

Old School Rules: Hollywood Loves Gen X

From NKOTB to '90210,' Hollywood's experiencing a Gen-X redux

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Sept. 2 is shaping up to be quite the nostalgia-trip for Gen Xers. Not only can you download the new NKOTB album from iTunes today, you can also set your DVR to tape the first episode of the CW's hotly anticipated "90210" revamp, which premieres tonight.



And it's highly likely Hollywood bigwigs are doing the same. After all, you're not the only one who's dusting off your "Hangin' Tough" CD.

"I think Hollywood definitely loves the '80s," said "90210" executive producer Gabe Sachs. "Come on, the hair, the music, the look -- what's not to like? And laugh at. When it was announced that we were doing the show, we got calls from friends who were doctors, lawyers, executives that were huge fans of the original. People you would never suspect would be addicted to that show. And when I say addicted, I mean that they knew every character, storyline and location."

From "90210" to "Knight Rider" to NKOTB, Hollywood is experiencing a Gen X redux -- and it's clear that Hollywood loves the '80s and '90s. Upcoming film remakes of '80s hits "Terminator" and "The A-Team," as well as old-school horror hits like "A Nightmare on Elm Street" and "Friday the 13th" round out the trend. But while it may seem like just a fun flashback to the average fan, there are big bucks behind bringing Brenda of "90210" back.

"The obvious thing at play in this resurgence of '80s and '90s culture is the nostalgia factor," said pop culture expert Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University of Buffalo. "It's all about the target audience. The reason this is happening now is because the people who were young in the '80s and '90s -- Gen-Xers -- are now in their 30s and 40s. And you have to think of TV as basically selling viewers to sponsors. They're always looking for those 24- to 49-year-olds because they buy the most products. So how are you going to sell products to those Gen Xers? By luring them in with the nostalgia factor."

Indeed, "it's all a sort of horrible flashback," said "Knight Rider" revamp executive producer Gary Scott Thompson, who claims this is all about Hollywood bigwigs bringing back their youth. "The reason I'm doing this remake is because NBC chief Ben Silverman said "Knight Rider" was his favorite show when he was a kid. It's all these Gen X kids who grew up with "Smurfs" and "90210" and "Knight Rider" who are in charge now. It's sort of a trip to look at your youth and say, 'Hey, if I could do this now, take this thing I loved and change this and that, wouldn't it be great? And of course they can, so they do."

Thompson likens it to the pop culture equivalent of comfort food. "It's definitely nostalgia at play, because when you're recalling the show or the song, you're also recalling all the moments that came with it," Thompson said. "The fire in the fireplace, the dog curled up at your feet, dad and mom watching the TV with you, it's all the moments that go with the memory. It's visual comfort food, so it better taste as good as your remember it."

But don't count Sachs and his producing partner Jeff Judah among those nostalgic types. "Jeff and I didn't watch the original "Beverly Hills, 90210,"" Sachs said. "I think what we liked about the opportunity was that it was a chance for us to try to tell stories in a backdrop that was so foreign to us. We come from a "Freaks & Geeks" world, and we're used to telling small, grounded stories. We thought this was a fun challenge for us to try to inject our style of storytelling into this slick world of Beverly Hills."

Still, living up to the hype -- especially once it was announced that Brenda and Kelly would be reunited -- was no easy task. "Expectations are really, really high for this," Sachs said. "All we can do is make the best show that we possibly can and hope that viewers will give us a chance. The built-in audience is fantastic for us. We want those viewers. We definitely respect them and don't want to piss them off. That's why we have nods to the old show."

That youthful enthusiasm is what's driving fans like screenwriter du jour Diablo Cody to gush about the NKOTB reunion. "Of course, we love what's familiar. But this nostalgia fest is driven by two factors, really. The creative impulse and the financial will -- both have to be there. First, there is the nostalgia. The audience was there -- and it could still easily be there now," said Blender editor at large -- and former New Kids on the Block fan Elizabeth Goodman. "But second, there's whether or not it will make money. When you look at a band like the New Kids, it's surprising, but in the '80s and '90s, they were a big touring success. They made more money than Madonna or Michael Jackson. That would be my big reason, if I were a New Kid, to get back on the stage."

Rapping, for one, expects the tour to do well. "People are really entranced when someone pays attention to whom they used to be. So a tour like this will become like a major bonding event for these women in their 30s," Rapping said. "They'll get together with their girlfriends, go to dinner, then go sing along to these songs from their teens. Who wouldn't buy the tickets?"

And the NKOTB aren't the only ones getting in on the action. "The nostalgia market has become a big deal," said Blender's Goodman, who cites nostalgia tours by acts like Sonic Youth, Liz Phair and a rumored Smashing Pumpkins reunion. "The expectations for this type of entertainment, with its built-in audience, are even higher than usual because the media is so tuned into them. We have all the stats, the numbers on how well the originals did, and so we will be comparing the new ones."

Which is why "Knight Rider" producer Thompson is pulling out all the stops for the show's Sept. 24 premiere episode. "Anytime you make changes to an iconic thing, fans are going to react. And the expectations are sky high," Thompson said. "That's why we have over 500 visual effects in the first episode. With the market these days, we might not make it to episode 10, so we have to hit the ground running. And we have to make it work for today. In the '80s, the awesome thing about KITT was that it was the car that talked. Now, my kids say, 'Dad, everyone's car talks. What's the big deal?' We had to research not what's around the corner but what we could expect 10, 15, 20 years from now. So this KITT transforms, it downloads, it's got a KITT cave, it can think -- it's all about the artificial intelligence. It's the iPhone of cars."

Thompson cites last year's "Transformers" remake as a perfect example. "That essentially had to be a Michael Bay film for it to work," he said. "It had to look that good, that slick, to work for today."

Added Blender's Goodman: "Sure, there was a built-in audience, but Bay had to make sure there were the guns, the hot girls, the special effects to make it appealing to today's audiences. Then he could sit back and count his money."

But as much as there's a risk in remakes, there's also security, says Richard Walter of UCLA's School of Film, Theater and Television. "Hollywood wants to play it safe, they want to avoid risk, so they aim for a built-in audience," Walter said. "But you can't chase an audience, really. It's all a crapshoot. Are they really going to be able to track how many people watch the new "90210" because Brenda and Kelly are back? No. Built-in audience is really a built-in excuse. It's a known quantity, so they have a prepared apology ready for the inevitable failure."

Still, in today's increasingly youth-obsessed culture, some Gen Xers are glad Hollywood's flashing back to their own glory days. "Pop culture has gotten annoyingly young, young, young," Buffalo's Rapping said. "They are really catering to kids with 'Gossip Girls,' 'Hannah Montana' -- it's all about the youth audience, and they do have a lot of spending power these days. But now Hollywood is starting to remember where that money is coming from, and catering to that audience. So with the new "90210," there's the younger cast for the youth audience, but the older audience can catch up with Brenda and Kelly. And it's reassuring to them that the characters have gotten older along with them."

"90210" producer Sachs is banking on that -- despite a confession that fan favorite Tori Spelling may not be returning. "We unfortunately don't have a deal with Tori so I don't think that is happening right now. [But] I think with a fan base as big as the original show had, it was a natural to ask some of [old cast members] to come back," he said.

"And the fan reaction has been amazing. We're really lucky. I'm sure a lot of them are skeptical about what we're up to but most of them have shown a lot of enthusiasm for a new version of this show. We know we're not going to be able to please everyone but we are hopefully going to introduce them to a bunch of amazing new actors and some stories that will pique their interest."