

The Screamers Are Growing Up

By Megan Rosenfeld
Times-Post News Service

IT WAS AN EVENTFUL year for the bubblegum entertainment industry. David Cassidy, for four years the idol of the millions of teeny- and weeny-boppers, announced he will leave "the Partridge Family" and go off to "live a little." Donny Osmond's voice changed. Merrill Osmond became the first of the singing brothers to be 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 establishment aimed at America's (roughly) 20 million girls between the ages of 5 and 15 — has gained momentum in recent years through the phenomenal success of its handful of top teen idols.

The bubblegum crowd churns out hit records and television shows, souvenir autograph books and pillow cases with the professional wizardry that has made entertainment an industry. Donny Osmond is only 15, but his face and persona have helped sell over 18 million records.

AT THE MOMENT, HOWEVER, the bubblegum industry is in a slump.

Record and magazine sales are down, and concerts may take weeks to sell out rather than hours. Cassidy's first single, "I Think I Love You," was released in 1970 and sold 5½ million copies. He 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 stars and their fans are simply growing up, and in many cases the love affair is ending.

"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.

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 the appropriate material — namely the DeFranco Family, five Italian Canadians whom 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." 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."

The DeFrancos have not started doing live performances — Laufer says they are not quite ready — but he tested them out with a free show for 7,000 girls in Buffalo just to see if "the fever was there." According to him, it was. The group's bubblegum

rock sound and wholesome family image, modeled on all the other teen stars and their bouncy, simple songs, may be what the screamers are waiting for.

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.

DAVID CASSIDY'S press agent says that the 23-year-old star "wants to be considered grown-up now. He's fed up with all those 'what's your favorite color' interviews."

Donny Osmond helped sell more than 18 million records, but now his voice is changing.



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. "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."

Like the Osmonds, David Cassidy is finding that as his audience cools off here, the sales are starting to climb in Great Britain, Japan, Germany and Australia. There are David Cassidy T-shirts and Donny Osmond posters prominently displayed in the stores on Piccadilly Circus now, and each group has had "chart topper" records overseas.

Now that it's almost over, David can look back on his years as a teen idol with a sort of philosophical reflection.

"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 wonder-

ful. 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 moneymaking 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."

TWO AND A HALF years ago Denise O'Leary was so angry about an article on David Cassidy in the Washington Post that she and two friends wrote an angry letter to the writer, which they signed "Cassidy Lovers Inc."

"... Would you kindly keep your underestimations to yourself?" they wrote furiously. "PS: You think all of his songs sound alike? Get your ears checked!"

Now 16, Denise has a boyfriend ("Well, sort of") and couldn't care less about David Cassidy. "He's definitely had it," she says. "Even the little girls don't like him."

Now Denise likes the Led Zeppelin, whom she thinks are great musicians.

"I don't even like to remember about liking David Cassidy," she giggled. "Although I admit we had fun in those days."

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