

## **A Star is Made**

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David Cassidy is an American television actor and singer. He is also a "star". The week before last, Cassidy played six concerts over three days to a total audience of around 50,000 people at Wembley's Empire Pool, the major venue of his current British tour. Those 50,000 did not go to see a television actor and singer. They went to see a "star". And they were not disappointed.

Cassidy belongs to that special breed of star: the teen idols. He achieved this position through his role in the successful American television show, *The Partridge Family*. This weekly series, produced and programmed specifically for younger viewers, follows the fortunes of a fictional family who perform in their own rock'n'roll band. Not a singer at all, but a struggling actor, 20-year-old Cassidy secured the part of 16-year-old Keith Partridge after occasional bit parts in *Bonanza* and *Marcus Welby MD*. The show continues. Cassidy will be twenty-three next month. Keith Partridge is still sixteen.

At the beginning, Cassidy had his doubts about the show. He thought the scripts were "terrible". But he needed the work and wanted the recognition. He thought that the songs he was asked to sing were "bubblegum". One of these songs, *I think I love you*, was issued as a single and sold five million copies. David Cassidy became a teen idol. He suppressed his doubts about the music. To date, Partridge Family and David Cassidy albums have sold over eight million copies. People like them.

For the last twenty years and more of relative teenage affluence, there have been teen idols. From the movies (James Dean) to rock'n'roll (Elvis Presley) to television (Richard Chamberlain's *Dr Kildare*) and back to rock (the Beatles) and television pop (the Monkees).

Over the years, the commercial development and exploitation of such idols has been refined down into a more and more exact science. The marketing men now know their target audience: early teenage and pre-teen girls. They know their very best medium of communication: the television series. They know their most lucrative multi-media property: the television pop star who is also a recording artist. They know, more or less, how such an idol should look and walk and talk and sing. They know how to strike the right balance in the television show between music and humour and drama. They know how to work the publicity machine, from the fan magazines on up. And they know how to milk the final product for its full market value, through record sales and publishing royalties and personal appearances and general merchandising. They hit on the right formula with *The Monkees*, and they did it again with *The Partridge Family*.

All this sounds very calculated, very manipulative, very exploitative. And so it is, from one point of view. But it's too simple to depict the marketing men as foisting off a useless and pointless product upon a young and completely brainwashed audience. Because those marketing men are, to the best of their quite considerable abilities, giving the audience exactly what it wants.

If the audience didn't want it, they wouldn't buy it. Cassidy believes as much. "You can only hype them to a certain degree. There has to be something there." Something there. But what? It's possible to try and isolate all the various reasons for Cassidy's success: to break down the particular combination of good timing and massive television coverage and appropriate looks and speech and singing style which has established his present power over his audience.

It seems fairly certain, for example, that music never had very much to do with it. Cassidy has a pleasant but unexceptional voice, well suited to the ballads which make up the most commercially successful part of his repertoire, noticeably strained when he attempts anything louder and

faster and more aggressive. His songs fall, for the most part, into that genre of rock'n'roll known as "High School Confidential", a genre which is really not rock'n'roll at all:

*Cherish is a word I use to describe  
all the feelings that I have hiding here for you inside.*

The message is usually romantic, rather than explicitly sexual. But there are obvious sexual undertones, which become mild overtones in the course of his onstage choreography. The appeal appears to be to very young girls, just graduated from doll play to the weekly love comics, seeking a "real" love object in what is only a more elaborate fantasy rehearsal for, or alternative to, day-to-day reality. Cassidy's fans perceive him as beautiful and innocent and untouched, and they individually achieve fantasy possession of him, choosing to believe that he sings only for them. Cassidy understands this: "There's one song I do, *I woke up in love this morning*, and I find a place where I can sort of point to them. And they each think I mean *them*, and I do."

So Cassidy unlocks romantic and sexual feelings and emotions in his fans. And because his fans have as yet very little understanding of these newly awakened feelings and emotions, they can only regard their idol as in some way unique and magical and omnipotent. As Cassidy's veteran road manager told *Rolling Stone* magazine: "For many of the girls, it's the first time their little thighs get twitchy." It's possible, then, to reduce down the Cassidy fantasy machine into its component elements. It's possible, but finally it probably isn't very helpful. To the casual observer, Cassidy's qualities appear as relative and transactional. But to Cassidy's true fans they are innate and immutable, the magical qualities of a "star".

A star, so legend goes, is a person possessed of charisma, of an aura of the extraordinary. A person, moreover, in touch with strange and mysterious forces. And it's true that a star does possess charisma, that he is in touch with

such forces. But charisma is hardly "innate", and those forces are "mysterious" only to the extent that we refuse to examine them. David Cassidy is a star only so long as his audience wishes him to remain a star. David Cassidy has power over his audience only so long as their need for him exceeds his need for them.

The attribution of "magical" qualities to particular individuals can be viewed, in one way, as a regression to childhood. It implies the same inability, or refusal, to distinguish reality from unreality. And this process seems particularly evident in the case of Cassidy, whose own starmaking audience are barely out of childhood, if indeed they are not still children. It's too easy, though, to sneer at or dismiss the apparently exaggerated reactions of Cassidy's fans. True, they wait at airports for hours to catch a brief glimpse of him. They chase him everywhere he goes. They scream a great deal. But all this is appropriate behaviour, long-established practice, an open code of communication between fans and their idol. They choose to wait at airports, they choose to scream. They do so because Cassidy is a star. They made him a star. They choose to worship him as a star.

Now it may be obvious to us that David Cassidy would not be a star, would not possess charisma, if no one had ever seen or heard of him. But it's also obvious the Mona Lisa would not be considered great art if no one ever saw it. Or that if gold had no exchange value, it would not be valuable. It may be obvious, but it's also beside the point. We are dealing with social perceptions, and social perceptions are continually reified. Gold becomes "valuable", the Mona Lisa becomes "great art", David Cassidy becomes a "star".

The attribution of magical qualities to a particular individual may well be the result of a failure (or deliberate refusal) to see his mere humanity. But it also seems to be a fairly well established feature of human nature. People wait at airports to see David Cassidy. People wait outside Buckingham Palace to see the Queen.

So David Cassidy is a star. And stars are something very

special. Alone together at the top, because they need to maintain a certain sense of distance. Close-up, their safety may be at risk. Or they may appear as too nearly human. Charisma always shines brightest at a distance. Get too near, and you might see Cassidy's famous spots. You might even sense his impatience with the whole charade.

Stars keep their distance. They have their private jets and huge estates and big cars and swimming pools — all kinds of amusements in compensation. And not only is this the accepted way for stars to spend their money: it is the *expected* way, necessary fuel for the admirer's fantasy. For a while, it feels good up there. Cassidy loves performing. "It's the biggest high I can get," he tells the *Daily Mirror*. Though there's always a catch. "When I come off, it's freaky, man. It's a shock to your system."

For the moment, Cassidy keeps running. He still dislikes a lot of his songs. He hopes to quit *The Partridge Family*. He's embarrassed by, but past thinking about, the fan magazines, with their endless photo sessions with articles about "David Cassidy's dream wife". It's all part of the deal, like the David Cassidy tee-shirts and David Cassidy lovebeads and the David Cassidy bubblegum. It's part of the deal, and quite beyond his control. But he hopes to make changes.

"I don't need to work for money. I just want to let the people hear me sing." Sing what? Sing what the people want to hear. If Cassidy wishes to remain a star, he must continue to define himself by the expectations of his audience, an audience of romantically yearning weenyboppers. Most rock stars find themselves caught in a similar way, trapped by the expectations they themselves have created. But Cassidy, as a pop star, is even worse off, because he didn't for the most part set those expectations in the first place: television producers and marketing men did that. So he's caught in a trap of someone else's making. And that, perhaps, is the crucial difference between rock and pop:

*I am a clown, look at the clown  
always a laughing face  
whenever you're around  
always the same routine  
I never change  
not funny ho ho  
funny strange.*

Early intimations of self-pity. But there's no reason at the moment to feel especially sorry for David Cassidy. He's got very rich, and he's made a lot of people temporarily believe themselves to be happy. The real self-pity — and pity — must come later, if they come at all. Right now, David Cassidy is a star. And that is all we need to know.

[1973]