

# Britney Spears: Not That Innocent?

Posted by *Arielle Schwarz* / March 1, 2011

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## The rise and fall (and rise again) of a teen queen

By *Arielle Schwarz*



Most American audiences first laid eyes on her on October 23, 1998. The first image of her on video is permanently emblazoned in pop culture history, an artifact of the time. It started with the strike of the clock at 3, and the rush of students into a hallway. There she stood: her honey blonde hair pinned sweetly in pigtails. Her blouse was tied high above her navel. Her skirt was short and her stockings were thigh high. The world didn't know it yet, but this 16-year-old was about to go from Britney Jean Spears, a girl from Kentwood, Louisiana, to Britney, worldwide pop phenomenon.

The media world of 1998 was simpler. The Internet was just becoming more widely accessible. The iPod and YouTube did not exist, nor did music downloads. People bought CDs and cassettes at record stores and played them on their Walkmans. Music videos were the best way for a pop artist to gain worldwide recognition. Shows like MTV's "Total Request Live" were the anchor for pop stars like Britney to gain access to their fans. They came on the show, waved to the screaming admirers in Times Square, premiered their video, and if they were lucky, became a household name and sold millions of albums.

The video for Spears' "...Baby One More Time" has been called iconic. It touches upon taboo, a young girl in a provocative school girl outfit, gyrating around and making herself available. According to Spears, she was not available, at least sexually. But people wanted her. The singer's debut album has sold more than 25 million albums to date.

But that Spears who crooned "ooh baby, baby" in a kittenish purr eventually disappeared and the Spears of today is paparazzi fodder. The way we scrutinize public figures like Spears has not changed much since 1998, but the means by which we do so have changed dramatically. Online and at dozen of celebrity sites, their every move is chronicled and we can see it all, almost instantaneously, at the click of a mouse.

Many pop stars sizzle out after an album or two, so why we are still talking Britney Spears 13 years later? In a 1999 Rolling Stone article, Stephen Daly explains that Spears was able to grab the crown of

the 90's teen queen because she was the only girl among the boy bands, the crackle to their pop.

Daly writes, "For all the fan-mag prose that greeted Spears' explosive marketplace entry, we know precious little about her beyond an image that hints at several stereotypes. Is Spears bubblegum jailbait, jaded crossover diva or malleable Stepford teen? Who knows? Whether by design or not, the queen of America's new Teen Age is a distinctly modern anomaly: the anonymous superstar."

It seems odd that in 1999, Spears was considered anonymous. As the new millennium rolled in, Spears' anonymity shattered open. What oozed out was a debauchery. In each subsequent video, Spears wore less and less clothing, and as years passed, she had whirlwind relationships and marriages, acted out in public, and became tabloid fodder with alleged alcohol and drug use. Spears' life was like a soap opera.

But what the public did not know was that at the core was a fragile, lonely girl. According to published reports, she was diagnosed as having bipolar disorder and put under the conservatorship of her father, Jamie. While she was considered a role model in her teens, the Spears in her twenties was a trainwreck.

Becoming a teen queen does not happen overnight, as Daly points out. Spears was put in auditions by age 10. When she was 11, she appeared on Disney's "The New Mickey Mouse Club" with future 'Nsyncers Justin Timberlake and JC Chasez. Right when she signed a record deal with Jive Records at age 15, the Spears marketing campaign set sail. Her image was carefully crafted, each song and video from her debut were slightly suggestive, catchy pop records that girls could sing to and that guys could want to be with. But as Spears (and every pop queen since) has showed us, a carefully crafted image is just that—an image—which makes it next to impossible to uphold. It seemed like Spears unraveled in front of our very eyes, but in reality, she experienced heartache and the challenges of adulthood like we all do. Blogger Cecelia Lawson says, "when you look at the boy-bands of the past, who have largely disbanded and moved on, and the Spice Girls, with their (mostly) respectable families and slowly re-emerging careers, it seems that the answer isn't what Britney *did* that separates her from the rest, but what she *didn't* do. Despite a massive fortune, an explosive career, a marriage, two kids, and a divorce, Britney never grew up."

Robert Thompson, a professor of pop culture at Syracuse University, echoed similar sentiments. In an interview, he said, "she has made some extraordinarily great pop songs. When she came out, she had the look and the moves, and went from a great performer to this mythological figure that kept giving us this extraordinary drama. She kept falling into this thing where we were less looking forward to what song she'd release and more to what she'd do next, right whether [it's] coming out of a car without underwear or driving with her child in her lap. When she's at the top of her game, she's extraordinary. [Looking at] her catalogue of music, no one should be surprised at why [her songs are so popular]."

Spears' personal woes may keep people interested, but her albums continue to do well. Her latest, *Femme Fatale*, is slated to be a smash despite the fact that Walkmans and CDs are dead, and the digital age now holds the reigns. She captured our attention in 1998 because she knew exactly how to play her cards. Spears was the ultimate virgin/whore; the sweet Southern belle and Lolita sex kitten. However, 13 years later, not much has changed. She's still not that innocent.

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