

CREATIVE NONFICTION

“Time for Justin Timberlake to say ‘Bye Bye Bye’” — A Personal Essay

Brian Huba

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I

I was twenty years old when I found out about Justin Timberlake. It was July 2000, and I was sitting in my small apartment, a third-floor unit in a low-rent complex near Albany, New York, flipping through TV channels. There was a concert airing on HBO. Although I didn't know then, it was NSYNC from Madison Square Garden. Of course I'd heard of NSYNC. This was the height of music's Bubblegum Era, when Limp Bizkit, Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears, and Eminem ruled the radio waves, and TRL's Carson Daly was a kingmaker. I only knew NSYNC wasn't the Backstreet Boys. They were the *other* boy band.

NSYNC's lead singer was a curly-haired kid donning a bedazzled bandana and matching jumpsuit. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. The electrified dance routines. The falsetto voice. He was like a young Elvis Presley. At one point in the performance, he stood on stage alone, beat-boxing into a microphone, and I had just one thought: whoever this is, he's going to be the biggest star in the world.

I read everything I could about Justin Randall Timberlake. I learned he was born on January 31st, 1981 in Memphis, Tennessee, just 16 months after I was born. I found out about his childhood turn on *Star Search*, then the two years (1993-94) he spent with *The Mickey Mouse Club*, where he met his most-famous future love interest. NSYNC was formed in 1995 by a promoter named Lou Pearlman, who'd later sue NSYNC for \$150 million dollars. Pearlman put the guys to work in Europe, where they literally sang for their supper. In 1998, NSYNC hit it big in America with the

release of their self-titled debut album, which sold 11 million copies. Around the time I got hip to JT, the band's second album *No Strings Attached* was the hottest commodity in music.

Back then I worked as an administrative assistant at a large car dealership called Orange Ford, and I remember sitting at my L-shaped desk, watching the videos for "Bye Bye Bye" and "It's Gonna Be Me" on some pre-YouTube platform. I couldn't get enough Justin. I was obsessed. I told everyone who'd listen, "Timberlake...he's the real deal." Most in my circle dismissed him as Mickey Mouse. But Justin Timberlake wasn't Mickey Mouse. Justin Timberlake was Elvis Presley. They just didn't know it yet.

I guess I've never had much confidence. I was born with strabismus, a medical condition in which the eyes don't properly align. I refused to have my picture taken. I wouldn't make eye contact with people when they spoke to me, often giving the impression that I was hiding something, or lying about something. I never knew my real father. And never got along with the man my mother married when I was eight years old. In high school, I wasn't a jock or a popular kid, and I went all four years without dating a single girl. After graduation, I worked for my Uncle Dave at Orange Ford. I had the grades to go away to college. I just didn't have the guts. I begged Dave to hire me, and he did, only if I promised to enroll in night classes at the local community college. At that time, I didn't see college as the conduit to a better life. I saw it as something I had to get through, and when I satisfied my quid-pro-quo with Dave by earning an associate's degree, I'd be done.

Dave wasn't just an uncle. He was a father figure. And my plan was to someday be a sales rep, just like him. Then everything changed. In November of 1999, Dave was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Even though the chemo treatments drew the vitality out of him, like sugar being sucked through a straw, Dave refused to take a leave of absence from Orange Ford. For the next five months, I sat beside him as he wasted away. Dave died on March 21st, 2000. (I would later learn NSYNC's album *No Strings Attached* was released that same day, which, to say the least, was miraculous timing.)

Dave was gone and I was totally lost. Then I saw that NSYNC concert on HBO, and I knew exactly what I wanted: I wanted to be Justin Timberlake. I began to walk like him, talk like him. I

bought teenybopper magazines so I could study Justin’s fashion sense, then began dressing like him: lots of baggy jeans and oversized shirts, lots of baby blue, JT’s favorite color. I sported faux-diamond earrings. I bought a heavy silver necklace. Despite all that, I still lacked the most-imperative part of Justin’s look. In September of 2000, a few days after MTV’s Video Music Awards (VMA’s), I drove to a beauty salon and asked for a perm. The receptionist pulled a face, then said, “Seriously?”

In my mind, having that perm completed the package. When people looked at me, they’d no longer see Brian Huba. They’d see Justin Timberlake: famous rockstar. In retrospect, this was clearly the behavior of a kid struggling to cope with loss, but at the time it felt right. With JT’s hair and JT’s style, I was a whole new man, a better man. And for the first time in my life, I had confidence.



Me with my “JT Perm” in 2001

In 2002, two things happened. I graduated from the University at Albany with a B.A. in English, thanks to a post-Orange Ford push that saw me finish 72 credit hours in three semesters. And Justin Timberlake launched his solo career. Concerning the decision to record his own album, Timberlake told *The Hollywood Reporter*, “I felt like I had other music to make and that I needed to follow my heart.”

NSYNC’s last two albums (*No Strings Attached* and *Celebrity*) had both gone multi-platinum in a matter of days. On the heels of this ridiculous success, Justin made the gustiest gamble of his career. Many had tried going from world-class bands to solo acts. Very few had pulled it off. (See Roger Daultry, David Lee Roth, Boy George, Daryl Hall, and Deborah Harry for evidence of that).

And JT wasn't the only one making moves in '02. Nick Carter walked away from the Backstreet Boys. His first solo album *Now or Never*, released one week before Justin would release *Justified*, sold poorly and then got dumped in the Bargain Bin. The smart money said Justin Timberlake would suffer a similar fate.

The setting of Justin's inaugural performance was the 2002 VMA's at Radio City Music Hall. MTV made us wait three hours to see JT do his thing. With ten minutes left in the show, Brandy announced, "...give it up for Justin Timberlake." The camera panned to a prop boombox situated at center stage, and Justin slowly rose out of its top, donning a black fedora cocked low, then launched into "Like I Love You": "Just somethin' about you/The way I'm lookin' at you." The next four minutes saw JT unleash the filthiest performance of his life. I'd never seen anything like it. The choreography was cutting edge and elaborate. Justin absolutely nailed every high note, "...just be limber, *baBAY*," then closed it out with a body-twisting breakdown, before disappearing back inside the boombox, "Now everybody dance," and just like that, NSYNC was history.

What I dug most was the story "Like I Love You" told. It was about a guy in his early twenties hanging with girls at the nightclub. That was my story back then. That was what I was doing every weekend. Justin was talking to me. To this day, "Like I Love You" is my all-time favorite Timberlake track. And no matter what happens, or how much time passes, I'll forever see Justin how he was that night in New York City.

To date, *Justified* has moved more than ten million copies. And I'm not suggesting Justin achieved this on his own. How different things would've been if he didn't team up with Timbaland, the Neptunes, Pharrell Williams. In addition to these absurdly-talented collaborators, it succeeded because Justin pushed all the right buttons. Of Timberlake, Brian McKnight (who worked on the song "Never Again") said, "He's one of the most talented people I've ever met. And what's really great about him is that he also knows exactly what he wants. And consequently he knows what he doesn't want too."

Even at such a young age, Justin was a pragmatist. And the first, post-NSYNC piece of pragmatic business he conducted was to ditch Britney Spears, the Homecoming Queen of the Bubblegum

Era. I have no idea what really happened between them. And I don't care. There was no way Justin would be taken seriously in big-boy music while playing second fiddle to someone like her and all she symbolized.

In 2003, Justin had yet to make a single major misstep in the public eye, a remarkable feat considering he'd been uber-famous since he was 17. Justin Timberlake was a child prodigy. And the roads of Hollywood aren't paved with gold. They're paved with the carcasses of child prodigies who'd blown it by breaking the law, or getting wrapped up in drugs and alcohol. You might remember 2003 was the year another child prodigy, Kobe Bryant, sat in a Colorado courthouse, accused of rape. Being young, rich, and famous is probably one of the hardest things to handle. Justin made it look easy.

Despite the massive success of Justin's next two albums: *FutureSex/LoveSounds* and *The 20/20 Experience*, in my opinion, *Justified* is still his best (and most underrated) work. It's cool. It's authentic. It's Justin bearing his soul on every track. Ben Ratliff of *Rolling Stone* said Timberlake had successfully "vaulted over the canyon" to adulthood. For a 2018 *Billboard* article, writers Taylor Weatherby and Nina Braca called *Justified* "possibly the most iconic debut album from a former band member." But it was so much more than that. *Justified* was the album that made Justin Timberlake the biggest star in the world.



Me in my Justified/ Stripped concert shirt, August 2003

II

Today I'm 42 years old. I teach 12th grade English. Age and experience have taught me this: in life, we either evolve or we die. There was a time when Justin Timberlake was bulletproof. Every pumpkin he touched turned to a carriage. But on the heels of two uncharacteristic stumbles—the hand-holding incident in New Orleans and the Beat-Ya-Feet Disaster in D.C., plus the cringeworthy mea culpas he felt compelled to make after each—Justin Timberlake has been reduced to a punchline with today's coveted 18-35 demo. Justin Timberlake isn't a joke. Justin Timberlake is Elvis Presley.

Yet I feel we've entered the Fat Elvis Phase of Justin's arc. And Justin isn't checking out on the toilet anytime soon. I only wish I could say the same for his pop-culture clout. But I can't. Justin's time in the limelight has officially out-kicked the coverage. Perhaps he knows this to be true, as he recently sold off the rights to his entire catalog. At this point, Justin has two choices 1) walk away with his legacy mostly intact, or 2) claw and scratch to stay in a game that's passed him by.

Even though today's social-justice warriors were still wetting their diapers in the early aughts, they've retroactively deemed Justin the scoundrel in his breakup with Britney Spears, and have come to believe Justin's toxic masculinity destroyed Janet Jackson's career. Both are laughable revisionisms to anyone who experienced the era in real time. But, alas, it is open season on JT, everyone from documentary director John Urbano to Audrina Partridge of *The Hills* lining up to take their shot. Five seconds after Justin joined TikTok, "Justice for Janet" and "Apologize to Britney" filled the comments section.

Justin's playing by a brand-new generation's rules. After teaching 12th graders for the past decade, I've come to intimately understand the Zoomer mindset at play here. Everyone is in a silo. There is no nuance. You're either lily pure or irredeemable. And recent evidence would suggest Justin has been labeled the latter, despite being one of the most philanthropic celebrities alive, raising tens of millions for various charities, including the Justin Timberlake Foundation, which funds public school music programs.

That is only one part of the problem though. The other, more-pressing issue at play, is the level of product Justin has delivered in recent years. Timberlake's latest studio album, 2018's *Man of the Woods*, was horrifyingly bad. And while it sold well, critics largely panned the effort. Jamieson Cox of *Pitchfork* called *Man of the Woods* "a huge misstep for the pop star." Justin's Superbowl LII Halftime Show, meant to promote the album, was an overproduced mishmash, devoid of the soulfulness that has defined so many of his past performances. You already know how I feel about what he did at the 2002 VMA's. But his big-band take on "Suit & Tie" at the 2013 Grammys felt larger than life on the TV screen. I can't count how many times I've rewatched his bring-the-house-down duet with Chris Stapleton at the 2015 CMA's, or the "Can't Stop the Feeling" medley that opened the 89th Academy Awards. And, with all due respect to the late, great Jeff Buckley, Justin's rendition of "Hallelujah" (performed with Matt Morris for 2010's Hope for Haiti Telethon) is the most-heartbreaking cover of Leonard Cohen's signature song ever recorded.

When Beat-Ya-Feet went viral, *Rolling Stone's* Brittany Spanos asked readers "What the Hell Happened to Justin Timberlake?" As a self-proclaimed megafan, I have certainly grappled with this. And here's what I've come up with. Justin's decline invokes thoughts of the biblical figure, Samson, a Nazirite who drew great strength through his hair, which allowed him to perform superhuman feats, including slaying a lion with his bare hands and massacring an entire army using the jawbone of a donkey. In Judges 16-15 -17, Samson is betrayed by his lover Delilah, who orders a servant to cut his hair while he sleeps.

I believe, as crazy as it sounds, when Justin Timberlake straightened his hair—right around the release of *The 20/20 Experience*, his fall from grace was set in motion. The curly, blonde locks were Justin's power source, the trait that made him superhuman. Reports at the time suggest fashion designer Tom Ford is the one who convinced JT to quit the curls. In 2013, when asked about Justin's Cary Grant-esque makeover, Ford told *The New York Times*, "I happen to like the hair straighter." Of course, the new hair didn't mean Justin suddenly stopped being a brilliant song-and-dance man. But it did mean he stopped being Justin. With straight hair, he was, and still is, a mere mortal.

Right now, Justin's featured on a track by Calvin Harris called "Stay with Me." I've watched its video a few times, and am left with this: why is Justin, at 41 years old, still singing about getting

girls: *And I feel like, damn/Look at those pants?* If he maintains this now-awkward course, where does it ultimately lead? Crooning “Sexy Back” to a pavilion full of blue-haired grandmas in 2045? Then he really would be Elvis Presley.

In my youth, I wore a perm and faux-diamond earrings to masquerade as Justin Timberlake. And now, almost two decades later, I’m probably more like him than ever. We’re both husbands, both fathers, both men facing the choice that all men of a certain age must face: either we selfishly—perhaps delusionally—cling to a past version of ourselves, or embrace the fact we’ve reached a place in life where it’s no longer about us.

Justin Timberlake’s reign upon pop music is finished, but his personal cup runneth over with riches. Justin has a beautiful wife, who stood by his side through the internationally-covered hand-holding fiasco, while a weaker woman might’ve taken the money and run. Together they have two healthy sons. And perhaps someday, in the not-too-distant future, one of those sons will grace the stage at Madison Square Garden. And maybe, *just* maybe, that performance will inspire one young fan. A fan who’s struggling to cope with loss in their life. A fan who’ll be more than a fan. A fan who’ll be a megafan... forever.

January 2003, when Justin Timberlake turned 22 years old, the tabloid show *Access Hollywood* sent a camera crew to Dublin’s Pub on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, the site of Justin’s star-studded birthday bash, where Justin told reporter Pat O’Brien, “This is the beginning of the end for me, you know that, right?”

Time for Justin Timberlake to say “Bye Bye Bye.”