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Artists & Music

ARISTA'S NEXT GLIDES UP CHARTS

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liest stages.

In 1994, Next was playing in its hometown of Minneapolis when it hooked up with Low Key's Prof. T and Lance. Those two, who eventually helped record "Rated Next," worked with the group at Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis' Minneapolis studio, Flyte Tyme.

Soon thereafter, a demo tape got the attention of Naughty By Nature's Kay Gee, who signed the act as the first release for his label Divine Mill, which at the time was still under development.

The group, which collaborated on album cuts with Naughty By Nature, Adina Howard, and others, is managed by Queen Latifah's Jersey City, N.J.-based Flavor Unit Management.

"We've had a lot of people in our corner," says Tweety. "We can't take all the credit for everything because of everything that's been done not only by Divine Mill, but people back home and radio stations and the people buying the music. It's been one big team effort, and being on the industry side of it, you start to realize how much more goes into an album than you ever realized."

The push for "Rated Next" began with the success of the act's first single, "Butta Love," which, according to SoundScan, has sold more than 1 million units. The album, meanwhile, has sold more than 161,000 units since its release in August 1997, according to SoundScan.

"'Butta Love' kept growing to the point where we had worked it from July through December," says Lionel Ridenour, Arista's senior VP of black music (U.S.). "Once we got it on in a market, it just locked in. It was one of those rare situations where the song was so good, it eclipsed who the group was in the beginning. Everyone knew 'Butta Love,' but they didn't all know the group."

Helping to remedy that lack of consumer awareness, Arista kept the group on the road doing local radio and TV appearances and track dates. The trio also performed on such national TV programs as "Vibe," "The Keenen Ivory Wayans Show," and, more recently, "Soul Train" and "Ricki Lake."

Meanwhile, BET, and later MTV, supported the clip for "Butta Love."

According to Tweety, the song represents more than the group's first sales and airplay success. It also illustrates Next's evolution, which can be measured on the album by listening to an earlier track like "Phone Sex" and a newer cut like "Butta Love."

"'Phone Sex' was the second song we ever recorded as a group, and 'Sex-itude' was recorded early on in our careers," he says. "'Butta Love' was [cut] during a growth period where we were getting involved with new people. You can hear the difference in the freedom we were feeling."

Arista is now focusing on the second single, "Too Close," which has sold more than 193,000 units since Jan. 27, according to SoundScan.

This issue, "Too Close" is No. 5 on the Hot R&B Singles chart.

In spite of the widening exposure, R&B WJLB Detroit PD Michael Saunders, who is spinning both "Butta Love" and "Too Close," says he has some doubts about whether Next is truly established yet in the marketplace.

"Today's record companies aren't marketing groups or artists unless they're major," he says. "With a newcomer like Next, they're not marketing them, they're marketing songs. If [the members of the group] were walking

down the street, I don't think people would realize who they are."

Still, according to Ridenour, the proof is in the sales and airplay.

"Those connections that we made through the television appearances really helped along 'Too Close,'" says Ridenour. "Everywhere we could get double-digit rotations for a couple of weeks, we saw the album [sales] grow steadily. It's now higher than it was at Christmas. That's how you judge the success of an album."

The act's profile is bound to be raised even further when Next, which is booked by New York-based Famous Artists, begins opening dates for Usher and Mary J. Blige in late March.

Though the group has taken its fair share of critical jabs for the preponderance of sexual innuendo on "Rated Next," the threesome's live show continues to win over audiences.

"We had one reviewer write, 'Even if Next never made it as singers, they could still make it as exotic dancers,'" says Tweety. "We called him back and

said, 'Thanks for recognizing that we're not limited to one talent.'"

George Daniels, owner of George's Music Room in Chicago, says the act's performance, both live and at his cash registers, has been pleasing.

"There's definitely an increase in sales and the amount of attention they're getting, and my personal opinion after seeing them perform is that they are true professionals," says Daniels. "You can see they have a strong future if they stay on the same path."

Also contemplating the future for Next is Ridenour, who is confident that "Rated Next" will keep the act in the spotlight. "I Still Love You" is tentatively slated as the next single.

"How many groups have a first single that goes platinum and a second one that goes gold and are still growing?" asks Ridenour. "We think we've got a nice run going, and as soon as that's over, we'll get them back in the studio and take it to a higher level, but right now, we feel there are at least two or three other nice cuts on the album."

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BOXSCORE TOP 10 CONCERT GROSSES

ARTIST(S)	Venue	Date(s)	Gross Ticket Price(s)	Attendance Capacity	Promoter
U2	Football Ground Sydney	Feb. 28	\$2,236,123 (\$3,287,101 Australian) \$63.36/\$27.40	37,976 sellout	Dainty Consolidated Entertainment TNA International Ltd.
MARIAH CAREY	Aloha Stadium Honolulu	Feb. 21	\$1,744,210 \$65/\$45/\$35	30,415 sellout	PACE Touring Tom Moffatt Prods.
REBA MCENTIRE	Houston Astrodome Houston	March 3-4	\$1,372,174 \$23/\$10	113,407 116,344, two shows	Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo
JIMMY BUFFETT & THE CORAL REEFER BAND	Palace of Auburn Hills Auburn Hills, Mich.	Feb. 16-17	\$1,367,517 \$46/\$30.50/\$21	40,243 two sellouts	Palace Sports & Entertainment Inc.
U2	Waverly Park Melbourne, Australia	Feb. 21	\$1,366,510 (\$2,036,100 Australian) \$63.36/\$27.40	23,810 30,000	Dainty Consolidated Entertainment TNA International Ltd.
GARTH BROOKS TRISHA YEARWOOD	Pyramid Memphis	March 5-7	\$1,290,129 Gross Record \$21.50	60,885 three sellouts	Varnell Enterprises
U2	Burswood Dome Perth, Australia	Feb. 17	\$1,273,178 (\$1,897,035 Australian) \$102.73/\$30.82	13,775 sellout	Dainty Consolidated Entertainment TNA International Ltd.
U2	ANZ Stadium Brisbane, Australia	Feb. 25	\$1,019,744 (\$1,529,616 Australian) \$63.36/\$27.40	17,567 30,000	Dainty Consolidated Entertainment TNA International Ltd.
JIMMY BUFFETT & THE CORAL REEFER BAND	Charlotte Coliseum Charlotte, N.C.	Feb. 14	\$878,972 \$46/\$30.50/\$21	23,977 sellout	Cellar Door
ELTON JOHN	San Jose Arena San Jose, Calif.	Feb. 6	\$785,380 \$47.50/\$37.50	17,232 sellout	Bill Graham Presents

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