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### Do you think he's sexy?

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When it comes to scoring a pop hit these days, dorks rule.

How else to explain Barry Manilow recently hitting No. 1 on the Billboard Top 200 Album chart with his reactionary "Greatest Songs of the '50s" CD? Or Disney's fantastically antiseptic "High School Musical" topping Billboard's album list not once but twice, with the second time being this very week?

Consider, too, the seemingly unstoppable success of "American Idol's" parade of well-scrubbed grinners (from Clay Aiken to '06 finalist Kevin Covais). Plus that rash of pre-rock-era-style hit CDs packed with either standards or that hybrid gruel of pop and opera ladled out by the likes of Michael Bubl , Josh Groban and Andrea Bocelli.

If that's not enough, the first new music in 15 years from that seminal '70s schmaltz band Chicago just hit stores. And Mr. Manilow coached the "American Idols" on songs of the '50s this week, forming a kind of double generational dork-a-thon.

Together, this conga line of conservative artists has created what could be the most unhip surge on the pop charts since before the rise of rock 'n' roll. What, in God's name, can account for this?

"With the Republicans controlling both houses of Congress, this is the Eisenhower-era revisited," says Rolling Stone senior editor David Fricke. "It's ostrich time, where people are looking for comfort rather than challenge in their art. It's a lot easier to listen to Barry Manilow murder what are actually good songs from the '50s than to consider what [left-leaning songwriter] Steve Earle has to say."

Author Karen Schoemer has written a new memoir, "Great Pretenders," which traces her own journey from rock-critic hipster to Pat Boone apologist. She sees a direct connection between Connie Francis crooning featherweight hits like "Who's Sorry Now?" in the '50s and what Manilow is doing now. "[They're] both completely irony free," notes Schoemer.

To author and pop-culture critic David Browne, today's political conservatism plays out in greater social conformity. "It began with the start of the Iraq war," he explains, "with the President saying things like, 'You're with us or you're against us.' Those who are a little quirky, strange or out of step are considered freakier than ever. And that filters down from the government to the singers on 'American Idol.'"

If nothing else, "American Idol" offers an uncommonly clear picture of the current tastes and desires of people outside the media elite. After all, it's voted on entirely by viewers. This has created, what Browne calls, "a return of the silent majority" (Richard Nixon's term for the unheard, conservative masses).

This surge in the squeaky clean may also come in flinching reaction to the flagrant sexiness that pervades the rest of pop culture. In that way, Manilow functions as a kind of anti-Beyonc  - as do the fresh-faced singers of "High School Musical" and "American Idol." "With Britney Spears, the tabloids and breasts everywhere, where do you go?" asks Schoemer. "To bring back the nonsex of the '50s is almost a weird breath of fresh air."

The uptick in earnest geek chic may also provide a respite from the snarkiness otherwise rampant in the culture. In that light, buying a Manilow or Groban CD can be seen as a kind of defiant act. It even functions as a response to the more violent or sexed-up expressions of cutting-edge forms like hip hop.

The trend also reflects a simple market reality: namely, the recent dramatic increase in tweens downloading music. That accounted for much of the early success of "High School Musical."

Fricke even sees a reactionary sensibility invading the once-revolutionary world of punk rock, via its castrated cohort known as "emo."

"Originally, punk rock was outwardly aggressive," he explains. "Emo is all about 'Why can't I get a date for prom night?' That's as '50s as the Platters."

Of course, the latest conservative wave is hardly the first. Back in the '70s, the "soft rock" movement rose in reaction to psychedelic hard rock and glam. It fostered Velveeta acts like America and Loggins & Messina. The '90s, for their part, saw a "correction" to grunge's nihilism in the form of a 10 million-CD-selling, smiley-faced band: Hootie and the Blowfish.

"It goes in 10-year cycles," explains Sean Ross, who analyzes radio trends for Edison Research. "One of the things that's happening now is that radio is in transition. So everything is up for grabs. Also, you have a very slow market out there - labels aren't putting out so many records. And, because they're looking at the costs of promoting records, they're putting out fewer left-field ones."

But before we consign innovation and edge to the dustbin of history, we'd do well to remember that the more extreme a reactionary movement becomes, the more likely it is to seed its own reaction.

"Back in November of 1962, who in their right mind would have predicted that the Beatles would blow up in this country 18 months later?" asks Fricke. "Nirvana also caught everyone with their pants down. I have eternal faith in the quality of art to blow people away - just when they least expect it."