

1997 Oklahoman

By George Lang

On a cloud-soaked December afternoon in Manhattan, the streets are gridlocked, a by-product of a visit by President Clinton and one of the best Christmas shopping seasons in recent memory. New Yorkers and interloping out-of-towners alike are jockeying for position at Macy's, Bloomingdale's, and the Virgin Records megastore, and the swarm of bodies and cars in the shopping districts could convert even the most gregarious people person into a fearful agoraphobic.

High above the fray on the fifty-first floor of the Rihga Royal Hotel, a luxury suite has been converted into a makeshift Fox Network television studio, where segments are being taped for *Hanson's Jingle Bell Jam*. The freelance camera crew is focused on three young brothers from Tulsa who, in all likelihood, are mentioned on a few thousand Christmas lists in the hands of those harried shoppers down below. The tape rolls, director Lee Adams calls "action," their SteadyCam-recorded images rock gently on a monitor, and one by one, the freshly scrubbed Oklahoma boys introduce themselves, in descending order of age:

"Hey, this is Isaac..."

"Taylor..."

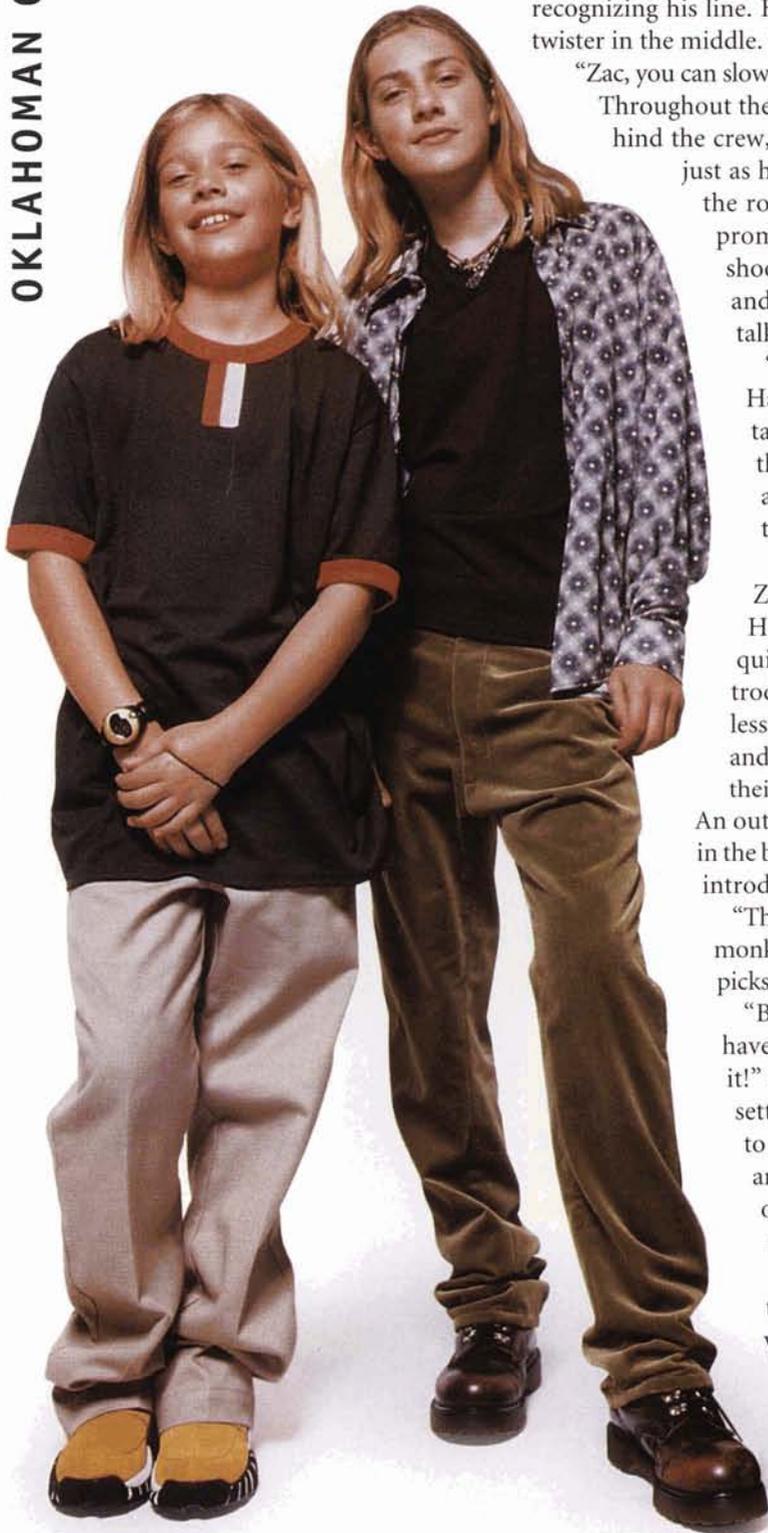
"... and Zac,"

"...And we're Hanson," they intone in unison, though not in the tight three-part harmony that has sold over five million copies of their major label debut, *Middle of Nowhere*. Although Adams will later ask them to sing on one of the countless promos being taped during the ninety-minute session, Isaac is emphatic. "We're not going to be able to do that," he says politely but firmly. Voices must be saved for that night's appearance at Madison Square Garden, where, alongside hot acts like Aerosmith, the Wallflowers, and Fiona Apple, Hanson will perform their worldwide hits like "MMMBop,"



of the Year





“Where’s the Love?” and “I Will Come to You,” all of which will elicit screams rivaling the intensity of jet engines from the mostly female, mostly teenage audience.

Throughout the taping, the brothers trade spots on the loveseat, make minor wardrobe changes, and perhaps most interestingly, work with Adams on their dialogue. Taylor, 14, is a natural when it comes to script doctoring, and without putting Adams or his crew on the defensive, is doing his fair share of directing on the set.

“Okay, I’ll start out with, ‘Hey, you’re back on *Hanson’s Jingle Bell Jam*,” Taylor says, then gestures to 12-year-old Zachary. “Then you say —”

“Check out Bobby’s mile-high pile of presents on *Bobby’s World*,” Zac interrupts, recognizing his line. He practices it a few times, occasionally flubbing the tongue twister in the middle. (“Check out Bobby’s mile-high bluhbluhbluhbluh.”)

“Zac, you can slow down, you don’t have to do it so fast,” Isaac says reassuringly.

Throughout the entire shoot a tall, goateed gentleman has been standing behind the crew, capturing all the action on his own 8 mm video camera — just as he does nearly every minute of every day of his sons’ lives on the road. Walker Hanson, 43, has watched his boys do countless promotional appearances, guest spots on talk shows, and photo shoots in the last year, and he knows when they are wearing down and require some fatherly guidance. Sensing the need for a pep talk, he approaches Adams.

“Okay, can we stop a second and talk about what we’re doing?”

Hanson says. “We need to powwow. Is there someplace we can talk?” With that, father and sons dart away to a side room, and the famished entourage from Hanson’s record label, Mercury, attacks the catering table, consigning a tureen of guacamole and two wedges of brie to history.

About ten minutes later, everyone files back into the room: Zac, Taylor, and Ike take their positions on the couch, Walker Hanson returns to his spot behind the crew, Adams calls for quiet, and the boys nail the next take perfectly. Next up: an introduction for a new Fox cartoon, *Sam & Max*. The brothers seem less than thrilled with the lines written for them on the cue card and immediately begin Hansonizing them, imbuing the script with their own personalities, particularly Zac’s more rambunctious one. An out-loud brainstorming session lasting all of two minutes results in the best segment of the afternoon, with Isaac, 17, providing a strong introduction and Zac proceeding to chew on the sparse scenery.

“They wanted us to tell you all about the show,” Zac says, making monkey faces and advancing toward the camera until all the monitor picks up is his devilish/cherubic face and preternaturally blond hair.

“But that would defeat the point of watching the show! We haven’t seen the show either, so that means we can’t tell you about it!” Zac spews onward until Taylor, making a calming gesture, settles him back into a more subdued stance and tells the viewers to stay tuned to *Hanson’s Jingle Bell Jam*. All three brothers smile, and Adams calls “Cut.” The small audience — consisting of various Mercury executives, wardrobe personnel, and managerial staff — applauds.

Walker Hanson, approving of the performance, gives Zac a thumbs-up gesture, then dispenses one last bit of fatherly advice to his little drummer boy.

“Zac,” he says, “let ‘er rip.”

IN 1988, WALKER HANSON TOOK A JOB IN THE INTERNATIONAL finance department of a Tulsa-based oil drilling company. Within a year, Walker was telling his wife, Diana,

that the firm was sending him to South America, where he would be spending extended periods in Venezuela, Ecuador, and the island of Trinidad. It would be a massive change for a couple who married as freshmen at the University of Oklahoma and lived in Oklahoma most of their lives. With three young boys and an infant daughter, Jessica, in tow, the coming year would be a challenge. But the Hansons were a close-knit family, and if one went, they all went.

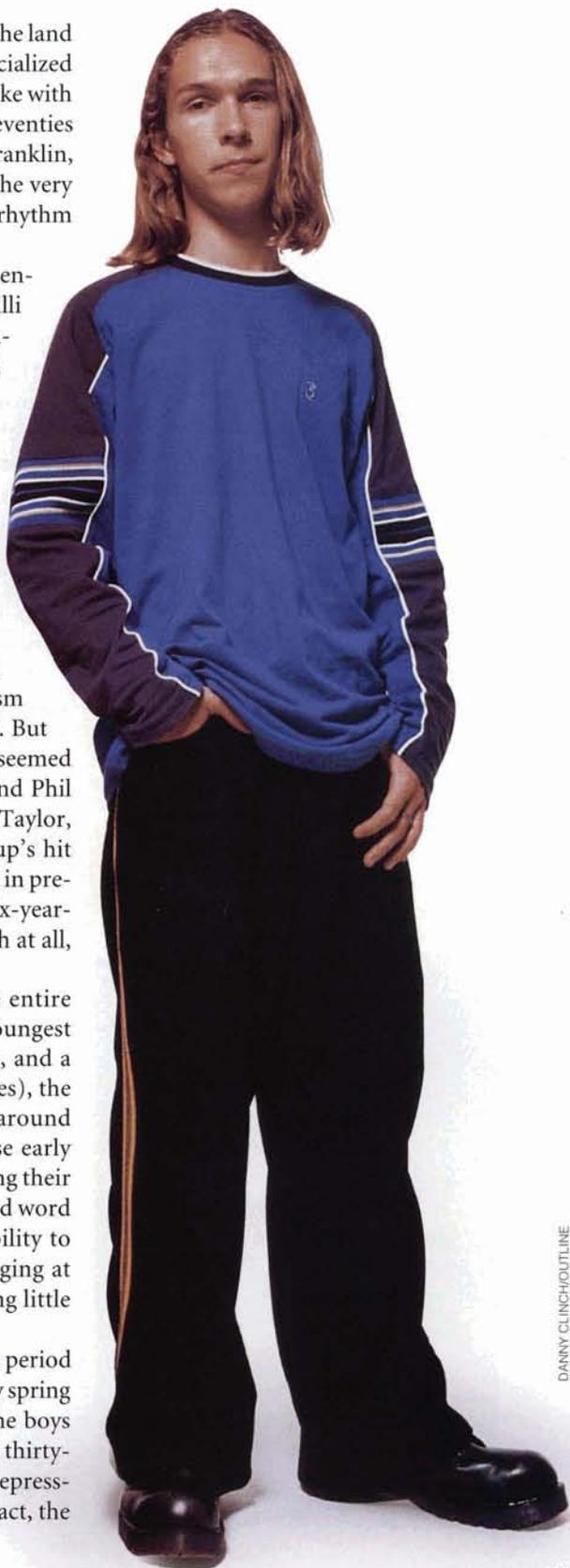
Assuming that familiar American rock 'n' roll might be in short supply in the land of salsa, samba, and Sergio Mendez, Walker and Diana ordered an infomercialized *Time-Life* collection of legendary rock music from the Fifties and Sixties to take with them. It wasn't their music — Walker and Diana came of age in the early Seventies — but it was a strong collection of solid gold hits by Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Elvis Presley, and the Beach Boys, among others. That compilation served the very young Hanson boys well, giving them an education in soul, harmony, and rhythm during their year in the tropics.

One year later, when the Hanson family returned to Tulsa, America was enduring one of its worst musical periods, with the twin torments of Milli Vanilli and Vanilla Ice pouring from every boom box in the land. But a year of intensive study in Rock 'n' Roll 101 had left Clarke Isaac, Jordan Taylor, and Zachary Walker Hanson with good taste and a desire to make their own music. Isaac had begun writing songs in Ecuador on a small Casio electronic keyboard, and by the time they were back in the U.S.A., Isaac was becoming more prolific and the two eldest Hansons had learned to sing harmony. "During that time, I started writing songs, and Taylor started singing and harmonizing," says Isaac Hanson, who, along with Taylor and Zac, spoke with *Oklahoma Today* at the Trump International Hotel in New York City. "We never came to the conclusion that we could sing — we just started doing it."

Anyone who has endured a cute but dissonant choir of elementary school kids at a Christmas pageant knows that children often have all the enthusiasm of seasoned performers but all the pitch control of a novice bagpipe squad. But the young Hanson brothers, by this time including kindergarten-aged Zac, seemed blessed with the same brotherly ability to harmonize that powered Don and Phil Everly and after them Brian, Carl, and Dennis Wilson of the Beach Boys. Taylor, whose soulful, slightly raspy vocals have been at the forefront of the group's hit singles, acknowledges the strangeness of this ability, particularly when found in pre-adolescent singers. "When you have an 11-year-old, a nine-year-old, and a six-year-old who are writing songs and singing together, and they're singing on pitch at all, you kind of wonder for a second," Taylor says.

Spending their mornings being home schooled by their mother (the entire Hanson brood, including eight-year-old Jessica, six-year-old Avery, and youngest brother Mackenzie, three, have been home schooled all their young lives, and a new Hanson baby expected in January will follow suit when the time comes), the boys occupied their afternoons singing a cappella standards and originals around the kitchen table, recording them on rudimentary tape equipment. Those early songs chronicled family life, puppy love, and faith in God, the latter reflecting their Evangelical Christian background. Time at home cultivated their ability, and word began to spread in Tulsa of talented, blond brothers with an uncanny ability to blend their voices. They became the hottest act in the neighborhood, singing at backyard barbecues and company picnics, astounding parents, and sending little girls headlong into hopeless crushes.

By 1992, Taylor, Ike, and Zac had outgrown the fireplace-as-concert-stage period of their careers and were ready to take it to the next level. Mayfest — held every spring in the streets of downtown Tulsa — seemed like the perfect forum, and the boys kicked off their professional lives as the Hanson Brothers, debuting with a thirty-minute a cappella set and causing a minor sensation with their talent and irrepressible cuteness. The transition to public performance wasn't hard at all — in fact, the



DANNY CLINCH/OUTLINE

boys found the gig to be less stressful than their customary venues.

“I would say it’s actually easier to perform for people you don’t know rather than friends and family,” Isaac says.

Zac agrees completely. “When you don’t know the person, then you can leave, and you never see them again,” he says.

Almost instantly, a market was created, and the Hansons were offered gigs at Bell’s Amusement Park, Big Splash water park, and various special events, but the universal launching pad for serious pop musicians, the club scene, was off-limits. The problem was, the three boys could only enter a club if they combined their ages, got ahold of a great fake ID, stood on each others’ shoulders, and wore a trench coat from a big & tall store.

Tom Dittus, owner of the Blue Rose Cafe, came up with a solution.

“I’ve known Diana and Walker for some time, and we had heard that the boys were performing and doing some things,” Dittus says. “We just thought it would be an interesting, fun idea to do a Friday happy hour show outside on our parking lot.

“It was amazing to see. These kids who showed up knew all the songs, they would lip-sync all the songs. It was remarkable.”

Those Blue Rose parking lot showcases were taking place along with several performances at local public schools, where the Hanson Brothers were presented as model youths for their goal setting and perseverance. Of course, what began as sedate school functions soon took on an entirely different character, as the role models transformed into heartthrobs. School auditoriums echoed with screams, and when they were home, the boys were inundated by phone calls from adoring girls professing their undying love.

The brothers now were seeing music as a potential career path, not just an after-school hobby. Isaac began thinking about lights brighter than those in Tulsa’s Brookside district.

“We had the interest of doing it on a more professional level. We wanted to go and get in touch with the record labels; we wanted to go to the level that all bands want,” he says.

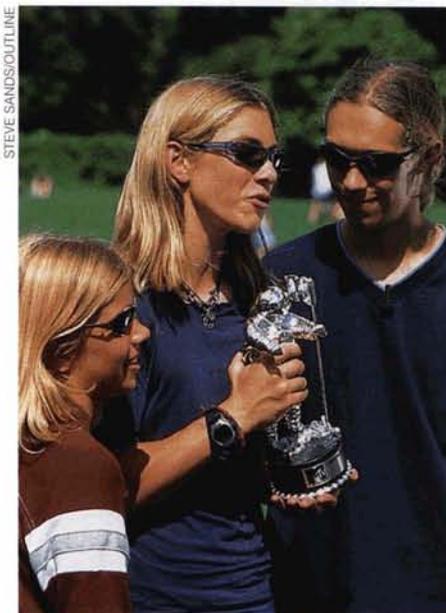
To get a contract.

BY 1993, THE HANSON BROTHERS WERE RECHRISTENED HANSON, AND the doo-wop arrangements of their a cappella beginnings were falling by the wayside, largely jettisoned in favor of hip-hop performances more reminiscent of Boyz II Men than Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers. Isaac began producing backing tapes for performances, and the brothers worked with a local choreographer to perfect some smooth stage moves. The crowds grew steadily, and so did Zac, Taylor, and Ike’s confidence.

In March 1994, Walker Hanson took his sons to Austin’s South By Southwest music conference, an industry glad-handing festival in which Artist and Repertoire (A&R) execs from record companies descend on the Texas Hill Country to find the next million-seller. Every year, thousands of performers ply their wares at local clubs and public forums, hoping the gods of industry will shine their bountiful lights upon them, and before you know it, Madison Square Garden is sold out, and the SoundScan machines at Tower Records say their debut album is outselling Mariah Carey.

For Hanson, South By Southwest was a long shot — particularly that year. Those were the days when grunge was the word, and ponytailed A&R scouts wanted something that was heavy, driven by guitar distortion, and preferably depressing. It was the beginning of the post-Nirvana years, and conventional wisdom stated that, with the suicide death of Nirvana leader Kurt Cobain, a void was waiting to be filled.

In retrospect, the record companies packed that void to the point of overflowing, but the contrast between Hanson and, well, everybody else, worked in the boys’ favor. One afternoon during a combination softball game/barbecue heavily attended by artist managers and record label staffers, Hanson began working the crowd whenever they could, stopping anyone who would listen and serenading them. Christo-



STEVE SANDS/OUTLINE

pher Sabec, a young music attorney and Grateful Dead follower then representing Dave Matthews, was watching the game when Isaac, Taylor, and Zac asked if they could sing for him.

Immediately, Sabec was knocked out. "It was their harmonies, the way they sang together," he says. "There was a softball game going on, about 200 people, and the guys were just moving through the crowd, but I had no idea what they were doing. About halfway through the afternoon, they performed in front of me."

By the time they sang their last note, Sabec, who had only been a music lawyer for about a year and a half, was convinced. He met with Walker and Diana and expressed his interest in the band. Although their sound and their ages seemed contrary to the trends of the time, Sabec was confident the brothers had star power. "I wasn't thinking about any obstacles — I was only thinking that the guys were so amazingly talented that they were going to break through on their own," Sabec says. "My recognizing their talent didn't take a long time."

After South By Southwest, Hanson returned to Tulsa, and energized by their initial meeting with Sabec, decided they needed a strong independent album to effectively compete for a recording contract. Although they had sold tapes like *Hanson Live* in '94 at their shows, there had been no official studio recordings. So in late 1994, Hanson booked studio time in Chicago and Nashville and began recording their first album, *Boomerang*. The six originals and three covers on *Boomerang*, including a performance of the Jackson 5 classic "The Love You Save," were familiar to the band's Tulsa followers, and copies of the album were snatched up quickly at subsequent shows in the spring of 1995.

Not long after Hanson completed *Boomerang*, Sabec called the family, asking if he could stop in and see the brothers play during a layover between flights. After catching the tail end of a performance at Woodland Hills Mall, Sabec extended his visit to two weeks, and during that time, secured the Hansons as his first managerial client.

Sabec aggressively shopped the boys to several labels and racked up fourteen rejection slips in the process. The companies didn't want a preadolescent harmony act, and given the success of West Coast gangsta rap and the continuing dominance of heavy grunge music, there was reason to believe the public wouldn't want Hanson, either. But Sabec saw something in his young musicians and didn't understand why others weren't apt to see it as well.

"I don't know what was going through their heads," Sabec says. "In the interactions I was having, they just felt there was no opportunity for Hanson to break through, that there was no market for the sound and no market for the songs."

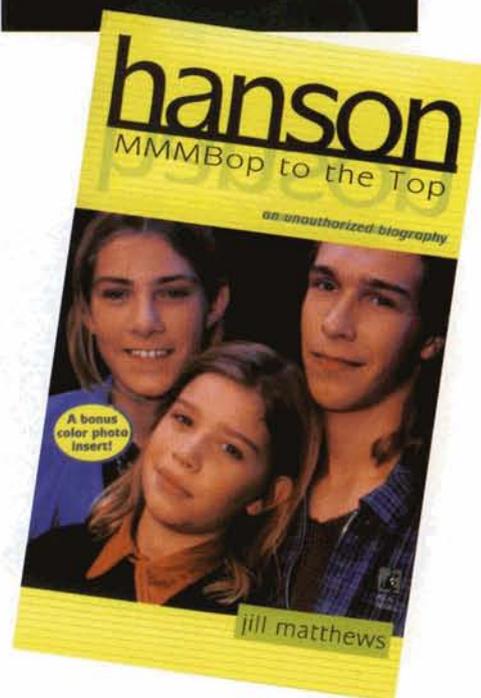
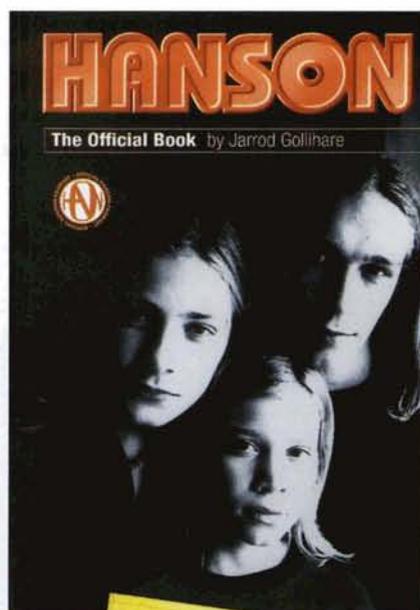
One record label did express interest in Hanson, but according to Isaac, the company's vision for the band seemed contrary to what the brothers really wanted. Their tastes were changing, and more importantly, the brothers were learning instruments — Zac's energy was being put to good use on the drums, Taylor had become increasingly adept at keyboards, and Isaac was making the transition from keys to guitar. Having spent the last year listening less to synthetic pop and more to organic rock acts like Counting Crows, Hanson began to sound more and more like an honest-to-goodness rock 'n' roll band, a new development reflected in the band's second indie release, *MMMBop*, containing an early version of their signature song.

"We had gotten a lot of interest from *Boomerang*, but not enough to make it happen," Taylor says. "On *MMMBop*, we were playing all the instruments, and we went into a garage studio in Tulsa and just did it ourselves with the help of an engineer."

Isaac said the album was recorded quickly and for a fraction of the cost of *Boomerang*, and while it showed some growth, a few crowd pleasers were thrown in for good measure.

"There were still three, four songs that were still that R&B 'track' stuff," Isaac says. "We still enjoyed that stuff. The whole album, there were fifteen songs, and it was just one of those 'one-two-three Go!' situations."

These days, Taylor sees the record, self-released in May 1996, as being pivotal be-



Two books currently on the
New York Times bestseller list

OKLAHOMAN OF THE YEAR



DANNY CLINCH/OUTLINE



cause it forced Hanson to reevaluate who they were as performers, and the move toward rock music likely kept them from being completely dismissed by the music establishment. "We were white guys dancing to tracks, which isn't really something that makes too much sense," he says. "At the time, that's who we were. When we first started recording, we had just started playing [instruments]. We ended up evolving toward being a rock 'n' roll band."

In 1996, Seattle's musical haze seemed to be lifting, and record companies were looking for the next stylistic wave. Some were forecasting that "electronica," an all-encompassing term for various styles of electronic dance music, would overtake guitar-based rock, but that since has revealed itself as a red herring. Ultimately, what happened was a return to pop, particularly teen-oriented music, a genre largely ignored since the dismal late-Eighties days of New Kids on the Block. As Sabec continued to lobby on Hanson's behalf, he began to see a thaw in record company attitudes toward the brothers, a thaw that eventually blossomed into full-fledged enthusiasm.

Sabec convinced Steve Greenberg, senior vice president of A&R for Mercury Records, to see Hanson perform at a June 1996 fair in Coffeyville, Kansas. Isaac said Greenberg later told them he was trying to find out what was wrong with them. Were they lip-syncing? Could they not play their instruments? But during the Coffeyville performance, the brothers apparently didn't feel the conditions were right to sweep a jaded record company executive off his feet. Relative unknowns outside Oklahoma, Hanson seemed unable to cast a spell over the Kansas crowd.

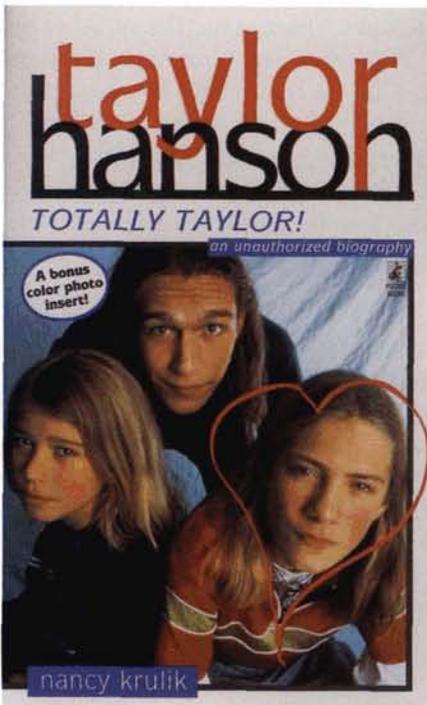
"It was kind of a strange show," Isaac says. "The audience was not real responsive to it." Taylor was even more dire in his assessment. "We were like, 'Why did the record label have to come to this show?'"

Despite a bum crowd, Greenberg was convinced. By late summer, Hanson was a top priority at Mercury Records, and the brothers soon would record the album that would change their lives, *Middle of Nowhere*. They were signed, and their future appeared to be sealed. Now all they had to do was deliver.

FOR MOST OF THE REST OF 1996, THE ENTIRE HANSON BROOD—Walker, Diana, Jessica, Avery, Mackenzie, Ike, Taylor, and Zac—lived in the Hollywood Hills while the three eldest brothers wrote and recorded their major label debut. Mercury had pulled all the stops in securing Hanson's success, hiring hot producers the Dust Brothers (Jon King and Michael Simpson) and Steve Lironi to man the boards and an army of topflight songwriters to bring several songs to fruition.

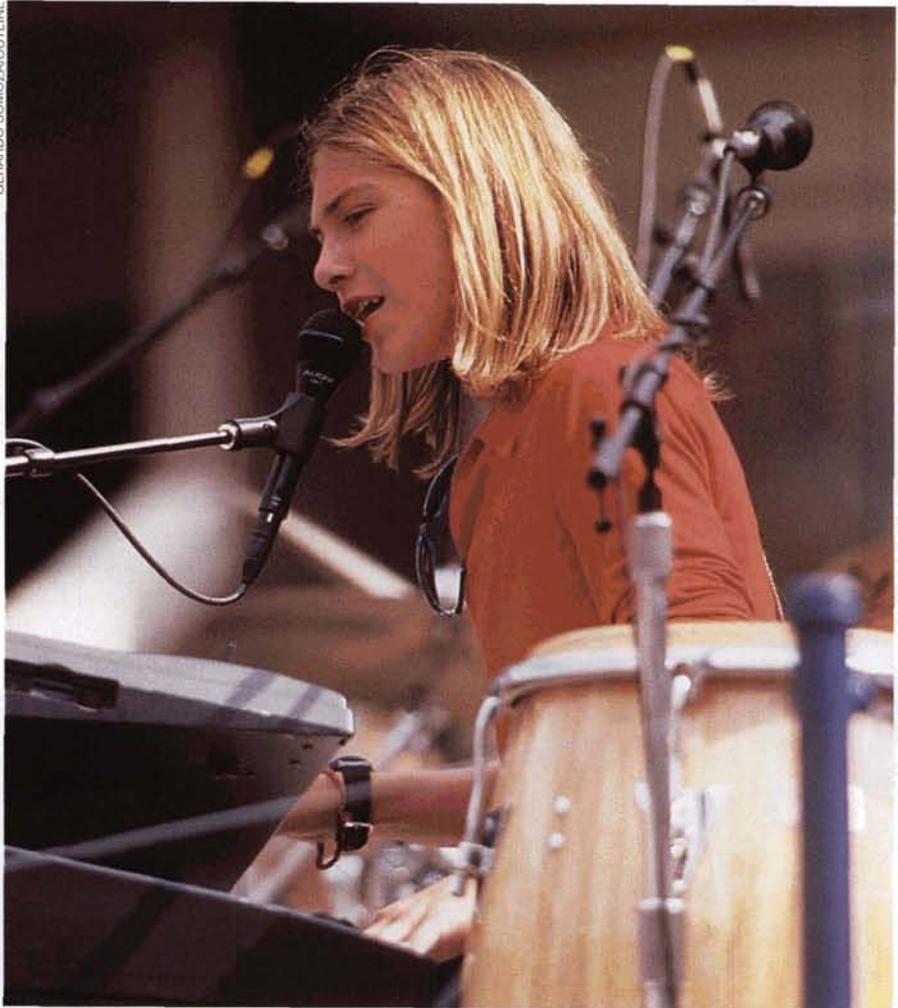
The Hanson brothers and the Dust Brothers made an unusual pairing. King and Simpson were known for their near-psychedelic treatment of critical favorites like the Beastie Boys' *Paul's Boutique* and Beck's masterful *Odelay*. Arguably the most in-demand production team in the business, it was a stroke of genius to pair the fair-haired boys from Tulsa with two men who'd long had a reputation for producing dense, lysergic hip-hop. Similarly, Lironi recently had become a hot ticket for producing the British avant-pop bands Space and Black Grape. He was working with the more familiar Jon Bon Jovi on a solo album when he was called in to work with Hanson.

As strange as it might have seemed to outsiders, Hanson felt completely comfortable working in the Dust Brothers' studio-home. As one of his first acts, Zac jumped in



"Hottie" Taylor Hanson and his own bio

GERARDO SOMOZA/OUTLINE



King and Simpson's pool fully clothed, then walked over to his drum kit and began to record—watching, of course, for any dangerous wires that could come in contact with his wet shoes ("MMMBop-bzzzzzz," Zac says, faking electrocution). That atmosphere typified the recording experience, which Isaac characterized as "relaxed."

In addition to re-recording "MMMBop," "Thinking of You," and "With You in My Dreams" for the album, Hanson began to whip new songs into shape with some hand-picked songsmiths. Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, who wrote such classics as the Drifters' "On Broadway" and "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," by the Animals, helped polish "I Will Come to You"; Desmond Child and Mark Hudson, each of whom penned hits for Aerosmith, both contributed — Child on "Weird," Hudson on "Lucy," "Where's the Love," and "A Minute Without You"; Ellen Shipley, who wrote Belinda Carlisle's "Leave a Light on for Me," provided input on "Yearbook." It was an odd gumbo: established legends, hired hands from the Eighties, and Hudson, who ironically was a member of the Hudson Brothers, a singing trio of siblings who enjoyed moderate success in the early Seventies.

Three dozen songs pared down by more than half, five studios, countless sessions, and one season later, *Middle of Nowhere* was completed, and the label heads were knocked out, particularly by "MMMBop," an easy choice for the lead-off single. For the new version, the pace was picked up and some strategic "scratching" and sampled beats were added for a hip-hop feel. It was a far more polished work, and one better for the changes. David Silver, a senior vice president with Mercury, saw it as a very pure song — it didn't seem calculated, like the processed cheese product generated by New Kids or earlier teen idols like Shaun Cassidy. Silver heard pure gold in "MMMBop."

“It’s very traditionally artistic,” Silver says. “They aren’t the kind of musicians who are thinking about the market. They think about what they like, what they respect. They’re real musicians, and they care about their music.”

Even if the Hanson brothers had no idea of the potential commercial appeal of “MMMBop,” a close look at the song shows its success was a no-brainer. Combining Jackson 5-style vocals, a chorus strongly reminiscent of Fleetwood Mac’s opening track from *Rumours*, “Second-Hand News,” hip-hop sensibilities, and the Dust Brothers’ indie credibility, “MMMBop” was destined for the upper reaches of the *Billboard* singles chart. But even Sabec wasn’t prepared for what would happen in March 1997, when “MMMBop” was released to radio.

“I was always confident it would be successful, but in a million years I couldn’t imagine that level of success,” Sabec says. In an “MMMBop,” which as the song describes is a brief moment in which everything can change, everything did.

RADIO STATIONS HAD “MMMBOP” FOR TWO MONTHS BEFORE HANSON BEGAN promoting the song, and they had no concept of the public’s response other than ever-increasing airplay. Then in May, just prior to the release of *Middle of Nowhere*, Taylor, Ike, and Zac got a full dose of teenaged mania in action. Preparing for a guest appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, Hanson reluctantly agreed to a promotional appearance at the Paramus Park Mall in Paramus, N.J.

“‘MMMBop’ was on its way, climbing fast in the charts, but we hadn’t seen the other side of it — the fan side,” Taylor explains. “We went there, to this mall, and we were actually rehearsing for *Letterman*, and we didn’t want to go, because we needed rehearsal time.

“Once we got there, this mall was just packed,” he says. “It was half an hour before the mall closed, and the mall was just completely packed. The security guards were looking at us like... they didn’t know what to expect. They went to the door and said, ‘Okay, guys, listen to this.’”

With that, the guard opened the door just a crack, allowing the sheer lung power of thousands of teenaged girls to emit from the building. Tornadoes have been described as sounding like a freight train, a jet engine, and a pride of lions roaring in unison, but Taylor says the thunderous sound of Hanson fans could put any tornado to shame.

Everyone was ill-prepared for the onslaught that might someday be called the “Paramus Park Mauling”—there were no barriers between the fans and the stage, and since Hanson thought their usual audience of about 200 fans would show up, the performance was amplified only through a tiny speaker and the inadequate equipment didn’t have a chance of overpowering the audience noise.

“Once we got there, we went into ‘MMMBop,’ and the entire crowd started singing, word for word,” Taylor says. “Every single lyric they were singing along with us—8,000 people in this mall!”

That night, the group made the trek to *Letterman*, and despite some more amplification problems, the performance was a success. It led to high-profile appearances that week on *The Rosie O’Donnell Show* and MTV’s *The Jenny McCarthy Show*, where Zac got tackled by the statuesque Playboy model-turned-wacky comedienne.

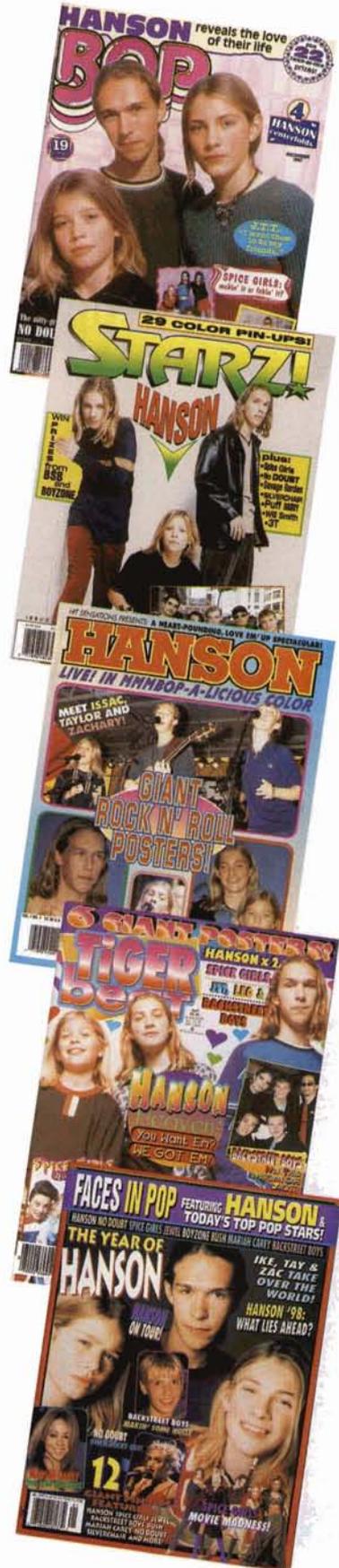
“She kissed me on the eye!” Zac exclaims, apparently still not old enough to fully appreciate such an experience. Regardless, Ike and Taylor go on record as saying their brother is a little misguided.

“Zac was fighting her!” Isaac says. “Zac was like ‘No! No!’ and if Jenny McCarthy tackled me, I’d be like, ‘Lay it on me!’”

“I’m not embarrassed,” Zac says, defending himself. “I just don’t want to be kissed by some weird...”

“He’s like the only one in about ten million people,” Taylor says, casting his vote.

By the end of May, “MMMBop” was the number one single in the country, and the album was ensconced in the top ten. The audiences at promotional appearances kept growing—at a stop in Kansas City, 30,000 fans showed up—and they were be-



The wide world of Hanson fanzines



coming more aggressive.

"We have some of the most interactive, reactive fans," Taylor says, being diplomatic. "The moms sometimes are worse," Zac pipes up, telling it like it is. Taylor, who is quickly becoming the chief teen idol of the band (there is an unauthorized biography singling the "hottie" out as the "dreamiest"), recounts a tale of a woman who might need to leave her adolescence behind.

"We were coming out of a radio station, and there were about 2,000 people outside this station," Taylor says. "And this 40-year-old woman jumps and grabs at my hair! I'm going, 'Have some control, woman!'"

By midsummer, the frenzy over Hanson had spread to the four corners of the globe. In Italy, controversy raged. Who was the biggest pop culture phenomenon — Hanson or the Spice Girls? Mobs screamed for them at performances in Tokyo, and a visit to the Hard Rock Cafe in Jakarta, Indonesia, nearly resulted in a riot. Although the Hansons had done some globe-trotting before this shot of fame, the adulation still surprises them. "When you walk down the street in Japan or walk down the street in Italy and somebody recognizes you, you have to say... Wow," Taylor says. "You can't take it for granted. There are so many other bands who have worked and played in clubs all their lives and never gotten this opportunity. We know a lot of bands in Tulsa that are still doing all they can."

As 1997 progressed, Hanson continued their world domination, sending "Where's the Love" and "I Will Come to You" into the top ten, but as with any true pop sensation, there were plenty who wished Hanson had never gotten farther than the Blue Rose Cafe. During the World Series, when Hanson performed the "Star-Spangled Banner," many unruly Florida Marlins fans booed. Donald Trump said, "Hanson sucks" in an MTV promo, and in a recent issue of *Jane*, the eponymous magazine headed by former



Sassy editrix Jane Pratt, sarcastic predictions for the Hansons' future included convenience store employment and drug addiction, all played off supposedly for blasé laughs.

David Fricke, senior editor of *Rolling Stone*, came to Hanson's defense in his year-end assessment of *Middle of Nowhere*.

"Age discrimination works both ways," Fricke wrote. "We distrust rockers who refuse to give it up in middle age, then we put the boot into Hanson because they're hot, they're pop — and on the wrong side of the legal drinking age in all fifty states.

"...But you don't have to be a *Bop* magazine subscriber to fall for the cheesy bounce of 'Where's the Love' or 'Man From Milwaukee,'" Fricke continued. "Wanna pick on Hanson for writing immature lyrics and singing formulaic ballads? Wait until they're old enough to know better."

Much of society has a problem with young performers and a fascination with what they see as their inevitable downfalls. When Adam Rich, Danny Bonaduce, Coreys Haim and Feldman, Todd Bridges, and Dana Plato ran afoul of the law after fame had lifted, their dark road down was intriguing to most, and in a perverse way, somewhat exciting. Perhaps we see children who enjoy seemingly idyllic, fame-filled beginnings as undeserving, and when they show up on *Extra*, hollow-eyed and holding up liquor stores, it feels like just desserts, revenge against the cool kids.

The Hanson brothers will likely avoid the fate of such former child stars. Members of a close family that stays together constantly, they are never without parental guidance and protection. Walker Hanson, despite his omnipresence, does not come across as a controlling stage parent like Kit (Macaulay's dad) Culkin or Teri (Brooke's mom) Shields. He's watching out for his kids, making sure they don't do stupid things. In short, he's being a father.

"The parents are a real stabilizing force, and their values are incredible," Sabec says. "(The boys) have amazing heads on their shoulders, and they're all about the music, and they're all about exploring different ways to further their talent and their interests. There is no problem with them mentally. They have their feet on the ground, they haven't changed one bit, and I've been with them from the very beginning."

David Silver, who produced and directed Hanson's video "Tulsa, Tokyo, and the Middle of Nowhere," which recently sold more than 500,000 copies, is completely in awe of the brothers and concurs with Sabec's assessment.

"What I've noticed about the way they respond to situations is that they're very intelligent lads, they really are," Silver says. "They are very conscious of their own destiny, but they do wish to learn, and they're never arrogant, ever."

Confidence without arrogance, strong bearings, and their legitimate talent could carry the day for Hanson. Even though Sabec is personally and professionally biased as their manager, his predictions of a long future in the music business don't seem all that far-fetched.

"They will be in the music business for a long, long time, in different variations and different aspects," he says. "Isaac, for example, has a keen interest in producing. You'll see variations on the same theme, but I think Hanson's here to stay."

SITTING AROUND A TABLE AT THEIR SUITE IN THE TRUMP INTERNATIONAL Hotel (the Donald might think they "suck," but he'll take their money), the boys speak easily among each other, maintaining friendly attitudes despite being cooped up in hotels, vans, and jets for the past nine months. Anyone who has fought over back seat space on a long family vacation knows how siblings can be caught in border disputes over the armrest, and it's a safe bet that they get a little sick of each other.

"We hate each other," Taylor says, smirking and looking at Zac.

"Yeah, most of the time, we're just beating on each other," says Zac, starting to giggle. "If you notice, my suitcase is really hard — it's a special suitcase for beating people. It's got steel casing, and whenever I get mad, I go 'Hey, Ike! Bam!'"

They really do get along, Isaac is quick to say, and the discussion moves to the brothers' favorite subject, touring. What they have been doing is not a concert tour



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but a promotional tour, one that has continued unabated, and with the release of their Christmas album *Snowed In* and the rave reviews that followed it, has shifted into high gear. Five acoustic songs in a mall or a thirty-minute spot at a radio-sponsored show does not a concert make.

"We really, really want to tour. That's high on our list right now," Taylor says. "When you do all this press, and a radio station has you play three acoustic songs... when thousands and thousands of people show up, you feel bad, because you want to give the fans more. But you can't."

They are likely to commence a full-length concert tour early in 1998, then return to the studio and release a new album of original songs in late 1998 or early 1999. Somewhere in the middle of everywhere, they plan to spend some time back home in Tulsa, a place they have rarely visited since March. Still, they know life there will never be the same.

"The scary part is, you know you couldn't go to Woodland Hills Mall. It wouldn't work — going to Woodland Hills Mall wouldn't be the smartest thing in the world to do," Isaac says.

"Like, the new theater that just opened — we went there for Thanksgiving," Taylor says. "And we still do all the same stuff. We still go Rollerblading, we still go to movies; even if sometimes it isn't a great idea, we do it anyway."

Zac, a good sport even when he's visibly tired, says the mobs of fans can be fun, especially when he can escape. "A lot of times, it makes it more fun when you're Rollerblading, because all of a sudden, it's 'the chase,'" he says.

When Hanson finally begins playing bona fide concerts, they will get to come home as well. Although they have played mini-shows in Tulsa and Oklahoma City since *Middle of Nowhere* changed their lives, they want to play full-length concerts and give something back to their original fans.

"We feel bad that we haven't been able to do more in our home state," Isaac says. "There are so many things we have to do. I know there are a lot of people in our hometown who have been, like, 'Why aren't they here?'"

"But when we tour, we will be there."

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