The Brady Bunch

At a Sydney theatre opening night in September, a manager of a computer software company was mobbed by the audience and hassled for photos and autographs. He wasn't even in the play, yet he was confined to the theatre for almost an hour after the performance by the adoring hordes. He wore a quite unhip jacket and went by the unassuming name of Chris Knight. But Chris Knight has a dim, dark secret. He was Peter Brady.

In 1969 the lovely lady with three lovely girls and the man who was busy with three boys of his own decided that they had much more than a hunch, and decided to join clans. The Brady Bunch spent the next five years setting up pressing family problems (Jan feels neglected as middle child; Greg wants to move into a room of his own) which could all be solved within 30 minutes, including commercials. The show was canned in 1974 and went on to syndication re-run heaven. The cast seemed destined for the 'Where Are They Now?' file, only kept alive in the memories of fanatics who knew the name of Cindy's doll, what Alice's sister was called, and Marcia's bra size. That all changed this year.

Barry Williams (who played Greg) kicked things off with his book, Growing Up Brady, which regaled us with tales of mischief—like the time he was stoned on marijuana on the set; a scene in which he was supposed to be pumping up a tyre on his bike became an intense experience where he attempted to form a relationship with each spoke on the wheel. He revealed what all Brady fans suspected—he was infatuated with Maureen McCormick (who played Marcia), Peter and Jan had a romantic liaison, and Cindy and Bobby actually used to make out in Tiger's doghouse! In the book's most talked-about section he recounts details of a date with his screen mother, Florence Henderson. Unfortunately, this Oedipal turn of events never emerged in a Brady script. Then Robert Reed (who played dad, Mike Brady) died of an AIDS-related illness and the tabloids and glossies went into overdrive. By this stage a theatre troupe had been having success in the States with The Real Live Brady Bunch, which involved actors re-enacting episodes word-for-word on stage, with extra innuendo and exaggerated character tics.

One reason for this Bradymania is surely our current fascination with all things 70s. It started with the music. The robotic beats, repetitive melodies and strobe lights of House music at warehouse parties and in nightclubs sparked a disco revival. Hand-in-hand with that came an assimilation of 70s fashion. The gaudy jewellery, flared pants, patterned vests and chunky platform shoes were snapped up from city op-shops and adapted to new designs. 'Dag nights' and 70s theme parties were suddenly en vogue.

The Bradys were so 70s it hurt. They started sedately enough with jeans and sneakers, but quickly took on the accoutrements of the decade which put the flair into flares. The girls had long straight hair parted down the middle, and favoured bell-bottoms and ponchos. The boys wore shirts with patterns so wild and bright that you could only look at them directly with the aid of sunglasses. And the collars were so wide that the actors could have jumped off cliffs and glided safely to the bottom.

But perhaps most importantly, the message that was rammed home week after week was that the family, as long as it stuck together, could surmount any problem. With a little understanding and a whole lot of brotherly/sisterly love, no one had to feel left out or persecuted. In the 90s, when children from broken homes are par for the course, this funny little TV world of domestic harmony with occasional minor, non-threatening upheavals looks like a comforting fairytale.

You could always tell when things got incredibly serious on The Brady Bunch; Mike would call a family meeting. He would lay down the law of the land, explain things reasonably, and Carol would nod sympathetically like a good wife. This seemed to be her major role on the show, as she didn't have a job and Alice the housekeeper handled most of the chores.

Australia didn't get the series until 1974, but it was repeated in its entirety five times up until 1987. As a result everyone from teenagers to thirtysomethings has grown up with the Bradys. At the premiere of The Real Live Brady Bunch they all lined up to get Chris Knight's autograph, and every one of them knew his character's most famous line from the show. For those who are unaware of those enigmatic words which mean so much to so many, they are as follows: "pork chops and apple sauce".

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