

'Ooooooh! It's the latest Teen Idol!'

Market for pop stars getting very lucrative

By JIM FARBBER
New York Daily News

"In the beginning," a God-like voice intones, "a legend was born. Like The Beatles in the '60s, the Jackson 5 in the '70s, in the '80s the New Kids. And now, General Entertainment Management proudly presents: RICK WES!!!!"

Who the heck is Rick Wes, you may be asking yourself.

For one thing he's someone crazy enough to kick off his just-released debut album with the unbelievably pretentious message above.

Which leads to another question — is this guy suicidal or what?

Far from it. Rick Wes, it turns out, is simply the latest entry in the teen idol sweepstakes: an arena in which no hype is considered too grandiose.

Especially these days. The current market for dreamy teen pop stars is more lucrative and competitive than at any time since pubescent girls first began getting their knee socks into a bundle over stars like Fabian and Tommy Sands in the '50s.

In the wake of the New Kids' mega-success, a whole wave of pipsqueak pop stars has come to the fore, hoping to snare their share of the baby-sitter market.

Included in this wave of dewy-eyed stars is Tommy Page (great eyes, greater lips), The Superiors (Ana Edition redux), Ana (cute — for a girl), Perfect Gentlemen (the world's most adorable fetuses), Rick Wes (return of the pompadour) and The New Osmond Family (don't ask).

Joining this invasion soon will be something called New Generation — whose name may sound like a hair regrowth system, but in fact is a group of Hawaiian hit-makers — plus something dubiously titled Homework.

All of these pretenders to the pinap crown (with the exception of The Osmonds) are brought to you by Maurice Starr, establishing him as the idolmaker of the '90s.

To solidify his title, Starr has a package tour of pint-size stars on the road this summer, bringing New Kids, Perfect Gentlemen, Tommy Page and Rick Wes to stadiums throughout the country.

So, you may be wondering, why the explosion of squealmongers just now?

"The New Kids' success has identified the extent of the market," explains Dan Beck, vice president of product development for Epic Records, which has signed many of the up-and-coming stars.

"Like any category of music, whenever there's a big success there are gonna be lots of new artists surfacing in that style."

And the success of the New Kids outdistances anything the peach fuzz market has seen since the '60s.

In the '50s, a lot of the pop market was young girls, yelping over Elvis, Rick Nelson, even Pat Boone.

In the '60s, you had, after The Beatles, such human kewpie dolls as Bobby Sherman, The Monkees and David Cassidy.



NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK — perhaps the most widely known of the latest teen pop stars — features (bottom front) Jon Knight and (from left) Danny Wood, Joe McIntyre, Donnie Wahlberg and Jordan Knight.

But in the '70s, the wave of teen idols achieved less theatrical heights of popularity. Shaun Cassidy, Andy Gibb and The Bay City Rollers all had big hits, but their sales were modest compared to earlier decades for one simple reason: demographics.

The baby boomers, who were young enough to rip their pigtailed out over really cute guys in the '50s and '60s, had moved into their 20s by the '70s and thus were less screech-prone.

In the mid-'80s, things began to turn around when two stars in the Stridex stage of life, Tiffany and Debbie Gibson, each sold in the 3-4 million range.

But that was nothing compared to the last two years of New Kids mania. Since their breakthrough hit "Hangin' Tough" in '88, the New Kids have sold more than 10 million records in the U.S. Not counting their latest, "Step By Step," which moved over 2 million in its first weeks out.

It would be tempting to say this again had something to do with demographics — say, with the oft-theorized echo baby boomlet.

But according to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were actually nearly 2 million fewer U.S. citizens ages 10-14 in 1989 than in 1980. The population of 15-19-year-olds dropped almost 4 million in the same time period.

Of course, that still leaves some 33 million teens in this country, plenty of whom got exposed to New Kids through radio, MTV, press hype and concert tours.

Epic's Dan Beck also believes the late '80s generation of teens faced some new factors which made them more susceptible to musical teen idols than '70s kids. "I think it made a difference that their parents grew up with a greater connection to music," he explains.

"Also when music was just a matter of sound, that was a little abstract. Adding video probably stimulated greater interest in the pre-teen audience because then you bring in clothing and lifestyle. Also MTV is bright and fast like a cartoon."

In addition, the editors of 16 Magazine (the bible of the scene) believe New Kids has been selling to more than just your hardcore screamers. "They have a strong R&B sensibility that appeals to adults and older teens," says co-editor Hedy End.

It may also be true that the term "teen idol" is less of a turnoff for general audiences than it used to be. "It's like merchandising used to be a sin for artists and now that's broken down," explains Beck.

As well, it seems audiences no longer expect teenybopper stars to stay in that mode all their lives, as they did with performers like David Cassidy.

Both Bobby Brown and Bell Biv DeVoe have been able to overcome their more sugar-coated days as members of New Edition. And this last year, even Donny Osmond had a surprise gold album.

Of course, in order to do that all these performers had to toughen up their approach a bit. After all, perhaps the greatest constant of the teen idol is a certain innocence.

The greatest sin, therefore, was committed by Cassidy in 1971 when he gave an interview to Rolling Stone in which he blabbed about his drug adventures and (worse) proudly revealed his pubic hair. As the editors of 16 will quickly tell you, hair of any kind that's not planted firmly on the head is a major turn off to this set.

"It's very important the look not be too manly," explains co-editor Randi Reisfeld. "Boys that are almost effeminate looking are what they like. Nothing threatening."

Still, the New Kids provide a certain twist in that formula, as do some of Starr's other acts. They have a demeanor of urban toughness and make their connections to black culture abundantly clear to their audience.

"I think that's a wonderful change," says 16's Hedy End.

A more timeless draw for these acts, however, is articulated by Dan Beck. "All of Maurice Starr's groups make you feel that anything is possible," he says.

"When Maurice talks about discovering Rick Wes wandering the hall at a talent show or a member of Perfect Gentlemen when he was riding his bicycle, he makes you feel dreams do come true."

Well, at least they do for a select few. In fact, for our old friend Rick Wes, Hedy End says "the chances are very good he'll make it."

Already the guy has had full color pictures of his puss appear in 16 — before his album was even out.

But then, why not? He's cute and he knows Maurice Starr personally. These days, that may be all that's required.



"AMERICAN BANDSTAND" and host Dick Clark (left) introduced most of the '50s and '60s teen pop stars, including (from left) Fabian, Bobby Rydell and Frankie Avalon.

ABC-TV

'Hope I can still hear before I get old'

By DAVID MENCONI
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

When the Raindogs opened for Warren Zevon in Boulder, Colo., this spring, they played a truly ear-splitting set.

The crushing volume hardly improved this Boston group's folksy bar-band rock, and not many people seemed to enjoy their performance.

At one point between songs, someone yelled out, "Turn it down!" Raindogs leader Mark Cutler sneered, "If it's too loud, you're too old." Then he and his mates went right on bludgeoning everybody's eardrums.

Real clever, Mark. Of course, it was even more clever back in

the late '70s, when Billy Idol said, "If I'm too loud for you, you're too old for me."

In fact, lots of people used to feel that way. Pete Townshend, for example, who has lost more than 80 percent of his hearing. Or Ted Nugent, who is now completely deaf in his left ear.

I'm only 29 — years younger than Cutler — and I've had it with some performers' arrogant stupidity about volume.

Sometimes loudness is expected. Heavy metal isn't a sedate genre, and most people who go see Metallica or Anthrax know what they're getting into.

But groups aren't doing them-

selves or fans any favors cranking amplifiers up past 11.

This isn't just a matter of simple discomfort. New studies on hearing loss come out all the time, most suggesting that between head phones (your Sony Walkman can put out 100 decibels) and concerts, generations of rock fans are going deaf.

The latest was in the Journal of Audiology in England; researchers found measurable hearing loss in more than a third of the rock-listening British college students they tested.

Our society being as litigious as it is, lawsuits over hearing loss are starting to crop up (al-

ways a sure sign of impending crisis). Last year, Motley Crue settled by paying \$30,000 to a 52-year-old Florida woman with permanent hearing damage after taking her teen daughter to a 1985 Crue concert.

Similar lawsuits are reportedly pending against David Lee Roth, Neil Young, the Jacksons and the Pandoras.

For now, about all you can do is wear earplugs.

I'll be interested to know if Mark Cutler can hear at all in another 10 years. At this rate, he'll be lucky if he doesn't find himself on the business end of a large lawsuit from an irate former fan.