

Earl Wilson

On The Town

NEW YORK — "He's got great sex appeal — even for me," David Cassidy's step-mother said.

It's something new for Shirley Jones. After all the years she's been pointed out as a movie star, as the screen "Laurie" of "Oklahoma" and as the wife of handsome Jack Cassidy, it could be a little unsettling suddenly to be ogled by the younger element because you're the step-mother of the new acting-singing rage of "The Partridge Family" TV show.

"He's the teen-age idol of America," Shirley said the other afternoon at the Regency.

"His fan mail doesn't stop. His fans range in age from seven to 14. He's 21 but plays younger on the show. He sits down once in a while and takes stock of himself.

"He's close to Jack and sometimes spends weekends with us, but the main part of his life he's spent with his mother. Jack has tried to tell him that just as quickly as his fame came, just as quickly it can go away."

Now Shirley and her step-son have a new record album, titled "The Partridge Family, Starring Shirley Jones and Featuring David Cassidy."

Shirley remembered how it came about. They had cast her in the TV show. David had been in a Broadway show, "Fig Leaves Are Falling," playing the juvenile lead, but it had closed, and he was in California doing some of the major TV shows.

"David read for the part of the boy in 'The Partridge Family' and when they found out that he was a relative of mine, they asked about my reaction. A lot of times they're very wary of relatives. I told them, 'I love David but you must pick who's best for the show.' As it turned out, of course, he was the best of the lot.

"And Jack, when he saw the pilot, said 'so long, Shirl, see you in about 5 years.'

"Meaning it would be a lot and I'd scarcely be with him any more except for weekends.

"I love the work, it's almost like playing myself. Shirley Partridge could just as easily be Shirley Cassidy. It's like going into my own home every day. The thing I don't like is getting up at 5:30 every day and getting home at 7."

David's rise to prominence was almost as sudden as his step-mother's.

"I was just a little girl from Smithton, Pa., and I went to an open audition of Rodgers and Hammerstein. They had three shows running then. 'The Ring and I,' 'South Pacific,' and 'Me and Juliette.'

"John Femley was the casting director, I sang for him and he said, 'What have you done?' I was brand-spanking new and hadn't done anything. He said, 'I want Dick Rodgers to hear you.' Mr. Rodgers was rehearsing across the street. After I sang for Dick, he said, 'I want Oscar Hammerstein to hear you.' Just to meet those two men at that time was an event for me.

"They put me into 'South Pacific' and then I understudied Isabel Bigley in 'Me and Juliette' on the road.

"Of course I had thought about the film 'Oklahoma,' but I didn't have a prayer. At that point I wasn't ready for such a role. They called me in Chicago while I was in 'Me and Juliette' — would I fly to California to be tested? I tested with Gordon MacRae who was auditioning for 'Curly.'

"I went back to Chicago and one day my agent called me and said 'Hello, Laurie!'"