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TV

The Multimedia Synergistic Slumber Party

By DAVE ITZKOFF

CASSIE SCERBO, a preternaturally poised 16-year-old wearing Juicy Couture sweats and a pair of Versace sunglasses resting atop her platinum blond locks, was contemplating fame and the motivation required to attain it. “Since I was a little girl, I’ve always wanted to be a megastar, not just a superstar,” she said over a recent breakfast at Le Parker Meridien, the Manhattan hotel. “I always say, there’s people that want it really, really, really bad, and then there’s people who just cannot live without it. That’s me.”

That day she and the four other equally self-assured, equally enthusiastic members of the Slumber Party Girls would resume a rigorous week of promotional duties for their newly formed pop band, followed by a long weekend of rest with their families, before returning to Los Angeles for another month of voice lessons and dance rehearsals. Still, Ms. Scerbo was reluctant to describe any of these activities as work. “Even if I didn’t have to, I’d be doing this,” she said. “I’d be in my mirror at home, just dreaming about it.”

In her wildest fantasies Ms. Scerbo probably could not have dreamed up the formidable launching pad that has been built to propel her and her new band mates to pop stardom. Having been together just two months, the Slumber Party Girls now reign over three straight hours of Saturday morning television as the hostesses of “KOL Secret Slumber Party” on CBS. An extended block of animated and live-action programming, it culminates each week in “Dance Revolution,” a dance competition on which they serve as the house band.

In October their debut album, full of upbeat anthems aimed at 9- to 13-year-old listeners, will be released by Geffen Records. Still want more? You can watch for continuous music and video updates on KOL, a children-theme AOL channel, or wait for a made-for-television movie and a second television series planned for the following months.

All of which makes the Slumber Party Girls — motivated, energetic and soon to be ubiquitous — an embodiment of the latest way to reach young consumers in their so-called ’tween years: using every possible avenue at once.
THE Slumber Party Girls made their television debut on Sept. 16. In a series of short, high-energy skits sandwiched between Saturday morning cartoon shows like “Sabrina” and “Trollz,” the young performers offered positive advice: Dancing is good exercise! Fruit is nutritious! And as the opening credits rolled on “Dance Revolution,” the Slumber Party Girls took to its neon-and-pastel stage with no narrative elements to explain who they were or how they had come together; they were just five industrious girls in leggings and short-shorts, strutting their stuff and singing about being best friends.

But before they sang their first perky note, several major media organizations had spent nearly a year planning the girls’ entrance. Last October, as it prepared to end its partnership with Nickelodeon, CBS turned to DIC Entertainment, an independent studio specializing in children’s television programming, to supply a new Saturday lineup.

Having seen CBS gradually lose young viewer to competitors like Kids’ WB and Cartoon Network, DIC’s chairman, Andy Heyward, had a plan to keep young viewers tuned in: he proposed “a threaded morning that had one theme going through the whole block,” a recurring element that would hold youngsters’ attention from start to finish.

Mr. Heyward approached Ron Fair, the veteran music executive, about providing songs for the “Dance Revolution” show. But Mr. Fair, who in August was named chairman of Geffen Records, had bigger ambitions. “I said, ‘You ought to have a group on there,’ ” he recalled, ‘ “so that every time you cut to a commercial or an interstitial — we’ll be right back and don’t forget to eat your vegetables — we continue to build awareness in our own John, Paul, George and Ringo.’ ”

Mr. Fair’s instincts are usually reliable: he shepherded the Pussycat Dolls from a burlesque troupe to a platinum-selling musical act and transformed an unknown singer named Stacy Ferguson into the pop sensation Fergie by pairing her with the Black Eyed Peas. Seeing an environment where ’tweens had helped make “American Idol” the top-rated television series of 2006 and the soundtrack to Disney’s “High School Musical” the year’s best-selling album so far, he anticipated that they would soon be clamoring for a pop-music group to call their own.

“What we can do,” Mr. Fair said, “is provide an age-appropriate yet really entertaining experience for kids that doesn’t speak to them in Barney’s voice. It’s speaking to them in an adult, cool, hip voice that they can understand.”

In July, Geffen and DIC began auditioning about 1,000 teenage girls at locations around Hollywood who could sing, dance and act. By the end of the month they had selected five winners with varying degrees of performance experience. At one end of the spectrum was Ms. Scerbo, born in Dix Hills, N.Y., and raised in Parkland, Fla., who started attending a charm school for acting at 7 and had already traveled worldwide as part of a dance troupe called Hip Hop Kidz. At the other end was Karla Deras, 17, a Los Angeles native of Mexican and Salvadoran heritage who had never sung or acted professionally and is now seeking her first agent. And Lina Carattini, 16, had left her hometown, Portage, Ind., only once before (to attend television auditions in Los Angeles).
Over a boisterous breakfast at Norma’s in Le Parker Meridien, during which the girls constantly switched seats and intermittently fiddled with glitter-painted digital devices, they each confessed to varying degrees of nervousness at the auditions. “We saw each other as competition at first,” said Mallory Low, a gregarious 18-year-old Southern Californian, who met and carefully befriended several of her future band mates during the tryout process. Ms. Low was at the gym when she got the call. Ms. Scerbo was in the parking lot of a mall. Ms. Deras was at the motor vehicles department taking a test for a driver’s permit. They all cried.

After toasting her success at a local IHOP, Ms. Deras called Ms. Low. She proceeded gingerly, as if trying to figure out her friend’s SAT scores. Eventually Ms. Low confessed the good news: “I was like: ‘I’m celebrating. What are you doing?’” she said. “She was like, ‘I’m celebrating too.’ I knew she wouldn’t have called me if there wasn’t anything going on.”

Caroline Scott, 15, was on her way home to Memphis from the band’s first audition when she got a call inviting her to a callback. She persuaded her mother to turn the car around and head back to Los Angeles. While her parents were on a business trip to China (during which she was staying at a friend’s house), Ms. Scott learned she had landed the job. “My friend was like, ‘So, can you spend the night next week?’” she said. “I was like: ‘You know what? You have to plan that I can’t spend the night for about three months.’”

In late July the Slumber Party Girls officially convened for the first time, at the Record Plant studios in Hollywood. There they were formally introduced to Mr. Fair and given songs and choreography to learn. They also got detailed itineraries for 60 days of recording sessions, video shoots, vocal instructions and one all-important licensing meeting, held at the Museum of Television and Radio in Beverly Hills and attended by Wal-Mart, McDonald’s, Target and Hasbro, among others. The girls say they were undaunted. “In Hollywood,” Ms. Scerbo said, “either you’re on the go or waiting, and I’d rather be on the go.”

At the same time they were provided with an official mentor in the form of Stefanie Ridel. Ms. Ridel, 33, is an executive producer on the Slumber Party Girls record. She’s also Mr. Fair’s girlfriend. But beyond that she had been a member of the all-female pop trio Wild Orchid (her band mates included the artist not yet known as Fergie), and she knows from experience why the girls would submit themselves to such a relentless work routine.

“I didn’t go to a lot of my things in high school, and I sacrificed a lot to be in Wild Orchid,” Ms. Ridel said, “but it was my passion. These girls grew up in an age where they’re watching ‘American Idol,’ they’re seeing people become stars overnight, and I think they’ve all been waiting for this. They won the lottery, and we tell them that.”

In four weeks they recorded a 13-track album. That pace left little room for experimentation. “We didn’t have the time to cultivate anything that wasn’t who these girls really are,” Ms. Ridel said. “If they couldn’t sing a lyric, they just went on to another one. They have this raw energy, and that’s what we got
Along the way the group was videotaped at every recording, photo and dance session, to create additional content for the Web, for a DVD, or for any other medium that someday becomes popular with 'tweens. “All the platforms have to be open for business or it doesn’t work anymore,” Mr. Fair said. “It’s radio, it’s Internet, it’s TV, it’s cellphones, it’s whatever — micro-sonic inkblots.”

But he insists the strategy can’t work if the music doesn’t. “People like to say it’s prefab or it’s manufactured or whatever, but it’s really no different than four guys getting together to form a band and going into a garage and creating a vibe for themselves,” Mr. Fair said. “Except for the fact that someone was at the helm, doing it.”

There are strong economic motivations for a record label to pursue such a young audience: in 2005 alone, consumers 10 to 14 purchased 8.6 percent of all recorded music, just over $1 billion of a market valued at more than $12 billion, according to a study published by the Recording Industry Association of America. But there are no data to suggest that today’s 'tweens are any more discerning than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago; they may be the last group of listeners who are still susceptible to a Monkees-style all-media blitz.

“Unfortunately they’re very impressionable at this age,” said Janet Giovanelli, the editor in chief of J-14, a 'tween-oriented entertainment magazine. “If they’re seeing the Slumber Party Girls everywhere, on commercials, on TV, on the Web, on iTunes, they come to the conclusion, ‘Well, they must be popular, and maybe I should like them.’ ”

IN their live performances, the Slumber Party Girls are learning to convey their individuality. They were carefully chosen to represent a range of ethnicities: two Caucasians, one Hispanic, one Asian and one of mixed African-American and Latin descent. (A made-for-television movie, which Mr. Fair and Ms. Ridel wrote in a single weekend, promises to provide the group with a “Wizard of Oz”-like origin story.) But for now, as they dance and sing their repertory — a mix of pop and dance songs with unapologetically innocuous titles like “Bubble Gum” and “Good Times” — they have little more than five distinctive wardrobe styles to differentiate themselves. It’s Spice Girls-style diversity, though the Slumber Party Girls don’t savor the comparison. “Not all of them sang, not all of them danced,” Ms. Scott said. “I don’t want to be thought of as a cheesy, manufactured girl group.”

In person the girls tend to speak in a singularly media-savvy voice about the break they’ve been given. They are all grateful and blessed to be living out their dreams, and they all thank God and their families for the support they’ve received along the way. And they have all studied the “Behind the Music” pitfalls of pop stardom. “I don’t want to be one of those one-hit wonder stars,” Ms. Scerbo said. “I want to have longevity.”

After enough time in their company, however, you may glimpse them behaving like actual teenagers. They giggle and gossip, and they seemed a bit overwhelmed by their first stay in a luxury New York
hotel. In August they attended the Teen Choice Awards, where the mere sight of the actor Johnny Depp was enough to render them collectively speechless. And their most cherished memory from the month they spent in the recording studio was a giant book of menus from which they could order food from nearly any 24-hour diner in the Los Angeles area. “We had lots of vegetables and well-balanced meals,” Ms. Scerbo said, rolling her eyes.

“Is that a joke?” Ms. Low replied.

But while two months may be sufficient time to learn a set of songs and accompanying dance steps, it may not be enough to prepare the Slumber Party Girls for the polished competition they face. For example the Cheetah Girls, a Disney-branded pop quartet, have already released three hit albums and appear in their own line of Disney Channel movies. “We are fighting for the same audience,” Ms. Carattini said. “It’s going to be a Britney-Christina thing. You’re going to choose one or the other.”

Then there are the rites of passage that no pre-emptive pep talks can ward off. “One day Cassie’s going to be the favorite, one day it’s going to be Karla, one day it’s going to be Lina,” Ms. Ridel said. “All the things that go with sharing the spotlight with four other girls. That’s the hard part of living in a girl group, and that’s why girl groups usually break up.”

Having been down this road once before, Ms. Ridel said she was in no hurry to usher her protégés into the wider world. “I miss those girls already,” she admitted. “I tell them they’re each special, and they each shine in their own way, and they have a long way to go.”

But the girls themselves are rarely nostalgic, not even for the lives they’re giving up for a chance at stardom. “I actually do not enjoy school that much,” Ms. Deras said, “other than being with my friends, but I’ll get to see them outside of school. This is all I’ve ever wanted, so to be doing this. I’d rather do this than school any time.”

Ms. Carattini agreed. “I went to school all the way to sophomore year,” she said. “I went to all the dances and football games. You just have to look at the bigger picture.”