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The Evolution of 90's Boy Bands

Attending a first concert is a memorable experience for anyone. I was nine when I went to my first concert. I went with my two older sisters. Our seats were high up in the indoor arena. When we looked down at the stage, it felt as though we would slide out of our seats and free fall onto the audience.

When the opening acts came onto the stage, I got a preview of what I could be expecting from the audience for the next few hours. Screaming filled not only the arena, but also my nine-year-old eardrums. I immediately plugged my ears and I glared at the girls around me. I didn't understand the craziness, especially since the band we had come to see hadn't come onto the stage.

And when that band finally did enter the arena, I didn't just plug my ears and glare as the screaming reached decibels I had never experienced. I started to cry. My head felt like it was inside of the liberty bell and I could feel my heart vibrating within my ribcage. And this was before the booming music started.

It wasn't until about half-way through the concert that I finally grew comfortable with the sound levels.

My first concert experience happened in 1999. The band was the Backstreet Boys, one of the more well-known boy bands of the 1990s.

Each decade has one or more genres of music that define that generation. The 1940's had swing music; the 1950's, the beginning of rock and roll; the 1980's, pop and hair bands.

Ask any 20-something girl about music from the 1990's and she will most likely answer with boy bands. Boy bands dominated the Top 40 radio stations throughout the decade and made regular appearances on the Billboard 100 lists.

The origins of the 90's boy band began in the late 80's, with the band New Kids on the Block. They first hit the music scene in the mid-80's, but their popularity didn't pick up until 1988. The band broke up in 1995, just a few short years from the peak boy band years.

Boyz II Men was the next boy band to grace the Billboard charts. The group produced a sultry sound with their four-part harmony. What mattered more to Boyz II Men was the music. They had #1 songs from 1992 to 1994, but they didn't have another #1 until 1997, the same year that one of the two biggest boy bands became popular.

Music debates between girls on playgrounds and in school hallways during the mid-late 1990s could be brought down to two sides: Backstreet Boys vs. 'N Sync. These two bands are the apex of the boy-band pyramid. Both became popular during the peak boy-band years of 1997-1999. Bands that followed after were considered wannabes and never had the same success as these two bands.

The Backstreet Boys were formed in 1995, but they did not get a following until 1997 with their first hit "Quit Playing Games with My Heart." Unlike Boyz II Men, the Backstreet Boys didn't just focus on their vocals. They also danced, providing their audiences with a more well-rounded, entertaining performance. The Backstreet Boys enjoyed a year of chart topping hits and screaming fans before their big main rival joined the pop music world.

'N Sync was also formed in 1995, but they did not release their first single until 1998. Like the Backstreet Boys, 'N Sync added dance to their talent resume. But unlike the Backstreet Boys, 'N Sync had a slow start. But after the more popular band turned down a televised concert on the Disney Channel, 'N Sync took the opportunity and performed. Their album went from #85 to #9 in three short weeks. From then on, the two bands entered into a musical banter, and the rivalry was born.

After the successes of the Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync, other boy bands started to sprout out from the pop music world. But none were ever as successful as these two bands. The closest success story could be from the underdog band 98 degrees. Although their vocals were stronger than 'N Sync, their lack of dancing ability kept them just shy of stardom.

ABC's reality television show "Making the Band" helped create the boy band O-Town in 2000. Although the band had a few popular songs, they never reached the same level of fame as the Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync.

Other bands such as Youngstown, E.Y.C., L.F.O. and Dream Street tried to make it out of boy band obscurity, but one world event would end an era of the romance and dreamy pop music.

New York Times columnist Jon Pareles attributes the decline of boy bands to the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. After 2001, listeners wanted more realism and honesty from their music.

Even the two top boy bands couldn't survive the musical shift. 'N Sync disbanded in 2002, just seven months after the attacks. The Backstreet Boys lasted longer, even returning in 2010 for a reunion tour with the New Kids On the Block, but they would never have a repeat success.

The dedicated boy-band fans may have taken down posters from their bedroom walls in 2002, but their love for the up-beat music lives on. I still listen to my Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync albums regularly and I still have spirited debates with fellow fans about who was better. I still remember my first concert experience with the Backstreet Boys. I still remember my second concert experience with 'N Sync.

And I'll always remember growing up during the 1990's because of boy bands.