

Bernadette Whelan has long been a haunting figure in David Cassidy's life. The *Partridge Family* star spectacularly abandoned his pop career after the 14-year-old girl was fatally crushed in a stampede at his 1974 concert in White City, west London.

The singer, then 24 and one of the biggest teen idols in the world, was devastated by Bernadette's death. In the fall-out of the tragedy he stopped touring, having already left the popular TV series. Eventually he suffered a nervous breakdown and shunned the limelight for years.

Now Bernadette's older brother Michael, 53, reveals for the first time the huge impact her death had on the lives of those who loved her, especially his Irish immigrant parents Peter and Bridget, both now dead. "They were heartbroken and never really recovered," says Michael from his home in Beckenham, Kent.

David initially clung to the assurances of his management team that the schoolgirl had a congenital heart condition and suffered a heart attack from the excitement of being among 35,000 screaming fans. But in his candid new autobiography, *Could it be Forever?*, the star, who is touring the UK this month, said he was shocked to learn quite recently that she had indeed been suffocated by a heaving mass of hysterical fans.

"Had I known this at the time, it would have intensified still further the terrible depression I felt in the years following my retirement in 1974," he writes. "I certainly did not want to believe that I could in any way have been responsible."

After his career nose-dived in the late 1970s, David battled with alcohol abuse before returning to the stage in musicals. He now lives in Florida with his third wife, Sue Shifrin, and their 15-year-old son, Beau. He also has a daughter, Katie, from an earlier relationship.

But the frank admission in his new book and his revival tour with *The Osmonds* and David Essex have reopened wounds for Bernadette's family, who have always refused to speak publicly about her loss.

"It was heartbreaking to see my parents struggle to cope," says Michael. "For a couple of years they kept her room the same as she had left it, as if it was a shrine. Mum got great comfort just sitting there. I suppose you could say they spent the rest of their lives mourning her in their quiet way. It's been over 30 years, but I still think about Bernadette every day and wonder what kind of life she might have had. She was such a bubbly and clever girl."

But despite their pain, the Whelans never blamed David Cassidy for what happened. "We saw it as a tragic accident," says Michael. "One of those shocking things you never expect. My

parents were devoted Catholics and their faith helped them to accept it as God's will."

Michael, who was 20 when his sister died, recalls that night: "I had been at the pub with friends. When I got home my mother said something had happened to Bernadette at the concert, but Dad had gone to pick her up at Hammersmith hospital. We thought she had fainted or maybe fallen and cut herself.

"I was woken up in the middle of the night to be told that she was critically ill in a coma. It was a complete shock. You don't expect your sister to go to a concert and not come back. She never regained consciousness and passed away four days later."

Bernadette was an avid Cassidy fan. "She had saved her pocket money for months to pay for the concert and she was very excited," Michael says. She went with two friends from the same housing estate. One of them, Vanda Heron, later said they had left Bernadette to go to the toilets, but could not find her on their return.

Disc jockey Tony Blackburn, the compere on the night, recalled that the atmosphere in the stadium was highly charged as tension built up to Cassidy's appearance. "It was bedlam. The place was jam packed and girls were screaming hysterically or pretending to faint in the hope that they would be carried to the front for safety," he said.

"I remember saying to someone backstage that something should be done to alleviate the grass verge, which was particularly crowded. It looked dangerous and there did not seem to be enough security. That's where the crowd broke through and Bernadette lost consciousness."

The schoolgirl never even got to see Cassidy on stage. According to one eyewitness account, she was taking a picture of the scene when the crowd surged forward and the barrier broke. She fell face down in the ground and was trampled underfoot. The coroner recorded that she died of traumatic asphyxia, resulting from compression of the body. Her brain had been damaged by cardiac arrest.

Michael says: "I loved her deeply and I was gutted by her death. David sent flowers to the hospital and a letter of condolence to Mum and Dad. I believe a wreath in the shape of a guitar also arrived for the funeral, but David did not attend as had been widely rumoured.

"We never did meet him. I can understand why he avoided the funeral. It would have been chaotic had he turned up. But if I saw him now I would say there was no hard feeling and we never held him responsible."



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