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Jive Records Presents: Teen Idols Collect Them All!

By David E. Thigpen

Every so often, when catchy music, clever marketing and the right timing come together, one record company captures prevailing tastes in a way that enables it to define the musical essence of an era. Motown did so in the 1960s with soul; Def Jam followed in the '80s with rap; and Interscope ruled the mid-'90s by mixing rap and metal.

By that same calculus, then, the beginning of the new century unquestionably belongs to Jive Records, the colossally successful independent label that has almost singlehandedly brought the teen-pop revolution--you know, the army of dimpled boy bands and midriff-baring teen queens--into homes across North America, Europe and Asia. Home to three of the world's highest-grossing acts--Britney Spears, 'N Sync and Backstreet Boys--as well as a significant roster of rap, rock and R.-and-B. performers, Jive has climbed to the top of the industry ladder by understanding, reflecting and influencing mass-market tastes to a greater degree than anyone else. Which may be why your sixth-grade daughter tried to leave the house in a halter top last week.

Last year three Jive releases finished among the Top 10 best-selling U.S. albums: Spears' *Oops!...I Did It Again*, Backstreet's *Black & Blue* and 'N Sync's *No Strings Attached*. If you think that's just kid stuff, think again. Privately owned by South African entrepreneur Clive Calder, Jive (and its parent company, Zomba) rode the teen wave to an estimated \$800 million in sales last year, making it the world's largest independent label. Jive's 6.7% U.S. market share placed it well ahead of better-established labels, including Arista (4.9%) and Def Jam (3.9%). This year Zomba (which also includes Verity, a gospel label, and Silvertone, a blues label) could pull in as much as \$1 billion.

Numbers like that make friends and competitors pay attention. "We'd be lining up if they wanted to sell," says Ken Berry, chief of the gigantic EMI Music conglomerate, "as would a lot of other people too, I suspect." Record industry analyst Michael Nathanson of the Sanford Bernstein company says Jive is nimble and quick to catch hot trends: "They've got an incredible track record of breaking new artists and building mass stars." In the expanding worldwide market, Jive has posted the kind of stratospheric sales numbers that the industry hasn't seen since Beatlemania: 60 million for four Backstreet albums, 30 million for two Spears albums and 14 million for 'N Sync's *No Strings Attached*. The question now is whether Jive can keep its numbers up as its customers--and its key artists--start to outgrow their teen years.

To get to the center of the teen-pop revolution, you enter an unmarked, soot-colored brownstone in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. In his office on the 11th floor, behind his big wooden desk with its neatly organized stacks of CDs, Jive president Barry Weiss is a crackling wire of energy, jumping up to fetch a DVD from a shelf, scribbling memos, barking orders in a brisk, rat-tat-tat fashion. The walls of the native Long Islander's office are decorated with the trophies of two decades of conquests--half a

dozen gold and platinum albums.

In late July, Jive asserted its market muscle in spectacular fashion as 'N Sync's new album, *Celebrity*, posted first-week U.S. sales of 1.8 million, the largest first-week total since, well, 'N Sync's previous record. Sales dropped 76% the second week, but Jive executives were still upbeat. "This is a big time for us," says Weiss. "We're in a wonderful place now. As an independent, we don't have the pressure of making quarterly numbers or pressure from shareholders. We don't have to rush out records and make bad decisions just because there's pressure from the top."

The chief architect of the Jive empire is Calder, a 54-year-old millionaire who shuns industry socializing and photo-ops and prefers to operate below the radar of press attention (he declined to be interviewed for this article). Once afflicted with severe allergies, Calder had his quarters in Jive's New York City offices sealed off from the rest of the building and fitted with its own air supply. Jive employees referred to it as "the bunker."

If touches like these have lent him a Howard Hughes-like air of mystery, those who know Calder insist it's a bum rap. "He's very friendly; he just doesn't mix and mingle a lot," says Ajax Scott, editor of London's *Music Week*. "He has bigger fish to fry." Epic Records executive V.P. David McPherson, who worked at Jive for four years, says, "You can be in a room with a bunch of high-flossing execs and never know he's there. He's soft-spoken but not shy."

When the time comes to go head to head over a boardroom table, Calder is a famously tough poker player. If the deal isn't right, he has been known to let future superstars leave for other labels. Will Smith, Aaliyah and Kid Rock did just that. "Jive is difficult--no, I wouldn't say difficult; they are conservative in deals," says Britney Spears' co-manager, Larry Rudolph. "It's a trade-off you accept going into business with them. You'll get less money up front and fewer points, but I'd rather have that and a hit album than the points and no hit. Their batting average has got to be five or 10 times that of the major labels."

Calder can also be impressively ruthless if necessary. When 'N Sync exited BMG's RCA Records in 1999 over RCA's objections, many observers thought that Calder would not approach the band for fear of alienating BMG, which is Jive's distributor. But Calder did so anyway, plucking the enormously profitable band out of the hands of Sony boss Tommy Mottola and several other eager suitors. 'N Sync's Lance Bass remembers that Calder's personal pitch was powerful. "A lot of people said to us, 'You're screwed; there are 20 million bands just like you.' Clive was the only one who believed in us. Jive stepped up to the table, and we liked them because they're the kings of promotion and marketing."

Calder kicked off his career back in the '60s as a bassist playing Motown covers in Johannesburg bar bands. He never attended college, but he made enough money as a teenage musician to support his family. In the early '70s, with his friend Ralph Simon, a keyboard player who would later join him in founding Zomba (Simon now chairs a wireless entertainment company), Calder branched out into producing local acts, promoting concerts, re-recording Motown hits for the Johannesburg market and sometimes peddling discs by hand, all the while dodging police, who restricted contact between blacks and whites.

"It was such a small industry that we both did everything," remembers Simon. "We had to find the talent, find the songs, take them to radio and promote the concerts ourselves. But it was very important to get out of South Africa because of the terrible political situation, so we decided to try to make a mark internationally."

In 1975 they launched Zomba in London (and opened a New York office six years later), naming their company after the former capital of Malawi, in central Africa. Simon recalls that they knew the name was right after learning of a tribe living outside Zomba near Lake Malawi whose members are said to

possess extraordinary hearing. The name Jive is after "township jive," a form of South African music and dance. "We would study the makeup and construction of each of the five major record companies and debate which parts of them would be an exemplar of how to best make a new record company work," recalls Simon. "The idea was to have a broad, international-minded business." From Berry Gordy's Motown, for example, Calder picked up the idea of pairing his artists with a team of in-house songwriters and producers, which could not only guarantee a steady flow of material but was less costly than hiring outsiders.

Calder's greatest stroke was assembling the team that enabled Jive to capitalize on teen pop. For talent, he went to the Svengali-like Lou Pearlman, whose Florida teen-band boot camp cranked out Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync, two acts with broad demographic appeal. For composing, Calder hired Swedish producer Max Martin to create light but carefully structured songs. And he caught a lucky break when a former Mousketeer named Britney Spears turned up at Jive's office for an audition.

The toughest test for young stars is crossing over to mature markets. Jive's biggest test will come when Spears releases her third CD (Nov. 6) and stars in her first feature film early next year. Is she the new Madonna or just another Tiffany? British pop star Dido has co-written a track for Spears that Jive no doubt hopes will help lure listeners old enough to drive. Also in the next few months, Backstreet Boys will know whether member A.J. McLean's alcohol rehab will cause the slipping band to disintegrate. But even if the teen-pop boom goes bust, Jive is making plans to move forward. Last year it signed a deal with rock label Volcano to further diversify itself. The first release under that deal, Tool's *Lateralus*, was an instant hit.

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