



1994—after lip-synching claims and member Jonathan Knight quitting the group due to his panic disorder did the group in—there was near silence on the boy band front for several years. Eighties kids were growing up and their music tastes were changing. Rap and grunge were paramount in the early 1990s, edging out wholesome, kid-approved bands like NKOTB (even their change to the acronym was an attempt to appear more mature).

But there was hope for boy band fans later in the decade. As *Billboard* points out, "By spring of 1998, pop had seen a long-overdue resurgence after a Nirvana-driven grunge era, thanks to the to the 1997 breakthrough of megapop groups Spice Girls, Hanson, and most importantly, the Backstreet Boys. With the stage set, another five-piece boy band named 'NSYNC was ready to join the Top 40 scene stateside."

In the few short years after NKOTB's demise, a tumultuous time in which the death of Kurt Cobain that rocked the world of grunge, there came a new class of pop music consumers: the Millennial generation. Gen X's kid siblings were clamoring for their own soundtrack; and at the same time, The Disney Channel became a megaforce in youth culture, including as a pipeline to boy band and pop music stardom. Justin Timberlake and JC Chasez came from *The Mickey Mouse Club*, and well-known names like Britney Spears, the Jonas Brothers, Demi Lovato, and Selena Gomez would be later alums of other various programs on the channel.

In fact, by 1997, Disney Channel had completely changed its format from family-friendly programming to shows and brands that appealed to kids and adolescents between the ages of 7 and 17. Early 2000s hits like *Lizzie McGuire* and *Even Stevens* and modern

Y2K IS COMING

As the world braced for the once-in-a-lifetime turn toward the year 2000, both a panicked and a fresh-start mentality took over humanity. Or, as CNN succinctly put it, "As we looked to the year 2000—that monumental Y2K—we saw both apocalypse and rebirth."

Technology was a huge part of the new dawn, and NSYNC used it to their advantage (as evidenced by the *TRL* appearance below). In 2000, Microsoft inked a deal with the fab five to "plaster them all over their platform," according to *VICE*. It was meant to bring teenagers over to MSN from the then-dominating dial-up service AOL, all for the cool price of \$21.95 a month. The NSYNC branding included browser wallpapers featuring photos of your favorite guy; web buttons that, once clicked, would play songs from the NSYNC catalog; and newsletters and exclusive news spilling all the band tea. The service was the 2000s-era version of the boy band hotline souped up for discerning Millennial teens. And it came with a fat paycheck, potentially netting NSYNC \$20–\$30 million.

NSYNC also teased the future of tech on the song "Digital Get Down," from the band's album *No Strings Attached*, a record that revolutionized Y2K pop according to critics at *Billboard*. It was the best-selling album of the year. Not only was the record an early example of hiring massive hip-hop production teams and steering away from formulaic music by genre hopping, but it also was one that ushered in the digital music revolution. As CDs were slowly being phased out, the *No Strings Attached* tracks were being shared on services like LimeWire and Napster.

"Digital Get Down" was full of techy synths and innuendo-laden lyrics, with some wondering if the band was piloting the idea of digital hookups. The *New York Times* described the track as "the first boy-band album with a song about video cybersex—a clear indicator of post-pubescent consciousness," and *Rolling Stone* said it was a "crash course in wireless foreplay."

"What's funny is we joke that 'NSync invented Skype and FaceTime, but that's really true in a way," John Andosca, host of an NSYNC podcast, told *Rolling Stone*. "Back in 2000, video calls weren't even a thing—heck, most people didn't really have cell phones yet, so the idea about being able to 'get down' with someone through a video screen as if they were right there, was like something out of a movie."

Of course, there was also Y2K-core style, which NSYNC all but modeled: baggy pants, frosted tips, puffy jackets, track pants and sweatsuits, metallic and bedazzled everything. All the guys were missing were some crop tops and butterfly clips from Claire's. Justin, in particular, "epitomized the Y2K boy band look," says *ID*, "a flashy, larger-than-life take on men's fashion that drew equally from Euro-trash, streetwear, and kitschy Americana."



directly affected their unexpected regrouping in 2023 is to look at the history of the highly successful pop music machine.

According to Dictionary.com, a boy band is “a trendy pop group of young male singers, each member typically cultivating an image so as to appeal to a preteen audience.” NSYNC and their predecessors all fit this carefully constructed mold. A big distinction in the genesis of boy bands versus other music acts is that the talents in these groups are all primarily vocalists (though some are also instrumentalists and/or producers), and each member is carefully

selected not just for their vocal abilities but also for their dancing skills and proficiency for following orchestrated choreography. Each group also usually settles on five members. Why five? While it may have been arbitrary, in numerology, five signifies curiosity and change, so maybe there were some astrologers in the boy band world who thought the number five a good one to settle on.

Having a good “look” and fitting into one of the familiar boy band archetypes (i.e. the bad boy, the sensitive and innocent one, the athletic type, the oddball, etc.) is also a bonus. These archetypes also lead to the other hallmark of the pop music phenomenon—the uber-devoted, typically female, fanbase.

If they weren’t comprised of family members (as in the case of the Osmonds and the Jackson 5), many boy bands throughout history were cobbled together through an audition process in which producers and managers put together the puzzle pieces. That’s the other big trait of boy bands—the mogul, impresario, or Svengali figure behind the act, the proverbial great and powerful Oz behind the curtain. Back in the days of Motown, it was Berry Gordy; in the times of New Edition and New Kids On The Block it was Maurice Starr. In the case of NSYNC and the 1990s/2000s crop of acts, it was the now-disgraced conman Lou Pearlman.

These architects are instrumental in the decision-making of their boy band machines and are incredibly savvy, if not also ruthless, in determining the course of the groups. At best, they might have been the ones to scribe the music (or be accused of doing the actual singing, as in the case of Maurice Starr and NKOTB); at worst, like Lou, they were accused of embezzlement and fraud and taking advantage of their curated cultural kingpins.



The Osmonds 1979.

When it comes to K-pop, the current evolution of boy bands, there are sometimes full corporations behind the groups, and once band members sign a contract, they might be put through grueling training regimens, aka K-pop boot camp, sometimes working hard for years before they make their debuts on professional stages.

Not that it was much different for groups like NSYNC. In the 2019 film, *The Boy Band Con: The Lou Pearlman Story*, produced by Lance Bass, members of NSYNC and Backstreet Boys (both groups overseen by Lou) describe the ways the mogul turned them into non-stop workhorses.

“When Pearlman signed ‘N Sync, he got them a house, told them they could quit their jobs and put them through a boot camp in unairconditioned airplane hangars,” *USA Today* explains in an overview of the documentary. The groups spent up to eight hours a day working in these brutal conditions. “I’m surprised none of us got heatstroke,” Chris Kirkpatrick said in the film, though quickly conceding, “As repetitive and annoying as it got, it was fun.”

And it was fruitful. NSYNC (and the concurrent career of the Backstreet Boys) filled a major gap in the boy band timeline. Following the collapse of New Kids On The Block in

The Jackson 5 1977.





A NEW GENERATION IS WAITING

**"If no one knows the group NSYNC at that age,
that's just bad parenting right there."**

—Lance speaking to *Entertainment Weekly* about Gen Z

There are a chosen few that come around every generation to form that most beloved of musical acts: The boy band. The teen idols. The musical hook and sinker that sticks with fans for decades to come, fueling their wistful nostalgia. In the world of pop music, history often repeats itself, but with no genre more than boy bands. In the '60s, it was the Jackson 5; in the '70s, the Osmonds and Menudo; in the '80s, New Edition and New Kids On The Block; and in the Y2K era of the late '90s and early 2000s, it was an all-out explosion of acts, with the closely aligned Backstreet Boys and NSYNC leading the pack, supported by groups like 98 Degrees and O-Town.

"From 1999 to 2002, NSYNC was everywhere, and they drove the girls crazy," an *A&E Biography* on the group begins. In fact, from NSYNC's start until they officially disbanded in 2004, the quintet became one of the biggest boy bands of all time with songs like "Bye Bye Bye" and the meme giant "It's Gonna Be Me." And their wild exposure served as the foundation for one of modern music's biggest solo acts, Justin Timberlake. To understand the meteoric rise and lingering fascination that

NSYNC at the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles in January 2000.

PART I
**HERE
WE GO**



NSYNC on Germany's
Kinder Wetten, das...?
In 1996.