

Invasion of the pipsqueak popstars

"IN THE beginning," a god-like voice intones, "A legend was born. Like the Beatles in the '60s, the Jackson Five in the '70s, in the '80s — The New Kids on the Block.

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 America's Teen Idol Sweepstakes' an arena in which no type 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 such as 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 (new 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 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 pinup 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 stadia throughout the United States.

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.

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 pigtails 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 strident 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 US not counting their latest, *Step* by

Step, which moved over two million in its first weeks out.

It would be tempting to say this again had something to do with demographics. But according to the US Census Bureau, there were actually nearly two million fewer US citizens between the ages of 10 and 14 in 1989 than there were in 1980.

The population of 15 to 19-year-olds dropped almost four million in the same time period.

Of course, that still leaves some 33 million teens in the 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 have been selling to more than just your hardcore screamers.

"They have a strong 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 such as 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 David 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 that 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 Maurice Starr's other acts. They have a demeanour 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.

— By JIM FARBEN for Knight-Ridder