

**It didn't fail for your ears**

***The Higher They Climb,  
the Harder They Fall*  
and  
*Home Is Where the Heart Is*  
David Cassidy**

If it were not for Captain & Tennille and David Cassidy, Barry Manilow might never have recorded the Grammy Award-winning song, "I Write the Songs."

Or so said the song's writer, Bruce Johnston of the Beach Boys.

The iconic classic was one of Manilow's three No. 1 hits during the 1970s and won a Grammy Award for Song of the Year in 1977. And the path the song took to iconic status features several connecting threads of classic rock-and-roll history from the 1970s.

Cassidy was just coming off a successful run as Keith Partridge in the wildly popular television series *The Partridge Family*, which aired from 1970 through 1974. He was a teen idol sensation, and girls went absolutely *Beatles-type-of-freakout-crazy* when Cassidy appeared in public.

Given the fact that his character on *The Partridge Family* had a gee-whiz comedic aspect to it, some in the music industry didn't at first recognize the high level of Cassidy's musical abilities.

But Johnston wasn't one of the doubters. David Cassidy wanted to be the "real" David Cassidy – not TV's Keith Partridge – and Johnston recognized that right away. So Johnston agreed to co-produce, with Cassidy, his first two solo albums for RCA Records, *The Higher They Climb, the Harder They Fall* in 1975, and *Home Is Where the Heart Is* in 1976.

"I think one thing people don't know is that David played really great electric guitar. You can kind of play guitar onstage and get by and that's cool, but he played on his solo album tracks," said

Johnston, the only Beach Boy who won a Grammy Award for Song of the Year.

“We had world-class musicians and vocalists recording with him and he really held his own in the studio. David worked extremely hard on both of his solo albums.”

Johnston and his longtime friend and production partner, Terry Melcher (son of actress/singer Doris Day), had a worldwide production deal with RCA Records. Johnston and Melcher had the option of signing artists to the RCA label and also producing artists already signed to RCA. In fact, Johnston said, they had a really generous production deal with the label.

“I think with all the ‘light’ albums David recorded as a member of The Partridge family, he was probably dying to create and record something serious,” said Johnston. “And I was really the right guy to work with for him because *I got it*. I could just tell David would make great albums, given the chance.”

Johnston called Cassidy a “hands-on artist” with his first two solo albums for RCA, much the same way Frank Sinatra was with his albums.

“Sinatra would pick his songs and get very involved with the arrangements and the back-in-the-day production. He probably should have had a production credit on all his recordings,” said Johnston. “David just wanted to do something really wonderful, and I think his two solo albums really hit the mark. But I don’t think the general public, or even the label, were thinking that way. I think they were just wanting the former *Partridge Family* teen idol to now become a solo ‘pop’ artist, churning out endless hit singles.”



Pictured is longtime Beach Boys keyboardist and vocalist Bruce Johnston, left, and 1970s teen idol, television star and recording artist David Cassidy, right. Johnston produced Cassidy's first two solo albums, *The Higher They Climb, the Harder They Fall* and *Home Is Where the Heart Is* in the mid-1970s. (Photo courtesy of Bruce Johnston)

And that's where choosing "I Write the Songs" came into play. It was Johnston's song, and Cassidy wanted it on *The Higher They Climb, the Harder They Fall* because he needed the album to have a hit song.

"I'm surprised he selected it, as it seemed like, at best, just a lateral music move. I've always kind of wondered if David thought, 'Maybe I better record it because I know that it could be a hit.'

"It's kind of like insurance," said Johnston. "I know David always says that he was the first one to record it, but it really was Captain & Tennille."

"I Write the Songs" appeared on Captain & Tennille's 1975 debut, multi-platinum album, *Love Will Keep Us Together*. Their album includes another Johnston-written song, "Disney Girls," as well as the Brian Wilson song, "God Only Knows."

Johnston likened Cassidy's decision to record "I Write the Songs" and to include it on his album to Capitol Records' decision to include the song "Sloop John B" on the 1966 Beach Boys album *Pet Sounds*, considered to be Brian Wilson's greatest studio masterpiece.

"Al Jardine convinced Brian to record 'Sloop John B' in 1965, and Al laid out a great road map/arrangement for Brian," said Johnston.

The 1965 track for the recording was in the Capitol Records vault for a short time when in 1966 the "Sloop John B" vocals were recorded. Later on, the song was included on *Pet Sounds*.

"Do you think 'Sloop John B' belongs on that album? No! What does it have to do with that album? Nothing, even though it's a really great recording. Capitol Records convinced Brian to include 'Sloop John B' on the *Pet Sounds* album," said Johnston.

And Johnston believes that Cassidy had a similar "label" mindset when he chose to record "I Write the Songs" for *The Higher They Climb, the Harder They Fall*.

"David was making this really great first solo album, but I kind of think he, too, was looking for a little song insurance," said Johnston. "Like 'Sloop John B,' here is the insurance song, or so he [and RCA Records] thought.

"Now we have a very cool first solo album – *The Higher They Climb, the Harder They Fall* – concept, but the album has one weak track and it's "I Write the Songs;" but I'm sure David didn't think of it that way then. It was well-recorded and sung, but I always felt that it contradicted the 'serious' direction of David's album."

"I Write the Songs" reached No. 11 for Cassidy in England, but the Manilow version would reach No. 1 in the U.S. and become Manilow's signature song.

"At the end of the day, I remember David pushing RCA to focus on 'Get It Up for Love' instead of 'I Write the Songs' as the single off *The Higher They Climb, the Harder They Fall* album."

As an aside, Johnston said that he didn't write "I Write the Songs" for Brian Wilson, as some have suggested over the years.

"If you ever read that I wrote 'I Write the Songs,' about Brian Wilson, please disregard it. I wrote that song as a hymn to God for

being the spirit of creativity in all of us. It gets me nuts when people say I wrote it for Brian Wilson,” said Johnston.

When it came time to choose an album cover for *The Higher They Climb, the Harder They Fall*, Cassidy once again made the call. The cover features Cassidy apparently flying upward in the sky while adoring fans look at him from the ground.

“It was his idea for the album cover. My only input on that was applause,” said Johnston. “I’m just an artist masquerading as a producer. I get all that stuff. I saw right where he was coming from. I was talking like a big brother to David, artistically.

“I loved that cover. Did David's first solo album commercially achieve massive success? Not really. It did OK; it sold enough. Artistically for David, did it personally achieve what he was hoping for? I'd like to think so,” said Johnston.

The follow-up album, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, was also co-produced by Cassidy and Johnston. It featured songwriting and vocal contributions from Gerry Beckley of the band America, which also had established itself as one of the top recording and touring bands by the mid-1970s.

Cassidy and Beckley co-wrote two songs, “Take This Heart” and “Bedtime,” for the album. Cassidy shared writing credits with musician/songwriter Bill House on four songs, and Cassidy also cut the Paul and Linda McCartney-penned song, “Tomorrow” for the record.

“Who wouldn’t want to work with Gerry Beckley?” said Johnston.

“And I had enough sense to never get in the way. Sometimes you have to really assert yourself as a producer, but David wasn’t blowing it in the studio. He was like an actor who gets to direct his first film. I didn’t have to step in very much. There are great session players on that album and I happen to really love [the band] America,” said Johnston.

Cassidy also had good sense on *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, about who he wanted playing and singing with him. Session musicians like King Errisson on percussion, Jesse Ed Davis on guitar, and Stephen Ross on keyboards provided support. And for vocalists, Cassidy chose an all-star lineup. In addition to Beckley and

Johnston on vocals, Cassidy surrounded himself with Carl Wilson of The Beach Boys, Richie Furay of Buffalo Springfield and Poco, Dewey Bunnell of America, and Howard Kaylan and Mark Volman (Flo & Eddie) of The Turtles, among others.

“It was really fun to work with all those great session players and vocalists. And David wasn’t making any mistakes by who he called up to back him in the studio,” said Johnston, who compared the talent of the vocalists to the cast of the 1963 film, *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, which featured a host of A-list actors, including Spencer Tracy, Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Buddy Hackett, Mickey Rooney, and Jonathan Winters.

“David wasn’t doing it for celebrity wallpaper. He listened to [the] music and determined, ‘Here is what I think I should do,’” said Johnston.

When it comes to *The Higher They Climb, the Harder They Fall* and *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, Johnston reiterates the two things he originally said about Cassidy: that in that mid-1970s, people did not realize that Cassidy was a serious musician, and that he was trying to achieve a high personal standard of musicianship with his two solo albums.

“With David Cassidy, it doesn’t matter if David hit home runs or failed artistically because David Cassidy did not fail for your ears. He can look back over his life and realize that he had a shot at doing something that he wanted to do, instead of just taking songs off the rack and having a TV show to back him up.

“I’m for the artist realizing what they should be doing and then achieving it in the studio,” said Johnston.



The author interviews Bruce Johnston of The Beach Boys prior to a 1986 concert in Rockford, Illinois.