



# Back to School

By Jackie Krentzman

Disney's *High School Musical* was that rare success: an all-ages film loved by, yes, people of all ages. This summer's sequel promises to be another sensation.

Will they or won't they?

Preteens across the country are waiting breathlessly for the August premiere of *High School Musical 2*, the sequel to the Disney Channel's smash hit of 2006, to find out if stars Troy and Gabriella finally kiss.

But we won't reveal the answer here. You'll have to watch the movie to find out. And if you're the parent of a preteen—*HSM*'s core demographic—see it you will. Again. And again.

*High School Musical*, which premiered in January 2006, was viewed by 7.7 million enraptured viewers in the United States. When the DVD was released a few months later, it became the fastest selling television movie of all time. The soundtrack reached number one on the *Billboard* 200 twice last year and has sold more than 6.3 million copies. And don't forget the national tour of the stage show, the concert tour, the ice show, and the best-selling spin-off book.

"We were completely floored by how big this became," says Lucas Grabeel, who plays Ryan in the movie. "You don't go into a project expecting it to become a cultural phenomenon—but this did."

The success of *HSM* also gave a huge boost to the careers of the movie's six appealing young stars. Zac Efron, who plays heartthrob Troy and is arguably the biggest teen star in the country now, can be seen in a new film version of *Hairspray*. Ashley Tisdale

(Sharpay) parlayed her success in *HSM* and Disney's *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* into numerous TV cameos, and Vanessa Hudgens (Gabriella), Corbin Bleu (Chad), and Tisdale have each released a solo CD. And Monique Coleman (Taylor) has appeared on many TV shows, including *Dancing With the Stars*.

With this level of media saturation, no wonder it's difficult to find anyone from six to 15 who hasn't seen *High School Musical* and watched its stars become A-list celebs. But unlike some media phenomena the younger set adopts, *High School Musical* is one that parents can embrace as well.

For those of you who managed to miss *HSM*, here's a recap. Troy and Gabriella meet at a New Year's Eve party at a ski lodge over winter vacation, and the sparks fly. Troy is heartbroken at their parting, but, as it turns out, Gabriella has just transferred to Troy's high school in Albuquerque. The problem is, Troy is a jock, and Gabriella is a brainiac. Under typically rigid high school protocol, their romance doesn't stand a chance. However, Troy and Gabriella resist peer pressure and not only keep their friendship and budding courtship alive, but they land the lead roles in the school musical.

Along the way, Troy, Gabriella, and the rest of the perky cast, led by Troy's best buddy, Chad, Gabriella's best friend, Taylor, and the movie's foils, Sharpay and her twin brother, Ryan, sing, dance, and learn some

important lessons. The messages include don't succumb to peer pressure, be open to new things, be true to yourself, and embrace diversity. And, at the same time, it's OK for everybody to sing and dance together.

And that may be the key to the movie's success. Forty years ago, musical films were frequently blockbusters, but they've been a dying art form in recent times. *High School Musical*, with its catchy tunes and lyrics, has filled a niche in the market and struck a chord with its audience.

"*High School Musical* has succeeded because it's a good movie," says Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University. "It's fun to watch, with a good story and surprisingly good songs. Many a thirtysomething mother has let the CD continue to play after she dropped her 11-year-old kids off at soccer practice.

"[The movie] has managed something that's almost impossible in 21st century American culture," Thompson continues: "It is a completely family-friendly movie—it has practically no sexuality, no bad language, no drugs, and no drinking—that's still hip enough for a young kid to like."

The movie's plot isn't groundbreaking (boy meets girl, his friends and the Other Girl interfere, the school outcasts win the respect of the cool kids, and tolerance and acceptance prevail), but who cares? For a 10-year-old obsessed with peer acceptance, this paradigm is fresh and meaningful.

"I find the messages in this movie inspiring," says Monique Coleman. "They are powerful and positive. It challenges kids to think outside the box, to break out of their cliques."

Expect the sequel to follow the same dramatic format and provide the same high-energy showmanship. Some things have changed, however. The action has moved from East High to a country club owned by Sharpay and Ryan's father. The gang have landed summer jobs at the club, and the conflict centers around the annual talent show.

"I think the second movie will be even more meaningful," says Coleman. "The first movie was about doing more than one thing, that you don't have to let yourself be put into a box. The second is about standing up and doing your own thing. The first one gives the courage to dream; the second gives the encouragement to do it."

As for the big question—will they or won't they?—the cast is being coy.

"We can't tell you what happens, but let's just say we shot a lot of different versions," says Grabeel, "and some of those versions did have kissing."



## WHAT'S ON THE CAST'S MP3 PLAYERS

What are members of the *High School Musical* cast listening to these days? The same stuff your own kids like, and maybe more.

### Lucas Grabeel

African tribal music, avant-garde jazz, and blues, among other genres. Favorites include Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Herbie Hancock, Roy Hargrove, and Kaos. "I probably have the most eclectic musical tastes among the cast," he says.

Where to find these artists: Rhapsody jukebox, via [www.comcast.net/music](http://www.comcast.net/music)

### Ashley Tisdale

Justin Timberlake, Jesse McCartney, Top-40 music. "Ashley and Lucas are exact opposites when it comes to the music they like," says Monique Coleman.

Where to find: Watch their videos at [www.comcast.net/music](http://www.comcast.net/music) (via the Fan) or by tuning to Music On Demand on Channel 1

### Monique Coleman

Beyoncé, Outkast, Black Eyed Peas, Rusted Root, Atmosphere, the soundtrack to the Broadway musical *Wicked*, Jack Johnson, and old-school Motown. "I like music that has a message," says Coleman, "music that's soulful, with a good beat."

Where to find: Music Choice Show Tunes and Hit List channels (commercial-free radio stations on your TV)

### Corbin Bleu

Prince, R&B, and soul. "It's all Prince these days," says Coleman. "Corbin is a humongous Prince fan, and it's getting out of control!"

Where to find: Music On Demand for R&B videos and a Video Vault of back-in-the-day favorites like Prince