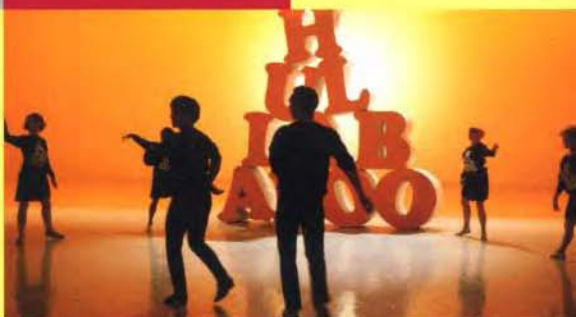


TV

*Rock on TV
from American Bandstand
to American Idol*

a-go-go



Jake Austen

Twenty-one months after the Monkees left TV, Screen Gems debuted *The Partridge Family* (ABC, 1970–1974). Like *The Monkees* the show was heralded by a hit single that shot up the charts before the show debuted. Like *The Monkees* it was a popular sitcom about a made-for-TV band that consistently produced real-life hit records. Like *The Monkees* it promoted new singles with musical numbers built into the show. And like *The Monkees* it produced frenzy among young fans that sparked comparisons to Beatlemania, Sinatra bobby-soxer fever, and Rudy Vallee’s swoon-inducing heyday.

Created by TV vet Bernard Slade and produced by Bob Claver and Paul Witt (who had helped turn Bobby Sherman into a teen idol on the nonmusical show *Here Come the Brides*), *The Partridge Family* was a fictionalized version of the Cowsills story. The Rhode Island–based Cowsills were a typical garage band made up of four brothers that became unique when their mother and seven-year-old sister, Susan, joined the act. Recording an armful of LPs between 1965 and 1971, having hit singles (including “The Rain, The Park, and Other Things” and a cover of “Hair”), making numerous TV appearances, and running the musical gamut from light bubblegum to conceptual rock, the family act was one of the more interesting groups of its day. But by the time Slade became interested in exploring the dynamic of a mom in a teen band, the Cowsills were too old (and other than little Susan, not quite cute enough) to star in the show themselves.

Another reason not to hire a real band was to avoid another Monkee mutiny. This show would unambiguously feature actors (not rockers) with the songs created strictly by studio musicians. When the casting was complete the Partridge family unit consisted of a beautiful, but too matronly to be sexy, mom (played by Broadway and movie vet Shirley Jones), two waiflike and enchantingly pretty teens (David Cassidy and Susan Dey), an adolescent comic prodigy (Danny Bonaduce), and two extremely quiet little kids (dual George Harrisons, without the brilliance, played by Suzanne Crough and Jeremy Gelbwaks, whom Brian Forster later replaced).

The family led a normal life by day (school, chores, pets) but was a popular band in the early evenings and on weekends. The show featured musical sequences highlighted by mimed drumstick motions, keyboard playing, and tambourine shakings, often completely out of synch with the music being played. In *The Partridge Family: Behind the Music* (VH1, 2000), Cassidy, the only serious rock fan among the kids, recalls screaming at Bonaduce for strumming instead of plucking his bass.

One of the most brilliant elements in the construction of *The Partridge Family* was making the mom a widow. By eliminating a patriarch they not only avoided the Ozzie Nelson castrated dad cliché, but also circumvented the sad reality that



The Partridge Family. Courtesy Jake Austen

the fathers of most musical family acts, including the Cowsills, the Beach Boys, the Jacksons, and even the Shaggs, were abusive dictators whose pursuit of family fame and fortune magnified existing dysfunction. It also suggested an unspoken subtext: the possibility that before settling down Shirley had been a loose and wild rock chick, as all her children clearly had different fathers.

Wes Farrell, who produced the music for the show, was similar to Don Kirshner in that he oversaw a brilliant stable of writers, including Neil Diamond and Barry Manilow. He composed a number of decent hits himself, but his fortune came from controlling the publishing of his gifted legion and from his ability to nurture a hit. In addition to using the finest tunesmiths Farrell also had the absolute best session musicians (including Tommy Tedesco, Mike Melvoin, and Hal Blaine) record the Partridge tracks; he also had a charismatic vocalist with a sexy voice in David Cassidy, who successfully lobbied to sing his own leads, despite being cast as a looker and lip-syncher. The resulting Partridge Family records were good enough to be hits. But they were *just* good enough, as Farrell didn't possess the intangibles that made Kirshner's best output so magical. The greatest Monkees songs transcend the disposable nature of their context, and that's why countless musicians credit that show with leading them down rock's glorious highway to hell. In contrast, when Joey Green, in his book *Partridge Family Album*, sur-

veyed rock stars to see how the Partridges influenced them, he received the written equivalents of blank stares. “Phil is sorry he’s unable to help you,” Phil Collins’s assistant responded in a typical reply, “as the Partridge Family didn’t do anything to influence him.”

Though they made some catchy songs—“I Think I Love You,” “I Woke Up In Love This Morning,” “Bandala,” “I Can Feel Your Heartbeat,” “Doesn’t Somebody Want to Be Loved”—the Partridge Family did not rock. In fact, the Partridges were perhaps the greatest triumph in TV’s long history of attempts to neuter the danger of rock ‘n’ roll. Although Ricky Nelson obviously came packaged with the parental seal of approval, at least his music stayed true to rockabilly, a genre with a raw, uncouth, rural heart. And while the Monkees may have been the definition of bubblegum, any interpretation of their antics must involve some threat to genteel society. (If you choose to ignore the obvious drug-laden counterculture themes and attribute their zaniness simply to Marx Brothers–style madness then you still have a scenario where America’s kids are worshiping behavior fashioned by anarchist Jews.)

The Partridge Family, on the other hand, made pleasant pop presented in a wholesome and sober manner. More significantly, they removed all the unsafe accoutrements of rock. Their mom was in the band, so certainly there was no sex or drugs or even hanging out after the shows. And in contrast to that Woodstock thing everyone had heard so much about, Partridge Family concerts all seemed to take place in dinner theaters or lounges with fans seated at tables politely applauding. The band was *sort of* part of the counterculture, at least aesthetically (they have long hair and a psychedelic bus) and politically (they do concerts to help displaced Native Americans on one show and a ghetto social program on another—in that episode, featuring a guest appearance by Richard Pryor, Danny even joins the Black Panthers). But as positive as their music and motives were, the Partridges never ruffled any feathers.

This isn’t an indictment of the program (which got better ratings and lasted longer than *The Monkees*). In general, *The Partridge Family* was a decent show. “We always figured,” Slade explained in the book *The Partridge Family Album*, “that we were a classier show and that we had better scripts [than *The Brady Bunch*].” He’s right. Many 1970s shows are still appreciated because of their camp and nostalgia value, but *The Partridge Family* has persevered because it was pretty good. Cassidy and Bonaduce possessed excellent comic timing; most of the writing, though hokey, was fairly sharp; and the overall look and feel of the program was solid (though mundane compared to *The Monkees*, the show was visually superior to the cheap-looking sitcoms that dominated the decade).

But the real legacy of the show isn't its content or even the hit records, but the fury it created surrounding David Cassidy. Like the Monkees before him, Cassidy was victimized by his own confusion about the legitimacy of his career. Like the Monkees he made the mistake of thinking his band wasn't real just because they were fictional. For someone who already had issues coming into the game, that crisis made it pretty hard for him to heed his own lyrical command to "get happy."

I won't be presumptuous enough to psychoanalyze Cassidy, but I will present the data and let you armchair Freuds have a go at it. The press had a field day with the charming fact that David Cassidy's TV mother was played by his real-life mom, Shirley Jones. He had a civil relationship with Jones, but she was actually his stepmother, the woman David's father left his mother for when David was five. His father rarely contacted David during his childhood ("a little boy shouldn't have been shunned like that," Cassidy told *Rolling Stone* in 1972). Jack Cassidy had been a stage and screen actor who stands as the all-time greatest villain on *Columbo* (NBC, 1971–1978; ABC, 1989–1990) because his cold, mesmerizing eyes conveyed a perfect balance between swarmy charm and brutal cruelty. He was a serial philanderer and a shitty father, rarely on good terms with his children. But when David decided to give showbiz a try (because, as he told *Las Vegas Weekly* in 1998, "I just wanted to act, like my father, and have him appreciate me for my talents") his dad made a gesture of reconciliation by setting him up with a super agent. Reportedly jealous of the success of others, Jack's relationship with David eroded again when *The Partridge Family* made his son a superstar.

Since he was the only Partridge who could sing (other than Jones, who was contractually guaranteed to do backup vocals on the records, earning her some royalties), David toured the country as a solo act on the weekends after filming the show, playing matinees to 56,723 screaming girls in the Astrodome one day, then to 20,000-plus in a sold-out Madison Square Garden another. His fans didn't miss the other Partridges; the singer and lead guitarist are the only ones anybody ever wants to see. But they did want to see a Partridge, as the songs he sang on that show, and the self-effacing character he played, were what made (to quote David from his *Rolling Stone* interview) "those girls leave behind thousands of sticky seats." David, however, was uncomfortable being white-bread Keith Partridge. He was a natural on stage, a decent rock guitarist and an aspiring songwriter who nurtured relationships with John Lennon and Brian Wilson. He wanted the credibility he felt he deserved, so he tried to get out of his TV contract and attempted to change his image (partially by doing the *Rolling Stone* piece, where he exposed his pubic hair, got high around the reporter, and let a girlfriend

tell the magazine he “was a really good fuck”). After the show ended he laid low, eventually attempted to get back into acting, and spent decades sounding either hostile or ambivalent when discussing *The Partridge Family*.

Cassidy’s bitterness is understandable. It’s hard for bubblegum music idols, from Fabian to Vanilla Ice, to get any respect after their brief moment on top, and it’s nearly impossible for the Gilligans and the Urkels of the sitcom world to move on after playing an iconic character. So David was double-screwed. That said, one of the keys to his redemption was realizing that Keith Partridge, despite being make-believe, was made real by the millions of little girls who believed in him. Today Cassidy is a doing well, both as a hot Vegas attraction and as a successful touring musician, and the key to these achievements has been embracing the idea that his loyal original audience was right to believe what they saw on TV, even if he thought it was bullshit.

Probably the most telling evidence of his troubled relationship with his Partridge past was a 2000 VH1 special about the show. Throughout the hour he seemed really upbeat and grounded, finally at peace with his legacy. But as the show progressed he began to seem a little *too* into the Partridges: he was producing a made-for-TV movie about the show, rerecording the songs with the original session men for that movie’s soundtrack, and then re-rerecording the songs with New Age arrangements for a solo album. It seemed that he had reached a juncture in his career where it was prudent to be pro-Partridge, and perhaps his charming smile was pasted on to cover his still seething hostility. This theory proved to have merit when the show ended with Cassidy declaring that he has nothing bad to say about his Partridge days. He then paused, looked directly into the camera, and in a half-joking, half-scary tone declared, “*And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise!*”



Because the Monkees’ success with preteens was immediately followed by the Archies’ success with pre-preneens, which was followed by the prepubescent popularity triumph of the Partridge Family, it became clear who made up the made-up band demographic. From then on the phenomenon mostly was relegated to kiddie shows, and for the next thirty years some of the more interesting TV rock appeared on Saturday morning instead of Saturday night.

The Banana Splits (NBC, 1968–1970) were four animals named Drooper, Snorky, Bingo, and Fleegle (live-action people in puppet suits) who played bubblegum flower pop while cavorting around playgrounds and their hip pad in Mon-