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Teen Culture Industry (or, You Pays Your Money and You Takes Your Choice)

Adult Production and Teen Consumption

In the scope of this project, "teen culture" is defined as cultural production primarily marketed towards an audience of cultural consumers ages 17 and under; in this respect, it could be said the focus is as much on *tween culture* as it is increasingly differentiated from *teen culture* as far as critical and marketing discourses. Another way to define it is that "teen culture" is the stuff of the annual Kid's Choice and Teen Choice Awards, and here the word "Choice" becomes crucial. The core contradiction of teen culture is that it is, and always has been, primarily *produced by adults in entertainment industries for adolescent consumers* save for its occasional teenage stars like Michael Jackson and Donny Osmond in the early 1970s, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera in the late 1990s, or, most recently, Miranda Cosgrove and Miley Cyrus. Conversely, David Cassidy was 20 when *The Partridge Family* debuted in 1970 and the Spice Girls were all in their early 20s when their breakthrough hit "Wannabe" was released in 1996. In this way, the term "teen idols" not only (pejoratively) refers to the adult performers but the adolescent fan base who, as far as the teen culture industry goes, might have rancid taste but not filthy lucre. Nevertheless, as much as teen culture is determined by a teen culture industry, teen culture is also determined by teens as far as what brands of teen culture they consume and for how long they consume them. To this extent, teen culture manifests the problematics of mass culture, and the extent the focus cannot be strictly placed on cultural production or cultural consumption.

At several levels the production of teen culture epitomizes Theodor W. Adorno's analysis of the Culture Industry. Adorno decried the standardization of culture in modern capitalism into mass produced, easily consumed, and ideologically affirmative "mass culture" that negates "true culture" as a challenge and critique of social conditions.[1] For Adorno, so-called "true culture" in the twentieth century was a highly select body of avant-garde modernism (e.g., the

The Archie Show it seemed America had yet to enter the 1960s, let alone being immersed in the political crises of 1968.

Each *Archie Show* was divided into two short segments that featured Archie and his friends in various predicaments. While cartoons, they were constructed and presented along the lines of the classical sitcom style, and even incorporated a laugh track. Produced by Filmation Studios, the animation of *The Archie Show* largely replicated the visual style of the *Archie* comic books. Moreover, Filmation reused animated sequences with infuriating frequency (which is to say the imagined audience of kids was assumed to be too stupid to notice). This was especially evident in the musical performances by the Archies in the midpoint of *The Archie Show*, where the same limited number of shots depicting various individuals and the band were continually recycled throughout the song with (sometimes) changing backgrounds. Of course, the Archies' musical product was actually the work of studio musicians and singers. Fresh off his rancorous divorce from the Monkees, Don Kirshner was enlisted as the musical director of *The Archie Show* (Kirshner reportedly commented that the best thing about working in animation was that the characters couldn't talk back). One of the first songs Kirshner used for the Archies was the aptly titled "Sugar Sugar," a turgid piece of bubblegum that Kirshner originally brought to the Monkees: they rejected it. To pardon the expression, "Sugar Sugar" was sweet revenge for Kirshner, as it topped the charts for a month. In tandem with *The Archie Show*'s representation of a younger generation who were seemingly impervious (or oblivious) to the dangerous blight of the counterculture, the Archies' bubblegum music affirmed the illusion of social harmony through saccharine musical harmony.

Get Happy: The Partridge Family

In 1970, ABC entered the pop-music sitcom market with *The Partridge Family*. Singer-actress Shirley Jones starred as Shirley Partridge, a single mom (widowed, *not* divorced) raising five children in suburban California, seeking to maintain their middle-class lifestyle amid counterculture turbulence while playing in a successful pop-rock band with her kids.[17] Like *The Monkees*, *The Partridge Family* was produced by Screen Gems, and the company was presumably in no mood for another round of production controversies, disputes, and problems that surrounded the Monkees. The initial plan was that non-musician actors would appear on the show while session musicians would serve as "the band" for the musical product. Circumstances changed when David Cassidy got the role of eldest son Keith Partridge.[18] Cassidy had aspirations of being a rock musician as well an actor, and lobbied for the job of lead singer on the Partridge Family recordings. As well as possessing highly marketable teen idol good looks, Cassidy proved to be a strong singer with a distinctive voice, and the producers agreed.

The Partridge Family was, and continues to be, largely reviled by critics; the music, even more so. However, it is difficult to distinguish the Partridge Family musical product as being substantially different — meaning *worse* — than much of the bubblegum and pop-rock of the era (e.g., the Monkees, the Archies, or even bands like the Turtles or the Lovin' Spoonful). A requisite song performance was written into almost every *Partridge Family* episode and done as a straight musical performance: rehearsing in the garage, recording in the studio, playing at a posh nightclub or some other mainstream venue like a city park or county fair. These numbers also served as a weekly, promotional "music video" of the Partridge Family. While some appeared in the middle of the episode, the usual tactic was to include them at the end as a musical coda and concluding statement to the episode after the sitcom had completed its ethical form trajectory, or simply forcing viewers to sit through the entire show if they wanted to see "the band" perform a song.

"Whatever Happened to Moby Dick?" (1971) begins with Shirley and Keith awakening at 5 a.m. by loud noises and what Keith suspects is a burglar. The noise of a "home intruder" is actually Danny listening to Laurie's record (at extremely loud volume) of whales in the garage. Danny explains that the "sounds" are "songs." In terms of Jacques Attali, the whales are designated as making an inherently natural "music" rather than strange disruptive "noise" outside the social order of humans. Danny, who throughout *The Partridge Family* was much more concerned with the money rather than the music the band and various side projects could produce, envisions a Partridge Family record with the band accompanied by whales as "a million dollar idea ... to cash in on the ecology movement." The rest of the family abhors the idea of exploiting whales and their "music" and unanimously rejects the plan. However, the owner of a large aquatic park is thrilled with the concept, hoping such a project could raise awareness of the plight of whales as an endangered species. Shirley agrees on the condition that all the profits go to charitable organizations saving whales, much to the disappointment Danny and band manager Reuben Kinkaid (Dave Madden).

The disorder occurs when Mr. Flicker, an unscrupulous pier owner on whose property the beached whale was rescued, claims co-ownership of the whale and demands half of the record profits under threat of a frivolous but time-consuming lawsuit (for added measure, Mr. Flicker is an uncouth Southerner). Danny is particularly bothered by the turn of events and has the epiphany of ethical as well as ecological awareness, telling his mother that meeting Mr. Flicker was like encountering himself and it felt "rotten." In turn, Shirley Partridge enlists ABC sports announcer Howard Cosell (playing himself) to conduct an ambush interview with Mr. Flicker live on national TV, effectively forcing him to sign a release on-camera guaranteeing his 50 percent of the profits will go to whale preservation.

The sitcom situation resolved, the episode concludes with a performance

Partridge Family entertainment (from left to right): Shirley Partridge (Shirley Jones), Tracy Partridge (Suzanne Crough), Keith Partridge (David Cassidy), Chris Partridge (Brian Forster), Danny Partridge (Danny Bonaduce), Laurie Partridge (Susan Dey) (ABC/Photofest).

of "Whale Song," at the marina, intercut with footage of the Partridge Family sitting on shoreline cliffs staring pensively and stock footage of whales. Shirley Jones sings lead, providing a mainstream adult credibility to the song's "hippie" environmentalist political message. Indeed, "Whale Song" is a maudlin ballad that inevitably compares to the pro-environment, MOR-folk-pop music popularized by John Denver during the 1970s. Recordings of whale sounds are mixed well into the background in "Whale Song" and, as noted, these sounds are specifically termed "whale *songs*" and a form of *music* in nature rather than communicative sounds per se (while birds are described as "singing" the sounds of cows mooing are not usually termed "cow songs"). It is through the rhetorical tactic of defining the whales as producers of music rather than noise alien to human society that their "music" and the popular music produced by humans can be synthesized into a whole rather than placed in a dialectic tension. The same domination of nature by humans the sitcom episode so stridently attack is ultimately captured in and through the music. In short, the whale sounds are not integrated into the blandness of "Whale Song" but *colonized* by it.

Unlike *The Monkees*' unorthodox form, *The Partridge Family* was done well within the conventions of the classical sitcom format, and the formal traditionalism paralleled the conservatism in the content. *The Monkees* featured a group of young men with no career goals except to be musicians. They had

little, if any, guidance from adult authority figures, and those that did appear were often ridiculed rather than respected. *The Partridge Family* depicted an American family that was not severely divided along generational lines and their marked cultural tastes, but quite the opposite. Their mutual love of popular music and the economic success attained by performing together in a band as a "family business" was precisely what held them together. "Where Do Mermaids Go?" (1971) involved the Partridge Family's encounter with Jenny, a nomadic hippie.[19] Accepting an offer to stay the night at the Partridge home, Jenny compliments Keith on his family and how they are "all so together" but also feels sorry for them because they don't have real "freedom" and have to "work." Keith responds that they could have much worse jobs than being professional musicians, and the only reason his mom sanctioned the band was is in order for them to earn money to eventually put them through college. The next morning, they find a note from Jenny explaining she inherited millions of dollars when her parents died; in effect, she dropped out of Square society to live a life devoid of work and responsibility. To this end, she also left a bank book and gave the Partridges a million dollars in the hope they can attain "freedom." The money brings anything but freedom but instead initiates a flood of pushy salespeople and unappreciative friends. Shirley insists that the family give the money back, and the messages of the episode are made perfectly clear:

> Shirley: There's nothing wrong with money if you work for it. It's a symbol of your labor so you can respect it, appreciate it. But if it's given to you it really isn't the same, it really isn't yours.
>
> Keith: Money isn't freedom. If it were, you wouldn't be living the way you do.
>
> Jenny: I guess you're right — I hardly spend any money at all.
>
> Keith: That's why you feel free: you do it yourself.

One message, especially in the context of the early 1970s, is a strong anti-welfare position and that money only "belongs" to someone if they work for it as opposed to having it given to them (i.e., "handouts" to "welfare bums"). The second message is that it is not Jenny's wealth that provides independence; it is her thrift and self-reliance that makes her free. When Keith states that the overt message that "money isn't freedom" the hidden message is that *work is freedom*. The conversation cuts to the Partridge Family at work and exercising their freedom as a band, performing a song at a nightclub. Jenny is happily in the audience, wearing a dress rather than jeans and a T-shirt, having learned her lesson and rejoined bourgeois society thanks to example set by the Partridge Family.

The Partridge Family's recurring theme was that adults and kids could get along, as much as that had *not* happened in America in the years prior to the show's debut, nor necessarily happening across America when the show began its run. In "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Partridge" (1971), Keith decides to assume a more active leadership role as "the eldest male" in the family, and as a better "role

model" becomes more of a "father-figure." The problem is that Keith quickly becomes a Square. He forcibly exposes Danny, Chris, and Tracy to what Chris unenthusiastically terms "intellectual stuff" like classical music, modern art, and evenings at home reading the encyclopedia. He intrudes on Laurie's personal life and insists a new suitor take her to a PG movie—and *no* drive-ins. Danny devises their revenge and they give Keith more parental responsibility than he can handle. Chris and Tracy go to Keith for "career counseling" on how to become "Negros" when they grow up; Laurie inundates Keith with a fake friend's highly intimate romantic problems; and Danny makes Keith give him "the facts of life" in all of their messy details. (Danny: "Why do people go through all that trouble if they *don't* want babies?") Keith realizes that the parenting is best left to his mom, but the problem is exacerbated when Shirley and Keith catch the rest of the family bragging about the subterfuge. Humiliated, Keith retreats to the garage. After being roundly reprimanded by Shirley, the kids individually apologize. All is forgiven and things returned to normal with Keith again the Hip older brother and not the Square father-figure. This cuts to a concluding nightclub performance where pop music, *working* as a band, and Shirley's parental presence are the stuff that hold the Partridge Family together.[20]

In this way, a rather uncomfortable trajectory runs from *The Partridge Family* to both *School of Rock* and *Hannah Montana*. In all three cases, the production of music by teens is under the control of the adult, both in terms of adult authority and the adult's world-view. To be sure, the particulars were different. Shirley Partridge was a suburban mom representing the stabilizing effect of middle-class mores when she joins her kids' band. On *Hannah Montana*, Robby Stewart represented traditional Middle American values and strict parental control over his daughter, Miley Stewart, as well as being the manager and songwriter for her pop star alter-ego Hannah Montana. In *School of Rock*, Dewey Finn was the Hip teacher who represented the mythic spirit of authentic rock insurrection on a quest to enlighten a new generation of teens lest they hopelessly succumb to the inauthentic of current trends pop music and the life of Squares. What all three shared was a view that the music of the kids is best produced under the supervision (and even domination) of the adult authority figure. Moreover, rock ideology's primary tenet of individuality was the valorization of self-determination and social mobility rather than self-will and social rebellion.

While Shirley Partridge was the main character, and Shirley Jones a well-known mainstream performer, Keith Partridge and David Cassidy quickly became the show's focus and star. In "Fellini, Bergman, and Partridge" (1972), Keith and Laurie argue over some "underground" films they saw, films Laurie loved while Keith considered them amateurish and pretentious slop that in no way matched the "art" of Federico Fellini or Ingmar Bergman. He bets Laurie that he can make a better film than so-called experimental "geniuses," but his

artistic vision is stymied by the prohibitive production costs which he estimates will be a whopping $15 (it was the early 1970s). Danny has the available money and agrees to produce the film, which amounts to a home movie. After a successful test screening with the family, Danny is convinced the film could be a hit and arranges a premiere in the garage, which attracts zero paying customers. Danny is greatly bothered by the financial failure, but for Keith the problem is different: "I'm not interested in the money, I'm interested in aesthetics. I want to be judged by my peers."

As far as the target audience market of "teenyboppers," David Cassidy was undeniably an early 1970s phenomenon and he soon realized that "Keith Partridge" was going to be his career albatross. What Keith Partridge asked for, David Cassidy soon after received, and the aesthetic judgment by his peers was far from supportive. Cassidy was featured in a 1972 *Rolling Stone* article written by Robin Green, "Naked Lunchbox: The David Cassidy Story," along with a cover shot where Cassidy posed in the nude (the bottom of the photo was cut off just above his groin). The accompanying interview was peppered with Cassidy's negative comments about the entire Partridge Family project, as well as Cassidy discussing his active sex life and recreational use of illegal drugs. Indeed, Cassidy's intended message was that he was all about the sex and drugs, but his involvement with the Partridge Family was constraining the rock and roll. In retrospect, it is not surprising the interview completely backfired. As Norma Coates noted, the article's intent was not assisting Cassidy in reinventing his image but ridiculing him as well as

> his teenybopper fans, and the entire television establishment and what it represents. Television, as characterized in this article, is populated and perpetuated by middle-aged producers who realize the medium is inauthentic by design, and do not care to change it. Moreover, they could not care less about rock music. Their, and Cassidy's, aesthetic malaise is implicitly contrasted to the other "authentic" artist profiled on the pages of *Rolling Stone*.[21]

Any attempt to manufacture counterculture credibility by Cassidy was dismissed as a blatant and even calculated effort to put distance between him and his teen-idol image. Rather than cultivate a new fan base of rock fans, Cassidy alienated much of his existing audience. With no one particularly enamored with the new David Cassidy public image, and Cassidy obviously less than enthused about the show that made him a star, *The Partridge Family*'s ratings eroded, ending its run in 1974.

The Great Divide: Rock and TV

The end of the pop-music sitcom era ca. 1974 coincided with primetime comedy-variety shows becoming the domain of mainstream pop music acts