

TV Sunday

That '70s Show

A series ahead of its time

By MICHAEL GILTZ

SUCCESS has been creeping up on "That '70s Show" for a couple of years now.

Suddenly, this month, it seems to have arrived. With a vengeance.

"Literally in the past two or three weeks, everyone's been getting mobbed for the first time," says Topher Grace, who stars as Eric.

"We went to 'Halloween Horror Night' at Universal Studios. Mila [Kunis, who plays Jackie] came to join us," Grace says.

"She was getting out of her car at Universal CityWalk, and it is a very public, touristy place. She was just walking from her car to meet us in a restaurant and she was mobbed."

"When she got to us, she was really scared."

The kids on the show — all of whom took roles in movies during the summer break — had better get used to being the center of attention.

"That '70s Show" began a new season earlier this

month to some of its best ratings since it debuted in a cushy timeslot between "The Simpsons" and "The X-Files" in 1998.

Set in a mythical town in Wisconsin in the late 1970s, it features Eric, a timid kid who is scared by his hard-nosed dad (Kurtwood Smith) and dating Donna (Laura Prepon), a girl who's much cooler and better-looking than he is.

Friends include Kelso, his innocent, babe-magnet buddy (Ashton Kutcher) and an exchange student named Fez (Wilmer Valderrama).

In its third season, despite seemingly endless switches from night to night, "That '70s Show" is stronger than ever.

Fox gave the series a big boost by renewing it for two more years last season.

And that confidence has been borne out: The unacknowledged, big factor in turning James Cameron's spooky new series "Dark Angel" into an unexpected hit? The lead-in is "That '70s Show."

"I've been on two of the most-moved shows in the history of television," says co-creator Mark Brazill, who worked for three years on "3rd Rock from the Sun" with producers Bonnie and Terry Turner

life more than it is to any decade," he says. And Topher Grace agrees.

"When we're reading scripts or rehearsing, it has almost nothing to do with the '70s until we put on our costumes."

'We're doing (the show) pre-Just Say No. Back then we thought you could actually function, grow up and live your life while still smoking weed' — co-creator Mark Brazill

before they launched this show based on his childhood in Wisconsin.

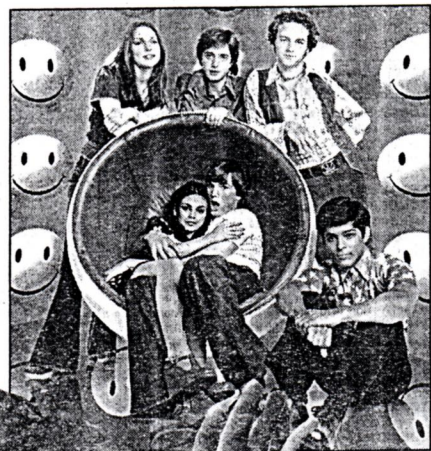
"I'm very familiar with my mother calling up and asking, 'What night are you on?' That was her complaint — especially when the show used to be on her bowling night," says Brazill. "So I said, 'Let me talk to Fox and get it moved.'"

Brazill is just as ambitious creatively.

He proudly calls the show "appointment television," a buzzword that is applied to shows like "ER" and "Frasier" — but not yet to his sitcom.

He agrees the show isn't about the '70s so much as how we view the '70s from today.

"It's true to small-town



Topher Grace (left) and his castmates (above) in "That '70s Show" are getting some of their best ratings since the retro show kicked off on Fox in 1998.

the show was set in today," says Brazill. "We're doing it pre-Just Say No. So innocent."

Back when one knew smoking marijuana was bad?

"Exactly. Who knew? Now everyone knows," he laughs.

"Back then we thought you could actually function, grow up and — oh, I don't know — create a show and live your life while still smoking weed every now and then."

Though high on the success of the show, they aren't taking it for granted. Most TV stars assume someone writing an article — like me — has been a fan since the first episode.

But Grace actually asks politely if I ever get a chance to watch it.

"I'm so used to doing the other kind of stories," he explains. "Where the writer hasn't seen the show."

But if it goes to Grace's head, real life seems ready to step in with a quick blow to the ego.

Says Grace, "I was doing a movie this summer in Cincinnati (Steven Soderbergh's high anticipated crime drama "Traffic")."

"Someone said, 'No offense, but you look like that kid from "That '70s Show.'"