



**THE PIN-UP BOYS:** Squeaky clean Donny Osmond (top) and David Cassidy drove the fans wild.

# Fallen idols

Gone are the days when a magazine cover photo of a male star could guarantee thousands of sales to lusty teens. **BRETT THOMAS** in New York reports on the death of the teen idol.

**T**HERE was a time when you couldn't walk into a newsagency without being confronted by a Genuine Teen Idol. They stared at you from the covers of numerous magazines, their air-brushed faces suggesting sweetness, niceness, wholesomeness.

A distinctly Hollywood invention, the Genuine Teen Idol (GTI) included "stars" like David Cassidy, Donny Osmond, The Jackson 5, The Monkees and, more recently, New Kids On The Block and TV's Kirk Cameron.

And GTIs provided an important service, becoming a safe focus for teenage girls exploring their first crushes and flowering sexuality.

Girls could worship their heroes from afar, sighing at the life-size picture on their bedroom walls and dreamily writing the star's name on their exercise books at school.

Then, of course, there was the scream. This particular brand of scream — high pitched, hysterical and often accompanied by distraught tears and fainting — was reserved for that truly special occasion: the meeting of worshiper and worshiped.

But in America — the world's major exporter of GTI culture — the era of teen idolism is on a slow and irreversible decline.

Magazines which once sold hundreds of thousands of copies based on

having a particular GTI cover star are showing significant circulation falls. *Teen Beat* magazine, for example, saw its average circulation drop by 32 per cent between December 1992 and December 1993.

The young television, movie and music stars of today just aren't winning the teens over and the image itself has changed as a drugged-out, scruffy grunge look supersedes the toothy grins and combed hair of yesteryear.

Indeed, the fans themselves have changed. Today's teens are far more streetwise than their predecessors from the early 1970s, who lived through the height of the GTI boom.

Judy Jorgensen, from Magazine Publishers of America, said publications catering for a young, female market had made significant changes over the last two decades.

"We've done a bit of informal research on the changes that have come about in design and content and there have been some quite major departures from the formats of even 10 years ago," she said.

"Today, the teen magazines are dealing with serious subjects like teen pregnancy, drugs and AIDS as well as the usual beauty and fashion segments.

"Our research shows that teens and even younger children are smarter and more sophisticated than they were years ago and they have an incredible influence on purchasing decisions."

Carla Lloyd, a professor of advertising at the SI Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, has studied the way young women model their appearance on entertainment images and agrees that today's teens simply have more on their minds.

"My teen idols were The Monkees and Bobby Sherman," she said. "Now, I think there's a lot more stress. To devote the kind of attention that girls of my generation did to construct our shrines to Micky Dolenz seems rather frivolous and out of step."

Joan Elliott, from America's *Sassy* magazine — heralded as the instigator of the more sophisticated teen magazine — said there were other factors behind the decline of teen idolism. One of the biggest reasons was that teens were scared of being let-down by their idols, she said.

"I think we can still say there are heroes but there have been so many disappointing heroes and these kids are so sharp and cynical, they don't want to depend on their heroes anymore.

"There may be some curiosity (in idols) but teens aren't getting involved as passionately as they did in the past because there's such an opportunity for disappointment.

"Look at people like Kurt Cobain, Michael Jackson and O J Simpson — when you get enough of these types of people picking you up and then disappointing you, you start to wonder if maybe you shouldn't depend on them anymore."

Ms Elliott also said today's teens had more cultural choices available, meaning it was now impossible for an idol to appeal to kids across the board.

"There are so many different choices they can make in terms of

fashion, personalities, music and behaviour. There are sub-cultures within cultures."

According to Randi Reisfeld, editor of 16 magazine, today's top three teen idols are TV stars Jonathon Brandis, 18, Jonathon Taylor Thomas, 13, and Rider Strong, 14.

They're hardly household names, which is why she and the other arbiters of teen culture are worried.

"I have to say that New Kids on the Block was the last great phenomenon," she said. "And that finished in 91-92. We've got lots of young actors our readers are interested in but none are in the league of the New Kids or *Beverly Hills 90210* when that first started.

"It would certainly help if somebody or a new music group came through but who knows? You can't shove them down readers' throats."

## Who do Australian teens idolise?

**W**HEN it came to having idols there were definite differences in teenagers today, said James Manning, editor of *Smash Hits* magazine.

"They are much more aware than teenagers in other eras and are much less obsessed with idols. Unlike teenagers in the days of The Beatles, for example, who were totally obsessed and almost in a dream-like state."

Teenagers idolise people who are not as squeaky clean as Donny Osmond or David Cassidy. They admire stars like Shannen Doherty from *Beverly Hills 90210* even though she may have a controversial personal life.

Manning said: "Kids can stand back now and appreciate idols for what they do professionally and aren't affected by their personal life. And kids don't need to slavishly idolise others these days because they have more of an idea of their own identity."

He said the hottest idols were often from soapies like Melissa George and Dieter Brummer from *Home And Away*.

Susie Pitts, editor of *Dolly* magazine, believes girls are still looking for idols and out of the three idol categories — squeaky clean, brooding Mediterranean and dirty rough — squeaky clean still wins out.

"Some people are more streetwise but not all teens. Joey Lawrence in *Blossom* is huge in the States, so is Jonathon Brandis in *seaQuest* DSV. For two years running *Dolly's* Prince of Soap has been Dieter Brummer. You couldn't get anyone more clean cut and baby faced."

She believes stars today can no longer boast such universal appeal because girls have so many to choose from. "When I was young it was either David Cassidy or Donny Osmond. Or you had to like one of the Bay City Rollers. Now there are hundreds of new stars."



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**FACE FACTS** How makeup can fight sun damage 150



**STRICTLY FORMAL** Gia Carides in party wear 148



**JUST WALKING** Steven Jacobs's fitness tips 150