

# British Boppers still wait for U.S. success

by GRAHAM PUNTER

THE WATER that forms the great divide between Britain and America appears to have embodied in its composition a mystic power that reaches far beyond the physical segregation of the two countries.

It has created a cultural split in the lucrative and rapidly-expanding new-found market that has earned the rather disparaging labels of teenbopper and weenybopper.

The question that has been thwarting everyone who has anything to do with the British artists endeared to the teenage market is: What's going wrong?

Why have Slade slayed the English kids but failed to persuade American boppers to Get Down and Get With It? Why have T Rex triumphed at home yet found only cold reaction instead of Hot Love across the Atlantic?

And even more concerning is the fact that while the English struggle for acceptance in the States, the American teenybopper idols, Osmond and Cassidy are adored and acclaimed away from home.

In an effort to unearth reasons for this apparently inexplicable phenomenon we spoke to David Joseph, a man with vast knowledge of markets and attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic. As manager of the New Seekers, whose Marty Kristian is being promoted as a teen-idol, and Sweet, he is



Why have Slade (top picture) slayed the English kids but failed to persuade American boppers to 'Get Down and Get With It?' And why are Donny Osmond (left) and David Cassidy (right) adored and acclaimed away from home?

clearly aware of the need for English teenybopper artists to break the States.

We spent some time examining and analysing the problem and emerged with an answer, if not a particularly satisfying solution.

First we must consider the historical circumstances of popular music. As Britain struggled along for a few years trying to find an answer to the American doo-wap and rock and roll, four young men from Liverpool produced an album called Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. With its deviation from tradition via obscure drug references, the venture into psychedelia and the general emphasis on creation, the door to experimentation was opened, pushed by a record that screamed: We need something new.

So followed a period of strange new musical conceptions and the creation of the underground. So mystified were the popular Press at this unknown quantity that misleading political connotations were placed upon the artists involved and a strange idea grew among the ill-informed that musicians were at the van of some Alternative Society.

The truth was that these progressive artists had merely heeded the Beatles' warning. The underground paid dividends. Music became more intense, higher technical standards had become established and bands were beginning to think more

about what was happening. Individualism became vital — no longer would copyists be tolerated in the Top Flight. But it had its side effects.

For only so long could young audiences sit cross-legged amid a fusion of flashing lights catching occasional glimpses of an introvert musician crouched low over his guitar and doing his thing apparently oblivious of his audience.

There was some light relief with the drifting to our shores of reggae and the creation of discotheques.

But, as far as English rock music and the new generation were concerned, something had to give. And give it did. A Wolverhampton band called Slade realised the time had come for a return to show-biz. With extrovert clothes, hair glitter, the wiggling bum of lead guitarist Dave Hill, the unmelodic but powerhouse vocals of Noddy Holder and a catalog of raunchy songs they at long last gave frustrated teenagers something to shout about, dance about and generally go mad about.

Marc Bolan quit underground kings Led Zepplin to form T Rex. They established themselves with a more laid-back, more melodic act than Slade but still very much a show-biz style.

The British teenybopper warmed to sounds and antics that suddenly sprung from the tight but necessary coil of musical development.

America appears not to have undergone such a dramatic change. Indeed it had no need to plunge so heavily below ground for there was the tradition and invention from which the British underground was designed to break free.

Thus there was the smooth and natural emergence of Donny Osmond and David Cassidy. Their simple ballads that require no thought yet draw upon maximum romanticism epitomise school love. Their youthful good looks and subsequent appeal as pin-ups affirmed their claim to the new teen market.

Sentimental songs and looks know no national boundaries. And, with a little push from Polydor and Bell, Donny and David found instant appeal to English audiences. Another strong factor in their acceptance must be the Osmonds and Partridge Family tv shows which ensured their names and music were disseminated to a receptive bopper market.

Slade and T Rex had no such tv promotion and with the physical size of the States were faced with greater problems. But more important, they were not finding a need to relieve a teen-market suffering from a preceding grey era of music — there had not been one.

## Established Hits

Slade and T Rex purists may well offer further factors for the States struggle. Neither British group depended on established hits to break themselves, apart from Slade having a minor hit with Little Richard's Get Down and Get With It. Donny, however, has ridden the crest of his wave on Paul Anka's Puppy Love, Johnny Mathis' Twelfth of Never and currently Sonny James' Young Love.

As lead vocalist with the Partridge Family, Cassidy came to the fore with Neil Sedaka's Breaking Up Is Hard To Do.

There are suggestions too that Slade's set is too esoteric for American audiences. A favourite deviation from the music is for them to set up a soccer chant geared to the league side local to the town in which they are appearing. The exercise is guaranteed to win over the 15-year-old soccer fans who comprise a large proportion of their audience.

Perhaps they missed scoring in the States by failing to research the likely reaction to baseball and American football chants.

Joseph agreed that it is likely that only time and evolution of the American teenager's thought process will solve the British problem. English teenagers appreciate both the raunch of home and the sophistication of abroad whereas the Americans appear only to want the sophistication.

Perhaps when they grow tired and want to jump the time will be right for the string of exciting teen-appeal acts who are established in Britain — Sweet, Gary Glitter, Suzi Quatro — to take the States by storm.

As America-born Miss Quatro said recently in a Music Week interview: "When the time's right I'd love to return to the States and knock 'em out." And when one in five kids under the age of 15 is buying records regularly, that time as far as everyone connected with the British bopper scene is concerned can't be soon enough.

But the intriguing bopper scene apart, what new talent is there in Britain and what of the rumours of a new underground?

Only once in a lifetime is there a need for a total musical re-think. So it's largely a misconception that another underground is forming.

What we do have is the creation of a new breed of rock



T Rex on U.S. tv — the sort of promotion they — like Slade — badly need in order to be able to make it in a country the size of the States. The Osmonds and the Partridge Family tv shows have demonstrated the importance of this aspect of promotion.

bands whose musical innovation has been allied to all that was learnt during the time of change.

If we are to talk about a new underground then the phrase must simply be used to describe groups who have found success developing a specialised appeal, rather than the mass appeal within a certain market — as with Osmond and Cassidy.

Of the post-underground established bands, it must be said Emerson, Lake and Palmer have attained a success by creating a new sound — classical-rock. It would be too easy and certainly inaccurate to suggest they have won through via Keith Emerson's reputation with the much-loved Nice. They have maintained their position too long to make that theory credible.

Procol Harum found a hypnotic keyboard combination that allied to powerful melodies has stood the test of time from Whiter Shade of Pale and Homburg to Conquistador. But even Harum perhaps realised the need for variation and Conquistador embodied the strength of the Edmonton (Canada) Symphony Orchestra.

## Welsh Rock

Of the new British bands who look a good bet as far as creativity is concerned, Man have found their originality in the creation of Welsh-Rock, a title that is being substantiated by other bands from Wales who are just beginning to make themselves felt.

Another on-the-up band is Renia, who are finding a formula combining the fringes of old rock and roll, and 1973 rock with urgent choruses successful.

Jo'burg Hawk's African-rock has emerged from tribal sounds set against a rock backcloth. The group have only developed to any great extent since coming to Britain from South Africa, where the segregation laws prevented them from playing as a unit.

One of the most exciting talents to emerge are Sutherland Brothers and Quiver, currently touring the States. Melodic songs and an emphasis on vocals which stretch to harmonies reminiscent of the Everlys are fused to a powerful rock base.

What all these promising new groups have in common is an original and distinct sound that stands a good chance of lifting each to the heights of their particular field. In an increasingly competitive world they realise that not only is innovation a vital ingredient to reach the top but that it is a pre-requisite for survival.