Disney machine working for Jonas Brothers

Kevin Jonas and brothers Joe and Nick appear on ABC's "Jimmy Kimmel Live." The Jonas Brothers' latest album went platinum, and Disney is using its TV, radio and Internet properties to promote the trio. The company, with its eye on a new potential franchise, is using its array of media tools to boost exposure of the band.

By Dawn C. Chmielewski, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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The alloy behind the theater erupted into shrieks Wednesday night after band members stepped out of the stage door and walked to their cars. A crush of girls pressed up against the razor-wire fence; some lobbed roses and stuffed animals over the barrier. Then the screaming mob dashed into the street for one last glimpse as the police-escorted motorcade drove off. "A scene from "A Hard Day's Night"? Nope. This is Jonas mania, not Beatlemania. The Jonas Brothers are the youthful heartthrobs whose self-titled album has gone platinum. They are the latest beneficiaries of Walt Disney Co.'s tween-targeted star machine and could be the company's next creative franchise -- in the mold of "High School Musical" or "Hannah Montana." Disney Radio and the Disney Channel helped propel the musical careers of the brothers Jonas -- Nick, 15, Joe, 18, and Kevin, 20 -- before the band was even signed in December 2006 by the parent company's label, Hollywood Records.

The exposure has turned the Jonas Brothers into a national media sensation. Last week, the brothers made appearances on ABC's "Dancing With the Stars," "Jimmy Kimmel Live," "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," Nickelodeon's Kids' Choice Awards and on a taping of "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

Now, Disney is throwing the full weight of its television group behind the Jonases' first movie, "Camp Rock." The TV movie will premiere June 20 on the Disney Channel and air over successive evenings on ABC, on cable channel ABC Family and online at Disney.com.

"This is a moment where the platforms of the television
Disney machine working for Jonas Brothers - Los Angeles Times

The Jonas brothers appear on "Jimmy Kimmel Live." [click to enlarge]

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The Disney Channel reincarnated "The Mickey Mouse Club" in 1989, launching the careers of Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and half of N Sync: Justin Timberlake and J.C. Chasez.

Since the January 2001 debut of "Lizzie McGuire," the Disney Channel has become a powerful creative engine for its Burbank entertainment parent, producing a string of bankable names such as the Cheetah Girls, "High School Musical" and "Hannah Montana." The latter two are each expected to reap $1 billion in retail sales this year.

"They own the talent, they own the distribution, they can promote it all the time on television," said David Smay, co-editor of the book "Bubblegum Music Is the Naked Truth: The Dark History of Prepubescent Pop, From the Banana Splits to Britney Spears."

"It's almost impossible not to have a hit," he said.

Although Disney's tightly orchestrated media exposure of the Jonas Brothers is different from how boy bands were made in decades past, when such acts were the creations of independent music producers, the perils to young performers remain the same, Smay said.

"What usually happens is that they get ripped off, kind of dumped when they're no longer young and pretty. The Bay City Rollers' story was worse than Motley Crue," Smay said. "It's really difficult to survive that. Because there's so much money involved, people don't have the interest of the kids in front of them."

"We grew up with a rule: Even if at the top, look like you're at the bottom," Nick said. "It basically means to stay humble and keep the right attitude through the whole thing."

Like the Jackson 5, the Jonas Brothers are built around a musical prodigy -- in this case, Nick Jonas, who has performed on Broadway since he was 7, including a role as Chip in Disney's live production of "Beauty and the Beast." He signed with a major label at age 12 as a Christian pop artist.

Steve Greenberg unearthed Nick's eponymous CD in 2005, among a pile of recordings from artists Columbia Records wanted to drop. Greenberg, then the label's president, said Nick's voice stopped him cold and reminded him of a previous discovery: the pop/rock group Hanson, whose debut album sold 12 million copies globally.

"This was the best voice I've heard since Taylor Hanson," said Greenberg, now head of S-Curve Records, a New York music company. "You don't just let guys like this go."

Greenberg encouraged Nick and his brothers in their songwriting, making them CD mixes of '70s punk rock bands such as the Ramones for inspiration.

Released in August 2006, the brothers' first album, "It's About Time," sold a mere 65,000 CDs, despite its endorsement by Radio Disney, which each week reaches more than 5 million listeners ages 6 to 14 and some 3 million moms. That's because Columbia made it available only in limited release.

But even before the first album was cut, Disney was courting the brothers. The band's advocates at Radio Disney brought the Jonases to the attention of the Disney Channel. By April 2006, the brothers were recording the theme song to the channel's animated series "American Dragon: Jake Long." A music video of the band appeared on the channel in May 2006, a month before the series debuted.

Rich Ross, president of Disney Channels Worldwide, didn't hear the group until October of that year, at Radio Disney's 10th-anniversary concert in Dallas. "You know the expression 'brought down the house'? They brought down the house, they brought down the city, they look everything with them," said Ross, whose
background is talent relations. "This was something incredibly special. They were all I could talk about."

The group's manager, Johnny Wright, who had worked with the Backstreet Boys, 'N Sync and Britney Spears, convinced Columbia to release the Jonas Brothers from their contract. So in December 2006, Hollywood Records stepped in, signed the group and teamed them with a veteran producer.

The group's next album burned up the charts. The album released last August, "Jonas Brothers," sold 1.1 million copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan. And two singles, "S.O.S." and "When You Look Me in the Eyes," cracked the Top 10 of Billboard's Hot Digital Songs chart.

The group's forthcoming album has even more potential, Disney Music Group Chairman Bob Cavallo said.

"I'm hearing the Beatles," Cavallo said, singling out one new song, "Love Bug." "It's really good, as is the arrangement. 'Love Bug' is like Paul McCartney wrote a song that's going to be a monster hit with adults and children."

The album could only benefit from on-air campaigns and live events on Radio Disney, and exposure on the Disney Channel, which in August 2007 featured the New Jersey boys in an episode of "Hannah Montana" after the premiere of "High School Musical 2," which delivered the largest audience in basic cable history. The band also opened for Miley Cyrus on her "Best of Both Worlds" North American concert tour.

This spring, the Disney Channel will feature a reality series, "Jonas Brothers: Living the Dream," which will give short behind-the-scenes snippets of the on- and offstage lives of the musicians. Then it's off on a 38-city summer concert tour.

"We think the sky's the limit with the band," said Jason Garner, chief executive of North American Music for concert promoter Live Nation, who said that the group sold out the Gibson Amphitheatre in a record two minutes.

This fall, the band will appear in a Disney Channel TV series, J.O.N.A.S., playing rock stars who are undercover spies.

"It feels like some giant wave forming out on the ocean," said Gary Marsh, entertainment president at Disney Channel Worldwide. "You don't know how big it's going to be until it hits."

dawn.chmielewski @latimes.com

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