

● REALLY BIG SHOW

Newlyweds

...Nick & Jessica

By MICHAEL GILTZ

POP stars Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey (of 98 Degrees) want their fans to know they're just average, normal, everyday people. So how do they prove it? By starring in their own MTV reality series, of course.

"It's important for people not to see us as a perfect couple," says Simpson, who proved irresistible with her double platinum breakthrough album "Sweet Kisses" and has a recurring role on "That 70s Show." (Simpson plays the age-appropriate girlfriend of Ashton Kutcher, who, in real life, prefers them older.) "I think that's wrong. Everybody has their imperfections and their flaws and, in Hollywood, people make their marriages out to be Romeo and Juliet. So people will see us fight and that we are normal."

Called "Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica," the series follows the couple as they get used to living together (Simpson is a slob; Lachey is a neat-freak), and work on their new albums.

Adding to the pressure: Lachey is trying to forge a solo career with his album "SoulO." Although he's working with top producers like The Matrix, the singer has to wonder if fans who once cared about 98 Degrees will remain loyal. Simpson, meanwhile, needs to recover from a sophomore slump album that only went gold (selling 500,000 copies). She has her hopes pinned on the new album "In This Skin," for which she wrote or co-wrote almost every song.

Originally, both CDs were slated to come out on August 19, but now Lachey's has been pushed back to September 9. Was the delay deliberate—to avoid head-to-head comparisons between husband and wife?

"Well of course, Jessica was going to whup me," says Lachey, with a laugh. "My pride can only take so much."

Simpson politely says that she and Lachey are competitive about recording the best music—but only in the best way.

"It's a healthy competition, nothing that causes strain on our relationship," she says. "We both have the same passions and we both support each other. It's fun having the same career."

"Speak for yourself," jokes Lachey. "I try and sabotage Jessica whenever possible."

Lachey's constant teasing only seems one-sided: Simpson proved she could give as good as she gets by setting up her husband for an elaborate practical joke earlier this year on Kutcher's MTV show "Punk'd."

"Yeah, that built trust right from the beginning," says Lachey about the episode in which actors posing as her relatives parked a mobile home in their front yard. "I thought 'That 70s Show' was punky enough, watching Jessica make out with Ashton on national television. I didn't know there was more."

If watching your wife kiss another man seems daunting, it's nothing compared to the couple's daily lives. The new series shows Simpson and Lachey struggling with the demands of record companies (Simpson's vocals on "Skin" is first single, "Sweetest Sin," get a thumbs-down) and the temptations of being a pop star.

In one episode, Simpson is seen driving to an audition where Lachey checks out sexy female dancers for his first video—something most newlyweds don't have to deal with. ("I am not jealous, I am not



Simpson and Lachey hope their MTV marriage can give them a boost on the charts.

jealous," Simpson says half-jokingly.) Later, Lachey is seen getting distracted by one of the leggy girls and Simpson makes excuses. "He's still a bachelor at heart," she says.

But the show mostly focuses on the mundane life led by the singers—whether it's following them home from a flashy premiere, where they eat pizza on the couch, or showing Lachey making fun of Simpson for wondering why one tuna fish brand is called "Chicken of the Sea." Or, most embarrassingly, letting viewers hear Simpson burp at the breakfast table.

Of course, good marriages don't always make good TV. Billboard senior writer Carla Hay, who covers film and TV for the music industry bible, says the show could conceivably give the couple the

boost that Brandy, who did an MTV series about giving birth, didn't get. "With 98 Degrees in the shadow of NSync and Backstreet Boys and Jessica Simpson in the shadow of Britney and Christina, it's just iffy whether or not this show is going to fly with the MTV audience. But if they end up with a million people watching the first episode, that'll be great," says Hay.

But there are risks. "When you're doing a show about a marriage, sometimes people watch and say, 'Too much information!'" Hay adds. "Do we really need to know that Jessica Simpson likes to burp?"

Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica
Monday, 10:30 p.m., MTV