



FELD ENTERTAINMENT/AP

Steven Smith leaps over his fellow Wildcats in "High School Musical: The Ice Tour," which has its official kickoff this weekend in New York.

Synergy in motion

Disney's High School Musical succeeds in all departments

Jocelyn Noveck/AP

Jessica Benjamin is a bit bashful about admitting this. But sometimes, driving by herself, this mother of four in suburban New York has been known to slip the "High School Musical" soundtrack into the CD player.

And Terri Welch, a mother in Houston, often catches herself alone singing "What Time Is It?" from "High School Musical 2," the second installment of the Disney Channel megahit.

Thus these two women slip into a parallel dimension, one inhabited largely by tween-aged girls (roughly 6 to 13) and the people who live with them. This universe spans the globe, and its deities are Zac and Vanessa (or sometimes "Zanessa") — two smiling teens as familiar and adored by inhabitants of this universe as they are unknown and irrelevant to those who don't live there.

So foreign is the "High School Musical" franchise to those with no connection to the tween world that Kenneth Feld, co-producer of the new ice tour that kicks off this weekend, calls it "almost underground." Tongue in cheek, of course. How many underground movements can claim the top-selling CD of 2006 and a global viewership of over 250 million? Or become the source of hundreds of amateur produc-

tions across the nation, not to mention untold numbers of preschool birthday parties? Less than six weeks after the premiere of "High School Musical 2," it appears the tween world is still passionate about Troy, Gabriella, Sharpay, Ryan and the rest of their pastel-colored fantasy world of secondary education. More than 17 million watched the first U.S. telecast. Since then it has reached nearly 49.8 million people across 12 countries, The Walt Disney Co. says.

Meanwhile, the sequel's CD has sold 1.6 million copies in the United States alone, according to Nielsen SoundScan. The DVD isn't out yet, but the first movie sold more than 8 million discs globally.

So it's as good a time as any to ask: What makes this scrubbed-up, 21st-century "Grease" the continued cultural phenomenon it is? For one thing, parents say, it's something the whole family can watch together — that entertains

kids without either embarrassing their parents or making them want to jump off a bridge. (One word: Barney.) But getting even more philosophical, it shows that maybe young people and their families want a little more fantasy and a little less reality.

"We are so deep into the age of irony that when you encounter something as naive as 'High School Musical,' it's almost avant-garde."

— Robert Thompson, Syracuse University

"It's something a lot of producers have missed," says television historian Tim Brooks. Many of them "think it's still the '60s. They think that because adults want to see sex, kids do, too. But a lot of kids don't, especially girls. Most sitcoms on TV are really meant for adults."

"This is a reminder that as American TV hurtles toward ever more explicitness, there is a market of people who don't want any of that," says Brooks, also an executive at Lifetime.

Before going further, a little HSM primer may be in order. The fictional East High is set in Albuquerque, but could be any American high school.

There's a pretty girl (Gabriella, math geek) and a dreamy guy (Troy, basketball star), but unlike "Grease," there's no spandex, no cigarettes, no drag racing and most of all, not a hint of sex. (There IS finally a kiss — in the sequel.) In this world with no rough edges, the geek gets the jock, the cliques melt like butter, and despite a few bumps, everyone gets along. Sound like any high school YOU went to? But never mind.

"I like the message of inclusion and diversity," says Diane Kendall, a mother in Weston, Conn. "I like that at least a couple of the problems they face are real. And I like that they're not all too beautiful."

That remark definitely does not apply to Zac Efron, who plays Troy. Kendall's daughter, 13-year-old Allie, says some might call Efron feminine-looking, "but he's gorgeous, if you ask me." Her door is plastered with a poster of the actor.

In Jessica Benjamin's home in Bronxville, N.Y., the two resident boys may be slightly less interested — or that's what they say — but Grace, 13, and Faye, 4, both are certified "HSM" nuts.

"Maybe it's just that it's good clean fun," says Benjamin.