

ON THE COVER

ABC's Friday-night sitcoms honor such TV traditions as The David Cassidy Perfect Shag and The Awww Factor.

BY KIRK NICEWONGER

When it comes to Friday-night scheduling, ABC's strategy traditionally has been as basic as its initials: Snatch the kids.

Let CBS sweep Mom away to the romance that is New York's sewer system with "Beauty and the Beast," and with the saddle soap of "Dallas." Concede the field of quietly desperate dads imagining themselves in daring escapades for which shaving is optional to NBC's "Miami Vice." ABC is content — and has been quite successful — in its pied-piper role of tootling the kids to bedtime with its lineup of "Perfect Strangers," "Full House," "Mr. Belvedere" and "Just the Ten of Us."

It was ever thus. Quick, on which night and network could you find the following kiddie-classic series:

"The Flintstones" (1960-66), "Jonny Quest" (1964), "The Green Hornet" (1966-67), "The Time Tunnel" (1966-67), "The Brady Bunch" (1969-74) and "The Six Million Dollar Man" (1974)? If you answered, "Fridays on ABC," congratulations. Your bionic Bedrock decoder ring will be arriving shortly.

In one sense, the current ABC lineup is quite different from the '60s series that glazed our eyes growing up. For one thing, each is situated in a real-life American metropolitan center. There's nary a Bedrock in the bunch. Now we are transported through the magic of the electron gun to such storied locales as Chicago ("Perfect Strangers"), San Francisco ("Full House"), Pittsburgh ("Mr. Belvedere") and Eureka, Calif. ("Just the Ten of Us").

And yet, most of the elements of the ABC lineup have a flavor of Fridays past every bit as reminiscent as the taste of bubble gum. "Full House," for example, recalls for us the days of The David Cassidy Perfect Shag. You remember The David Cassidy Perfect Shag. It propelled "The Partridge Family" to ABC Friday-night hitdom from 1970-73. Cassidy played the eldest brother of a musical family and

emerged as first among equals in the teen-dream pantheon. It was the hair, of course. Conditioned to perfection in those innocent, pre-mousse days, it was worn like a coronet by Cassidy. Other haircut heroes from ABC's Fridays vied with Cassidy for poster space on the bedroom walls of prepubescent female America, including Bobby Sherman ("Here Come the Brides," 1969-70) and Donny Osmond ("Donny and Marie," 1976-78). None, however, approached Cassidy's shagged and sculpted glory.

None, that is, until John Stamos, who plays guitar hero Jesse on "Full House." Stamos sported a coif in every respect the peer of Cassidy's, and even a half-inch or so longer, thanks to recent technological advancements in hair care. Stamos boldly met the Cas-



Sculpted glory: Cassidy (l.), Stamos

sidy challenge and then transcended it by defoliating the back of his neck in a recent "Full House" episode devoted to this traumatic event. Despite this, "Full House" survives, thanks to another ABC Friday-night innovation, The Awww Factor.

ABC recognized the importance of The Awww Factor on Friday with "Webster" (1983-87). Emmanuel Lewis's adorable antics elicited loving "awwws" from the audience, and these soon became indispensable elements in the soundtracks of all shows with small kids in the cast. Now we were cued not only when to laugh, but also when to go gooier than caramel in the Sahara. "Full House" has lifted The Awww Factor to the level of the Greek chorus, thanks to Ashley Fuller and Mary Kate Olsen. They alternately play Michelle,

the 2-year-old in the care of three young men only one of whom could be considered even remotely adult. Whenever "Full House" threatens to bog down in its own silliness, the camera cuts to Ms. Olsen's facial reactions, which generally involve widened eyes and buzzing lips. The soundtrack immediately sounds like 500 people being lowered into a hot tub.

"Full House" certainly owes a little something to "Three Men and a Baby," no? Of course: No one ever accused ABC of daring to be original on Friday nights. "Mr. Belvedere," in which Christopher Hewett plays a butler who's a Solomon of the scullery for a surreally befuddled family, is based on a series of 1940s movies. Moreover, the domestic is a TV stock figure — just

think of such odes to saintly domestic service as "The Farmer's Daughter" (1964-66), "Nanny and the Professor" (1970-71), "Benson" (1980-85) and the immortal "I Married Dora" (1987). They all aired on ABC and they all aired on Friday — despite the demographically demonstrable fact that the vast majority of American families do their own vacuuming and consult the clergy for guidance.

In "Perfect Strangers," Mark Linn-Baker and Bronson Pinchot play two single guys sharing a household and indulging in sundry wackiness. Haven't ABC viewers seen this situation before on Friday night? They have if they watched "The Odd Couple" (1971-75), "Bosom Buddies" (1981) or the short-lived "New Odd Couple" (1982).

The precedents for "Just the Ten of Us" (a spinoff of "Growing Pains"), a sitcom about a high-school coach (Bill Kirchenbauer) with a family of sufficient size to merit inclusion on Zero Population Growth's hit list, are less obvious. "Eight Is Enough" (1977-81) comes to mind. Wasn't that on ABC? Sure, but it aired on Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday nights.

We'd like to know this: If Friday night is good enough for Bill Kirchenbauer, how come it wasn't good enough for Dick Van Patten?