

Journalistic Approach to New Jack Swing

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It's clear that the wound is still fresh, for otherwise the ghouls would have arrived long ago, as they did with Acid House and "Electro." What a time you chose to be born! The short-lived musical genre known as New Jack Swing is just old enough to be vaguely embarrassing. It hasn't attained classic status, and may never do so. Why is it that some styles pass directly into legend, while others remain trapped in an awkward limbo?

It's important to stress that New Jack Swing, like most conservative pop, depended heavily on producer svengalis. When we talk about the '80s, the specter of production control looms over all hit music, dance music, beat music. A good example is the Pointer Sisters' 1983 album *Break Out*, in which different working units are responsible for each track, and the achievement is that the product is coherent at all, let alone a classic record.

New Jack Swing emerged in the latter half of the decade. The way was cleared by Bobby Brown's 1986 split from New Edition, the hit group created by Maurice Starr and Michael Jonzun. The genre reached a high point around 1990 with the international success of Bell Biv DeVoe's single *Poison*. By 1991 it was probably dead of overexposure, as signaled by the release of the film *New Jack City*, co-scripted by Barry Michael Cooper, a journalist and early electro pop producer whom some say coined the term "New Jack Swing" in a *Village Voice* article. The same year saw the release of the Wreckx-n-Effects hit *New Jack Swing*, another possible source of the term. In

any case, it's clear that the mainstream press frenzy of the early '90s was symptomatic of the genre's quick slide into irrelevance.

The sound could be described as an admixture of hip hop—at the time still roughly produced, which makes sense considering that albums were being turned out by bedroom-based 19-year-olds totting cheap samplers—and the kind of music on which labels like Motown always depended: popular soul that relied on hired guns to midwife the product. It was an obvious match, and it still seems a little surprising that major labels took so long to catch on. Actually, the entire New Jack Swing venture can be seen as a grab for market share, a way to assimilate an obstreperous but promising youngster into the secure, decades-old structures of popular black music. This sort of music depended on being taken as sexy, smooth, Adult. Lacking now was anything 'edgy' (a defining critical term in the 1990s, across media). Adult Urban Contemporary producers decided that in the interests of survival they'd better learn to incorporate hip hop rhythms, samples, and production techniques. If this indeed was some kind of strategy, today's charts demonstrate its total success. Motown itself, for example, found new life in the 1990s with prime New Jack Swing acts like Another Bad Creation and Boyz II Men, the latter of which is, according to the RIAA, the most lucrative R&B group in history.

The New Jack idiom proved tremendously popular, spanning disparate genres and forms. Its influence could be seen in movies like

House Party, hip hop groups like Heavy D and Nice & Smooth, catch-up albums by established stars like Michael Jackson, and fashions that included towering high-top fades, single-suspender overalls, and baseball caps dangling their price tags. The styles stretched as far as Japan, where artists like Zoo and LL Brother carried the torch.

“If you take a band that’s good, you bust it up and sell three times as many records.” This was Devo’s critique of what they saw as rampant in rock ‘n’ roll, and New Jack Swing honed the strategy, with popular artists going on to become producers rather than simply solo acts. For instance, New Edition gave Michael Bivins the industry experience that he’d use to orchestrate ABC and Boyz II Men: the family seed must be perpetuated. The prodigy-grooming formula was copied back into hip hop by artists like Dr. Dre and EPMD (whose 1990 hit single “Gold Digger” swiped the archetypal New Jack Swing beat and slowed it to a hip hop tempo, incidentally).

But what is it that makes this music “New Jack Swing”, as opposed to something else, “up-tempo R&B,” say? Distinctions are hard to make, as this is a style with an as-yet unwritten history. Bell Biv DeVoe suggest a general definition in a liner-note credo describing their own music: “mentally hip hop, smoothed out on the R&B tip with a pop feel appeal to it.” It’s important to note that this definition asserts hip-hop as the heart of the sound. After all, one of the putative selling points of New Jack Swing was its “edge.” New Edition was a saccharine boy band, and Bobby Brown, in leaving for the new style, wished to define a more mature image; the same strategy was adopted by many other performers, including Janet Jackson, not to mention the remaining members of New Edition.

For a supposedly street-wise mode, however, the music itself is fairly tame. This is due partly to fat record contracts, which demanded high production values, which meant increasingly professional electronic studios and a clean, airless sound that made no attempt to conceal its digital origin. As with electrofunk, the goal was the crispest highs and the heaviest bass. While in some music samples are the chinks in the armor through which grit, poor recording, and vinyl-crackle enter, here they were employed as rhythmic punctuation rather than as loops, and were in any case often generated in the studio rather than appropriated. Tracks were actually composed, sometimes by producers with music backgrounds, and synth sounds came straight out of the box, with little of the knob-twiddling that House and Techno brought to electronic music. It was a voracious synthetic mode, seeking to fold in hard beats and cuts, breathy vocals, chimes and bells, swelling strings, sexual innuendo and declarations of love. Rapping was kept to a minimum, sometimes ushered into special bridges and breaks, and overshadowed by harmonizing, crooning, and wooing. The term “swing” referred to the rhythm, which often employed a combination of straight 8ths, 16th-note shuffles, and 16th-note swing patterns (in Europe, the music was sometimes known as Swingbeat, and this name survives in the Netherlands, which for some reason is a stronghold of New Jack Swing fandom). The style was most clearly expressed in the particular sound crafted by producers like Teddy Riley, who is acknowledged as the master and originator. While Riley’s breakthrough was Keith Sweat’s 1987 album *Make It Last Forever*, he hit his stride a year later with the trio Guy, one of the most influential bands of the period, and went on to remix or produce literally hundreds of tracks.

What are we to make of this movement? It may be that it's deeply reactionary, but there's something interesting about the low regard in which it's now held. You can trace a cyclical pattern: every ten years or so, up rises a dumb, faddish genre that will eventually come to sound like death. "Jungle" might see its turn come up again, although it never reached a critical levels of popularity, at least in the US. Ultimately, these comparisons are absurd but fun: you could juxtapose white acts like Sudden Impact or New Kids on the Block with the Brothers Gibb, or with Steely Dan, whose notoriously antiseptic sound has affinities with that of New Jack Swing.

If we take a genre that's even closer to us in time, like Grunge, it's clear that New Jack Swing's current crap status doesn't come simply from the passage of time. Grunge, while quickly coopted, grew out of an apparently independent community, whereas New Jack Swing was from the start large-format, cash-making, eyes-on-the-charts. Giving such control to the technicians yields a sound overly indebted to then-fashionable production tools, whether it was digital reverb in the early eighties or the auto-tuner today. What is off-putting to us is the pathos of the obsolete product. It made a sacrifice so that we could move on with a clear conscience. Pop cannibalized any useful parts and ditched the corpse. Producers like Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis long since moved on to the next sound; surely they haven't shed a tear for New Jack Swing.