

Cassidy out to shed image

By DEB RICHARDSON

ATLANTA — David Cassidy has a lot to live down. And no one knows it better than he.

Circumstances conspired to make him the teen singing idol he never wanted to be, and he's spent three years virtually in hiding trying to escape the image. He hopes his role in NBC's new series, "David Cassidy — Man Undercover" premiering Thursday, will alleviate it.

Now 28, Cassidy looks the same as he did during his "Partridge Family" days when he played the lead singer in a family rock band. Slightly built and boyish looking, he speaks seriously, politely, frowning a little when the conversation turns to his years as a TV and recording star, and the recognition and screaming fans it brought him.

"It's such an overwhelming thing. There's no such thing as handling it," he says, shaking his head. "I was on lunchboxes, bubblegum, everything."

After four years in the series, "I was physically and mentally and emotionally drained. My career had taken this unusual twist that I had never planned. I was an actor who did a pilot that launched me into this bizarre hell."

People magazine reported that he resorted to drugs to get through the period. He emphatically denies it.

"I could no sooner have been doing drugs and continued doing that show," he says, his voice trailing off exasperately. "I was in danger of being burned out just from the show. There's no way I could have been on drugs, too."

"It really irks me when someone takes a cheap shot like that."

In any event, Cassidy stopped working, determined to take time out for himself. He traveled around the world, wrote music, spent time on his Hawaiian estate and Santa Barbara horse ranch.

"It was such a young age to be able to step back and say, 'I don't have to work.' I had made enormous amounts of money but I had no social life." Asked if he were lonely during those star days, he nods quickly.

"Absolutely. Many, many, many times."

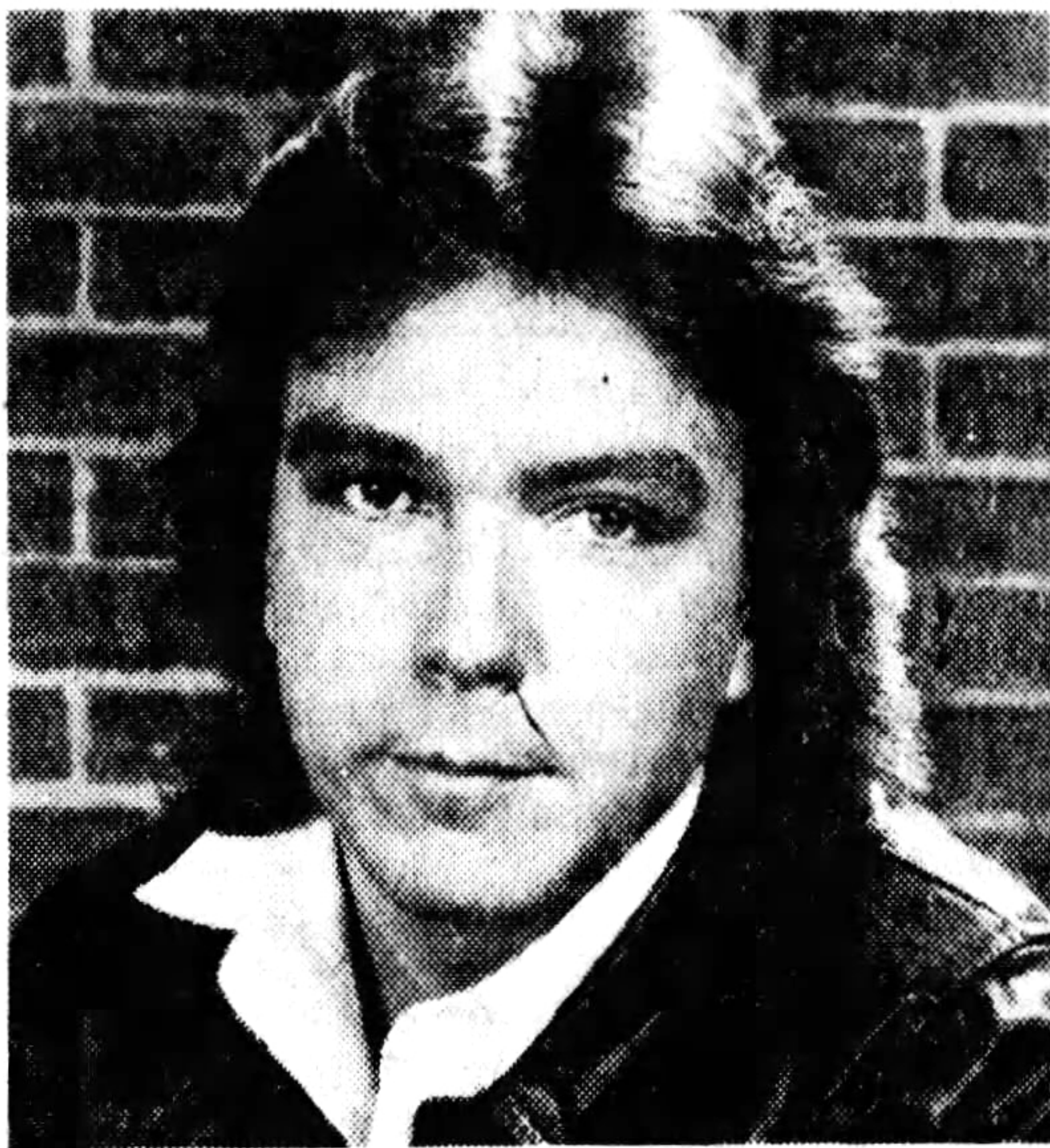
Several things conspired to bring him out of his voluntary sabbatical. He was listening to the news at 6 a.m. one morning when he heard that his father, actor Jack Cassidy, had burned to death in a fire. Their relationship had always been erratic and they hadn't seen each other for a year before the death.

It turned out later that each recently had mentioned to friends that he intended to break the silence.

"But the moment I found out (that Cassidy had died), I felt like he just passed through my body. Everything that hadn't been straightened out, that hadn't been cleared, everything was suddenly okay."

He speaks wistfully of his father now.

"I kind of always wanted us to have a relationship more as friends and I think he found that difficult Most of the time he was giving me fatherly advice, which of course I totally ignored."



David Cassidy as Dan Shay

"But he had a tremendous influence on me. I see myself feeling his presence more now than I did when he was alive."

The other big change in his life was a blind date that mutual friends arranged with actress Kay Lenz. It wasn't love at first sight, he grins, "but it was sure heavy like." They were married two months later.

Kay, William Holden's co-star in "Breezy," was getting scripts and working regularly. It began to look good to Cassidy.

"Finally I said, 'Hey, what a great idea — getting up in the morning and going to work,'" he laughs. So he put the word out to his manager that he was available for parts.

"For about six months I read a lot of crap," he remembers. He turned down three situation comedies for fear of re-establishing his former stereotype.

Then he received an offer to play an undercover policeman on a two-hour episode of "Police Story." Though he liked the script, he told the producers:

"I can't play a cop. I haven't changed that much. I'm not 6-foot-2 and weigh 205."

Nonetheless, he was what they were looking for, and he subsequently received an Emmy nomination as outstanding lead actor for the show which aired in May. Spun off from that segment, his new series casts him as Dan Shay, an undercover officer in his mid-20s who looks young enough to penetrate teen gangs.

Meanwhile, he hopes his half-brother Shaun, 20, has taken over the teen-age girl gangs. No such luck.

As he entered a hotel elevator to return to his room, a group of young girls in the hallway recognized him.

"That's David Cassidy!" screamed one, as the others tumbled in the doorway, preventing its closing.

Yep, he's got a lot to live down.