

Bubblegum Music Revenue Declining

By MEGAN ROSENFELD

It was an eventful year for the bubblegum entertainment industry. David Cassidy, for four years the idol of millions of teen- and weeny-boppers, has announced he's leaving "The Partridge Family" and is going off to "live a little." Donny Osmond's voice changed. Merrill Osmond became the first of the singing Mormon brothers to get married (the fans are taking it okay) and two of the Jackson Five got married. One of them (Tito) even fathered a child, and also faces charges in California of receiving a stolen amplifier and tape recorder. (A family spokesman says Tito has receipts to show he paid for the stuff and they're sure the case will be thrown out of court.)

The multi-million dollar bubblegum industry — a record, concert, magazine and souvenir-producing establishment aimed at America's (roughly) 20 million girls between the ages of 5 and 15 — has been gaining momentum in recent years through the phenomenal success of its handful of top teen idols.

The hit records may not be the best sellers of the year, and perhaps few over 21 have ever heard of David Cassidy or the Osmonds, but the power of their screaming, madly devoted fans is strong enough to make these stars (and others) millionaires. Donny Osmond is only 15, but his face and persona have helped sell over 18 million records.

At the moment, however, the bubblegum fun industry is in a slump.

Record and magazine sales are down, and concerts may take weeks to sell out rather than hours. Cassidy, whose first single, "I Think I Love You," was released in 1970 and sold 5½ million copies, didn't even get into the charts with his latest album, "Dreams Are Nuthin' More Than Wishes." The highest the Osmonds' latest record reached on Billboard Magazine's chart was 58, which hardly compares with their former ability to get into the top 20 just by releasing a new record.

The reason, says the editors, press agents and managers, is that the industry is in a state of "transition."

"The screamers in the first row four years ago are now 18 or 19 and married," said Jackson Five tour manager Jack Nance. "They aren't buying records." And today's young teens are waiting for their own show business idols.

The stars and their fans are simply growing up, and in many cases the love affair is ending. In addition, industry sources complain, there are no new Number One Fave teen idols yet surfacing, no irresistible teen-age heart throbs to inspire the kind of devotion that demands posters for the bedroom walls, records to dream with and concerts to scream at.

"This happens every now and then," says Gloria Stavers, editor of the senior of the teen magazines, "16." "Of course they're still hundreds of girls who say they will love Donny 'til they die, but basically my girls are bored with him."

Chuck Laufer, who publishes Fave, Tiger Beat, Tiger Beat Spectacular, and Right-On, has a theory that all teen idols have a 2½-year (give or take a few months) "flush" period for merchandising and idolatry, and that the current depression is due to the fact that David and Donny's cycles have simply run out. But he thinks the girls are ready to fall in love if presented with the appropriate material —

namely the DeFranco Family, five Italian Canadians that his company is "handling" ("Please don't say 'Managing,'" he says).

After a year of grooming and looking for the "right material," the three brothers and two sisters have a no. 4 record, "Heartbeat — It's a Lovebeat." Their father has even quit his job as a custodian in a nickel plant in Ontario and moved to Los Angeles.

Laufer says the next teen idol is undoubtedly going to be Tony DeFranco, 14, the youngest and lead singer of the group.

"The mail is Tony all the way," he reports. "It's comparable to what we got for Cassidy and Donny at this stage. The kid's a natural."

There are other hopefuls featured in the glossy pages of the dozen or so fan magazines, including Andy Williams' adolescent twin nephews, who sing; the 5-year-old star of a commercial for a chain of California hamburger carryouts; and a pretty Australian singer of the advanced age of 23. And for the first time since Annette Funicello stole the hearts of millions in her heyday on the Mickey Mouse Club, a female is trying for the attention of the young audience.

She is Marie Osmond, 14, sister of the brothers. Marie is being promoted as "a star in her own right," according to one of the family's press agents, and will be booked separately.

Her first single has made No. 7 on the charts. It's "Paper Roses," a melancholy tale of false love, which she sings in what is being called a "country pop" style produced by country-and-western music veteran Sonny James.

The rest of the Osmonds, who have sold over 18 million records to date, seem to have shifted the focus of their mass adulation overseas, Great Britain in particular.

Tickets for the group's concert at the 3,000-seat Rainbow Theater in London went on sale over a month ago. Girls started queueing up the day before the box office was due to open, so the unfortunate box office man-

Gaming Special Will Air Again

The award winning film, "Should the Lady Take a Chance?" will be rerun Wednesday and next Sunday at 8 p.m. on Channels 23, 50, 52 and 58 on "Assignment: New Jersey."

The half-hour, full-color program focuses on the pros and cons of extending legalized gambling in New Jersey. Atlantic City Mayor Jay Bradway advocates the legalization of Casino gambling as one of the answers for an economic revitalization of the resort city. Seaside Heights Mayor "Pat" Tunney is strongly opposed to an extension of gambling.

New Jersey Public Broadcasting recently received the Philadelphia Press Association and Philadelphia Electric Award for the Best Television Documentary for 1973 for, "Should the Lady Take a Chance."

ager decided to open at midnight.

The stir created by those who arrived at the official opening time of 11 a.m. Sunday forced the scheduling of an additional concert, for which tickets were sold through a lottery.

Their latest album is also a departure from their usual bippety-bop rock. Christened "The Plan," it represents the five Mormon brothers' "philosophy on life and how they see it."

Lush with orchestral strings and rigged with electronic wizardry sounding like an infant's cry, it comes off as remarkably reminiscent of the Beatles "Sgt. Pepper" album, except that, well, they aren't the Beatles.

David Cassidy's press agent was worried about just what questions the 23-year-old star was going to be asked.

"He wants to be considered grown-up now," she said. "He's fed up with all those 'What's your favorite color' interviews."

Indeed, after nearly four years as the object of frantically passionate hero-worship from millions of girls ranging from age 4 to 16, David has had it. "The Partridge Family," the television show that catapulted him into the dreams of millions, has also had it, having been rescheduled opposite "All in the Family" this season.

"It was a wonderful experience," Cassidy said recently in a phone interview from California, "but it's been real hard for me to slip into that Keith Partridge suit and try to have fun with it lately. Contractually I couldn't leave. It's been sort of like being divorced but still living with your wife."

"I don't want to put anybody down — there are worse things — but what they do is, they think they can make anybody a star. It's all contrived. They make you — in my case — the white knight. Nobody's that wonderful. There are positive things in the whole routine, wish fulfillment and things like that, but it's all basically dishonest. When you get right down to it it's a money-making proposition."

"It could be done tastefully, not icky. They underestimate the kids — you can hype them just so far."

"My advice for the next teen idol is to always approach the whole thing with a sense of humor. You've got to maintain your self-respect and draw lines. Otherwise they'll own you."

Stephen Kahn, publisher and editor of Flip, producer of the "Miss America Teen-Age Pageant" and publisher of a series of paperback books for girls like "Hollywood Star Reporter," "Dear Karen," and "Making It Together" (as a rock group), concurs that the new faces hoped for from this television season are not materializing.

Kahn, however, is going after the corporate dollar by convincing the business world that not only is teen-age

allowance money a considerable sum, but that buying patterns and habits are set early. Unlike the other magazines, Kahn uses advertising and says his ad revenues have increased from \$40,000 to \$250,000 this year.

"The biggest change in the teeny bop market this year is corporate acceptance," he says. "People like Avon and Sears are sensing the importance of this market. The teen-age girl is the last of the big time spenders."

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