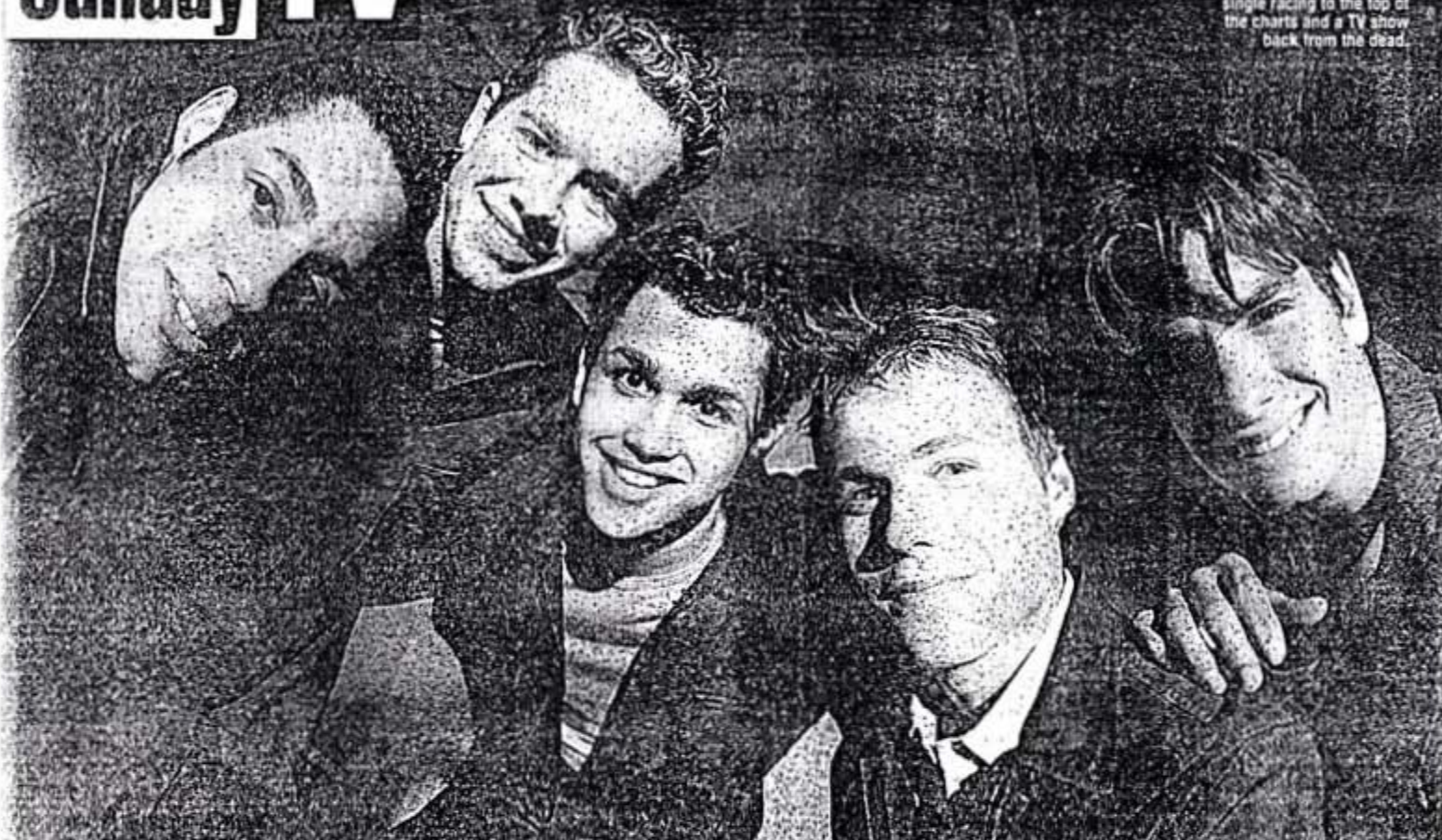


Sunday TV

O-Town — slang for the city of Orlando where they lived and rehearsed — has a hit single racing to the top of the charts and a TV show back from the dead.



The boys are back in 'O-TOWN'

Last fall, O-Town was nothing but the answer to a trivia question. Suddenly, they are the first bonafide hit band TV has produced since the Monkees. Here's how a legendary record exec made a TV network into a believer

by MICHAEL GILTZ

TELEVISION has always had a knack for turning unknowns into pop stars — from Ricky Nelson to thetridge Family to Josie & the Sussycats.

But now, for the first time since the Monkees, it looks like a pop band is going to turn ride a TV show into a hit record.

O-Town — the boy band created for ABC's reality show "Making the Band" — has a hit single, "Liquid Dreams," racing to the top of the charts and their first album due out later this month. Funny, but O-Town was supposed to be dead by now — because in, TV terms, their show was a bomb. Cancelled. Over and out.

Instead, the boy-band is all over the TV again — doing everything from Dick Clark's New Year's Eve

special to tomorrow night's American Music Awards.

Most improbable of all, there will be a second season of "Making the Band."

Well, the music happened. Kids heard "Liquid Dreams" and went out and bought it by the hundreds of thousands.

What was dead was, suddenly, pulsatingly live again.

As Andrea Wong, ABC's senior vp for alternative series and champion of "Making the Band" puts it, "We are thrilled with the hit single. It can only mean better things for the show."

It's not supposed to work like that, of course.

Call it the media's fuzzy math.

A major network TV show needs 10 million viewers or more to survive, while even a superstar like Madonna needs to sell only five million copies of her latest album to stay at the pinnacle of the music business.

'That was our lives and people were saying it wasn't worth watching'

Someone like Bette Midler can be a huge draw in concert but she's touch-and-go on TV. Why? Because the show makes the band — not the other way around.

Certainly, ABC expected a hit show when it launched "Making the Band" last March. Whether or not the boy band they fostered ever got a record deal.

The idea was pure Hollywood goes to Florida. Lou Pearlman — the mastermind behind the Back-

street Boys and *NSYNC — would pluck five lucky guys from obscurity and groom them to be superstars.

The band already had a name, O-Town, slang for the city of Orlando where they lived and rehearsed. All it needed was five fresh faces.

And Pearlman did a fabulous job. For the most part, the critics liked "Making the Band" (The Post's own Linda Stasi said: "By the end, I was shamelessly crying with the winners and losers") and thought the five young men had plenty of what it takes to make it.

The WB liked the show enough to commission a female "Making the Band" — called "Popstars" — which debuts Friday night.

And ABC thought enough of the idea to premiere it behind the red-hot "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" — and "Making the Band" delivered. In its first week,

it ranked No. 6 in the Nielsens, a spectacular start.

But its second airing was a cold splash of reality: the show immediately plummeted to 41st place.

The news got worse as more episodes aired during the summer. Even against repeats on competing networks, the show struggled to win its time slot, ultimately reaching about only five million viewers and ranking as low as No. 103.

Nervous network officials pulled the show from the schedule altogether and it looked like O-Town would be gone as quickly as "The New Monkees."

"When the show was cancelled, it was a very big disappointment," says Erik-Michael Estrada, one of the five members of O-Town and lead singer on most of the songs.

"That was our lives and people were saying it wasn't worth

watching."

Estrada obviously was not savvy to the way networks talk.

In TV-speak, there is a subtle — but crucial — difference between "hiatus" and "cancelled."

Maybe he saw the writing on the wall and figured the show was done for, whatever words ABC used to describe its apparent death.

But an on-the-bubble series nearing cancellation for ABC was something quite different to the record industry.

As far as music industry legend Clive Davis was concerned, these guys in O-Town were "the stars of a very successful TV show."

Last fall, Davis signed the band to his new label, J Records, and made the group a priority. According to Tom Corson, vp of worldwide marketing for J Records, that gave ABC an incentive to give serious thought to a second season for "Making the Band."

"ABC was clearly excited that Clive Davis was signing them," says Corson. "I'm not saying that's totally the reason they picked up the show, but that's clearly why they were excited about doing it."

He agrees the two decisions — to give the show a second season and to sign the band to J Records — happened in lockstep.

ABC's Wong sees it differently. "They independently signed the band and we independently decided to do a second season," he says. "J Records signing them was not reason enough."

So what gave "Making the Band" new life?

A few things: First, it's cheap to make.

Next, the show is already airing in a number of other countries (including the UK, Israel, Brazil and Singapore).

And, perhaps as important as the other two reasons put together, a looming actor's strike that may bring TV production to a screeching halt this summer makes any viable reality show worth its weight in designer jeans come May (which is about when new episodes will start to air).

That decision of ABC's looks a lot smarter now that the band has a smash-hit single on its hands.

"Liquid Dreams" debuted at No. 21 on the Billboard Hot 100, the second-highest debuting single in all of 2000.

Now, the band created by TV is using TV to promote the heck out of its first CD — just like a "real" band.

They are making the obligatory stops on MTV's "Total Request Live" and every talk show that will have them.

Were people predisposed to book O-Town? Yes, says Corson, who agrees they've been able to get a lot more appearances booked



Lou Pearlman — the mastermind behind the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC — created and groomed O-Town for the ABC reality series "Making the Band." The boy band now has hit CD, *Liquid Dreams*, which debuted at No. 21 on Billboard magazine's Hot 100 chart.

THE Billboard HOT



'They've given up their lives to be a human experiment'

than most new bands thanks to the TV series.

"But some of the hardest-to-book shows were bowled over by the fact that this looks like it's real," says Corson, meaning that the band is not just a figment of television but living, breathing hit-maker.

The video on MTV and the song on the radio in heavy rotation add up to what, in effect, are three-and-a-half-minute commercials running 24 hours a day promoting "Making the Band." Not had for a dead TV show.

When the show returns, Estrada is a lot more excited about what people will see.

For the first time since the Monkees, success on the charts may translate into success in the Nielsen.

The pre-fab four was created for TV (and despised at the time by critics). Few people remember that their first album was a smash success before any episodes aired, catching everyone by surprise.

Of course, none of the acts given a leg up by TV was given any credit by music critics.

Ricky Nelson waited most of his career to be acknowledged for his contributions to rock 'n' roll (the first serious collection of his music — the four-CD set "The Rick Nelson Legacy" — just came out on Capitol).

And the Monkees had to be revived by MTV before anyone would admit that, yeah, they had some great singles.

So a band that looked like it was turning into a trivia question before it had even really begun now has a first album coming out and something to prove. "The critics are going to be singing a different tune when they hear the album," he says.

As Estrada emphasizes, the music was always more important to them than the show.

He says when they auditioned for "Making the Band," most of the five people there (and three of the five band members who made the final cut) didn't even realize there was a TV show aspect to this boy-band audition.

In didn't take long though — after being filmed 24 hours — for the TV part of their new jobs to overwhelm them.

"All the reality-show people are part of this cult," says Estrada. "They've given up their lives to be a human experiment."

Despite being taped by the same crew that taped MTV's "Real World," the band was more concerned about the rehearsals and the songs than whether they would become famous through the TV show, Estrada says.

"In our minds, the cast of 'Making the Band' is totally different from the members of O-Town. Even when it looked like the show was over, we were still rehearsing and taking lessons and committed to the group."

And trying to worry about how they were coming across on screen was pointless. "You wish you could play a role, but you can't," says Estrada, who says they were all being themselves.

Estrada also hopes people will get more hooked on who O-Town really are when new episodes air in May.

When people watched the first season, Estrada believes viewers were struck by "how little control we had over the direction the group took it."

"Last year was set up before we even got there," he says. "It was always going to be about getting down to the final five guys and then rehearsing and recording a few songs."

"Now it's about the band — and they can't storyboard that. The storyboard is our lives."