

# '90s pop artists leave teenage fans behind

BY JONATHAN STUTTE  
Reviewer

To most of us, the '90s are memories that we reminisce about when we watch an episode of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* or hear an original Backstreet Boys or Britney Spears song. Now we can reexperience the '90s with the comeback albums of those musical artists.

"They've lost Kevin Richardson. That's no good. He was like the 40-year-old man in the Backstreet Boys. I guess that makes him 50 now?" A friend of mine made these remarks as she reflected on the past glories of the Backstreet Boys after I told her I was reviewing the group's sixth studio album, "Unbreakable."

My friend, like other young teenage girls in the late '90s, saw the Backstreet Boys as a group of perfectly sculpted men (except for maybe Kevin Richardson). Now she's grown up and said she just wants them to make good music. She doesn't care about the group's image.

Similarly, when I was 12, I had a good male friend who owned a poster of Britney Spears because she was wearing leather pants studded with O-rings. You could see through the rings, and he swears you could tell she wasn't wearing underwear. Spears now has released her fifth studio album and the first in four years, "Blackout." And it's apparent by her white-trash image that she does not have the same effect on 12-year-old boys that she used to. Spears has a lot more ground to reclaim than the Backstreet Boys, who still are struggling to remain relevant.

For the Backstreet Boys, this technically isn't a comeback. They have been on the return for two years, now looking back at the release of "Never Gone" after five years of inactivity. Are they back on track? In the heyday of bubble gum and teen-pop, the Backstreet Boys were the smooth operators of their own brand of dance-pop, teaching eighth graders how to dance clean and feel dirty at the same time. With "Never Gone," the

Backstreet Boys didn't miss a beat after exhausting the teen pop that had died five years previously.

In "Unbreakable," the Backstreet Boys go soft and give up the dance floor. They trade in their leather jackets and Euro-glasses for clean suits and sport jackets. They look nicer. They look older. They sound like a schmaltzy Maroon 5. "Unbreakable" sounds like the Backstreet Boys have retooled their style to aim for an older, sophisticated audience instead of the now 21-year-olds who once bought their albums in droves.

The album starts promisingly, with a soft three-part harmony in "Intro," but then the Maroon 5 sound kicks in on the only club-ready track on the album, "Everything But Mine." If Maroon 5 hadn't already patented the clean-sounding, stepping-and-echoing guitar and the yearning soft-rock vocals, this song would be gold. It's still not a bad song. It's just been done before.

The next track, "Inconsolable," is part of the new adult contemporary that artists like Avril Lavigne succumb to when waxing emotional (and not bitchy). It resembles nearly every song remaining on the disc. It's a soft-rock song sitting on a piano riff in a melodramatic structure and melody. I know I'm saying a lot there, but it's difficult to describe derived melancholy — soupy strings, histrionic piano or both.

Every song on this disc has it in spades. The Backstreet Boys have crossed over into a soft-rock malaise where every track tries to be a single rather than part of an album. Their once-enchanted listeners might like it because it sounds nice and subdued, but that can get boring faster than a good, bouncy pop record.

Unlike the Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears hasn't been out of the limelight for the past several years. She's become the epitome of trash celebrity and dug a hell-sized hole herself. "Blackout" won't allow her to come all the way out, but surely it'll bring her pretty far.



Photo courtesy of TheBackstreetBoys.com

With the release of their sixth album, the Backstreet Boys lost their eldest band member, Kevin Richardson.

## Music Reviews

### "Unbreakable"

Backstreet Boys  
Label: Jive  
Released: Oct. 30

Rating



### "Blackout"

Britney Spears  
Label: Jive  
Released: Oct. 30

Rating



Pop in the disc, and you will be greeted by a snarling "It's Britney, bitch" from lead single "Gimme More." Spears aims for the clubs, where she suspects her grown-up demographic has moved. Every song is built on snappy club beats and, at the very least, interesting electronic rhythmic sounds. "Blackout" never loses its dance tempo and doesn't want you to stop dancing. Spears

is so insistent on making you move your hips that she'll even ape Justin Timberlake's "Sexyback" lyric rhythm for "Toy Soldier."

That's the issue with "Blackout" — as catchy as the album is, you'll want to dance to something else pretty soon. You've heard it all before, and Britney brings in nothing new, but she's made a good start by entering herself into a relevant music scene. If she could update

her lyrical themes and push her song production into more creative territories, she could hold her own once again in pop music.

Spears has made a good step forward with a decent dance record. That's much more than can be said for the Backstreet Boys, who just seem to keep stepping sideways, but maybe it's because all along we had lowered expectations for Spears.

# Jay-Z's new album rocks with high-quality rhythm

BY FRANKLIN CLINE  
Reviewer

From out of nowhere, the ruler's back with his 10th studio album, "American Gangster," inspired by the film of the same name. Although I applaud Jay-Z for making a concept album that adheres to his old-school mafioso "Reasonable Doubt" persona, more than anything, "Gangster" signifies either a lack of passion or talent on Hov's part — maybe both.

This might seem like a sharp criticism, but it's true. This is the first Jay-Z album in which the beats are the high point instead of the lyrics. Damn, the beats are good. They alternate between '70s-slow-jam-inspired Marvin Gaye samples to subwoofer-ready head-bobbing and hypnotic grooves, such as "Hello Brooklyn 2.0," in which the relatively unknown producer Bigg D knocks it out of the park with a fat, thumping club beat accompanied by an obscure Beastie Boys sample. Likewise, the track "Roc Boys (And The Winner Is...)" features a vintage Jay-Z beat that would have fit perfectly on "The Blueprint" — it's brass-heavy and feel-good, bringing to mind the triumphant, recently acquitted Hov of 2001. In fact, "Roc Boys" also is the track in which Jay-Z brings it like only he can. The couplet "Bullet wounds will stop your buffoonery /

thanks to the pastor rapping at your eulogy" is indicative of the clever, angry imagery that peppers this album, but it never works as well as it does on "Roc Boys."

Jay-Z is all over the place lyrically, at points displaying his trademark gymnastic and elastic flow and other times totally phoning it in, like on "Ignorant S---," in which he raps: "I'm so bossy / B----, get off me / Trick, get off me / You can't get s-t off me / I'm so flossy." This is a tired rhyme-sandwich: for the bread, two inexpressive and bland adjectives, and for the meat, a triple-decker of lazy, hateful phrases that rely on shaky internal rhyme (b----, trick, s---). Here, it feels like Jay-Z's just killing time until the chorus.

Most of the fatigue or boredom Jay-Z exhibits in this album can be attributed to the fact that "Gangster" is a concept album, so the content of all of his raps center around the gangster lifestyle. I know, I know, that doesn't seem like much of a change from a typical Jay-Z or mainstream rap album, but there is a noticeable lack of introspection here. There is nothing like "Moment of Clarity" or "Song Cry" on "Gangster," and that's a shame because those songs are the marker by which Jay-Z's abilities as a rapper most easily can be measured. It is through songs like those that Jay-Z's growth as an artist most

easily is seen, and although many critics have been quick to celebrate this album as a welcome return to form from one of the pioneers of the mafioso rap genre, it feels as though Jay-Z paints himself into a corner, and by the end of the album totally has run out of things to say, having reiterated the same thing in vaguely similar ways for 15 tracks.

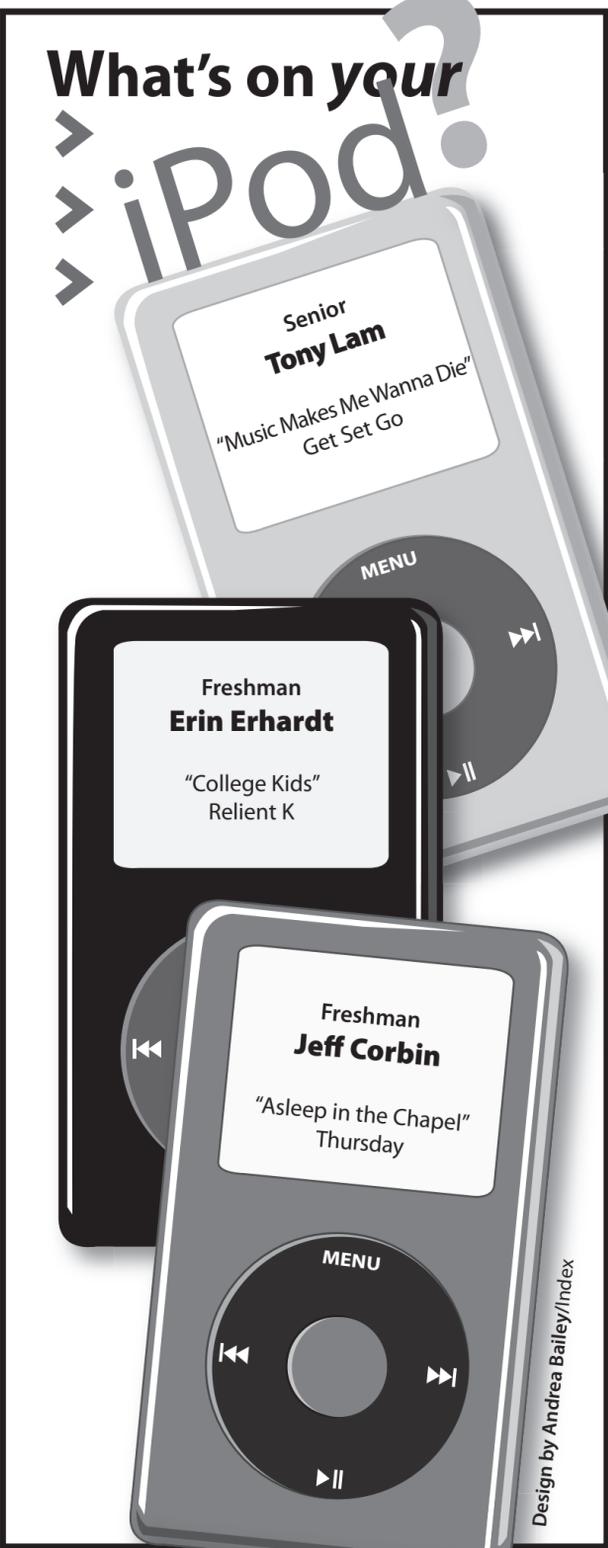
Although Jay-Z's examination of exactly what an American gangster is or should be is one-sided, repetitive and flawed, the album still is a fun, mindless ride. "Ignorant S---" sums up this album's content quite nicely: It's all self-referential and tongue-in-cheek. This is "Reasonable Doubt" on downers, with the immediacy and fear brought about by hustling replaced by the cool confidence (or laziness, if you're pessimistic) that only a millionaire who is sleeping with Beyonce could exude.

## Music Review

### "American Gangster"

Jay-Z  
Label: Roc-A-Fella Records  
Released: Nov. 15

Rating



**ARIES** (March 21 to April 19) Your work requires increased effort during the next few days. But it will all pay off down the line. Things ease up in time for weekend fun with family and/or friends.  
**TAURUS** (April 20 to May 20) Your genuine concern for others could prompt you to promise more than you can deliver. It's best to modify your plans now, before you wind up overcommitted later.  
**GEMINI** (May 21 to June 20) A situation that seems simple at first glance needs a more thorough assessment before you give it your OK.

Dig deeper for information that might be hidden from view.  
**CANCER** (June 21 to July 22) Careful: Right now, things might not be quite what they appear. Even the intuitive Crab could misread the signs. Get some solid facts before you act on your suspicions.  
**LEO** (July 23 to August 22) Your energy levels are high, allowing you to complete those unfinished tasks before you take on a new project. A social invitation could come from an unlikely source.  
**VIRGO** (August 23 to September 22) You might think you're helping, but unless you're asked for a critique, don't give it. If you are asked, watch what you say. Your words should be helpful, not hurtful.  
**LIBRA** (September 23 to

October 22) Your attempt at mediating disputes might meet some opposition at first. But once you're shown to be fair and impartial, resistance soon gives way to cooperation.  
**SCORPIO** (October 23 to November 21) Go ahead. Reward yourself for helping settle a disturbing workplace situation. On another note: A personal relationship might be moving to a higher level.  
**SAGITTARIUS** (November 22 to December 21) A sudden change of heart by a colleague might create some momentary uncertainty. But stay with your original decision and, if necessary, defend it.  
**CAPRICORN** (December 22 to January 19) Rely on a combination of your sharp instincts along with some really intense information-

gathering to help you make a possibly life-changing decision.  
**AQUARIUS** (January 20 to February 18) Instead of worrying if that new person in your life will stay or leave, spend all that energy on strengthening your relationship so it becomes walk-out resistant.  
**PISCES** (February 19 to March 20) A sudden financial dry spell could reduce your cash flow almost to a trickle. But by conserving more and spending less, you'll get through the crunch in good shape.  
**BORN THIS WEEK:** Your ability to keep secrets makes you the perfect confidante for friends, family and co-workers.

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