

Shirley Jones: 'Here I Am Back In The Chorus'

By CECIL SMITH

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HOLLYWOOD — "After 20 years," said Shirley Jones, "here I am back in the chorus."

She'd been on a glittering stage within a stage writhing under the hot lights and going "beedle-de-beep" along with those strumming and banging children while her handsome stepson David Cassidy sang one of those haunting non-rock ballads that for all their amplified ferocity are love songs gentle as kittens.

Shirley, as lushly lovely a female as ever lighted a soundstage, whispered: "Don't worry; I'll be singing leads yet." She looked back wonderingly toward young Cassidy: "I never knew David could sing. All kids plunk guitars around the house — but really sing . . .?"

This is a new world for Shirley Jones, and she is entering it unhesitatingly via the new television series out of Screen Gems for ABC called the Partridge Family. You may have heard this before, but it isn't just another situation comedy. Fact is, as Room 222 was the most talked-about series in town last summer before it got on the air, the Partridge Family is this year's equivalent. Okay, so Andy Griffith's new Headmaster series is opposite it on Friday nights; it's a dilly of a show and I think audiences will find it.

Said Shirley: "It's tough to do. Not only five kids and five SINGING kids, but we do a new song every week — completely arranged and choreographed. Put that into a four-day schedule and try and do it." I asked where they got the songs.

"Young composers bring them in, and they're wonderful. We're doing an album of them for Bell Records that is to be released at about the time the show goes on the air (Sept. 25) — 'Shirley Jones and the Partridge Family.'" She giggled. "With a title like that I can't just do 'beedle-de-beep-beep.'"

This is Shirley's first invasion of the world of rock. She's been a singer all her life, "but I never sang pop songs with bands or made records; I was a show singer. I made albums — 'Oklahoma!' 'Carousel,' 'Music Man.' But I never sang the songs apart from the shows."

But rock — hard, soft or intermediate — defies the Shirley Jones image of a trilling ingenue in operetta. But then she's made a career of image smashing. Pegged as cornfield wholesome from "Oklahoma!" and "Music Man," she won the movies' Oscar as a sleazy harlot in "Elnora Gantry." During the last year she's made three movies in which she scored as an actress without singing a note, so she winds up with a singing comedy series on TV.

The movies are worth noting — "The Happy Ending" and "The Cheyenne Social Club," currently in the theaters, and the World Premier "Silent Night, Lonely Night," which I think is the most adult love story ever made for television and which NBC has scheduled for reshowing next Saturday Night at the Movies — Aug. 8.

Taking nothing from the other films particularly the antics of Hank Fonda and Jimmy Stewart in "The Cheyenne Social Club," Shirley is as proud of "Silent Night, Lonely

Night" and her work with Lloyd Bridges in it as anything she has ever done. With reason. She was nominated for an Emmy for her performance which combined internal wars of restraint and passion with a sense of reserved elegance, even though a bit of it in imagination was in the buff.

But Shirley has long wanted a TV series — "so I can stay home; I seem to be eternally on location or touring." She made a pilot a couple of years ago about a girl from outer space which didn't sell (which may be a blessing). In The Partridge Family, she's a widow with five musical kids — like the Cowsills, if you will, or a contemporary edition of the Trapp Family.

The kids, ranging from 7 to 16, rope mom in on a taping session in their garage which turns out a hit record and in the meteoric music business of today, before you can say Jack Cassidy, mom is wheeling a gaily painted old school bus with the kids on the concert circuit.

Obviously, the thinking behind the show, devised by Bernard Slade for executive producer Bob Claver, is to get the young audience with the music and their elders with the problem of a mother coping. Slade's scripts are much less hokey than the usual TV claptrap. "I like this woman," Shirley says. "I like the way she thinks. She feels about her kids the way I feel about mine. I don't feel insulted by the things she has to say; she's got a brain."

Shirley and her husband Jack Cassidy have three children of their own; David is Jack's son by his first marriage. The story is that no one connected David and Shirley when they were cast and in respect to the stepmother legend everyone was terrified to tell Shirley her stepson was aboard. Which was nonsense; she adores David. "He's teaching me to sing rock. And to like it."