

Teen rock idols back in vogue

By Gary Graff

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Tiffany, Debbie Gibson and Shanice Wilson have at least two things in common: They've all had hit singles, and none of them could vote in the last election.

Holy David Cassidy, Batman! Pop music is in the midst of a teen boom it hasn't experienced since the early '70s, when the Jackson 5, the Osmond Brothers and the Partridge Family, Cassidy's TV clan, were racking up hits for legions of teenybopper fans.

Tiffany Darwisch, 16, hit No. 1 a few weeks ago with a remake of Tommy James' "I Think We're Alone Now." She was the youngest singer to top the charts since 14-year-old Michael Jackson scored with "Ben" in 1972.

At 17, Gibson, of Long Island, already has had two big hits: "Only in My Dreams," which peaked at No. 4 this summer, and "Shake Your Love," currently at No. 6.

Wilson, who's 14, had a Top 10 Black hit with "Can You Dance." And a group called the Jets, ages 14 to 22, have been popping such hits as "Crush on You" since 1985.

ANY WAY YOU cut it, this is a bona fide trend that will likely expand in the coming year.

"Kids buy kids," said Brad Schmidt, who co-manages Tiffany with George Tobin. "The record companies are starting to be open to the possibility of there being a youth market out there. They're trying to find the best of the talent out there that will accommodate that."

It's a bold and somewhat surprising move by record companies, long scared off by the manufactured image of those early '70s performers. But there are crucial differences in the then-and-now scenario.

For starters, the '70s groups had an unhip, corporate air. The Osmonds, Bobby Sherman and the Partridge Family both had TV ties that allowed them to launch their records. And they were guided by outsiders at a time when self-

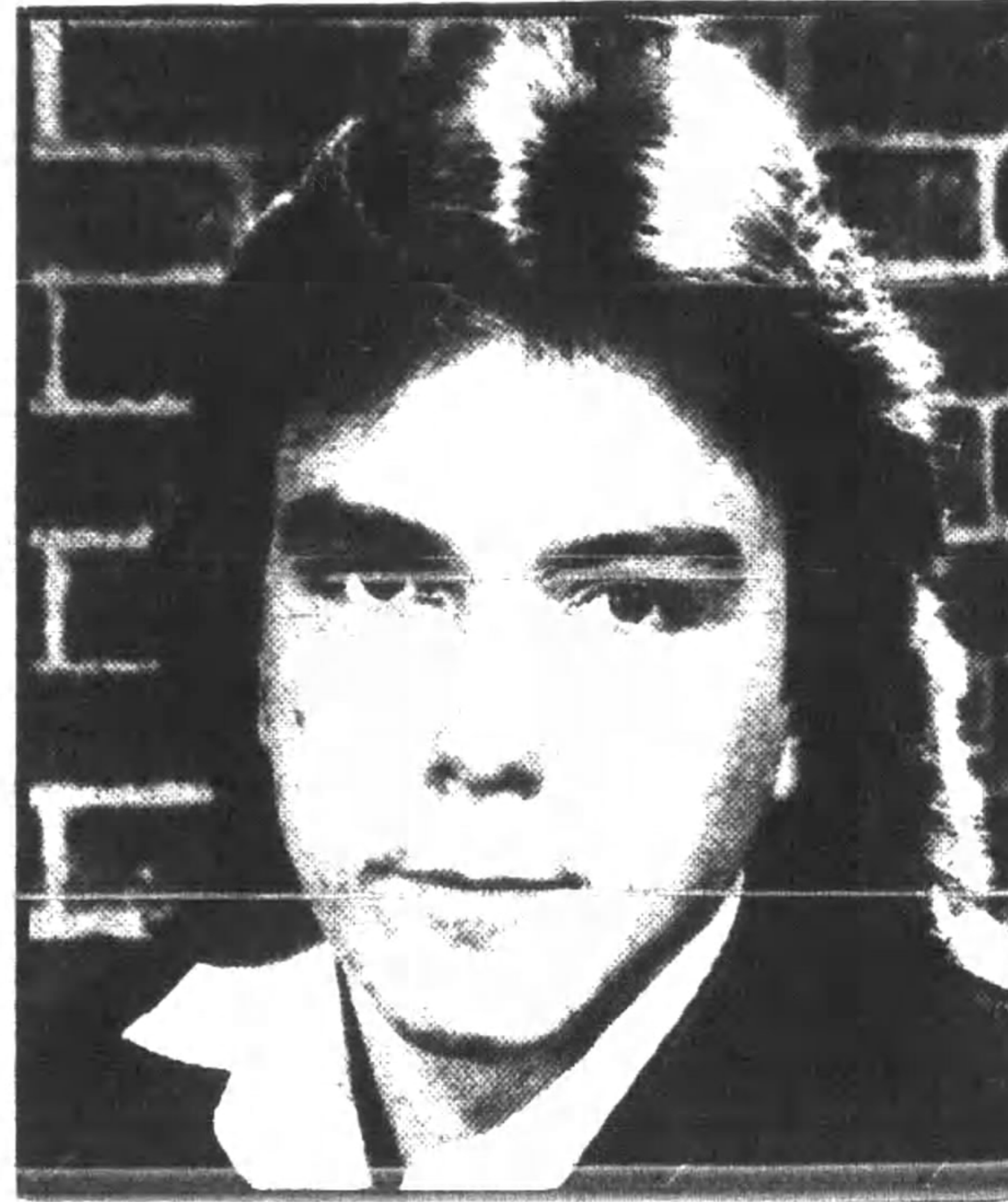
Remember these cool stars?



Back in the '70s Bobby Sherman was the cutest thing alive, according to the pre-teen female set.

contained rock groups were championed. Their songs, meanwhile, were calculated bubblegum alternatives to the psychedelic sounds favored by the "hip" rock audience.

THE JACKSON 5, at least, started with respectable talent, although they too were guided by outside management — the Motown machine. Before long, they also had their own TV show, a cartoon



David Cassidy starred in "The Partridge Family."



A lot of girls had puppy love for Donny Osmond.

version.

The careers of Tiffany, Gibson and the others are just as controlled. As the Jets' Rudy Wolfgramm, 18, said, "Eventually we would like to write as well as play our own songs, but our management says we're not ready."

But that management is far more in tune with contemporary tastes than that of the '70s stars. The songs

of the current crop can hold up on Top 40 radio next to older hitmakers like Madonna or George Michael; many listeners don't even know they're listening to teen-agers.

For teen stars, "it's the second time around," said Schmidt, adding that with what record companies learned before, "maybe ... everyone involved tries to give more breadth and depth to their careers."

"THE MUSIC has a broad, accessible appeal," said Tom Arndt, associate editor of Tiger Beat, a teen-oriented magazine. "A lot of kids are surprised to hear that Tiffany and Debbie Gibson are as young as they are."

Still, a key element in Tiffany's success is that she was marketed as a teen. In a stroke of product-selling genius, her label, MCA, put her on a tour of those popular teen hangouts, shopping malls, where she would perform to taped music and then sign autographs.

"We built a grass roots campaign," said Schmidt. "We went hands-on with the audience, and they took to her."

Other record companies haven't made a huge fuss out of the age of their acts, but they haven't exactly hidden the fact, either.

"It's not a bad gimmick," said Atlantic Records vice-president Larry Yasgur, who worked with Gibson. "With Debbie, I thought, 'Here's a good-looking 16-year-old, she has good material, a nice voice; there hasn't been anything like this around for a while.' You could have 16-year-olds relating to a 16-year-old."

BECAUSE OF THAT, record companies are reportedly searching out their own teen acts. So don't be surprised if, come next year, established stars are sharing Top 40 space with performers who could be their sons or daughters.

"There's a lot of young talent out there," said Atlantic's Yasgur. "It just has to be brought out. The companies, after seeing this, may go out and find it."