

BUBBLEGUM

THE GENERATED MARKET

While the greatest trend in the past several years of rock has been the increasing development of the medium as a form for artistic expression, one area of pop music has remained essentially business: the bubblegum race.

Where there are people with money to spend, saleable commodities will soon appear, tailored to meet the demands of that particular market. Where the demand doesn't exist it can be generated. Thus was bubblegum born, built on the natural tendency of children to imitate adults and on the tendency of parents to find that imitativeness cute and appealing.

There is only one major difference between the bubblegum market as a buying power and any other consumer population: freedom of choice and personal taste. In all other phases of the entertainment industry, the product must offer something that will have enough value to the buyer to beat out the heavy competition and get its own message across and its own money made. The adult record buyer chooses his music and creates his stars by means of his own preference and taste (however much that taste may be influenced by the power of fashion and fad.)

But bubblegum-aged kids are simply too young to know what they (as individual human beings) really like, particularly when they are effectively being told what to like. They are easily influenced by televised hype and well-calculated publicity, to such an extent that a fad can be imposed upon them in an entirely predictable manner, particularly given the extremely limited variety of bubblegum that they have to choose from. It is not the kids' taste but the adult businessmen's concepts that determine the kind of entertainment known as bubblegum; hence the fact that current bubblegum music reflects only adult preoccupations, having little or no relevance to the real lives of the age groups that actually buy the records.

And if the music does have

relevance to those groups' fantasy lives, that may be because the music and the surrounding media are themselves imposing the fantasies.

Bubblegum wasn't always an artificial medium.

Strange as it may seem now, the Beatles actually created bubblegum, as they created so many other still-existent forms of pop music. On February 7, 1964, when the gentlemen who were commonly referred to as the Fab Four or the lovable mop-tops from Liverpool first appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, the American business world had to recognize the existence of an enormous and potentially fanatical (read: extravagant) buying power.

The Beatles were bubblegum because their audience was the youngest massive group of people buying records; and because that age group was still, only eight years ago, more likely to be chewing bubblegum, than smoking cigarettes or taking pills. The Beatles didn't talk down to their audience; neither did they impose any premature sophistication upon them. What they offered was magnificently successful because, among other reasons, it was perfectly appropriate.

Once the young kid market has been opened up to the music business and had become the basis for an industry, the present dichotomy began to develop. On the one hand, children of progressively younger ages are getting progressively more money at their disposal, so that it is financially wise for the product offered to appeal to even the youngest potential buyer. On the other hand, bubblegum having become big industry, it is now the domain of adults, artistically as well as financially. Professionalism is the work of grown-ups even if the actual performer is very young. The approach the bubblegum-makers has changed through the years, but the medium has never again been a natural expression by kids for kids.

After the Beatles and their audience grew up a little, the next generation of bubblegum was in a distinctly "naughty" vein. Where the

Beatles maintained an image of romanticism and innocence, their teenybop-successors tried to be anything but naive. Overtly or metaphorically, all the hit songs were about sex. There came the famous string of eating songs: "Chewy Chewy," "Yummy Yummy," "Goody Goody Gum Drops," and so on. There was also that short-lived genre, the defensive teenysex song, opuses by Jeff Barry or Tommy James or Gary Puckett and the Union Gap. The assumption of the songs, particularly in hits like "I Think We're Alone Now" and "Young Girl" was that whereas sex is a no-no (the songwriters rarely challenged that precept) you're supposed to want to do the most grown-up naughty thing you can, if only out of defiance.

Out of that morass, though, came a couple of honest and intelligent tunes that may have been bubblegum records in that they were bought by young kids, but that reflected neither the immaturity of the audience nor the prudish discomfort of the adults. The Brooklyn Bridge's famous hit "The Worst That Could Happen," later covered by the Fifth Dimension, is one of the all-time classic love songs, which somehow emerged immortal from Buddah's bubblegum period. And even among the really gummy groups, the 1910 Fruitgum Company could come out with as frank a complaint as: "Every time I make a move to love you/ 1-2-3 red light you stop me." With no hedging or embarrassment, they expressed in song a controversy that is as relevant a problem in human relationships as any issue that's ever been sung about. The song may not have been great art, but it was honest and real.

The foundation of today's bubblegum came six years ago with the Monkees. They were the first pop Pygmalions, chosen and molded to enact pre-determined roles both in a television series and in the wider area of the music business. Their success es-

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established the existence of an infallible but expensive formula to bubblegum stardom, one which has been followed with success by other artists. The rule: there's no hype in the world like a weekly sitcom series. The little kids can't resist.

There came the Monkees on TV and the Monkees on record and the Monkees on the charts. Later came "Here Come the Brides" and with it Bobby Sherman, travelling the same route. There came the Partridge Family. And there will come more.

Effective as TV exposure may be as a jumping-off point for bubblegum artists, it's not the only direction from which that initial impetus can come. In the case of the Jackson Five, added to the group's own novelty, talent and polish was the sponsorship of a superstar, Diana Ross. She provided the launching publicity that called attention to the group.

But while the Jackson Five, with an 11-year-old lead singer, had no trouble conquering a young audience, their early material was closer in sound to Motown soul than to other bubblegum. Only as they began to attract a huge and varied following did they modify their material to be yet more acceptable to a wider (and not primarily black) young audience.

What Diana Ross did for the Jackson Five, the Jackson Five's own popularity did for the Osmonds. "One Bad Apple" was a smash not only because of its quality as a pop record but because of its comic value as a perfect imitation of the Jackson Five. The two groups' audiences overlapped hugely in the beginning, but the Osmonds soon dropped the mimicry and with it their claim to any major soul audience.

There are currently only three bubblegum supergroups: the Jackson Five, the Osmonds and the Partridge Family. Certainly many other artists sell great numbers of records to the pre-adolescent market; but only these three acts have that intense force of personality working for them that distinguishes the mere successful performer from the pre-teen idol.

Since personal image, continually reinforced by publicity, hype, television and the ubiquitous fan magazines, plays such a major part in the popularity of these acts, it is inevitable that the focal personalities of each group should have a solo career. Why sell records only by the group when you can also sell records by the star? When it was fully clear that David Cassidy was adding far more than his share to the Partridge Family's public appeal, he emerged

as one of the most popular solo singers ever to pack a stadium with frenzied fans.

Michael Jackson, obviously the special darling of the Jackson Five's following, has not done concert appearances on his own, but has firmly conquered both the soul and pop charts with solo singles. The same is the case for Michael's Osmond counterpart, Donny, whose million-selling "Puppy Love" captured the hearts of the young fans as well as the sense of humor of their older listeners. The latest soloist to emerge from among the diminutive superstars is Jimmy, the youngest Osmond, whose "Long Haired Lover from Liverpool" recently made a sizeable impact on the singles charts.

Given the malleability of the audience and the financial permissiveness of parents in a very rich country, it is no wonder that bubblegum is big business. The latest Information Please Almanac population figures state that there are 40,743,000 Americans between the ages of five and 14. It requires only a small percentage of that 40-million-plus to make a million-selling record. Gold records abound in the bubblegum field. Donny Osmond and his group have chalked up a total of six million-selling singles and four gold albums, with several more likely candidates coming up. For the Partridges and David Cassidy, reverse the figures: four gold singles and six albums; and the Jacksons have had similar sales success. The economic potential of the pre-teen market is staggering.

The future of the current bubblegum superstars can only be a matter of speculation. Those artists whose appeal is based purely on personality with little or nothing musical to offer can maintain their peak of popularity for only a relatively short time. After a while the little girls grow up a little, and the star they adored is old hat to their younger sisters. That has been the case with Bobby Sherman. He offered his fans a personable idol, a sense of humor, a vital and outgoing warmth, and the determination to make his audience happy; but he could offer very little musically, so the interest had to die when the fans fell out of love. The same will be true of David Cassidy, who, while not quite equalling Sherman's bemused good humor, shares all his other qualities.

The future professional life of the Osmonds and the Jackson Five, however, depends entirely upon the groups themselves. Hopefully, they



may grow and mature, both as groups and as solo performers, into consistent acts of high musical quality, holding on to their present audience as they grow up and attracting more along the way. Elvis and a few others have done it. It can be done.

As for more gum to come, the future probably holds very few more bub-



MICHAEL JACKSON—aged 11 and the lead singer with the Jackson Five, who have no trouble reaching that wider audience making up the bubblegum crowd.

blegum supergroups as we know them. The pre-teen audience will be tapped again and again, but no one fad-format in pop music can last very long. While the popularity of the existing kiddie-stars is still at a peak, the enthusiasm can be siphoned off to

support new artists. But just as surely as Donny's voice will change some time soon, the bubblegum audience will outgrow its present impressionable state. Then there will be a generation of yet more children, with yet more coins in their pockets. By

the time those who are just entering school now are old enough to cross the street to go to the local record store, there will be something new there. And it will be designed, promoted and marketed just for them.

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