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## Music: Big Poppa's Bubble Gum Machine

By Bruce Handy and Timothy Roche

Advice for the modern teen idol: there's more to it than just cashing royalty checks and autographing training bras. There are difficult issues that must be faced. For instance, some toy company may want to measure your face so that it can manufacture dolls with your likeness. You could make a lot of money selling them to your youngest fans, but then your older fans--the 12- and 13-year-olds--would think you're babyish and move on to Hanson. And then there's all the choreography you have to remember while you're trying to look as yummy as possible. And the whole goatee-or-non-goatee dilemma. And the fact that your manager keeps insisting you enter your hotels through the front door to keep the fans at the police barricades happy. It's a hard row to hoe for the turn-of-the-century dreamboat.

Still, these are fat times for bubble gum and its makers. Backstreet Boys, a quintet of clean--but not too clean--cut guys with great dimples and abs, was nominated for a Grammy as Best New Artist this year and has so far grossed more than \$900 million in record, video and merchandise sales. Last year the group's eponymous debut album was the nation's third best-selling record, followed closely by its chief rival 'N Sync, another quintet of clean--but not too clean--cut guys with great dimples and abs whose eponymous debut was the year's fifth best seller. Both records, with their similar mixes of pop dance music spiked with just a touch of hip-hop edge, are still holding strong in the Top 40, as is 'N Sync's Christmas album.

In January.

"Everybody is copying now," grumbles Maurice Starr, who put together the pre-eminent '80s boy groups, New Edition and New Kids on the Block. He is preparing to launch two new groups later this year. Quintets and quartets of young European hotties are also circling the American market. The Backstreet and 'N Sync numbers are like prepubescent chum.

"I don't think this thing has peaked yet," says Tom Calderone, senior vice president of music at MTV. The network was originally loath to air Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync videos, until viewer demand overcame the reflexive hipster's prejudice against groups whose faces appear on school binders with little hearts drawn around them by hand. Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync are currently MTV's most requested artists. "Whether it's cool or not," concedes Calderone, "it's what the viewers want."

If, to untrained eyes and ears, the two groups are virtually indistinguishable, there are a pair of good reasons for this. First, the time-tested formulas for making music for young girls to swoon to still work. They date all the way back through New Kids, the Jackson Five and the Monkees to the Beatles, who in their earliest, cuddliest incarnation were the progenitors of this sort of thing--if you don't count Frank Sinatra or Franz Liszt or probably some medieval troubadour no one remembers.

And second, both Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync are the brainchildren of the same man: Louis J. Pearlman, a florid 44-year-old entrepreneur based in Orlando, Fla., whose countenance suggests Ken

Starr crossed with the late Chris Farley. Pearlman's ambition for his Trans Continental Entertainment and related companies is nothing less than to create a new Motown. O-Town, for Orlando, is the name he has given his sprawling \$6 million recording studio that doubles as a boot camp for would-be stars. Here the crushes of tomorrow are groomed by teams of choreographers, vocal coaches, personal trainers, marketers, stylists and p.r. experts. Pearlman's stable includes a young girl group and three more up-and-coming boy groups, including C-Note, a quartet of three cute Hispanic guys and one cute blond guy, from whom many in the music industry are expecting big things when their first Latin-inflected CD is released this spring.

On a recent afternoon at the O-Town complex, C-Note is huddled inside a sound room harmonizing with a vocal coach, while down the hall, Take Five, a younger-than-'N Sync quintet for pre-teen fans, is practicing footwork with a choreographer. Pearlman comes in to take a look, and the kids stop to give him hugs and shake his hand. "What's up, Big Poppa?" one of them asks (they actually call him that). "Did you get a haircut, man?" "You look like Tom Cruise," jokes another. Big Poppa beams.

At present, there are 24 young musicians signed to the studio, most found through ads in the trades or auditions; many are from the Orlando area, where performers now flock because of the increasing film and television production at Disney and Universal, as well as all the singing and dancing jobs at theme-park shows. The O-Town kids are paid \$500 to \$1,000 a week until their groups take off and they start making real money. Or not. A reporter jokes that if things don't work out, the boys can always go to work for the Chippendales chain, which Pearlman owns. "Or make pizza," Big Poppa adds. He owns a pizza restaurant too. Meantime, he tries to keep his young charges from the well-known temptations, drugs and whatnot, that come with the music business. "Big Poppa's watching," he says. Like a rich uncle, Big Poppa has been known to throw elaborate pool parties or fly group members and their parents to New York City for dinner.

Assembling the right group is a delicate business; as with any ritualized art form, from Kabuki to slasher films, one must follow rules but with a whiff of originality. Pearlman and his staff look at everything--the proportionate size of group members, their height, their weight, their hair color, their personalities onstage and off. Who will be the prankster, like 'N Sync's Chris Patrick? Who will be the lead sex symbol, like Backstreet's Nick Carter? Who can make a credible dangerous guy, the one who dresses more "urban" and maybe even has tattoos?

Pearlman, who grew up in Queens, N.Y., first made his mark on the world by building Trans Continental Airlines, which leases jets to such celebrities as Michael Jackson and Madonna. In the early '90s, when New Kids rented one of his planes, Pearlman was surprised that a kiddie pop group could afford it. When his cousin Art Garfunkel explained that an act like New Kids could bring in hundreds of millions of dollars, the seeds of Trans Continental Entertainment were planted.

Over the course of seven months in 1993, Pearlman found the five members of Backstreet Boys through a series of auditions, chance meetings and familial connections (Kevin Richardson, the boy-next-door one, and Brian Littrell, the older GQ-y one, are cousins). All told, Pearlman pumped \$1 million into the group and \$2 million more into an entertainment-company infrastructure to support its members before they signed with Jive Records. At the time, alternative rock was still big, the New Kids were played out, and industry wisdom was that bubble gum was over. But all things must return as well as pass.

"For a while there, kids wanted to be older than they were," says David Zedeck, owner of Renaissance Entertainment in New York City, which books concert tours for both Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync. "Now," he says, "kids want to be kids again. It's the effect of Disney and Nickelodeon on the music industry."

But here's the sad part of the story: when Backstreet Boys was starting to break, Pearlman, sensing an

even vaster market, formed 'N Sync. Hurt by the sudden competition, Backstreet Boys sued Pearlman as well as their personal managers (who are allied with but independent of Trans Continental). Happily, the group settled out of court with Big Poppa, and members still graciously refer to him in interviews as "the sixth Backstreet Boy."

In terms of differentiation, to one critic's eyes Backstreet is the marginally raunchier group, although this is somewhat like insisting that Homepride Buttermilk is a racier bread than Wonder. In each group's stage shows, nothing more untoward is going on than the obligatory bared torsos and an occasional semi-risque hip movement. Even Elvis Presley in his prime 4 1/2 decades ago was lewder. The song titles are self-explanatory: I Just Wanna Be with You, I Need Love, I'll Never Break Your Heart. Once in a while a kid may sing that he wants to be "your lover," but it's all within the realm of I Want to Hold Your Hand. As always, the groups are selling themselves as training boyfriends--sexy, crushable, but no Usher, say, who might use a swear word now and then or want to go too far too fast, if you catch our drift.

Oh, yes. The music. In interviews, Backstreet and 'N Sync members stress the centrality of "their" music. As Pearlman says, "You have to be able to sing first or it doesn't matter how good-looking you are." The two groups share some of the same songwriters and producers, and both acts owe their most immediate debt to the somewhat more sophisticated R.-and-B. harmonizing of Boyz II Men. The hits are catchy, even compelling, but it's hard, once a girl has grown breasts, to make it through a whole album's worth; then again, to be fair, the same was true of the Jackson Five, the greatest bubble-gum group in history.

Marketing to pubescent girls has its peculiarities. Selling merchandise on the Internet isn't nearly as lucrative as it is for other performers, since most of the boy-group fan base doesn't have credit cards. And given that it might take fans longer than their older sisters and brothers to scrape together the price of a ticket, the groups have to space their playdates carefully before returning to the same city. Nevertheless, since a big part of the game is maintaining an aura of intimacy with the fans, the boys have grueling concert schedules studded with state fairs and in-store appearances--'N Sync did more than 140 dates last year, a far more frantic pace than most multiplatinum artists would put up with. Then again, the need isn't quite so urgent for most acts to--let's not put too fine a point on it--milk their popularity.

"Radio gets tired of the screaming girls and the calls coming in for requests. These groups don't last forever," says Donna Wright, who used to co-manage Backstreet Boys, is still in litigation with them and thus has an ax to grind. Backstreet Boys sued Wright in part because they wanted somebody else to take them to the next level. "There is no next level," Wright replies. "This is as big as you get." Pearlman figures on a three-to-five-year life-span for his bands. "The new fan base, the younger sisters, may or may not be into you," he says. "They may be into the next group." Which may or may not be another Trans Continental group.

The boys see things differently. "We won't be a one-hit wonder," says Joshua Scott Chasez--J.C. of 'N Sync. He's supposed to be the brooding one, yet adds, "I have faith." And who knows? Michael Jackson did O.K. for himself. But does anyone remember who the sensitive Bay City Roller was?

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