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Norwegian Newbies Go Pop

Nico & Vinz invade the States — and the Hot 100's top 10 — after switching from hip-hop to African-influenced “Scandinavian melodies”

BY JASON LIPSHUTZ

Nico & Vinz's pop smash is called “Am I Wrong,” but so far the song can only do right. The Norwegian duo's debut chart entry leapfrogged into the top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100 dated June 7, just its sixth week on the tally. On the June 21 Hot 100, the song dips to No. 8 from its No. 6 peak, but with a 9 percent gain in chart points. Nico & Vinz are still mostly unknowns stateside, although that hasn't stopped the song from taking over the airwaves: “Am I Wrong” leaps 14-10 on Radio Songs with a 22 percent jump to 83 million audience impressions, according to Nielsen BDS, and goes top 10 on Mainstream Top 40 (12-10) and Adult Top 40 (11-7). It has sold 844,000 copies to date, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

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Pop radio is embracing the song's world music-meets-soul vibe — think Akon singing over The Police — but it's a new sound for Oslo-born Nico Sereba and Vincent Dery, both 23. Before they recorded “Am I Wrong” in February 2013, the pair had worked together as a hip-hop duo called Envy since 2009.

“I was an East Coast guy — Jay Z, Nas, Wu-Tang,” says Sereba.

“And I was all West Coast — Xzibit, [Dr.] Dre, Snoop Dogg, Ice Cube,” adds Dery. “I had a do-rag and everything.”

The pair only began singing out of necessity. “We would write these hooks and be like, ‘Wouldn't it be dope if we got R. Kelly or some

big star to sing this?’” says Dery. “But yeah — R. Kelly wasn't coming to Norway.”

The stylistic makeover accelerated when the bandmembers changed their name (to avoid conflicts with other groups named Envy) and started incorporating their African backgrounds into their music. “Nico has a father from Ivory Coast and a mother from Norway, and I have parents from Ghana,” says Dery. “We mixed those African roots with urban influences and Scandinavian melodies.”

Before “Am I Wrong” debuted on the May 3 Hot 100, the song was already a hit in Norway, Sweden and Germany. Nico & Vinz signed a U.S. deal with Warner Bros. in January, and have been steeped in studio sessions during their breakout single's rise, working on an

album that will be released in the fall.

“We always knew it was possible to reach outside of Norway with our music,” says Sereba. “With this song, we wanted to say, ‘Are we wrong for thinking that we can actually do this?’

That's how that message came about — trusting your gut feeling, going for it and searching for your own happiness.” ●



Nico & Vinz's Sereba (left) and Dery went from no-names to the top 10 in just six weeks.