

## Vibe Interview

It's 2 a.m. in New York City. God knows where K-Ci, Dalvin, and JoJo are. We're in a recording studio, where over Zima and too-hot microwaved Chicken McNuggets, Donald "DeVante Swing" DeGrate says he is one persistent motherfucker. He likes that word, and he loves to tell a story.

When I was 16, I ran away from home and went to Minneapolis to get a job with Prince. K-Ci and JoJo and them was, like, "If you make it with Prince, don't forget about us." When I got to Minneapolis, I hooked up with two white girls who had this gold Mustang that their father let me drive. I was up at Paisley Park every day begging for a job, asking people to listen to my tape. The receptionist kept saying she couldn't help me. I wasn't gonna leave until they put me on.

But then I started realizing that Prince was the only one making real money in his camp. So I took my ass right back to Charlotte, N.C. I wrote a song about a girl I liked; the chorus was, "Where could I go wrong..." JoJo sang the song. People were saying we should do something with it.

I played K-Ci the tape over the phone and told him me and JoJo was thinking about going to New York. We was all hype 'cause we was thinking we'd created a sound, something new. So just me and JoJo was gonna go, and K-Ci said, "You can't use my name, then!" JoJo was, like, "No K-Ci! He'll change our sound!" But when my brother, Dalvin, started coming around, JoJo said, "Let Dalvin be down!" And I was, like, "Hell, no! He won't be coming up in here trying to take over." Finally, K-Ci said, "I'm just going for the ride. Don't expect shit." But when all four of us was on our way to New York, everybody was, like, "What we gon' do now, De?!" All I could think was, I gotta make something happen; everybody's looking at me.

It took them five hours to get from their Queens hotel to Uptown Entertainment's offices in Midtown Manhattan. The four boys from North Carolina had a little trouble finding their way. "We got to New York with 29 songs on three tapes," says DeVante. "And at first, they was not trying to hear us." Legend has it that A&R guy Kurt Woodley thought Jodeci's demo didn't have enough "bump." Heavy D overheard the tape and convinced Uptown's president and CEO, Andre Harrell, to hear them sing live.

Sean "Puffy" Combs, now president and CEO of Bad Boy Entertainment, was an Uptown intern when he heard Jodeci for the first time: "I was bugging that they were my age and able to sing like that. K-Ci was smaller than he is now. I couldn't believe all that came out of him." It did, though. And just like in the movies, Jodeci signed a recording contract, moved into the projects in the Bronx, and recorded Forever My Lady. It was 1991, and as boy groups began to spring up like weeds, the tallest and the strongest were Boyz II Men and Jodeci. Still are.

"Silk? Shai? UNV?" DeVante chuckles. "Put that in there. That I laughed. They're just jokes. There are only two powers: us and Boyz II Men. Anybody that comes after us has to be classified as like one or the other." Boyz II Men have been cast as the pop Boy Wonders, and Jodeci as the magnetic, penis-pumping, bluesy Bad Boys. To Puffy, though, it's all about Jodeci: "No group can compare to them. Not even Boyz II Men. Boyz II Men have more of a mass appeal, but Jodeci is straight black. Straight chicken and grits. Boyz II Men is a salad and a veggie platter. But it's all good food."

"There's no comparison," says Dalvin on the subject of BIIM after a rehearsal at Harlem's Apollo Theatre (the group is preparing for a live BET taping, to be followed by a 10-city club tour in July to benefit Harrell's new Urban Aid Life Beat AIDS awareness project). "We're like light and dark." Or, perhaps, like sex and divine sex. "Don't nobody mack like Jodeci. We're making music that we like. We don't make music to be on every white awards show. Nothing against Boyz II Men-I like them. But I prefer soul music."

The differences, though, run even deeper than that. All four members of Jodeci have been gospel professionals since they were young boys. As members of gospel bands, they traveled the southern revival circuit and cut albums-DeVante and Dalvin with their father, the Rev. Donald DeGrate Sr.; K-Ci and JoJo with their father, Clifford Hailey, known as the Haileys. Folks down South used to call Cedric "K-Ci" Hailey the "Michael Jackson of gospel." Jodeci are used to-as Mahalia Jackson once said-"singing in churches where nobody would dare stop them until the Lord arrived." Instigators of spiritual ecstasy as boys, they are catalysts of another kind as men.

These two sets of brothers were raised in Pentecostal churches-African-American Christian temples named in commemoration of the descent of the Holy Ghost. But unlike Sam Cooke, Al Green, or the many other artists who've made the transformation from gospel to soul or pop music, Jodeci's other influence-hip hop-is something that didn't exist at all 25 years ago. Green (who went through a life-altering moment with a pot of cereal) is the legend to whom Andre Harrell compares K-Ci Hailey. "K-Ci's a real gospel singer," says Harrell with a bit of a laugh. "The first one dressed, first one to perform. The kind who might get some hot grits thrown on him by Mary [J. Blige, K-Ci's girlfriend] and end up singing gospel again."

Harrell knew the guys needed a little grooming, so he looked to a tastemaker. "Their style was country, not nationwide hot or East Coast refined," says Puffy, who'd been promoted to artist development by the time Jodeci were ready to drop Forever My Lady in 1991. He says he took a gamble and made them "look hip hop" because "all the tapes they had in their pockets were rap tapes."

Though DeVante's self-given last name implies otherwise, Jodeci's sound contains only whispers of what people were calling new jack swing in the late '80s. Individually, you can see where they're coming from: K-Ci is some compromise of Bobby Womack and Solomon Burke; DeVante is on some Marvin Gaye-esque, funk-flavored rhythm mission; JoJo's voice rings like a pewter bell; Dalvin, in a jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none kind of way, jumps in where he's needed vocally, provides a grinding stage presence, and produces the more upbeat Jodeci cuts. That's separately. When they pull it all together, it's way wild. It's like adding lemons (K-Ci) and water (Dalvin) and ice (DeVante) and sugar (JoJo) and getting vodka-Jodeci.

And folks drink it up. Like Luther Vandross in the early 1980s, Jodeci have an extremely loyal black fan base. They tend to live at the top of Billboard's R&B charts. Only a song not written by DeVante-the group's cover of Stevie Wonder's "Lately"-ever made the Top 10 on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles chart. But Forever My Lady, which had one gold single ("Come & Talk to Me") and sold 3 million copies, soared to No. 1 on the R&B Albums chart. The follow-up, Diary of a Mad Band, sold 1 million copies with next to no promotion. "Uptown didn't push it," says Dalvin. "Maybe they got mad because we started fucking with Suge." It's the ubiquitous Marion "Suge" Knight, CEO of Death Row Records, to whom Dalvin refers.

Right before the release of Diary, there were rumors that Jodeci wanted out of their management contract with Uptown. Jodeci were signed to the Uptown/ MCA label, but DeVante supposedly wanted the group to leave Uptown and go to Death Row Management. [There were rumors that Knight threatened Harrell. Both deny the story.] K-Ci says the band chose not to participate in any video after "Feenin' " because Uptown "wasn't treating us like we'd just sold 3 million albums. We're making three times as much now as we was then."

DeVante (who is now personally managed by Sheryl Konigsberg, who's also providing the whole group with "informal interim management") has his own take on the subject. "Suge got a lot of energy," he says, drinking red wine from a mug at the studio. "The record company felt like he was on a power trip that would damage the relationship between us and Uptown. But the negative vibe they expected never came across. Suge'll do whatever is needed in a given situation. We down with Suge; we signed to Uptown."

Jodeci were almost a trio. It's something that people forget because Dalvin's been in since the ride to New York. "Jodeci'll never break up in this lifetime," says DeVante. "All of us got our own shit, but it'll always be us."

In North Charlotte, we lived in Hidden Valley, like the salad dressing. The place with all the fly tricks. I always stayed with friends. Always doin' something. You know how they say preacher's kids are always the worst. Me and Dalvin, K-Ci and JoJo, we used to hear each other's [gospel] songs on the radio. These tricks we was messin' with told us we needed to meet each other. So when they brought us together, K-Ci saw Dalvin with his girl, so he pulled a gun on Dalvin. K-Ci's really an I-don't-give-a-fuck type of person. JoJo calmed K-Ci down; I calmed Dalvin down. We was all like 15 and 16. Then me and K-Ci and JoJo started hanging out, messing around with songs. They had this little studio in this shopping center. I pretty much moved in there with K-Ci and JoJo. I lived there five nights a week for like a year, fucked a lot of girls, partied-we had a little money from our gospel gigs. I'd go home Friday nights, go to church on Sunday, and after church, go back to the studio. My parents knew where I was.

One night, at like 3, 4 in the morning, me, JoJo, and K-Ci was sittin' in this old station wagon we used to call Cleetus. Dalvin would be around, but not really down-he and K-Ci was still beefin'. "Think if we did R&B music...what would it be like?" We started imagining it and coming up with names-I never wanted anything like the Thises or the That's; I wanted to put myself in the name. So we was, like, "Why don't we do Jo for JoJo, De for DeVante, and Ci for K-Ci?"

DeVante, still nursing his vino, has just declared K-Ci and JoJo the best singers in the world. " `So you're having my baby'-do you know what that was, when K-Ci sang that?" he asks, gesticulating wildly. "If you can't make people feel you when you're just singing a line, you ain't got it!" His rangy frame buckles back into the chair. "We just all doing our thing. I don't think of Jodeci as no boy group or no harmonizing group," he says. "I think of us as a black rock 'n' roll band.

"We're not the cutest niggas in the world," he continues, playing down his and Dalvin's lustrous good looks, as well as K-Ci's and JoJo's sensual, if less obvious, appeal. "But we're special. A song could be mediocre, but by what we do to it, we add what it needs. No polish, no routines. We ain't tryin' to be hard; we just don't give a fuck. I can flip tracks and make a Babyface-type song, but we're not trying to make pop songs. It's not about harmony, it's about us doing our thing. And our thing is, `Can you feel us? Can you feel us?'"

The answer is yes. "Freak'n You," the first single from the new album, is vintage Jodeci: K-Ci in prime, achy-churchy form; JoJo melting in and out; DeVante's erotic words spoken over his own pulsing rhythms. But the rest of The Show, The After Party, The Hotel sounds completely new. The Dalvin-produced "Get on Up" (cowritten by JoJo, K-Ci, and Dalvin) is the first upbeat single Jodeci have ever created worth listening to. "I didn't like it at first," DeVante says. "It was too happy for me. Now I love it, 'cause you can't help but be glad to it."

"Love U 4 Life" could easily have been on Boyz II Men's recent album. A vague power ballad, the song is one of the original 29 from Jodeci's demo. But instead of reaching for pop heights, the chorus has some freaked-out harmonies flowing over a stomping bass line. And the closing acoustic number, "Good Luv" (which signifies 'Face's "When Can I See You"), is dazzling. The first verse showcases K-Ci's tobacco-raspy baritone voice-alone except for DeVante's guitar. JoJo's buttery tenor is the solo star of the second verse, and it too seems to glow, standing out first one alone.

It's 4:00 on a cool spring Harlem afternoon as Cedric "K-Ci" Hailey gets out of his jeep on his way to work. He's got a gold, diamond-packed JODECI emblem dangling from his neck and gold hoops in both ears. Offstage, on the street, K-Ci is surprisingly little. Skinny.

Today K-Ci is a "celebrity scooper" at the nonprofit Ben & Jerry's ice cream parlor on 125th Street. "May I help you?" K-Ci asks the awed congregation. He's got on a plastic apron and is up to his elbows in New York Super Fudge Chunk. Most of the Catholic schoolgirls-with their gray skirts, nose rings, Tims, and bright red beepers-have color pictures of Jodeci torn from fanzines and want autographs. K-Ci looks at them from behind his black shades. The girls are whispering about the tattoo on his neck. They think it says MARY, for Mary J. Blige. But it actually says MAZÉ, after his grandmother. Later on, after a Grand Marnier on the rocks, in a rare moment of conversation with someone other than crew, JoJo says of his brother's chocolate fudge expertise: "You know how K-Ci is. He takes his job seriously-no matter what it is." They all seem to take it seriously. As their album title suggests, they're in it for the money-for the shows, the after-parties, and the groupie-filled hotel lobbies. But also for the love of music. To see K-Ci Hailey in rehearsal, singing " (Not Just) Knee Deep" slowed down and steady like it was "Amazing Grace," is an awesome experience.

"This is a job," says K-Ci, in the Apollo Theatre's rehearsal hall, mike in one hand, Newport burned almost down to the fingertips of his other. "But we're doing what we love. What we were born to do."

DeVante's taken off his dark glasses and his stocking cap. The longer hair on top of his head is wrapped in many tiny rubber bands. The new Jodeci logo, the one with the sword and tiny nude woman, has recently been tattooed on his forearm. The skin there is raised and a little crusty. His upper body is elaborate with tattoos. Tired and high, DeVante's playing with his lighters. The gold one works, and a tiny orange-blue flame illuminates his face. The silvery one hisses and hisses. No spark. He keeps trying, though, flipping the tiny lever over and over again with his thumb.

"Sex is dope, but it's Money Over Bitches-I'm down with the MOB," he laughs. "I write about love. In Jodeci songs there's not that much sex. My writing shows I'm a lonely person. I don't know why.

"If you look at `Stay,' I'm asking a girl to stay. `Forever My Lady'-so you're having my baby, I'll be there for you. `Come & Talk to Me'-I'm asking a girl to come and talk to me; there again, I'm by myself. `I'm Still Waiting'-I'm waiting. I'm by myself again. `U & I' could be one, after all, but I'm trying to explain to the girl we can do this, we can do that. I'm not with her. Go on to `Feenin' '-I'm fiending for the girl. I'm still not with her. `Cry for You'-I'm crying for this bitch, I'm still not with the bitch. `Alone'-I'm asking her to be alone. `What About Us'-I'm still not with her. On the new album, I said I'ma get sexual, write one o' them freaky, knocking-the-boots shits. But it's all, `What must I say? / What must I do?' Jodeci songs is always begging."

Now it's 24 hours later, almost to the minute. Like 2:30 a.m. We're back in the same studio. The Rev. Al Green's voice leaps from the giant speakers like a sinewy brown ballerina, lithe and majestic as ever. Green is singing a new song, "Could This Be the Love," written and produced by DeVante Swing. Al Green. DeVante is working with one of the chief sculptors of gospel as soul, a man who has spent his life testing the thin emotional fabric that distinguishes the embrace of a loving God from the embrace of loving human. DeVante feels right at home. He sits, head back, eyes closed behind dark shades, deciding which of the 11 takes sound best. Homeboy's been doing this for a long time.

He says stuff comes to him quickly. "Like with K-Ci and Mary's duet, `I Don't Want to Do Anything'-Mary walked into the studio, asked, `Where's the words to the track?' and I said, `Give me a minute.' I wrote her and K-Ci's verses in like five minutes. I guess feelings are inside me and they just come out. I sit and zone. Not about a real relationship-just zoning."

Zoning. Maybe that's what DeVante and K-Ci were doing back in April 1993, when a woman claimed that, after she left a Manhattan club with K-Ci and went back to DeVante's New Jersey home, DeVante pointed a gun at her. She also said that K-Ci threatened her and fondled her breast. At the time, DeVante said the girl was upset because he had a gun in the house and because no one would take her home, so she got mad and made up a story.

In April, DeVante pleaded guilty to gun charges, as did K-Ci to sexual contact [both were facing sentencing as VIBE went to press]. "K-Ci may have touched her breast," says DeVante, "but it was no rape, no sexual thing. He pleaded guilty, but whatever he pleaded to, it didn't involve sex at all."

But then DeVante gets angry. "Why we gotta be crazy, though?" he asks, all bitter and serious-like he expects a clear answer. Like someone can tell him what "good" really means, what "bad" really means, what sin is and what it isn't. "Crazy like what? What is this `bad boys' shit, this negative shit? Fuck that. I ain't ill. I ain't bad. I ain't trying to hurt nobody."

DeVante knows about betrayal and violation. In the spring of 1993, robbers broke in to his house and stole \$160,000 worth of jewelry and clothes. "They had a gun in my mouth and one to the back of my head," he says easily. "Talkin' about `Kill 'im.' I sleep lighter now. Shit made me want to fuck up a nigga. I'm in trouble for guns, but you won't catch me not packing." DeVante seems to make no connection between his own pain and any pain he may or may not have inflicted on others. "I'm a regular motherfucker," is his spat-out description of self. "I shop at the malls in New Jersey, I rent videos, I hang with my niggas, play cards-and might come up with a dope song like that.

"You wondering if I ever did fun shit like take a girl to the Bahamas? Walk on the beach? No. I don't live like that. I wanna do shit like that, but that ain't me. I gotta watch my back and shit." He pauses. "Held hands?" Pauses again. "I've done that." Then DeVante momentarily slips back into the unemotional pimp role currently in vogue. He's faded in and out of it all evening. "I get my ass, now-don't get me wrong."

Then he's earnest again. "If I was that much in love, would I be really fucking around on 'em? Would I?" His face is toward the ceiling. "If you're in love, you're happy. If you're out there fucking the world, is that really your main girl? When you in love, you don't think about no one else. All you think about is this one motherfucker."

Now he leans forward, light brown eyes unblinking, intent on being understood. "So if somebody came by all fly, big ass, tight dress-see her pussy print-beautiful eyes and all that shit, you wouldn't even see that bitch. All you'd be thinking about is your girl at home." Deep breath. "So then I ask myself, Have I really loved?"

Mad melodrama. DeVante Swing's bony shoulders go up in a big shrug.