "We're two totally different people, and our sound is totally different," Spears told a Toronto newspaper. True, Spears has the tools for a long career, just as long as top-notch songs keep coming her way. But teen pop is about the here and now, so why worry about tomorrow?

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