

Journalistic Approach to New Jack Swing

Seth Price, 2002

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It's clear that the wound is still fresh, for, if it were otherwise, the ghouls would have arrived long ago, as they did with Northern Soul, Miami Bass, 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, like most conservative pop, New Jack Swing depended heavily on producer svengalis. When we talk about the eighties, the specter of production control looms over all hit music, dance music, electronic 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, its incipient arrival signaled 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 journalist Barry Michael Cooper, a producer of early electro pop under the name "Micronawts", whom some say coined the term "New Jack Swing" in an article for *The Village Voice*. 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 seems clear that 1991's mainstream press frenzy was symptomatic of the genre's quick slide into irrelevance.

The sound could be described as an admixture of hip hop—at the time roughly produced, which wasn't surprising, considering that albums were being turned out by nineteen year olds on cheap bedroom sampler kits—and the kind of music on which labels like Motown always depended, popular soul that relied on producers to midwife the product. It was an obvious match, and it still seems surprising that major labels took so long to catch on. In fact, the entire New Jack Swing venture can be seen as a producer's grab for market share, a way to assimilate an obstreperous but commercially successful youngster into the secure, decades-old structures of popular black music. This sort of music at the time depended on being received as sexy, smooth, Adult. Lacking was anything "edgy", which was a defining critical term in the 1990s, across media. Adult Urban Contemporary producers decided that, in the interests of survival, they'd better incorporate hip hop rhythms, samples, and production techniques. If this indeed was some kind of strategy, today's charts demonstrate its success. Motown itself, through streetwise marketing and production, 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 style proved tremendously popular, spanning disparate genres and forms. Its influence could be seen in movies like *House Party*, rap groups like Heavy D or Nice & Smooth, catch-up albums by established stars like Michael Jackson, and fashions such as towering high-top fads, single-suspender overalls, and baseball caps dangling fresh price tags. The style 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. New Edition gave Michael Bivins experience that he’d use to groom ABC and Boyz II Men: the family seed must be perpetuated. The formula was copied back into hip hop by artists like Dr. Dre and EPMD.

But what is it that makes this music “New Jack Swing”, as opposed to something else, say, “up-tempo R&B”? Distinctions are hard to make, as it’s 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 presents hip-hop as the heart of the sound. After all, one of the premises of New Jack Swing was its “edge”: New Edition was a saccharine boy band, and Bobby Brown, in leaving, wanted to assert a more mature image. It was a strategy adopted by many other performers, including Janet Jackson, not to mention the remaining members of New Edition.

The style was most clearly expressed in the particular sound crafted by producers like Teddy Riley, who is acknowledged as master and originator. While Riley’s breakthrough was Keith Sweat’s 1987 LP *Make It Last Forever*, he really hit his stride a year later with the trio Guy, one of the most influential bands of the period, and he went on to remix or produce literally hundreds of tracks.

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 musics samples are 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, often by producers with extensive musical training, 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 contained in bridges and breaks, and overshadowed by harmonizing, crooning, 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 is a stronghold of New Jack Swing fandom, inexplicably).

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, catchy mode that will eventually come to sound like death. "Jungle" or "Drum & Bass" could see its turn come up, for example, although those forms never reached critical levels of popularity, at least in North America. Ultimately, these comparisons are fun but absurd: you might juxtapose white acts like Sudden Impact or New Kids on the Block with the Brothers Gibb, or even 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 shit status doesn't come simply from the passage of time. Grunge, while quickly co-opted, 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 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. It seems that music arising from a community dies with some dignity, whereas producers like Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis have long since moved on to the next sound; surely they haven't shed a tear for New Jack Swing.