

# Backstreet Boys aim to relight fan fire

The band marks its 20th anniversary with a documentary and a renewed connection.

By Amy Kaufman

In the '90s, the Backstreet Boys were his enemy. They were bubble-gum pop, a manufactured quintet made up of guys who wore matching sports jerseys and sang about the shape of their hearts.

They were everything Stephen Kijak was against. He wore black and liked musicians who did too, like the Cure. So when production company Pulse Films asked him to direct a documentary about the BSB — ugh, a cutesy nickname! — he balked.

"That's what you brought me? You work with Nick Cave, Blur, LCD Soundsystem, and you bring me the Backstreet Boys? Yeah, I don't think so," recalled Kijak, 45.

But then he met with the band, and they said they were more interested in emulating Metallica's gritty 2004 documentary ("Metallica: Some Kind of Monster") than Justin Bieber's 2013 fluffy one ("Justin Bieber: Believe"). Plus, group members were at a pivotal moment: their 20th anniversary. Kevin Richardson had just returned to the band after a six-year hiatus. And they were just about to start recording a new album in London.

"They didn't have anything to lose," Kijak said. "They didn't have a record deal and sort of weren't sure if anybody cared about them anymore. They felt like underdogs."

Which is kind of crazy for a group that has sold 10 million albums worldwide, toured in more than 100 countries and received seven Grammy nominations. But as viewers learn in "Backstreet Boys: Show 'Em What You're Made Of," which debuted in limited release and on video-on-demand last week, even that



THE BACKSTREET BOYS, from left: Nick Carter, Brian Littrell, AJ McLean, Howie Dorough and Kevin Richardson.

list of accomplishments won't earn you much respect when you're a grown man in a boy band.

Yes, the Backstreet Boys — Richardson, 43; Howie Dorough, 41; Brian Littrell, 39; AJ McLean, 37; and Nick Carter, 35 — are adults now. They're all married and have kids, except for Carter, who wed his wife only a few months ago. But hanging out by the rooftop pool of a trendy Hollywood hotel last week a few hours before their movie's red carpet premiere, they hardly looked like soccer dads. There was a blingy dog tag hanging from Carter's neck, and McLean kept his sunglasses on despite the fact that it was 4 p.m. on an overcast Thursday.

"I want Champagne. Anyone want Champagne?" Littrell asked, settling into a canopy.

"You gettin' some sparkly?" Dorough asked.

"Yeah," Littrell said. "Let's rock the roof."

McLean, who has battled alcohol and drug addiction for more than a decade, abstained. His struggles with sobriety are discussed in the film, as are Littrell's serious vocal issues and the band's relationship with Lou Pearlman, who put together the group in 1993 but later went to jail.

"When we decided we were going to make a documentary film, we said, 'OK, well, we don't want it to be a 'VH1 Behind the Music,' because we've already done that,'" said Richardson, who still sports the same overly manicured goatee he did two decades ago.

Carter, who has starred in two reality shows, was the one who first suggested that the group make a documentary. He'd seen "Beats, Rhymes & Life," the 2011 film about A Tribe Called Quest, and was left with a "nostalgic feeling," wanting to revisit the hip-hop group's music.

"I thought doing some-

things similar would be a cool way to reintroduce ourselves to fans who may not have kept up with us — a cool way to rekindle that love," he said.

But the movie also served as a way to bring the men closer together. They decided to visit one another's hometowns for the first time and film the experience, which proved surprisingly emotional for some members. In Kentucky, Richardson broke down outside the home he grew up in as he recounted his father's final days battling cancer. In Florida, Carter dissolved into tears after his elementary school drama teacher presented him with a video of him performing in a play.

They also were forced to face their feelings about Pearlman, who in 2008 pleaded guilty to charges, including conspiracy and money laundering, and was sentenced to 25 years in federal prison. Richardson says

in the film that Pearlman was not only recouping his investment on the band but also taking his cut as a manager and getting paid as the group's sixth member.

"Everything we pulled in in the first couple of years, he was making 70% of it," Richardson explained. "We barely saw any of that."

The group had planned to visit Pearlman in prison — "to just ask him, 'Why?'" Dorough said — but the warden wouldn't approve the request because of security issues.

Not that there wasn't plenty of other drama for Kijak to dive into.

As it turned out, the cameras provided an outlet for the band to discuss Littrell's muscle tension dysphonia, which had severely altered the quality and consistency of his voice. In one heated scene, Littrell and Carter get into a curse-heavy fight during which Carter shouts: "Are we going to talk about

the fact that you don't necessarily sound as good as you used to?"

With the band set to record a new album this summer, Littrell said his voice is still causing him trouble. Though he was able to participate in the group's 145-date "In a World Like This" tour last year, he said he was unable to speak just five months ago.

But as worried as he is about being able to sing, he's more concerned with being taken seriously when he does.

"With the term 'boy band' — people toss it to the side and think it was a generational movement that won't happen again," he said. "And yet we're still kicking. We've been nominated for a ton of Grammys but have never won. It would be nice, from an industry standpoint, for someone to go, 'Hey, well done.'"

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