



Jimmy Jam (left)
and Terry Lewis,
Los Angeles, 1989

JIMMY JAM AND TERRY LEWIS

THE ARTIST-DRIVEN PRODUCERS/
SONGWRITERS MAKE UP ONE OF THE MOST
SUCCESSFUL TEAMS IN MUSIC HISTORY.

BY JASON KING

To say the names Jam and Lewis is to conjure associations with musical excellence, creative ingenuity, steadfast reliability, and career longevity. One of the most prodigious songwriting and production duos of the past forty years, Jam and Lewis have earned sixteen *Billboard* Hot 100 Number One hits – more than any other songwriting/production team – and twenty-seven R&B Number One hits. Working with artists like Janet Jackson, Human League, Aretha Franklin, Mariah Carey, Rod Stewart, and Usher, Jam and Lewis have come to represent ideals of unbounded creativity, aesthetic openness, sonic innovation, and musical sophistication – and they've done so while looking fly in matching suits and ties, fedoras, and dark sunglasses.

Born in 1959 in Minneapolis, James Samuel “Jimmy Jam” Harris III came from musical roots. His father, Cornbread Harris, was a local blues and jazz musician noted for playing on what most consider to be Minnesota’s first rock & roll record (Augie Garcia Quintet’s 1955 “Hi Yo Silver”). Terry Steven Lewis, born in 1956 in Omaha, Nebraska, moved to Minneapolis with his family in the early 1960s. Jam and Lewis first met in high school: Both were enrolled in an Upward Bound program and bonded over shared musical interests. The duo cut their chops in the competitive, late-seventies Minneapolis R&B scene – the same one that birthed Prince (he and Jam took piano lessons at Central High

School). At age 16, Jam was already drumming, writing, and arranging for an eleven-piece band called Mind & Matter, and soon he’d be DJing at Minneapolis nightclubs. Lewis pivoted to playing bass in local band Flyte Tyme after suffering a knee injury that prevented him from taking advantage of a football scholarship to Notre Dame University.

In 1981, Lewis invited Jam to play keyboards for Flyte Tyme, and the duo began writing songs together. Prince, now a star in his own right and riding on his early eighties entrepreneurial hot streak, took over Flyte Tyme operations, replaced lead vocalist Alexander O’Neal with Morris Day, and renamed the band the Time. Jam and Lewis became original members of the Time, alongside Day, Jesse Johnson, Jerome Benton, Jellybean Johnson, and Monte Moir. Working closely with Prince in the recording studio and opening on tour for him, Jam and Lewis got a firsthand, second-to-none education on high-level musicianship and industriousness. And as Jam said, “You believe in yourself.”

Still, the Time was Prince’s exclusive creative concept. He pulled all the strings. Lacking artistic and financial control, and in need of a more suitable outlet for their multifold talents, Jam and Lewis looked for an escape hatch.

In 1982, Solar Records employee Dina Andrews began to manage Jam and Lewis, introducing them to hitman Clarence Avant and producer Leon Sylvers III, who’d worked with acts like Shalamar and the Whispers. Avant



The Time in 1986:
Jerome Benton and Morris Day
(front row, from left);
Terry Lewis, Monte Moir,
Jimmy Jam, Jesse Johnson,
and Jellybean Johnson
(back row, from left)

and Sylvers would, in turn, serve as mentors for the duo, and open some critical doors.

While cutting tracks in Atlanta for the S.O.S. Band (an act signed to Avant's Tabu label), Jam and Lewis got stranded in a winter snowstorm and couldn't rejoin the Time for a San Antonio concert. Taskmaster Prince fired them from the band. Though initially devastated, Jam and Lewis soon saw their fortunes rise when the funky, robotic track they had made in Georgia, "Just Be Good to Me," turned into a smash hit for the S.O.S. Band. "That was the first time that we got serious about producing," noted Jam. "Up to that time it was just fun. 'Hey, let's write some songs. Ha-ha, this is fun.' All of a sudden, it's like . . . 'This is how I'm going to make my living now.'"

Dina Andrews helped Jam and Lewis incorporate their company, Flyte Tyme. Over the next few years, the duo wrote and produced sensuous, high-sheen R&B projects for acts like Change, Klymaxx, Cheryl Lynn, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Patti Austin, and Thelma Houston. Some of their relationship-themed tunes – like "Tell Me If You Still Care" for the S.O.S. Band, Cherrelle's "I Didn't Mean to Turn You On," and "Saturday Love" for Cherrelle and Alexander O'Neal – came to define the sound of post-disco 1980s soul. They remain beloved R&B and Quiet Storm radio classics to this day.

By the mid-eighties, A&M executive John McClain recruited Jam and Lewis to rebrand label artist Janet Jackson. Jackson had released two solo albums to luke-warm sales and was then languishing in the shadow of her world-famous older brother. Jam and Lewis cowrote and

coproduced Jackson's 1986 *Control*, a concept album that crafted lyrics and themes from elements of the singer's autobiographical narrative. Featuring attitudinal, hard-hitting street-funk jams like "What Have You Done for Me Lately" and "Nasty," alongside tenderized slow jams like "Let's Wait Awhile," *Control* went crossover and catapulted Jackson into superstar status. It also helped launch the modern era in which women pop stars promote their music by way of themes of self-empowerment and autonomy.

Jam and Lewis followed *Control* by writing and producing on Jackson's 1989 social-justice-themed *Rhythm Nation 1814* – which soared up the charts on the strength of five Number One R&B singles and seven Top Five pop singles. Then came *janet.* (1993), *Velvet Rope* (1997), *All for You* (2001), *Damita Jo* (2004), and *20 Y.O.* (2006) – and the duo contributed to *Unbreakable* in 2015. Jam and Lewis' collaborative relationship with Jackson, spanning more than thirty years and sailing on the strength of nine Number One pop hits and fourteen Number One R&B hits – may be the greatest three-way creative marriage in pop history.

One reason Jam and Lewis have partnered so well with Janet Jackson is because they have always been artist-driven producers: They see their role as bringing out the personality of the musicians with whom they work, rather than imposing a preestablished sound upon them. "It sometimes means playing the role of psychiatrist, listening when artists only want to talk about their problems," said Jam about the duo's recording process. "But whether you're trying to re-create magic with an



FROM TOP: Lewis (left) and Jam in Los Angeles, 1982; Jam (left) and Lewis with Janet Jackson, New York, 1996.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: With Alexander O'Neal, Minneapolis, 1988; with Clarence Avant, Washington, D.C., 2013; getting their stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, with Janet Jackson, 1993.

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artist with a history, or you're working with someone new and trying to figure out what that unique sound is, the fun is in the collaboration."

While there is no singular, monolithic Jam and Lewis style, the duo landed on certain signature sounds that define their classic eighties period. Jam and Lewis productions, crafted in their Flyte Tyme Minneapolis studio, were often characterized by hummable melodies and textured harmonies played against hyper-syncopated, boominly loud rhythm tracks – as on Janet's "Control" and Johnny Gill's "Rub You the Right Way" (1990). Slow jams like New Edition's "Can You Stand the Rain" (1988) and Ralph Tresvant's "Sensitivity" (1990) feature blanket-synths over jazzy harmonic progressions, and Jam and

Lewis ballads sometimes favor organ and glassy sound effects. As early adopters of left-curve technologies like the Roland TR-808 drum machine and synths like the Oberheim OB-8, the Ensoniq Mirage, and the E-mu SP-1200, Jam and Lewis tracks sound sonically different from those of their peers. While Lewis was often responsible for locking down the groove and Jam for adding harmonic and melodic elements, the duo took a flexible approach, depending on the artist they were working with – and their roles easily shifted to customize a recording project.

You might call Jam and Lewis maximalists: Listen to the industrial cacophony and buzzy, freaked-out synths on the 1995 Michael and Janet Jackson duet, "Scream." But they also excelled as minimalists, as evident on the



Jam (left) and Lewis
onstage at the
Grammys, 2022

stripped-down piano balladry of Force M.D.'s "Tender Love" and Janet's sentimental, Oscar-nominated 1993 ballad "Again." Jam and Lewis were just as adept at composing original songs on traditional instruments as they were at deploying samples and interpolations: Check out their deft use of Change's "The Glow of Love" on Janet's "All for You" (2001) or Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" on Janet's neo-soul "Got Til It's Gone" (1997), or their use of "Nadia's Theme" from *The Young and the Restless* on Mary J. Blige's 2001 "No More Drama."

Jam and Lewis are equally comfortable recording battleship belters like Patti LaBelle and Ann Nesby as they are lithe-voiced vocalists like Janet. And along with Babyface, Jam and Lewis helped establish a tradition of mature "grown 'n sexy" R&B that could illuminate themes of divorce ("I'm Still Wearing Your Name" for Nesby) or fidelity ("On Bended Knee" for Boyz II Men) or male outrage ("Fake" by Alexander O'Neal) or tongue-in-cheek carnality ("Where Do U Want Me to Put It" by Solo) with equal aplomb.

While some writers and producers stumble to adjust to changing pop tastes, Jam and Lewis have long been fearless experimenters and genre-hoppers, skilled at navigating shifting musical and sonic trends. Their 1988 remix of George Michael's "Monkey" helped take that song to Number One. They embraced rhythmic innova-

tions like deep house on tunes like Janet's "Throb" (1993) and "Together Again" (1997), and Dirty South beats for Jordan Knight's "Give It to You" (1999) and Janet's "Doesn't Really Matter" (2000). They've produced hip-hop for acts like MC Lyte, Big Daddy Kane, and Ice-T. And in the early nineties, they dove into gospel, signing and producing the Sounds of Blackness for their own record label, Perspective Records; the duo delivered gospel singer Yolanda Adams her biggest crossover hit with 2000's "Open My Heart."

Jam and Lewis have received a whopping (and record-breaking) eleven Grammy nominations for Producers of the Year Non-Classical (they won the award in 1987; Jam also served as the first African American Chairman of the Recording Academy from 2007 to 2009). They've been Emmy- and Oscar-nominated and have earned over one hundred gold, platinum, multiplatinum, and diamond albums. They've also achieved the rare honor of having Number One hits across four consecutive decades. As hitmakers, the Jam and Lewis influence has been slow and steady, rippling across the landscape of popular music and influencing everyone from Justin Timberlake to Beyoncé.

Early on in their careers, Jam and Lewis were asked, "How does it feel to be the hottest producers?" Their savvy response was this: "We don't really want to be the hottest producers. We just want to be warm for a long time."