

By Adrian Lee

THE BROTHERS ARE BACK

Older and wiser... it's the Osmonds - or what's left of them

BACK in their heyday, posters of the Osmond brothers adorned the bedroom walls of a million young girls. Screaming fans besieged airports everywhere they performed and they sold records by the million. The world hadn't really seen anything like it since the days of The Beatles.

But looking back on those crazy times in the early Seventies the youngest of the six performing brothers from Salt Lake City Utah has a confession to make.

"In those days we were untouchable and were becoming jerks," says Jimmy Osmond, now 50. "You can be the nicest person on earth but if you are looking at yourself in the mirror too much every day you have a distorted view of reality. That's what happened to us."

It took financial disaster, not to mention a few family feuds as fame overtook them, to force the brothers to take a step back and re-evaluate. The result is that the Osmonds, in a scaled-down form, are still going strong. These days the band, reduced by illness, consists of just Jimmy, Merrill, 60, and Jay, 57.

Next year the trio will be back in the UK for a tour, appearing alongside veterans the Bay City Rollers, Showaddywaddy and David Essex.

Jimmy, who remains the youngest performer to have a UK No1 hit (he was nine) with Long Haired Lover From Liverpool, adds: "We go on performing because we love it. If you really enjoy what you do, you just hit the stage and every venue you play whether it's an arena or a cruise ship it is a different experience and a different challenge."

"We were trained in the old-school way when you had to fight to stay in the spotlight and I don't want to

Jimmy, Merrill and Jay prepare to tour the UK and recall the family feuds and financial disasters that toppled the teenybop stars



STILL SMILING: After weathering troubled times the brothers, from left, Jay, Jimmy and Merrill, are touring again

'At one stage they were reduced to performing in gyms'

quit. It's a real honour to look out there and see everyone from our fans from the Seventies to their children experiencing our music for the first time."

In one form or another the group has been performing for more than 50 years. Donny and Marie Osmond still appear regularly as a duo in Las Vegas but Alan, 64, who has multiple sclerosis, and Wayne, 62, who suffered a stroke, have called it a day.

It's a remarkable achievement for a group that has never really been considered cool but has still sold 102 million records worldwide.

YET it has not been an easy ride. The Osmonds have been beset by squabbles and jealousies, such as when Donny replaced Merrill as the front man, which might have destroyed other families.

There was also a series of calamitous business ventures by their father which saw the family fortune eroded. That coincided with a slump in their careers in the Eighties after the hits dried up.

Jimmy, now a father of four, says: "We've had ego problems and there are peaks and valleys in everyone's career but somehow we've got through it. I don't think there's anything in this business that's easy. We've all had those days when you want to be the only guy but the truth is we have a great team spirit."

However he admits he is still haunted by the amount of money that has slipped through the family's hands. It has been reported that £40million was lost.

"To be honest it freaks me out. We were pretty naive and very trusting. When you are focused on the artistic side sometimes the business

side falls. In a way, though, it was the best thing that happened. When we lost a lot of our wealth it really made us appreciate the value of

money and the importance of family. Tell me anyone who has not had trouble in life."

At one stage the Osmonds, who are now on a secure financial footing, were reduced to performing in school gyms to make ends meet. For that reason Jimmy sympa-

thizes with another Seventies heart-throb David Cassidy who has battled against alcohol addiction. Jimmy adds: "I understand that. I have yet to meet an entertainer that isn't a little insecure. I feel for him."

He also believes that he and his brothers, who began performing at Disneyland and became regulars on the Andy Williams Show in the Sixties, were exploited.

"We were very young so it was inevitable," he says. "The train was leaving the station and you either got on or got off. I guess I didn't have much choice but it was fun. I aspired to be one of the brothers and to have my own successes here and there was really the frosting on the cake."

The Osmonds have been accused of producing saccharine pop from behind shiny teeth, such as Puppy Love and Love Me For A Reason. But the band was also responsible for edgier hits including Crazy Horses - which is about pollution caused by cars.

THE track was mistaken for a song about drugs and was banned in South Africa, much to the amusement of the clean-living brothers who are all Mormons.

The extended family is growing all the time. Merrill has six children and 12 grandchildren while at a recent family get-together almost 200 Osmonds showed up. They come from all walks of life but there's no sign yet of the next generations forming a band.

So what do younger members of the family make of the three brothers still belting out the old hits in addition to new material?

"The reaction is mixed," says Jimmy, who spends much of his time living in England and appeared on I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here! in 2005.

"Some of the kids in the family are embarrassed but others are proud. I asked my son Zachary, who is turning 16 and looks just like I used to, if it bugs him but he says it makes him happy. But some of my brothers' kids hardly use their last name so being an Osmond can be a curse or a blessing."

Merrill admits that it was "a tough time" personally when Donny replaced him as the lead singer.

Their father George, who pulled the strings, is said to have told Merrill bluntly that he was being sacked. The siblings were worked relentlessly by their ambitious father, a former army sergeant, who often insisted they perform three shows a day. Mistakes and bad behaviour were punished by beatings.

Merrill says: "We've been through our ups and downs but it's a brotherhood. We're on the road, we write songs and the fan base continues to grow. We see our fans bring their children to our concerts and that drives me because I think maybe we still have something to give."

"During the Seventies we lived in a bubble. We went through life not really touched by the outside world. At one stage I wanted to be a doctor but when I look back I'm grateful we stayed together."

Recently Merrill has struggled

against diabetes and heart disease. He contemplated retiring but adds: "Not now. I feel fine and my health is in good shape. To have been through some of the disasters we've had I'm most proud that I can look back and say the family is still together."

It's a sentiment shared by Jay, who has three sons and a grandchild.

Unlike many of their peers no one has ever read stories about the Osmonds trashing hotel rooms or going into rehab and he says: "It's a combination of our family and religion that has kept us stable."

"There was a time when I was 18 years old and wondered what the other side was like. I just wanted to be a normal kid going through high school."

"The worst part of being an Osmond in the Seventies was all the guys poking fun at us because

all our fans back then were girls. But I don't really have any regrets."

Jay is also keen to set the record straight on the Osmonds' songs, adding: "I do think a lot of people focused unfairly on the early bubblegum pop, which was meant to appeal to young girls, and didn't look at the quality of some of the later material. We wrote the music ourselves and played all the instruments."

Now with yet another tour on the horizon Jay says they are all having far too much fun to think of bringing the curtain down on their careers.

"I think we will just take it year by year and see what happens but we are sure enjoying it now. We work well together."

● *The Once In A Lifetime Tour starts on June 20, 2014. Tickets are on sale from today via ticketmaster.co.uk*

'A combination of family and religion has kept us stable'



BANDED TOGETHER: At the height of their fame in 1973, Merrill, Wayne, Jay, Jimmy and Alan. Donny is not shown

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