

The Idol Maker. Tapping Into The Pulse Of Young America

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We know the names of the stars that got teen-age girls screaming. Frank Sinatra could do it, and so could Elvis and the Beatles. And so can Lou Pearlman, it seems.

Pearlman, a 47-year-old native New Yorker, has the recipe for creating teen sensations that get kids to part with their pocket money. Who is this supermogul with his finger on the pulse of young America? 60 Minutes II Correspondent Vicki Mabrey reports that Pearlman gave us N SYNC, whose debut album sold 7 million copies, three times as many as Elvis Presley's first album.

He also is responsible for the Backstreet Boys, whose album - "Millenium" - sold more copies in its first week than any other album before it.

When the fans are going crazy, what's Pearlman doing? "Sitting back, taking it all in smiling because that's exactly what I like to see happen," he said.

"I'm there because I want to make everybody happy. I like to see the artists happy. I like to see the fans happy. You know, of course, there's a tinkle to the cash register, and everybody's getting some financial happiness," Pearlman added.

Actually it's more like a flood to the cash register. Pearlman has created these sensations, many of them from scratch, and he banks on the fact that these young fans, once infatuated, will spend millions of dollars on everything from compact discs and concert tickets, to T shirts and posters. And if their allowance money won't cover it, Pearlman calculates rightly that their parents will chip in.

A \$30 T shirt here, a \$15 disc there - these teenyboppers' buying power is estimated at more than \$100 billion per year.

Pearlman is hoping to grab a chunk of that. An entrepreneur who backed into pop-mogul status just six years ago, he made his fortune in the aviation business. His path crossed with the music industry when he started outfitting luxury jets and leasing them to rock stars like Paul McCartney, Phil Collins and a boy band called New Kids on the Block.

"I was invited to a concert. And I saw New Kids performing," Pearlman explained. "And it wasn't hard for me to see the stage, because all the people they were like this big, so I sort of looked right over their heads. And I was able to see the stage; I saw everybody, and I was like amazed."

What amazed Pearlman was that the fans were buying every product the New Kids offered. Pearlman wanted a piece of that gold mine, so he set out to create his own teen idols. Starting from scratch, and with the advice of some friends in the music business, he held auditions and eventually put together a group intended to drive young girls wild.

What was the winning formula? A young one, a cute one, a sensitive one, a jokester, a bad boy and the older hunk - all between the ages of 12 and 20. He then spent more than \$1 million over the course of two years, training and molding them into what would become the Backstreet Boys.

The Backstreet Boys caught on, racking up an estimated billion dollars in record sales alone. Pearlman heard the cash register ringing and figured if he could do it once, he could do it a dozen more times.

So on advice from singer Smokey Robinson, Pearlman set out to recreate the Motown model, with white kids singing pop instead of soul at a place that he calls "O-Town."

O-Town operates from an industrial park in Orlando, Fla., within an \$8 million state-of-the-art facility where Pearlman basically grows his own bands, like the group Take 5.

Pearlman finds his raw material using talent scouts and word of mouth. There's no need for open-casting calls. The kids then go through a combination boot camp and charm school, complete with vocal coaching, public relations training, image styling and choreography. Pearlman hires studio musicians for backup, the best producers in the business and well-known songwriters to craft instant hits.

All of this is tailored to what his market research tells him the fans will buy.

"We try to create that image and sound that we hope they like," he said. "We go out there and test market it."

Pearlman said the bands must have a clean look as well as a good look. The good look is to win the hearts of the kids, the clean look, to win the approval of the parents, and in the end, the wallets of both.

But being cute is not enough. Pearlman insisted they all must have talent. Contrary to what the critics say, no lip-synching is allowed.

N SYNC fits the Pearlman profile perfectly, with teen magazines dubbing J.C. "the serious one," Lance "the ashy one," Chris "the prankster," Justin "the young, cute one," and Joey "the bad boy."

The members play along with those labels but bristle at any implication that the group is manufactured. They say the nucleus of N SYNC was formed before Pearlman's charm school was even built.

"It wasn't like people were trying to whip us or say, 'You need to do this,'" Joey said. "It's just something that we wanted to do."

Added Justin: "We were very lucky and very blessed of course. But we feel like, you know, that takes you so far."

"He definitely was there in the beginning, and he gave us the opportunities that, you know, a lot of people don't have," Chris said.

Still to the nonfatuated, N SYNC may seem strikingly similar to Pearlman's other groups.

"Ask the fans and they'll tell you they could tell everyone apart. Maybe the concept, the style, or where we're going might be clean cut and that could be the commonality," Pearlman said.

Pearlman continues to dig deep in his pockets to finance one group after the other. With several cute boy bands up and running, he's started a girl group at O-Town called Innosense.

Then there's LFO, whose single was at the top of the charts. It's supposed to stand out as the group with a harder edge.

Recently several of his groups have lost money and disbanded. Still it doesn't stop Pearlman from bringing out new bands. Once they succeed, Pearlman starts to recoup the money he's paid to support them, and he gets a hefty chunk of their profits. But not everyone is pleased with the setup.

In separate lawsuits, the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC accused Pearlman of cheating them. Both groups have left Pearlman and settled their lawsuits for undisclosed amounts of money.

"The lawyers that got in the middle of it kind of blew it out of proportion in a sense," Pearlman said. "As time progressed, like in any situation, you want to get paid more when you deserve more. But there was a legal way to go about doing it."

Pearlman is not looking back, though. He's had so many requests to turn his pop stars into movie stars that he figured he'd do that himself. He's making a movie featuring his singers and using focus groups to tailor the script to young fans.

"Two little sayings you might want to put in there, which is something to go into the movie: 'You snooze you lose,' and, 'My way or the highway,'" said Pearlman.

He often refers to himself as the sixth Backstreet Boy, and in some circles, he is almost as famous as his young stars.

But if it all crashes tomorrow, and people want a whole different sound, what will Pearlman do?

"We had a lot of fun," he said. "And I'll break my guitar out and try to see if I can start feeling that new sound. Hey, maybe I'll get my time!"

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