

Contemporary Collectibles: The heyday of bickering musical duos

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

What could be more '70s than a set of paper dolls displaying Sonny & Cher in matching bell-bottoms or Donny & Marie wearing identical toothy grins? It was the heyday of bickering musical duos on TV, and this pair of pairs, one of them husband and wife, the other a pair of siblings, were the leaders of the pack.

The "Sonny & Cher Hour" was the first to debut, in 1971, becoming a huge hit, drawing an estimated 20 million prime-time viewers each week, putting them into the Top 10. Cher soon established herself as a superstar, with her wry quips, nasty put-downs of her husband, and glamorized hippie wardrobe. Cherilyn LaPiere had married record producer Salvatore Bono when she was 18. Sonny had been selling songs to recording artists while still in his teens, and was also a favored background vocalist on some of Phil Spector's big hits. Cher was occasionally backing up the Ronettes, which is how they met.

They didn't get very far under the name Caesar and Cleo, but soon after they morphed into Sonny & Cher they produced such megahits as "I Got You Babe" - their first single, released in 1965 - and "The Beat Goes On." Their joint career was faltering, however, when a shot at a youth-oriented summer replacement series led to their own successful CBS variety show which became television's top-rated variety series. The main draws were Cher's acerbic wit and the increasingly more outrageous costumes designed for her by Bob Mackie.

Of collector interest, the Mego Co. put out a line of Sonny & Cher dolls in 1976 - fully jointed replicas accurate down to Cher's long black hair and exaggerated eyelashes. These are now worth at up to \$100. Other dolls followed (with Mackie-designed wardrobe), plus a backstage dressing room playset, a Cher travel trunk, a large Sonny & Cher Theatre in the Round (\$175-200), and a now rare, red Sonny & Cher Chevy Roadster. Also: sets of far-out Cher jewelry, and a sought after Cher's Sing-Along Phono with a working microphone.

"Donny & Marie" was launched in 1976, with the husband and wife repartee replaced by the sibling put-downs of the young Osmonds. The show also brought in other family members, the Osmond Brothers vocal group (Donny had joined them at the age of 6 after previously singing "You Are My Sunshine" on the Andy Williams show at 4, while Marie debuted at the age of 3, sitting on Williams' lap), plus such other ensembles as The Ice Vanities and The Disco Dozen. Whereas the Bono show was sassy, the Osmonds were squeaky-clean ("a little bit country, a little bit rock and roll"). During the first season, the target audience was definitely teenyboppers, though they later aimed for a more adult demographic, with Marie now stylishly dressed by Cher's own Bob Mackie.

Most of the Donny & Marie merchandising was produced under the copyright of the family firm, Osbro Productions. Vinyl dolls by Mattel were made in the images of Donny, Marie and brother Jimmy, as were puppets of the show's two stars. There were also paper dolls and coloring books from Whitman Publishing, and a book, "The Top Secret Project" by Laura French. And for any child who wanted to produce their own Osmond show, there was a "Donny & Marie Osmond T.V. Show" set, consisting of a stage, piano, guitar, and lights. Other opportunities for collectors: a battery-powered toothbrush; autographs albums and diaries; a board game; a camera and photo album set; a Country and Rock Rhythm Set and Country and Rock Band; a

clothing line sponsored by Osmond mom Olive; costumes; jigsaw puzzles; guitars; a vinyl lunch box by Aladdin; various Marie make-up and jewelry sets; portable AM radios and record players - and much more.

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