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Marketing androgyny: the evolution of the Backstreet Boys

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Abstract: *The trend in popular culture away from idealising mature, strong 'men' in favour of young, androgynous 'boys' can in part be traced to how pop music impresarios such as Lou Pearlman present sexuality to their huge market of young listeners. During their time under the management of Wright Stuff, 1996-1998, the Backstreet Boys were the most popular manufactured boyband in the world, and as such influenced the sexual development of millions of young women and men. This paper examines how, during this period, the presentation and marketing of the Backstreet Boys, and their youngest member Nick Carter in particular, encouraged queer readings, and how those subtle queer subtexts in the music and videos may have affected their (mostly) young, uncritical audience.*

Introduction

In five years of active clubbing in gay clubs across Canada and Western Europe, I've noticed that a common feature of all of them is that you can find straight women dancing with the men, ogling the men, and sometimes attempting to pick up some of the men. In talking to these women (some of whom I count among my closest friends), I've discovered that they fantasise about gay men, in part, because it is a safe way to have fun: no matter what happens on the dance floor, they'll end up going home with their friends because the men are generally not sexually interested in them. But many of these young women are seriously attracted to these men; the stereotypical young gay male body, a staple of homosexual male desire since at least ancient Greece, has, over the past few decades, become a new standard for masculine beauty in both straight and gay culture. This relatively new type of male sex symbol is sensitive (not afraid to express emotions), soft-skinned, usually blonde, thin (if not emaciated), youthful (which implies a lack of body and facial hair, boundless energy, as well as a certain coy naïveté), fashionable and possesses an above-average ability to dance; he is, in a word, androgynous, embodying in roughly equal proportions traits which are traditionally perceived as masculine and feminine.

Most gay men are not androgynous; many androgynous men are not gay. What is intriguing, however, is how this body type, embodied by celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio, David Beckham, and Orlando Bloom, has become the standard in the entertainment industry, overtaking the dominant type of male sex symbol of the previous half-century – men such as William Holden, Sean Connery and Humphrey

Bogart – strong, possibly hirsute, hyper-masculine types (Bordo 1999, p. 21). Though the reasons for this generational reversal in tastes among straight females are no doubt many, varied and complex, I posit that pop music, if not the prime instigator of this trend, has played a major role in perpetuating it, and introducing it to each new generation of consumers. And one of the principal vehicles for this cultural shift is the manufactured band.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address gay culture or pop music in general, or the role each plays when combined with the other. Though there are few studies relating specifically to pop music's effects on adolescent sexual development, general studies agree that mass media consumption does influence youths' attitudes toward sexuality and expectations about sex (Roberts, Henriksen and Foehr 2004, pp. 499-502; Ward 2003, p. 372). We can therefore assume that the producers of manufactured bands do have some influence on the sexual tastes of the youngest members of society. Continuing from that assumption, what this paper will address is the ways that these producers shape the music, videos, and images of their pop stars to create and perpetuate a market for androgynous (or gay-looking) men among their core target audiences: young heterosexual girls and homosexual boys.

As a young queer man, I have a secondary, personal interest in this topic. How did the music I listened to, and the music videos I watched, at the time I came out of the closet affect my sexual tastes (not to mention the sexual tastes of the many straight girls I met at gay clubs when I first started going to them)? Or, alternatively, how did the management teams and creative forces behind pop groups like the Backstreet Boys that were popular at that time market the music specifically to young gay men, to use our sexual confusion to enrich themselves? This issue of specifically, and subliminally, aiming at a gay male audience while not offending the large

homophobic market that also existed in the United States (and still exists, though hopefully it is diminishing) fascinates me, especially as it worked so well on me. I was a very serious teenager, who listened only to art music and jazz until I began the process of coming out; only then did I become interested in popular music at all. I imagine that this subtle appeal to gay tastes in manufactured pop had much to do with this sudden change in my musical preferences.

I will focus my examination on the Backstreet Boys, who were created in Orlando, Florida by Louis Pearlman (who later created *NSync and O-Town) and were managed, until December 1998, by Wright Stuff, who are Johnny and Donna Wright (also the managers of New Edition and the New Kids on the Block). I have chosen the Backstreet Boys partly because, at the time, they were the band I was most interested in. Their peak period of popularity, from 1996-2000, coincided with my coming out. But, on a much more important, universal level, the Backstreet Boys are significant because they were the first North American boyband to aggressively pursue the gay market. (That they were the first, of course, was partly political: only since the mid 1990s has the political climate in the United States liberalised enough to allow the so-called 'gay community' to emerge as a powerful economic force, a constituency large enough to be worth actively pursuing.)

Nick Carter, as the youngest, most androgynous member of the band, was the Backstreet Boy who played the most sexually ambiguous role within the band. Since he appealed to both of the main groups of fans that the Boys were courting (young girls, due to his age, and gay men, due to his androgynous body-type), Wright Stuff made him the frontman of the band, emphasising his youth, innocence and his sexual ambiguity. They isolated and highlighted him in the Boys' videos, they gave him more solo lines in the singles, they even put him on the cover of a gay teen magazine.

And since managerial control over the image, sound and marketing of the Backstreet Boys is my greatest interest, I will concentrate on the earliest years of the band's popularity, 1996-98, as they were no longer represented by Wright Stuff, and Nick's special queer function in the band became less marked, after that period.

It is important to remember that throughout these analyses I am essentialising the binarisms gay/straight, masculine/feminine, queer/normal, etc. I do this not because that is how I view the world, or because it is how I believe the world ought to be viewed. I do it because the marketing constitutes essentialism, though an essentialism based on years of research. As the subjects of this paper are dealing with essentialism in their marketing of a band and a singer, then so must I to understand them and to analyse the products of their labours.

An extremely brief history of the practical queering of pop culture

Before specifically examining the Backstreet Boys' early career, a few words need to be said about gay appreciation of popular art forms. As with any oppressed group of people (as homosexuals were, and, in many parts of the world, still are), gay people developed coping mechanisms to survive the dominant straight culture's onslaught of heterocentric discourses. Film and music were two of the forms most widely appropriated by gay audiences, because they often lent themselves to queer readings. 'Queering' texts, be they film, music, stage or written words, became a way for queer men and women, especially before the era of queer liberation movements, to feel as if they were a part of a larger society, and to 'make sense of the everyday experience of alienation and exclusion in a world socially polarised by sexual labels.' (Ross 1993, p. 70) These queer decodings were the result of a 'ghetto sensibility, born of the need to

develop and use a second sight that [would] translate silently what the world [saw] and what might actually [have been].’ (Russo 1981, p. 92) Whether the gay viewer was identifying with young, beautiful and rebellious boys like Sal Mineo and James Dean or projecting themselves onto the power and majesty of divas like Bette Davis and Judy Garland (‘Friends of Dorothy’, referring to Garland’s *Wizard of Oz* role, was a popular euphemism for gay men in the ‘fifties and ‘sixties queer community), the closeted homosexual, and they were virtually all closeted, could dream of a future where he could be open about himself. This common interest in specific movie stars and genres also provided a useful way to identify other gay men.

To this day, pop music ‘contributes in powerfully formative ways to a great many lesbians’ and gay men’s self-perception and communication with one another,’ (Doty and Gove 1997, p. 90) since, though adult homosexuals are by and large accepted by society, teenaged homosexuals, especially those still in school, are too often still harshly repressed by their teachers, their parents, and their peers. Boyband producers know that gay youth are hungry for acceptance, and use that knowledge to present music and videos that are easily interpreted as queer by those in the know (i.e. gay men), while those who are not (i.e. young straight women or prepubescent boys) are completely unaware.

Queer readings of popular music have been around as long as there have been queer people listening to pop, and androgynous young men have been singing pop music for as long as managers have been creating bands. Simon Napier-Bell, the manager of the Yardbirds, admitted that (at least in Britain) ‘managers’ sexual tastes determined rock’n’roll talent – most of the managers were men and most of them liked boys’ (Frith 1988, p. 169). Louis Pearlman may or may not be gay, and Johnny and Donna Wright are certainly not – the semiotic codes which govern pop music

iconography are by now so deeply entrenched in homosexual desire that few producers could now ignore the gay market, regardless of their personal tastes. Boybands with pretty members are nothing new, especially in Europe, where the Backstreet Boys had to first go to build up a reputation and experience before returning to the United States. What makes the Backstreet Boys special is that they brought this European formula to America, and thus became the biggest selling boyband in the world up to that time. But they are also important because Pearlman and Wright Stuff specifically marketed them towards the gay community, focusing attention on Nick, his youth, and his androgynous body, rather than on the older and more classically handsome Kevin Richardson, or Brian Littrell, who is arguably a better singer. By extension, they also helped the youngest members of the female heterosexual audience to develop a sexual taste for the androgynous body type of which Carter was a prime example.

The first four singles

In 1993, Louis Pearlman, who had made his fortune renting airplanes to rock stars and other celebrities, decided to create a boyband and thus become involved in the music industry in a more direct way. After a series of auditions in Orlando, he assembled four boys: Nick Carter, AJ McLean, and Howie Dorough (who all knew each other from TV advertising auditions that they all regularly attended), and Kevin Richardson (who had been working at Disney World). Kevin suggested that his cousin Brian Littrell (from Kentucky) would be a great addition to the band, and, after an audition, he was added to the line-up. Pearlman, exploiting his contacts in the entertainment industry, sent a demo tape of his new group to Johnny and Donna Wright and to Jive

Records, and soon the Backstreet Boys (supposedly named after a store in Orlando) were signed to Jive and under the management of Wright Stuff. After two years of rehearsing, performing in malls and theme parks, and generally preparing themselves to follow in the footsteps of New Kids on the Block, in the autumn of 1995, the Backstreet Boys released their first single and video, 'We've Got It Goin' On'.

'We've Got It Goin' On,' however, is a fairly unremarkable song, with a video so full of boyband clichés that it almost plays as a parody of itself. The video begins in the time-honoured manner of seemingly all manufactured bands' first singles: by introducing the members of the band by name. The scene is in a radio station; the female DJ asks the boys to introduce themselves, and they do. Howie, who is Hispanic, introduces himself in Spanish; the others speak in middle-class teenager slang ('what's up?' etc). Then the music starts. The track is faster and funkier than most of the singles which followed, the lyrics straight-forward posturing ('We've got it goin' on for years', 'Backstreet's got the special effects') mixed in with quasi-ambiguous sexual references ('Straight up funky when I get with you / Keep it ruthless when I get wet'). Though the music is very much a dance track, there is little dancing in the video (which is directed by Lionel Martin). After the initial introductions are over, the boys are shown doing stereotypical adolescent boy things, such as hanging out on a basketball court, hanging out with motorcycles, hanging out in the woods. There are a few shots of them practising dancing, and singing on stage at a small club.

Right from this first single, the Backstreet Boys' creative team are sending out mixed messages. They want the boys to have an aura of rock and roll rebelliousness, but if they are going to remain on good terms with the parents of their primarily young audience, they must refrain from showing any specific rebelling. The boys are

probably singing about sex (but possibly not), may well be standing around in a forest because they're about to do something illicit (or maybe they just like the outdoors), nice boys don't ride motorcycles (or do they?). The girls can be attracted to these pseudo-rock stars, the parents can convince themselves with not too much trouble that the song is all quite innocent.

The song bombed in the US, staying on the top 40 for only 2 weeks before disappearing. However, in continental Europe, where boybands were more common and more popular, the song did fairly well. So for the next two years, the Backstreet Boys abandoned their home country to concentrate on the rest of the world.

The next two singles to be released, 'I'll Never Break Your Heart' and 'Anywhere For You,' were both ballads, and, like 'We've Got It Goin' On,' both had videos directed by Lionel Martin. These first three videos share a certain style; they all focus on the band members as a whole (as opposed to individual members of the band), there are no discernable plotlines, a sport is featured in each one (basketball, skiing, beach volleyball respectively). And though these videos, along with the video for their fourth single, the fast dance track 'Get Down (You're The One For Me),' are at pains to present the Backstreet Boys as a single entity, with plenty of group shots, and no single member yet presented as a front-man, a star, there are already small indications that Nick is somehow different from the others. In certain scenes on the ski slopes in 'I'll Never Break Your Heart,' Nick is wearing a white turtleneck sweater, while the other boys are wearing red. Likewise, in the forest scenes in 'We've Got It Goin' On,' Nick is wearing a white baseball cap, while the other boys are bareheaded. In 'Anywhere For You,' the Boys are strolling down a beach and playing volleyball, and all of them except Nick have their shirts off (or at least open) at some point during the video. Nick's unwillingness to show his chest (officially

explained as his mother's wish to keep him innocent until the age of 18) is taken to a ridiculous extreme in the 'We've Got It Goin' On' video, where a scene of him playing basketball with Brian has them both in singlets, but Nick has a T-shirt on under his. These all serve to draw one's eye toward Nick, away from the other members of the band, to emphasise his difference, and, crucially, his innocence. White being a colour traditionally associated with purity, it is probably not an accident that it shows up in Nick's wardrobe more frequently than in the other Boys'. And Nick hiding his body while the other four flaunt theirs serves the same end more obviously.

In 'Get Down,' a new director, Alan Calzatti, brings a new vision to the Backstreet Boys' videos, eschewing the montage approach to focus on a single scene, the inside of a disco ball, surrounded by video screens of dancing girls. But the focus on the band stays; excepting the bizarre appearance of a floating rapper halfway, and the spectral girls, only the Boys appear. Nick is again presented as slightly different, this time by doing flips and otherwise displaying his agile body. If the Lionel Martin videos presented Nick as the most innocent and youthful member of the Boys, this one emphasises that he is also their best dancer and has the best 'moves' of all of them.

Back to America

Building on this foundation of innocence and agility, the director of the fifth Backstreet Boys' video, Kai Sehr, takes this queering of Nick to a new level. The sexual tension and ambiguity of the 'Quit Playin' Games (With My Heart)' video

make it the first Backstreet Boys video to escape from boyband cliché, and the first one worthy of a deep analysis.

The most obvious difference between this video and the four previous is that only the Boys are in it – there are no women in the video, nor are any women mentioned in the lyrics of the song. Nick's first solo shot is a fuzzy one (which could be meant to imply fantasy or dreams) which quickly resolves to show him brooding, with his head down and his blonde hair hanging sensually over his eyes. When he is singing, Nick is usually shown alone, with the focus going in and out, his head thrown back and his eyes closed. This is a clear semiotic evocation of sex – in western culture, through the indoctrination of Hollywood films, sexual pleasure is often implied by shots like this one. In a very striking moment, Nick abandons the pseudo-sexual ecstasy for two words, 'for you', where he looks straight at the camera, directly addressing the viewer and even pointing at them. This accentuates what Simon Frith has noted, that 'pop effects are usually explained in terms of identity – the key words in most pop songs are "I" and "you".' (1988, p. 167) Though there has yet to be any serious queer implications (other than the underlying homosocial sexual tension), Nick is clearly being set apart as *the* object of desire in the band.

Approximately half way through the video, which takes place at night in a sort of concrete-covered public park, it begins to rain, and the Boys, who hitherto had been sitting on a step socialising with one another, decide that this would be a good time to move to the basketball court. So the soaking wet Boys, now in various states of undress (except for Nick, who remains fully clothed) proceed to congregate and dance on the basketball court. Except, again, for Nick. Nick is never shown on the court; he is always on the bleachers watching the other boys, who never leave the court from this point in the video. What is being enacted here, in a abstract way, is a 'fear of the

locker room' and 'fear of sports' scenario, of the type that keep many gay boys from participating in organised sport. Nick sits on the sidelines and watches the older, mostly shirtless Boys 'play' basketball. Regardless of whether or not he has the ability to play, he does not, because he is afraid of being looked down upon for being perceived as gay, perception being everything in high school. No matter how good Nick might be at basketball, he is young, thin, blonde, and androgynously pretty, therefore he must sit and watch, not participate. Whether he is watching the 'game' or the players is up to the viewers to decide – queer viewers will likely assume the latter and straight viewers, if they even consider the question, the former.

There are other things that add to the queerness of this second half of the video. Nick's first solo shot after the rain begins is of him fixing his hair, an essentially 'gay' thing to do. In some group shots, while the other four boys are dancing, Nick is sitting down, looking at the asphalt, as if willing himself not to stare at the semi-naked wet men in front of him. With the frequent shots of his hands moving near his face (a gesture especially notable just before the final chorus), Nick seems to be visually quoting Madonna's 'Vogue' choreography. This referencing of one of the biggest subjects of gay diva worship of the 'nineties is analogous to the men in the 'fifties who quoted Bette Davis and Judy Garland – it is a calling card designed to be noticed and appreciated by gay men, and simply passed over as another dance-move by the twelve year old girls who have likely never seen Madonna's 'Vogue' video, and, if they have, probably do not understand the gay subtext behind it. The penultimate shot of the video is Nick's alone, and once more he is pictured slightly out-of-focus, his head thrown back, his eyes closed, but this time, with an intense, almost orgasmic expression on his rain-dampened face.

It's hard, for me at least, not to view this video as anything other than a paean to Nick Carter. But it is probable that someone not looking for them would miss all the subtly queer moments, and so the video works perfectly from a marketing perspective – gay viewers read it as queer, straight viewers read it as straight, and everyone reads it as principally about Nick.

What is especially noteworthy about 'Quit Playin' Games' is that this is the song and video Wright Stuff chose as the first American single after the Boys' two-year Euro-Canadian hiatus. That they would choose this video, one with a strong queer subtext, and one that so prominently features Nick, is indicative of their conscious decision to court gay men, and market Nick as sexually ambiguous. Another strong indicator of this is their decision to have photo sessions and interviews with not just teen girl magazines like *16*, but also the sole American gay teen magazine, *xy*. Indeed, *xy*'s October 1997 issue not only has an interview and fashion spread with the Boys, but it has a picture of Nick on its cover. Once again, Nick is separated from the other Boys, and this time, is specifically linked with a something unambiguously gay.

And the music?

Thus far I have concentrated almost exclusively on the Backstreet Boys' videos, but the music of the first album bears some comment before some more detailed analysis of the music in album number two. It can be confusing, however, defining what exactly constitutes the first album. There are ten tracks on the Canadian version, thirteen on the UK version, fourteen on the Italian version and a massive fifteen on the Japanese one. Most of the tracks were written by songwriters from Stockholm's

Cheiron studio, headed by Denniz PoP and Max Martin, and are very high quality Euro-pop (Cheiron also produced songs for Ace of Base, *NSync and Britney Spears, among many others). What I mean when I say 'high quality Euro-pop' is not that the songs are particularly original examples of the genre, but that the production value of the music is very high – the actual sound of the music is easy and pleasant to listen to, without any of the distortion that is a feature of rock music production and pop music which wishes to project a rock'n'roll sound image (to sound more 'authentic'). The songs conform to familiar patterns harmonically, rhythmically and lyrically, and because of this, the fast ones can be danced to on a first hearing, and you know when you're supposed to feel the strongest emotions during the ballads before you've even heard the song or digested the lyrics.

The two dance tracks I have already discussed, 'We've Got It Goin' On' and 'Get Down (You're The One For Me),' are nearly identical in structure. They have a slow dance beat, a standard verse-chorus form, they both have a 'break' after the second chorus where the beat drops out and the Boys are left to harmonise alone for a few bars before the beat is brought back in for the final chorus (which is identical to the previous choruses, but somehow seems more intense in contrast with the more relaxed 'break' section). The three ballads are all traditional verse-chorus structures, complete with final choruses a tone higher, just so they are that much more emotive. The lyrics of the dance tracks are more explicitly sexual than the ballads, which tend to deal with love, both requited and unrequited.

Throughout this album, there seems to be no special musical treatment of Nick. It is likely that the decision to focus on Nick as the star of the band was made after this first album was produced, especially, as we have seen, as it is not until the fifth video ('Quit Playin' Games') that he is most truly and obviously set apart from

the rest of the group. As we shall see, the music for the second Backstreet Boys album *Backstreet's Back* will subtly shift towards this new view of the Boys: no longer a cohesive unit, but five individuals, with Nick as the star.

Album the second: *Backstreet's Back*

In reality, working out which songs are on which album is a decidedly difficult affair. A song that appears on the Italian edition of *Backstreet Boys* might appear on the Canadian edition of *Backstreet's Back*, and not appear at all on any American album. Further complicating this matter is the fact that the two-year hiatus from the American charts meant that the American edition of *Backstreet Boys* was actually a compilation of tracks from both of the first two albums released abroad, so that there are (at the time of writing) only four Backstreet Boys albums available in the US, compared to the five available everywhere else. This discrepancy infects even the videos; when 'I'll Never Break Your Heart' was released in America, two years after its release elsewhere, the video was entirely reshot by a different director, with a completely different concept.

The Canadian version of *Backstreet's Back* consists of twelve tracks, four out of the Cheiron studio, one by the legendary producer 'Mutt' Lange (AC/DC, Def Leppard, Shania Twain), and one credited to Brian Littrell. Though only writing a third of the album, Martin and PoP's influence on the Backstreet Boys' sound should not be underestimated; the first two singles from the album were by them, and four of the first five tracks on the album are theirs.

'Everybody (Backstreet's Back)' was the first single from the album, and, from anecdotal evidence, seems to be the song that most people first think of when the

Backstreet Boys are mentioned. It certainly has the most memorable video. Set in a haunted mansion, it is an extravagant paraphrase of Michael Jackson's classic 'Thriller' video, complete with the singers becoming monsters, an intro and outro with the Boys acting, and an elaborate mass dance sequence at the climax. Though the Boys themselves are credited with the general idea, the director who brought off this camp gothic masterpiece was Joseph Kahn. The story (the fact that there is even a vague narrative is unusual for a music video) is roughly as follows: the Boys' tour bus breaks down, and their driver leaves them alone in the traditional horror-film abandoned castle. Upon falling asleep, all five participate in what they assume to be a dream, where each of them are transformed into a 'monster' – Kevin becomes Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde, AJ becomes the Phantom of the Opera, Brian is a werewolf, Howie a vampire, and Nick a mummy. In the final main sequence, the Boys (as themselves, not as monsters) participate in a 'ball' in the castle, which in reality is just an excuse for some mass dancing. The boys awake the next morning, discuss their dream, and then are greeted by their bus driver (who now looks like a horror film evil butler cliché himself), and the video ends with the Boys screaming in fear. Musically, the song follows the identical structure of the previous two up-tempo singles – it is another funky Euro-pop dance track, with a break section just before the final chorus where the beat momentarily becomes less intense (which in the video allows for the transition to ballroom dancing), followed by the mass dance number when the beat returns.

As usual, Nick stands out from the rest. He gets to sing the line 'Am I sexual?' both times it comes up (which is answered with a falling 'sigh' motive and the word 'Yeah' sung by the four other boys, a moment that stands out as queer no matter how you read it), and his mummy costume appears to include some sort of leather bondage

gear, which is a highly anachronistic, sexually charged touch. When the boys come out of the dream at the end and are discussing their experience, Nick is the only one to mention anything other than which monster he was, or that he had trouble sleeping. His line is 'I was a mummy, and there were these two girls....' which again plays up his sexuality, while the others are presented as background, as if it's not worth bringing up their sexual thoughts. Or, alternately, it plays up his youth; all the Boys had girls with them during the dream sequence, but only Nick brings it up. Maybe for the other, more mature boys, dreaming about girls isn't something they discuss with each other, it's something they keep to themselves. Or finally, it may be interpreted as covering up his desire for men – closeted gay men often talk about girls much more than is seemly, as if to be constantly pointing out just how straight they are. It could be a case of the lady protesting too much.

'As Long As You Love Me'

'As Long As You Love Me' is the second single and first ballad from the *Backstreet's Back* album. Written by Max Martin, it is a duet performed by Nick and Brian, with no solo lines sung by any of the other boys. For this and other reasons, it stands out musically in the Backstreet Boys collection of hits, and is, in my opinion, the most interesting of all their songs.

The main theme of the song is the need for completion through unconditional love, and it is the singer who is expressing this vulnerability, this need for the other. This idea is not just expressed textually, but in the music as well, right from the first eight measures of the song. The first four measures are synthesised treble (i.e. in the register in which females sing; feminine) tones that move solely on beats one and two,

holding chords over beats three and four. This creates a feeling of hesitancy, of stasis and incompleteness, which represents the singer alone, without love. In the second half of the introduction, the previous material is repeated verbatim while a synthesised guitar in a lower register (i.e. the register in which males sing; masculine) fills in beats three and four, thus completing the sound, and removing the static effect. The music now has momentum, an energy to it, and this new drive has come from the union of the feminine and masculine registers. Especially noteworthy is the lack of any drums; as Susan McClary has noted in her discussion of Madonna's music, removing or 'diffusing' the 'phallic backbeat . . . often results in music that sounds enervated or stereotypically "feminine".' (1991, p. 154) So far, this is a fairly traditional male-female situation, hardly original, and not at all queer. But when this material returns at the end of the first verse, as the backing for the chorus, what is notable is that only the feminine voice is used, and not the masculine guitar voice. After a verse in which a confused young protagonist – Nick – pours out his soul, the chorus is accompanied by the hesitant, static, drum-less, *feminine* theme, thus associating Nick with the feminine theme which needs the masculine to complete it.

Loneliness, the condition of the protagonist before the song's narrative begins, is itself, though far from exclusively, a very common feeling for gay youth. According to social worker Paul Gibson, '[g]ay youth are the only group of adolescents with no peer group to identify with or receive support from. Many report *extreme isolation* and loss of close friends' [emphasis mine]. Coming out is a frightening experience, one which many boys choose to avoid until after high school or away from home altogether. When a teenager discovers that he is gay, '[j]ust when [he] needs reassurance the most, those whom [he's] always counted on, [his] parents and friends, become antagonists to be hoodwinked' (Due 2000, p. 24). Coming out is

not always a matter of choice, however, as other boys may notice his furtive glances in the locker room, in a day-dream-inducing class, or in any other social situation.

The first verse of 'As Long As You Love Me', which is sung by Nick, suggests something of this scenario. He's a boy of few friends ('Loneliness has always been a friend of mine' is the first line of the text), but is willing to, needs to, 'risk' his safe but unhappy isolation for love. He has been looking – the song is filled with eye imagery ('Risking it all in a glance', 'blind' twice, 'look into my eyes') – and we soon find out that the object of his affection is Brian. Brian, though he seems more self-assured in the lyrics he sings than the confused, immature-sounding words of Nick, has also been hiding a secret ('I've tried to hide it so that no-one knows' he sings). With an acknowledgement that Brian has a huge amount of power over him (Nick: 'I'm leaving my life in your hands'), Nick finds the courage to reveal his desire – he's sick of running from his true self. (Brian reassures him that 'it doesn't really matter if you're on the run'.) The three other Backstreet Boys, acting as the chorus, only sing words of acceptance: nothing else matters 'as long as you love me.' Just before the final chorus, the drum and voices stop for a four measure recapitulation of the introductory synthesiser/guitar phrase. It is a reminder at the end of the piece of the beginning, of how the tentative, 'feminine' synthesiser (Nick) has been made whole by the stronger, 'masculine' guitar sound (Brian).

'As Long As You Love Me' is not only a song with a strong queer sub-text, it also has a very gay-positive message – one should accept love when you feel it, not try to hide it, and not care about what anybody else thinks. The fact that this is a love song which only two singers of the five sing, that no gendered pronouns are used at all, and that we know (from extramusical sources) that Brian and Nick had a very close friendship adds to the suspicion that this gay relationship is being consciously

implied by Martin. Best of all, from a marketing perspective, only people who search for queer meanings will interpret this song as a gay love duet. Most will hear it as a love song addressed by the Boys to the listener alone. Gay boys can interpret it one way, young girls (and their parents) can interpret it in a completely different way; everyone is pleased, and no one is offended.

The video, directed by Nigel Dick, obscures the queer reading, possibly intentionally. Where the previous two videos ('Everybody' and 'Quit Playin' Games') emphasised the individuality of the five band members and focussed on Nick especially, this one tries to conflate them into a single entity once again. The scenario is that the Boys are auditioning for something unspecified before a panel of six beautiful professional women (to whom all the Boys are clearly attracted). During the verses, Nick and Brian respectively take centre stage, and during the first one there are a few scenes where they share a tender moment – Brian adjusts Nick's jacket, they share the microphone for a single line. But during the choruses the sense of the Boys as a unit is enhanced: with remote controls, the women are able to turn one Boy into another, and the whole band is cycled through in this way. Then there is a dance sequence where all the Boys, dressed identically, perform the same moves. Though Nick again gets more solo time than the other members, and crucially gets almost the entire opening sequence to himself, the relationship between him and Brian so strongly suggested in the song is almost erased from the video.

The rest of the album

'All I Have To Give' is the final single from *Backstreet's Back*. Credited to Full Force, the song is almost a mirror of 'As Long As You Love Me,' with the Boys in the role of a supplicant begging for love, rather than offering their love

unconditionally to someone who has none. It has a very traditional ‘feel-good’ pop message, that material wealth, and especially the lack thereof, can not stop the power of love. The music is a ballad of average quality, again giving Nick the first solo, followed by solo passages from Brian, Howie and AJ (Kevin is denied a solo for some unknown reason). Nigel Dick also directed this video, using a concept that he had originally written for ‘As Long As You Love Me.’ There are some similarities between the two videos, most notably the classic style of microphones used. Nick is once more the focus of attention – he gets the first and last solo shots and a long series of shots at the beginning (as he sings the first verse) where he is the centre of attention. Though all the Boys go through many outfits, the wavy blue shirt that Nick is wearing in one of his solo scenes is notable for being partially unbuttoned — for the first time ever in a Backstreet Boys video, Nick is exposing some of his chest. One assumes that this video is his first past the age of eighteen, and therefore his mother can no longer prevent him from being overtly sexualised.

Though the singles and videos are heavily Nick-based, and the ‘As Long As You Love Me’ has a strong queer subtext, the rest of the album is more evenly distributed among the members. AJ, the ‘bad-boy’ of the group, gets to take the lead on the more explicit tracks, such as Cheiron’s ‘That’s The Way I Like It’ and ‘Mutt’ Lange’s ‘If You Want It To Be Good Girl (Get Yourself A Bad Boy).’ Despite the unwieldy title, the latter is a good song which has a musical and lyrical edge clearly (one might say deliberately) lacking in the rest of the album. Besides that stand-out track, most of the rest of the album are trite ballads and uninteresting dance numbers, intended, it seems to me, to make the rest of the group feel like something more than Nick’s backup singers (and to please the minority of Backstreet Boys fans who don’t prefer Nick).

What happened next

In December 1998, disputes over money led to the Backstreet Boys firing Johnny and Donna Wright as their managers and hiring, in January 1999, a group called The Firm. Louis Pearlman remained as Executive Director of the band. With the departure of Wright Stuff, so went the concept of the Backstreet Boys as five boys who, led by Nick, took off their shirts, acted sexy and sold their image more than their music. Under The Firm's management, they would concentrate on selling themselves as musicians, disavowing the Wright Stuff's marketing strategy that had brought them to world-wide fame. The first video for their next album, *Millennium*, showed just how much their mindset had changed.

'I Want It That Way' was released in the summer of 1999, at the height of the Boys' popularity. The video is no longer about pleasing fans, and especially not about attracting new ones. It is about power. Gone are the five individuals. Instead, we see a group of five similarly-dressed men striding through an empty airport ('How much money and influence does it take to shut down an airport to film a music video?' we ask). We see they have an airplane with their name on it ('That must have been expensive!' we exclaim). We see them surrounded by adoring female fans ('Look how much they are loved!' we marvel). We don't see them dance in any extended choreographed sequence, take their shirts off, or act like a traditional boyband should.

What seems to have happened is that, not being content with being the most popular band in the world, they wanted to be taken seriously as well. They wanted to write some of their own songs (though these are shunted to the end of the album, or off it entirely), they wanted to play some of their own instruments (Kevin on piano,

Nick on drum-kit, etc.), they even wanted to direct some their own videos (Kevin co-directs the fourth video from *Millennium*, 'The One'). Musically, this album and the subsequent one, *Black and Blue*, are no worse, and may even be better, than the two which preceded them. This is mostly because Max Martin remains the primary producer (Denniz PoP died in 1998, and the third *Millennium* video, 'Show Me The Meaning Of Being Lonely,' is dedicated to him). But the pretentious videos, the increasing seriousness of the lyrics, the desire to sell their music and not themselves, and the inability to realise that the essence of their success was in the construction of Nick as an innocent, but sexually aware, youth, eventually destroyed their fanbase. Post-*Millennium*, Nick became much less sexually ambiguous, and, inevitably, much less youthful: his dress sense became less 'gay', his voice deepened, he gained weight, he got a tattoo, he grew a goatee, he started publicly having girlfriends.

When it came out, fans of the band's first two albums snapped it up, making *Millennium* the fastest selling album in history; two years later, almost half of those fans responded to The Firm's change in marketing focus by not buying the fourth Backstreet Boys album *Black and Blue* (13 million v 8 million in the USA [Official Website, 2005]). Nick's subsequent solo album, *Now or Never*, which was again helmed by Max Martin, failed miserably in comparison to the other ex-boyband solo album to come out that same month, *Justified*, by Justin Timberlake of *NSync. Finally, in what must have been for them a somewhat humiliating move, the Boys rehired Johnny Wright to manage them and released a fifth album, called *Never Gone*, on 14 June 2005 (which has had a fraction of the sales of their previous efforts).

Conclusion

From 1996-1998, the Backstreet Boys rose from nothing to become the most popular music group in the world, and were guided to that enviable position by a number of people. Johnny and Donna Wright, Louis Pearlman, Denniz PoP and Max Martin – they were the real power behind the band. After the first album of formulaic boyband pop was created, it became clear that Nick Carter, the youngest, the blondest, the most agile, most androgynous member was the key to taking the band beyond normal boyband status to something huge. By writing the hits from the second album with Nick as the featured singer, by dressing Nick in subtly different ways, by keeping any girlfriends out of the media, by keeping his innocence unblemished and his chest firmly covered, Nick was elevated to the status of sexiest and most eligible Backstreet Boy by the young girls who were the main fan base of the group. But, crucially, Wright Stuff went beyond that. His boyish, stereotypically gay body-type, his lack of public girlfriends, his appearance on the cover of the gay teen magazine *xy*, his ‘close friendship’ with Brian, and the queer subtexts behind the video of ‘Quit Playin’ Games (With My Heart)’ and the song ‘As Long As You Love Me’ all contributed to a strong gay following for the group, and especially for Nick.

Queer, straight, or ambivalent, there is no question that Nick was presented differently from the rest of the Boys. Nick was constructed as the outsider, the youngest and most innocent of the band, and, with wonderful sleight-of-hand, simultaneously the most sexual. In manufactured pop, according to Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, ‘male sexuality is transformed into a spiritual yearning carrying only hints of sexual interaction. What is needed is not so much someone to screw as a sensitive and sympathetic soulmate, someone to support and nourish the incompetent male adolescent as he grows up.’ (1990, p. 375) Nick Carter clearly plays this role in the Backstreet Boys. He is the youthful, innocent, androgynous boy who needs

another person to help him ‘become a man’. For his youngest fans, ‘becoming’ a man may not have any sexual connotation at all – they may picture themselves as his surrogate mother, or best friend. Teenaged fans, of both genders, are liable to see the same things and interpret them sexually.

But, eventually, even the youngest fans grow up and begin to think sexually about their pin-up idols. If we assume that pop music does influence the sexual development of its youngest consumers, then it is reasonable to assume that some of those pubescent straight female Nick Carter fans from the mid-nineties had their ideas of masculinity shaped by what was essentially a gay male view of the ideal body. It is also reasonable to assume that for the young gay males who watched, this age-old stereotype was reinforced, and when Boys switched management to The Firm and stopped selling Nick as a sexually ambiguous teenager, these gay fans may have found themselves lusting after someone who was suddenly presented as very straight.

Though Nick Carter’s image was moulded to wrap sensitive ballads and good dance tunes in a cute, youthful package that girls would feel safe falling in love with and parents would feel safe buying for their daughters, what may also have happened is that the team of producers behind the Backstreet Boys (and all the copycat boybands that followed) have influenced, for some of their former fans, the definition of what makes a man sexually attractive. While many of them may look at pictures of Nick from 1998 and cringe, wondering how they could have ever found him attractive, some may still be attracted to that thin, blonde, androgynous ideal. After all, Nick is far from the first or last celebrity to look like he did, and the continued popularity of androgynous boys and men in pop music, film and television means that some of his fans have just moved on to fancy different, but similar, guys. And for those that have switched preferences to more traditional ideals of masculinity, the fact

that they now entirely dislike that boyish body-type can probably be attributed to a reaction against their former infatuations, rather than a disinterested reassessment of male physical beauty.

For gay people, Wright Stuff's pioneering use of queer subtexts and gay media in mass-marketing a boyband in the United States may not have had any immediate socio-political effect. One hopes, however, that by subliminally feeding these queer images and lyrics, by encouraging an appetite for stereotypically gay male body-type among straight girls, the straight fans of the Backstreet Boys, other boybands, movie stars, etc., will be more willing to engage with the queer community, to hang out with gay boys rather than taunt them, to go dancing with them rather than ostracize them, and to insist that their governments and politicians treat homosexuals the same as everybody else. Perhaps that's hugely overestimating the influence that the media has on youth, or, at least, overstating the longevity of any influence it may hold. But a generation of girls who grew up lusting after an androgynous boy who sang sensitive love songs with (or possibly to) a close male friend about accepting love, even when it's outside society's norms, might well go on to make the short mental leap to realising that men loving men, and women loving women, is just as acceptable as any other form of love. And if the American music industry had any role in that particular generational reversal, then perhaps the Backstreet Boys and Nick Carter will have had an important social function after all.

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