

The roller coaster world of a teen idol

Today's pre-pubescent heartthrob is tomorrow's Trivial Pursuit question

By Michael Mills

Cox News Service

Being a teen idol is risky business. One day you're hot, the next you're not. Just ask such where-are-they-now figures as Fabian, Davy Jones and David Cassidy.

Just ask Johnny Depp, who made his starring film debut in the recently released "Cry-Baby." Despite an avalanche of publicity, the John Waters musical comedy made a disappointing \$3 million its first week of release.

Where were the legions of teen-ager who helped make Depp's TV series, "21 Jump Street," a hit?

"I think a lot of it is that Johnny isn't real accessible to his young fans," said Julie Lauffer, editor of "Bop" and "Big Bopper," two teen magazines with a combined international circulation of about 850,000. "He has said in many interviews he doesn't want to be in teenage entertainment magazines. He doesn't think highly of them."

The target audience for Lauffer's magazines consists of young teen girls in small towns. It's important to her readers that they relate to their idols, she said.

"If they play somebody nice and vulnerable and emotional and sensitive, and things don't always go their way, our readers have a tendency to relate to that, because they can share some of those same feelings."

There's also an element of budding sexuality involved with teen idolatry, said Jack Nachbar, professor of popular culture at Ohio's Bowling Green State University.

"For a teen-age girl, idols are safe," Nachbar said. "They're not a real test of one's sexual allure at a time when teen-age girls are very self-conscious, very unsure of themselves. A lot of them are just going through puberty, so that's a touchy time, and it's easy therefore to take on this kind of highly emotional thing with somebody who is at a safe distance."

Depp fit the bill when "21 Jump Street" first aired three seasons ago, Lauffer said.

"The girls didn't know that much about him yet. He's handsome on the show, and his character is emotional and vulnerable. He did become very

popular, but as he spoke out more, he became distant to his young audience."

As Nachbar and Lauffer point out, the young audience is extremely fickle.

"They're real trend-oriented. Their main concern is acceptance," Nachbar said. "This goes with, I think, the whole business of being insecure. Something catches on and you don't want to be left out, so you grab onto it as quickly as you can. And then you don't want to be seen as sticking with it too long because the danger is then you'll be thought of as a has-been."

"They are loyal to a point, but not when they're cut down," said Lauffer. "There's a lot of other people out there that they can put their energies — and their money — toward."

Greater spending power is an important distinction between the young fans of today and those who popularized such early teen idols as Rudy Vallee and Frank Sinatra.

Kids between 12 and 19 spend about \$30 billion annually these days, and the teen magazines are a \$100 million-a-year market. With that kind of financial clout, teen fans can make or break an idol.

Exposure is another factor, said Lauffer, adding that musicians often fare better as teen idols than actors. Judging from reader fan mail, she said New Kids on the Block are THE hot teen idols of the moment.

"Young teen-agers need that stimulation almost daily, and that's why musicians seem to really gain the popularity, because their fans can listen to their voices and see their videos every day."

Finally, the simple fact of aging ultimately comes into play, according to Nachbar, who said a teen idol who doesn't work hard to broaden his image and appeal can expect to fade fast.

"If you don't act like you're 17 anymore, kids just aren't interested. The only person I know of who's really been able to maintain that sort of rebellious, sneering image for any long length of time would be somebody like Mick Jagger, who is actually starting to look a little bit ridiculous."

"But most of these people are associated with youth, and that's why there's the sense of identification."



FABIAN



DAVY JONES



DAVID CASSIDY



DONNY OSMOND

What ever happened to?

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Fabian Forte

Age: 50

Big break: Appeared on "American Bandstand" at age 12 in 1952; signed contract with Chancellor Records at 14.

Greatest success: Wound up teen years in 1959-'60 with three Top-10 singles ("Turn Me Loose," "Hound-Dog Man" and his theme song, "Tiger") and a gold album, "The Fabulous Fabian."

Questionable career move: Into film. After a reasonably promising start in such movies as "Hound-Dog Man" (inspired by his hit song), "North to Alaska" (with John Wayne) and the World War II epic "The Longest Day," he went into a steady decline in the mid-'60s with "Fireball 500" and "Mary Jane," continuing into the '70s with "The Day the Lord Got Busted" and "Disco Fever."

Image-breaking tactics: Starred as gangster in 1970's "A Bullet for Pretty Boy," posed for nude photo spread in "Playgirl" in 1974 (and later regretted it, saying he looked "fat and stupid").

Donny Osmond

Age: 32

Big break: Appeared, at age 14, with four older brothers on "The Andy Williams Show."

Hits: From 1971-'78, amassed 22 gold records with and without his musical siblings, including four solo albums and five singles; "Go Away Little Girl" was a No. 1 hit, and "Puppy Love" made it to No. 3.

He also teamed up with his sister, Marie, for co-host a highly popular weekly television variety show in the mid-1970s.

Misses: By early '80s, was reduced to pitching Hawaiian Punch on TV with his sister Marie; in 1982, he starred on Broadway in George M. Cohan's "Little Johnny

Jones," but the production closed after opening night.

Comeback: Two 1989 singles, Soldier of Love and Sacred Emotion, were Top-20 hits. The video for the latter featured Donny with stubble, tight jeans and an open-neck shirt.

David Cassidy

Age: 40

Big break: Cast as Keith, opposite stepmom Shirley Jones, in TV's "The Partridge Family," based on short-lived stardom of the Cowdill family.

Fame and fortune: The Partridge series, which aired 1970-'74, spawned megahit single, "I Think I Love You" (6 million copies) and loads of lucrative merchandising tie-ins for which he received royalties.

Image-breaking tactic: Posed for slightly racy "centerfold" in "Rolling Stone" in mid-'70s (shot was cropped a few inches below navel).

Davy Jones

Age: 44

Big break: In 1965, selected over more than 500 other applicants, including Stephen Stills (Crosby, Stills and Nash), to be one of the four Monkees.

Background: Only Brit in group. The Monkees were enormously successful, both on their TV series, which ran from 1966-'68, and on stage in their world tours in '67 and '68. Four of their first five albums went gold, the first yielding three Top-20 singles, "I'm a Believer," "I'm Not Your Stepping Stone" and "Last Train to Clarksville."

Comeback: In 1986, Three of the original Monkees reunited for successful 20th-anniversary album and world tour.



File photo

JOHNNY DEPP: The next Mick Jagger or just another pretty face?