

In 1998, pop music was poised to make one of its greatest comebacks in history. Following several years of brooding, self-absorbed radio fare, top 40 listeners were aching to see the sun and have a little fun with the car windows down. \*NSYNC introduced itself to the U.S. with the anthemic, high-energy “I Want You Back.” In March, it lit the airwaves like fireworks, washing away FM’s dark veneer and offering a proper introduction to the consummate millennium-era hitmaking ensemble. Of course, at the time, no one knew that these five show biz kids were destined to break records left and right.

Over the course of five years, \*NSYNC—Justin Randall Timberlake (Justin), Joseph Anthony Fatone Jr. (Joey), Joshua Scott Chasez (JC), James Lance Bass (Lance) and Christopher Alan Kirkpatrick (Chris)—would sell nearly 30 million records in the U.S. and 42 million worldwide. The group charted with a dozen singles, conquering top 40, AC, dance, Latin, country and R&B. Their gargantuan worldwide “No Strings Attached” and “PopOdyssey” stadium tours rewrote sales, artistic and technical standards for road shows (when tickets for the first 52 “Strings” dates went on sale, one million sold on day one, a record). Later, the stripped down “Celebrity” tour zeroed in on \*NSYNC’s musical prowess. These guys even refined the definition of a boy band, working with “grown-up” acts like Gloria Estefan, Celine Dion, Phil Collins and Richard Marx.

Their story began modestly enough in the mid-1990s. Timberlake and Chasez knew each other as Mouseketeer graduates of the Disney Channel’s “The Mickey Mouse Club.” As the two were recording respective demos in Nashville in search of a recording contract, Timberlake received a call from Kirkpatrick, whom he’d met on the audition circuit around Orlando’s Disney and Universal Studios, suggesting that they put together an ensemble. The three then went on the prowl for a bass singer, meeting up in a club with Fatone, who Kirkpatrick and Chasez knew from making the rounds. His voice wasn’t low enough to meet the role’s demands, but a kinship was established and he was in. Finally, a call to Timberlake’s former vocal coach reeled in Bass.

Once the quintet was set, \*NSYNC was groomed on the BMG Ariola label in Germany, where uptempo pop music was more readily accepted. Within weeks, “I Want You Back” snatched three long-held records: it hit the singles charts faster than any other new act (after one week) and had the longest top 10 stay ever for a new group (eight weeks), while they became the fastest newcomer to hit the top 10 (in three weeks). The last such superlative artist was a guy named Michael Jackson, and he already had a legacy established with his brothers.

With success secured across regions of Europe, the boys returned home with a track record and the album was released on BMG’s RCA label \*NSYNC more or less started over, performing in clubs around Orlando and at Disney’s Pleasure Island. “I Want You Back” was an effortlessly executed hit in America, accompanied by a video showcasing savvy dance steps and shimmering smiles. It hit No. 13 on the singles chart, sold a million copies and remained active at radio for half a year. From there, as anybody’s grandmother knows, the singles hit with blow torch intensity, as the public gobbled up \*NSYNC’s musical wares with unbridled gusto.

The uptempo, sing-along “Tearin’ Up My Heart” came next, reaching the top 15, establishing the group as stalwart chart warriors, while awakening record labels to the dazzling star power coming out of Sweden that was fueling the group’s ascendancy. Denniz Pop, Max Martin, Rami, Carl Sturken and Evan Rogers and Kristian Lundin became as ubiquitous to hitmaking

executives as pepperoni on pizza. From there, \*NSYNC cruised onto the fast track, making history with most every move. Their self-titled debut album ultimately peaked at No. 2 and sold more than 10 million copies stateside; the group was named the No. 3 new act of 1998 by Billboard. The fab five's faces became a fixture on teen magazines, while the burgeoning Internet became a smorgasbord of unofficial fan sites, all clamoring to determine the cutest, coolest, most talented member—and, of course, to compare their favorite colors.

Third single, the ballad “God Must Have Spent A Little More Time on You” became \*NSYNC's first top 10 release and a #2 at AC radio, attesting to their striking versatility (to the point of convincing country staple Alabama to record a version of the song, with \*NSYNC providing background vocals; it reached No. 3 on the country singles chart). Fourth radio-friendly pop single, “I Drive Myself Crazy” followed. At the end of 1998, the group released its second album, *Home for Christmas*, which provided holiday cheer for more than 2 million fans (a European version was titled *The Winter Album*). In 1999, \*NSYNC's 18-month-old debut was the No. 4 disc of the year, while they were deemed the No. 2 pop album group/duo. In addition, ‘N the Mix with \*NSYNC was the year's top-selling video. As the new millennium dawned, the group ushered adults into the fan club, by contributing vocals to Gloria Estefan's “Music of My Heart.” The song became \*NSYNC's biggest hit to date, peaking at No. 2 on the singles chart and at AC radio.

The release of their third album *No Strings Attached* in April 2000 marked a transition for the boys in the band, having inked a new deal with Jive Records the previous Fall. The set debuted at No. 1—selling a first week record of 2.4 million copies—and spent eight consecutive weeks at the summit. First single, the independence-themed “Bye Bye Bye,” not only resonated with listeners to the tune of No. 4 on the singles chart, but it was nominated for Song of the Year at the Grammy Awards. In an instant, the world's most popular boy band graduated to the major leagues in terms of artistic achievement. Follow-up single, “It's Gonna Be Me,” perhaps the group's definitive dance refrain, at last catapulted \*NSYNC to No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100, for two weeks in the summer of 2000. Third release, the love ballad “This I Promise You,” written and produced by Richard Marx, displayed an elegance and maturity that made the song a true classic in the group's catalog and one of the year's indelible melodies; it was also \*NSYNC's fourth consecutive top 10 hit, all in the span of the year 2000, and their first AC #1. The song was also recorded in Spanish as “Yo Te Voy A Amar,” which \*NSYNC performed on the Latin Grammy Awards.

*No Strings Attached* finished as the best-selling album of the year, while the group was the leading top 40 act and top pop artist/duo of 2000. When the guys returned to the studio in 2001 to record their fourth album *Celebrity*, they continued a transition toward self-expression, calling upon such producers as the Neptunes, Rodney Jerkins and Brian McKnight for a more robust R&B vibe. The members also revealed their writing skills on a number of tracks, including Justin's contribution to first single, the jive-talking “Pop,” which said it all: “I'm sick and tired of hearin' all these people talk about/What's the deal with this pop life/And when is it gonna fade out?/The thing you've got to realize/What we're doing is not a trend/We got the gift of melody/We're gonna bring it til the end.” Fans and radio welcomed the shift, and the song took a shine to the top 20 in July 2001.

The five-times platinum *Celebrity* spawned two more smashes, “Gone,” which hit No. 11, and “Girlfriend” featuring hip-hop namesake Nelly, which peaked at No. 5. Following \*NSYNC’s lower-key acoustic “Celebrity” tour that year, Justin, Joey, JC, Lance and Chris decided it was time for a rest stop along the freeway of fame.

Since then, the guys have embarked on a number of creative independent endeavors, including solo albums, movies, Broadway, television and music production. For now, that’s where the story stands—with this greatest hits collection providing a non-stop triptych through \*NSYNC’s musical legacy. Each song represents a milestone along the magical journey for a young vocal ensemble that set a new standard for pop quality, tenacity and celebrity. For any fan of melodic music from 1998 to 2002, \*NSYNC provides a fluid season-by-season soundtrack that will endure for the long term. It all started with dauntless rehearsals in an Orlando warehouse filled with hope. But now \*NSYNC’s vast accomplishments belong to the world.

— Chuck Taylor

Chuck Taylor has been an editor and writer at *Billboard* since 1995. He first interviewed \*NSYNC in April and November 1998.

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