

Canada should cherish pop treats

Though we used to be renowned for our sugary musical gems, Canada's fallen behind pumping out pop-stars—and supporting pre-existing ones



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A&E
Commentary

As the Spice Girls wrapped up their reunion tour in Toronto recently, one couldn't help but wonder: whatever happened to pop music in Canada? We used to be a country that both supported and created great pop music, a bridge between the balls-to-the-wall sugar of Europe and the more urban-influenced, R&B-heavy American market. In recent years, however, as the UK has continued to churn out the likes of Girls Aloud, Sugababes, and Sophie Ellis-Bextor, very little has washed up on our fair shores, as we've increasingly integrated with the American music market.

No one can argue that Canada is bereft of musical talent and influence. Our great country has a strong and varied musical history: from Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen to Alanis Morissette and Celine Dion, even the insufferable Avril Lavigne and much-maligned Nickelback have found significant international success. Yet these days, we seem to be lacking in the pop music department. I'm not talking about the bubble gum, over-manufactured drivel that, incidentally, Lavigne seems to be selling under the guise of "princess punk";

I'm talking about hook-laden, heart-stopping, so-hip-it-hurts popular music that makes you feel as though someone has re-invented the wheel the first few listens.

While the under-15 set are currently gobbling up the non-threatening sounds of Miley Cyrus and The Jonas Brothers, the market for intelligent, engaging pop music is being left to Britney Spears, and even writing "intelligent" within seven words of her name makes me feel uneasy.

The problem essentially lies in cost: it doesn't make financial sense for a record label to invest in breaking a pop act in Canada unless they're convinced they can break in America. On the flipside, with a largely integrated television universe, American acts are going to end up in Canadian homes with little, if any, additional cost to get them there. The result is that Canadians end up with less pop music and start to believe that perhaps there simply isn't demand for it.

In the past, Canada served as a staging ground for the expansion to America: the Backstreet Boys and the Spice Girls both broke Canada before heading south to conquer America. This practice is less prevalent in part because of the availability of leaked albums online, but also because of the demise of pop music as a popular medium—bands like the Backstreet Boys are nowadays restricted to, well, the back streets.

As for home-grown Canadian pop acts, they too have suffered from the push for a more Americanized

sound as record companies look for the cheapest route to the US market. Look no further than Nelly Furtado, whose recent transformation from hippy chick to über-skank has accompanied a move toward more urban music and increased success south of the border—though Furtado still manages to bang out some great pop tunes. Feist is another anomaly that manages to continue making lovely folk-inspired pop by harnessing the power of viral marketing, with genius music videos that spread her reach worldwide.

There are signs that the times are changing: Simon Cowell-backed, personality-challenged Leona Lewis is looking to hit big State-side this month with the gorgeous "Bleeding Love," and Kate Nash, whose quirky pop songs have made her an instant star in the UK, is coming to Canada in May. Danish sextet Alphabeat are currently winning over Europe with the ecstatic "Fascination" and are tipped as "one to watch" for 2008, and Robyn, who's back on the international scene after a 10-year absence, has slowly worked her self-funded album across Europe and is looking to break North America this year with perhaps the most exquisite pop song of the decade, "Be Mine!" and the brilliantly jaunty "Konichiwa Bitches."

Within Canada, Hilotrons' upcoming album *Happymatic* embraces a pop sensibility that has been sorely missed here and is hopefully a sign of things to come. Bring on the pop onslaught.

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