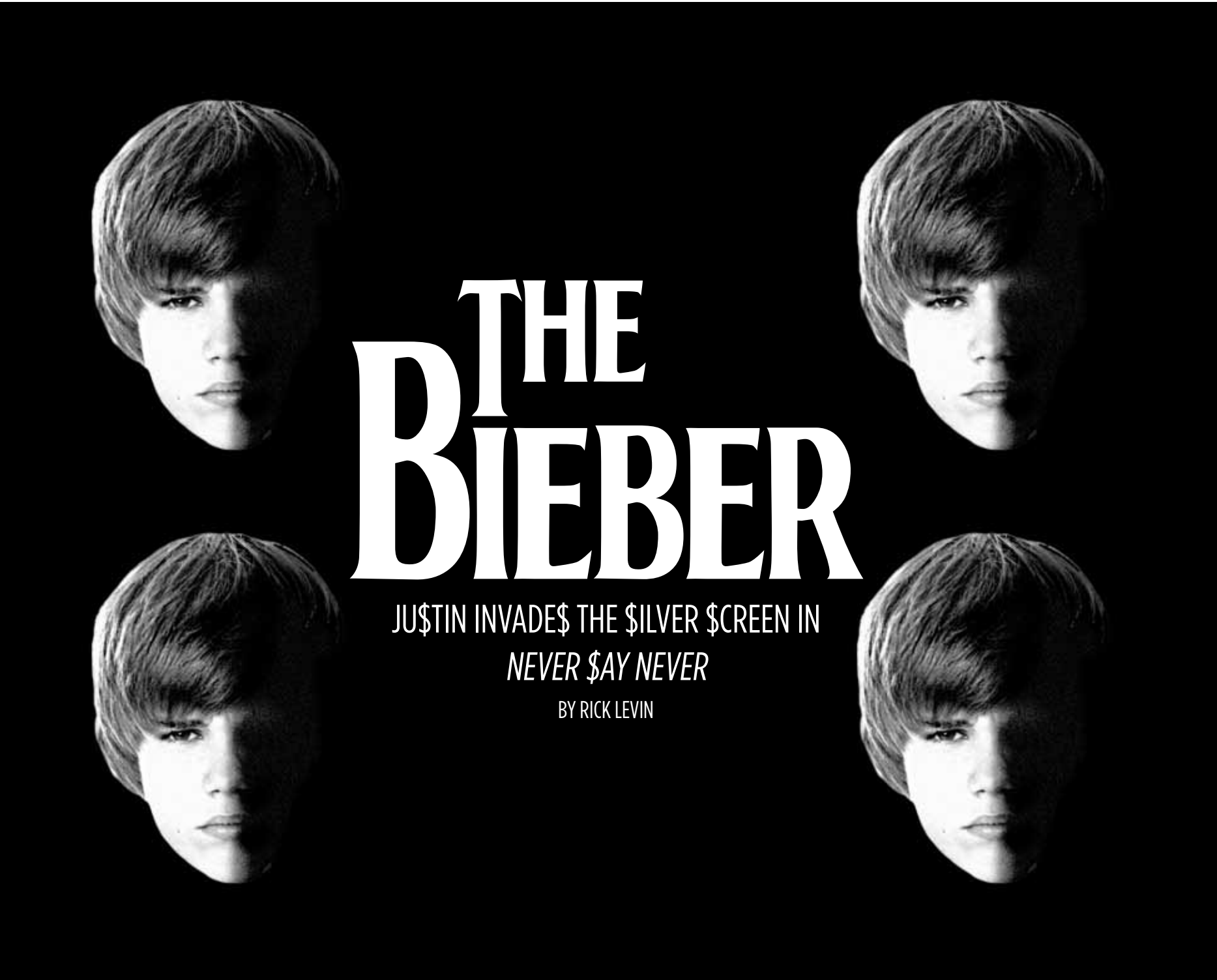




THE BIEBER

JUSTIN INVADES THE SILVER SCREEN IN
NEVER SAY NEVER

BY RICK LEVIN

As I waited in line at the concession stand clutching two bags of Twizzlers, I noticed a gaggle of adolescent girls flocked behind me, none taller than Frodo. The three of them were dolled up in Bieber gear and giggling to beat the band. Turning full around, I asked the ducklings if they were here on opening night to see the Justin Bieber movie. “Aren’t you?” one of them replied, eying the sack of sterilized 3D glasses poking from my jacket pocket. “But of course,” I said, “who isn’t?”

I asked the girls how old they were. Thirteen. Then I had them guess the average age of a Bieber fan and one of them, somewhat generously, estimated that demographic range to fall between 13 and a half-century. Did everyone at her school love the Bieb equally? “No, not everyone,” she answered. “There are Bieber haters.”

But why would any red-blooded American hate the Bieb, I asked, feigning disgust. And this teen triumvirate, without missing a beat, sang out in perfect unison: “They’re jealous.”

Dear Reader, are you jealous of Justin Bieber? I’m not. Should I be? After sitting through the better half of his new film, *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never*, I find the question itself baffling, if not a tad disturbing.

Justin Bieber is huge, global, larger than life. Discovered on *YouTube* and signed by freelance marketing executive Scooter Braun to Island Records, Bieber’s debut single, “One Time,” was released in 2009 and charted across the world. At that age in life when Playstation, Pepsi

and jacking off pretty much define the existence of most American male adolescents, Bieber already had a platinum album to his name. He was the first musician ever — not the Beatles, not Michael Jackson — to have seven songs from his first album peg the *Billboard* Hot 100.

So the real question, for me, is this: In the strange universe of pop music, is there a discernable difference between a “mania” and a “fever”? Can it be measured in degrees? When the Beatles first invaded these shores in 1964, they ignited an unprecedented mass hysteria that had all the outward symptoms of an airborne epileptic virus — teenaged girls screaming themselves hoarse, weeping uncontrollably, passing out in a swoon. Beatlemania may have provided a sort of adolescent sexual release in our puritanical society of the Easy A, but — as some have argued — the band was also a conduit for a more asexual catharsis, a spontaneous outlet for all those new, confusing fears kids had about everything from asshole parents to wholesale nuclear holocaust. The 16 (almost 17) year-old pop star Justin Bieber — with his neo-bobbed swath of silky sideways hair, his pneumatic lips, doe eyes and Cheshire grin — certainly fits in the same category of cultural phenomena as Beatlemania. But he is something new as well, a fever very of and for this new century. The technology that just sped revolution in Egypt is the same technology that rocketed Bieber into the big time.

In many ways, Justin Bieber is the latest incarnation in a lineage of pop stars whose ancestry can be traced from African music to the blues and rock-and-roll, on through a series of imitative white-boy miracles from Elvis to Jim Morrison to George Michael. In more recent years, however, with the advent of the internet, that particular

species of singer has taken on a new sheen of self-awareness.

Celebrity now moves at the speed of light. Our pop stars are so very far away from us and yet so near at hand, always accessible on screen, just a mouse-click away. The World Wide Web has delivered unto us such aggressively self-made mega-stars as Eminem, Kanye West and Justin Timberlake. Bieber, with his casual style and infinite aplomb, belongs in this stable of musicians. He seems utterly in control of what he’s doing, with oodles of talent, smarts beyond his years and confidence bordering on arrogance.

The movie itself is an epochal fart — it reveals nothing of what’s inside that whiff of stardom. The basic facts are there, presented in (mostly non-3D archival footage) home videos and snapshots of the boy’s childhood: Raised by his comely young mother in Stratford, Ontario, Bieber from an early age displayed a precocious knack for rhythm and an almost Dylanesque drive to get his foot in the door of the music industry. There’s no doubting his phenomenal talent, which *Never Say Never* all but drowns out with a glitzy, pandering, pedo-technic stage show that is all flawless Vegas dance routines and audience come-ons. *Adore me*, Bieber seems to sing with every inch of his body, *and I will make you whole*. He is bubblegum Jesus come to lay hands on pre-pubescent pimples, turning them into beauty marks.

The girls sitting to the left of me and my man date let out ear-piercing screams every time Bieber appeared in graphic, glorious, towering 3D. They cooed at his baby pictures, and then fondly called out the name of every member of the Bieb’s entourage, well before any of them were identified on screen. “Whoo, Pattie!” they yelled