

Teen idols

Who's hot and who's not among young readers

By Jill J. Lanford

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Kirk who? Corey what?

If you have to ask, try not to admit it to anyone under the age of Sweet 16.

Ranking teen idols Kirk Cameron and Corey Haim hold sway over today's adolescents in much the same way The Monkees and Bobby Sherman mesmerized their parents.

Cameron stars in the ABC sitcom, "Growing Pains." Haim rose to teen idol status through such films as "Murphy's Romance" and "Secret Admirer."

Their fresh-scrubbed faces grace the cover of teen magazines. Their fans — overwhelmingly female, of course — clamor to discover their every like and dislike.

What's Corey's favorite color? What does Kirk look for in a girlfriend? What will their next acting roles be?

The magazine articles are peppered with breathy exclamations (Corey: What He's Feeling! Where He Is!) and filled with a multitude of trivial facts which may make parents shake their heads in wonder until they recall the idols almost certain to be lurking in their own pasts.

Maybe it was a fixation with Donny Osmond, Frankie Avalon or perhaps even Frank Sinatra.

Experts agree that whatever the names, the faces of these teen-age gods remain remarkably the same: "Most are boyish, not-too-masculine or threatening — something which stays



Kirk who?

the same year in and year out," says Sharon Gintzler, editor of Super Teen magazine.

Gintzler should know. It's her job to fuel these one-sided romances through monthly installments of photos, interviews, fave trivia and reader contests.

In this role, she must be part fortune teller and part cupid, predicting who will be hot, and using the power of her magazine to buoy the young stars' popularity.

Most times, they're the features of popular television series or up-and-coming recording acts. "Visibility is a must," she says, commenting on the ingredients of a bona fide heartthrob.

According to Julie Laufer, editor of Big Bopper magazine, rock stars also make easy-to-adore idols: "There's just something about listening to someone's voice," Laufer says, noting the popularity in years past of such bubble gum rockers as David Cassidy and Donnie Osmond.

Laufer says the current rage is Jon Bon Jovi — admittedly a little naughtier teen idol than most, but still squeaky clean by heavy metal standards.

"It's historical," says Laufer, who describes her average reader as a 13-year-old female just beginning to take notice of the opposite sex.

"Most aren't dating yet, but are interested in boys — particularly ones that they sense some vulnerability in. Maybe they associate the soft features with soft personalities, but most teen idols have had dark hair, soft eyes and babyish faces ... Young men that they find attractive, but not too intimidating."

Of course, not all teen idols are male. While teen girls tend to be the most ardent fans, buying the vast majority of magazines, posters and other fave merchandise, some of the personalities they follow most closely are actually other teen-age girls.

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An example is all-American Debbie Gibson, featured heavily in a broad cross-section of the monthly teen fanzines. "She's someone they can emulate — her hair, her makeup, everything," Laufer says.

James Seegars, chairman of the psychology department at Wofford College, agrees that this imitation is important — that having a star or personality with whom to identify is one of the reasons teen idols exist.

"There are an awful lot of insecurities during these years, and, consequently, teens look for someone with credibility and strength with whom they can say, 'This is who I am and what I want to be,'" Seegars says.

The phenomenon is traditionally female because adolescent males tend to identify more closely with sports figures, he adds. "Boys still look for symbols of strength and girls toward more romantic figures — singers, movie stars, and so on."

They are also not shy in letting these preferences be known, editors of both magazines agree. By tradition an intensely loyal and vocal readership, they flood fan magazines with thousands of letters each month demanding photos and interviews of their favorites.

Editors do their best to comply, frequently working through the mothers of the stars to obtain their "inside information" on the idols' every whim.