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Music: Fresh Faces from Beantown

By Jay Cocks

Born to be hated: fresh-faced white boys, copping black street attitudes, co-opting black dance sounds, style and slang. They produce Reddi Wip pop music that comes out of nowhere but sells a cumulative 7 million on two albums, scoring with five hit singles (Cover Girl is currently No. 2), while the R. and B. brothers still struggle for the mainstream breakthrough.

The New Kids on the Block are commercial product all right, right down to the heels of their felony flyers. Fast-food Princes, Jack-in-the-Box Jacksons, rappers with no nutritional value. Right. They're also pretty good and, of course, just plain pretty. Their just released Merry, Merry Christmas is a Yuletide celebration that sounds snappy while simultaneously evoking the innocent pleasures of mistletoe and holly. All the things that hard rap never is, but those 7 million record buyers apparently yearn for it to be: safe, snug and (if you listen close), just a little smug. This is one key to the Kids' success. Parents are perpetually sweating about rap-smitten, rock-blitzed offspring going to concerts and mixing it up with gold-chain snatchers and drug vendors. Little chance of that on any block where the New Kids reign.

They are as scrubbed up as the Bay City Rollers and as menacing as lap cats. So what could be their main "dislikes," as listed, fan-mag style, on their 1986 debut album? Jonathan Knight, 20, and Danny Wood, 20, say "prejudice"; Donnie Wahlberg, 20, mentions "war," and Joseph McIntyre, 17, nominates "poverty." Jordan Knight, 19, Jonathan's younger brother, plumps for "all basketball teams except the Celtics." There, then. You wouldn't mind if your daughter married a New Kid, unless, of course, you're a Lakers fan.

"We never got together and said we were going to be good role models," says Donnie. "When we say no to drugs, it's from seeing people around us using them." The Kids all hail from Dorchester, a blue-collar section of Boston where the street action can run pretty heavy. Maurice Starr, 35, the drummer and producing whiz who put the Kids together in 1985, comes from neighboring Roxbury, where the streets are definitively mean. He has produced all the Kids' records, writes much of their material and commands the instrument work ("All instruments played or programmed by Maurice Starr" reads a large credit on the Hangin' Tough album). His gifts give the Kids a smooth buzz, but his ego increasingly gives them a pain.

Starr, who assembled the soul group New Edition (from which the superlative Bobby Brown emerged), has the musical credentials that the Kids still lack. "Our first album was a Svengali-type situation," Jordan Knight concedes. "But on the second," Jon Knight adds, "we told him stuff we wanted. We're from the streets. We like music that is funky, with heavy bass."

This week the Kids leave home (everyone still lives with his family) for a five-month tour. Starr will show up only occasionally, so the fans, Donnie thinks, will finally learn that "Danny is a great songwriter, Jordan is a great keyboardist, that I am a drummer and singer and dancer." Four years ago, Jordan auditioned for Starr and got told, "Get ready to be great. You are going to be the biggest thing in

the world." Replied Jordan: "All I want is a scooter." He got his wish, and then some. Just now, the New Kids on the Block are hell on wheels.

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