

sound collector

audio review
number three



SOME OF 1997



FREE

Various Artists

NJS: *Megamix*
Distributed History
2002

By Seth Price

It's clear that the wound is still fresh. Otherwise the ghouls would have arrived long ago, as they did with classic soul, funk, and "electro." At the same time, the music called New Jack Swing is just old enough to be vaguely embarrassing. How is it that some genres pass directly into legend, while others remain trapped in an awkward limbo? Making the rounds in the clubs, an anonymously produced mixtape called *NJS Megamix* (available from distributedhistory.com) arrives at just the right moment to assess the pros and cons of the genre.

Before covering the who and when of New Jack Swing it's important to stress that, like most conservative pop, it depended heavily on producer synergies. When we talk about the 1980s in music, the specter of production control looms over all hit, dance, electronic, and beat music. An early instance is the Pointer Sisters' 1983 album *Break Out* where different working groups are responsible for each track and the achievement is that the product is coherent, let alone a classic. New Jack Swing emerged in the latter half of this decade, reaching a zenith around 1990 with Bell Biv DeVoe's "Poison." Death of overexposure came with the 1991 movie *New Jack City*, which was co-written by journalist Barry Michael Cooper, who some say coined the term "New Jack Swing" in a *Village Voice* article (Cooper also produced early electro tracks as The Micronauts). The same year saw the release of *Wreck-n-Effects* hit single "New Jack Swing," which some claim is the origin of the term. In either case, it seems that the public naming of the genre was a symptom of the downfall.

The style could be described as an admixture of hip hop—at the time still a largely DIY music, where a top-selling album might have a jarringly rough, flattened, bedroom-production sound, although this wasn't surprising once you learned that a 19 year-old had turned all the tracks out of a single sampler-workstation—and the sort of music that labels like Motown always represented: popular and lucrative soul that relied on writers and producers to midwife the product. Motown would revive itself in the 1990s through marketing and streetwise production, as with the band Another Bad



Seth Price

Creation. Likewise, it may be that the entire venture of New Jack Swing can be seen as a grab for market share, a way to assimilate an obstreperous youngster into the secure structures of popular black music—structures bristling with adjectives like "emotional," "sexy," "dick," or "smooth." What was badly needed was an adjective like "edgy," a defining critical term in the 1990s, across media. Adult Urban Contemporary producers decided that, in the interest of survival, they had better incorporate hip hop rhythms, samples, and production techniques. If this indeed was a strategy, today's charts demonstrate its total success.

The New Jack style was tremendously popular, reaching across genres and forms, yielding movies like *House Party*, hip hop acts like Heavy D and Nice & Smooth, straight-up pop stars like Janet Jackson and Paula Abdul, and fashions like towering high-top fides or baseball caps still dangling their price tags. It stretched as far as Japan, where artists like ZOO or LL Brother carried the torch. It was a voracious synthetic mode, one that sought to fill in hard beats and cuts, crooning vocals, chimes and bells, swelling strings, nasty innuendo, and declarations of love.

What is it that makes this music New Jack Swing, as opposed to something else—say, up-tempo R&B? While there is no unanimous agreement as to style, dates, or participants, I am proceeding from a few assumptions. Bell Biv DeVoe created a general definition with their credo: "Our music is mentally hip hop, smoothed out on the R&B tip with a pop feel appeal to it." I would tag the origin to Bobby Brown's 1986 split from New Edition, the hit group created by Maurice Starr and Michael Jonzun. After all, one of the mainstays of New Jack

Swing was its putative "edge": New Edition was a saccharine boy band, and Bobby Brown wanted to project a rougher image. This strategy was adopted by many other performers, including Janet Jackson, not to mention the remaining members of New Edition. It wasn't enough, however, to incorporate adult-themed lyrics—the style was really telegraphed by the sound, which is where the producers entered. Among them, Teddy Riley is acknowledged as the godfather. Although his 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 hundreds of tracks. What these men were doing was marking a territory, working a variation on pop's promise: "You will recognize this as The New Sound."

For an ostensibly streetwise mode, the music itself is fairly tame. This is a partial result of far 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 chinks in the armor through which grit, poor recording, and vinyl-crackle enter, here they were employed as punctuation rather than loops, and were often generated in the studio rather than imported. Tracks were actually composed, often by producers with some musical background, and synth sounds came straight out of the box, with little of the knob twiddling that House would bring to electronic music. Rapping was kept to a minimum or ushered into special bridges and breaks, 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).

"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 honored the strategy, with popular artists going on to become producers rather than solo acts. For instance, New Edition gave Michael Bivins the experience that he'd later 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.

What are we to make of this movement? It may be that it's deeply reactionary, but there is something interesting about it—namely, the low regard in which it's now held. You can trace a cyclical pattern: Every ten years or so, up springs a dumb, catchy mode that will later sound like death. As a high-concept joke, you could call New Jack Swing the disco of the late-'80s. Entertaining this line of thinking for a moment, it seems clear that Jungle or Drum & Bass would come next, although these forms never reached a critical degree of popularity, at least in the U.S. Ultimately these comparisons are fun but absurd—one could juxtapose white groups like Sudden Impact or New Kids on the Block with the brothers Gibby, or even with Steely Dan, whose notoriously anti-septic sound has affinities with that of New Jack Swing.

If we take a genre that's even closer to us in time—for example, Grunge—it's clear that New Jack Swing's current status as Bad Object does not 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 be digital reverb in the early 1980s, or the auto tuner today. In other words, 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 has cannibalized any useful parts and ditched the corpse, a move that allows us to believe how far we have come. The lesson is that music springing from a community dies with 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. □