

Bubblegum Rock Is Quickly Deflating

Teenybopper Music Stars Losing Clout

By MEGAN ROSENFELD
Washington Post Service

It was an eventful year for the bubblegum entertainment industry. David Cassidy, for four years the idol of millions of teeny- 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.

Following the methods of other pockets of special interest in the entertainment field (rock, pop, young adult, family, etc.), the bubblegum crowd churns out hit records and television shows, souvenir autograph books and pillow cases with the same professional wizardry that has made the entertainment industry an industry.

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, 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 new record.

The reason, say the editors, press



The Jackson Five: teenybopper fans grow up.

agents and managers, is that the get into the top 20 just by releasing a 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, bored with him." till they die, but basically my girls are "16." "Of course they're still hundreds



David Cassidy, a 23-year-old "teenager" is slumping.

of girls who say they will love Donny

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.

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 in 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.

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 like being divorced but still living with your wife."

David plans to "live a little for a while." He's going to build a house in Hawaii with some friends, and when he starts his next world tour soon, it will be a different sort of show.

"It may be something they aren't prepared for; they may be expecting me to come out in my little Partridge Family white suit," he explained. "It's going to be much more of a show. I never wanted to be the only one on all the time; it will have other people in it. It'll be a sort of musical comedy song and dance kind of thing; like a two-act play with me in both acts."

Like the Osmonds, David Cassidy is finding that as his audience cools off here, in Great Britain, Japan, Germany and Australia sales are starting to climb. 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.

Also like the Osmonds, Cassidy's latest record is a personal statement. It is also not a runaway hit.

Although he continues to crank out Partridge Family albums under the direction of producer Wes Farrell, "Dreams Are Nothin' More Than Wishes..." is Cassidy's first album with a new producer, Rick Jarrau. Half of the album cover is a picture of a dripping David surfacing from a pool, and the music inside includes songs like "Bali Hai" from "South Pacific," Peggy Lee's old hit "Fever" and John Sebastian's "Daydream."

Actually, to the adult ear, it's not half bad.

"For three years I had to just pop 'em out—who cared what they sounded like? Everyone knew those albums would sell. They were totally contrived. I had almost nothing to do with it," Cassidy says now.

Now that it's almost over, David can look back on his years as 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 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."