

TV idol worth millions in teenage market

By DAVID LAMB
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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—They came at him as if on cue, the flashbulbs on their instamatic cameras popping furiously, thousands of girls intent on nothing less than mauling, maiming or at least touching David Cassidy.

Their pounding feet echoed through Albuquerque's tin-roofed Coliseum and they reached the stage just moments behind three husky cops, who scooped up the 125-pound Cassidy, rushed him to a nearby limousine, waiting with doors open and motor running, and flung him head first into the back seat.

The driver stepped hard on the accelerator and the black Cadillac sped into the night, leaving behind a throng of girls who clutched \$2 David Cassidy posters, \$1 David Cassidy photo albums and \$1 David Cassidy Love kits, who chewed Partridge Family bubble gum and wore David Cassidy dresses, David Cassidy blouses and David Cassidy shirts, a few who even carried David Cassidy coloring books and David Cassidy lunch boxes covered with David Cassidy "luv" stickers ("include 25 cents extra for rush handling").

NICKEL AND DIME STUFF? Not at all. The marketing of a teen-age idol has come a long way since the days of Rickie Nelson, Frankie Avalon and Fabian. It's strictly big business, shrewdly promoted and skillfully merchandised.

Consider, for example, 21-year-old Cassidy—also known as Daru Enterprises, Inc.—who plays Keith Partridge, 16, on ABC-TV's Partridge Family series. And consider the spending power of his pre-teen audience, an audience considerably younger, wealthier and more exploited than that which swooned over, say, Bobby Rydell, a decade ago.

In a single day last month, the four Partridge Family record albums on the market sold a combined total of 200,000 copies. (A store can buy a record for \$2.25 and sell it for \$4.98 with the performer getting from 1 per cent to 9 per cent and the producer from 1 per cent to 4 per cent.)

SCREEN GEMS, the television subsidiary of Columbia Pictures which owns the Partridge Family, has earned over \$100,000 from bubblegum royalties this year "and we'll quietly make a fortune on a new line of Partridge Family dresses," a top executive said.

Cassidy, who draws a weekly allowance of \$150 from his business manager, Lee Buch, but stands to earn over \$250,000 after expenses this year, recently grossed \$58,000 for one-night concerts in Amarillo, Tex., and Albuquerque (before the promoter's share and \$20,000 expenses, including a \$1,100 chartered return flight to Los Angeles).

As a result of Cassidy's popularity, six-figure deals are negotiated, people struggle to get close to him and related



ABC photo

Cassidy: being an idol is big business.

employment extends from New York's record promoters and fan magazine publishers to Hollywood, where Mikal Bales works nearly fulltime designing his show clothes (always white in keeping with the "youthful purity" of his image), often spending an entire week stringing thousands of decorative beads on 20-pound test fish lines to be sewed on Cassidy's concert costumes.

SO FIERCE DOES the competition become for a piece of the action that when Cassidy's contract expired with a talent agency 18 months ago, Ruth Aarons, president of Aarons Management, Inc., which represents Cassidy, tells of being offered \$125,000 "front" money, a sizable under-the-table bonus and a promise of hidden interests in future deals, if she would sign with a certain new agency.

"The word spread like a virus that David's contract was available," she said. "People just started coming out of the woodwork."

In some ways, the most difficult promotion problems are over. For Cassidy, like Bobby Sherman, Donnie Osmond and a handful of other teeny bopper stars, have long since made it. But why them? Are they the creation of a public relations genius like the late George Evans who paid "bobbysoxers" \$2 an afternoon to squeal over Frank

Sinatra outside the Paramount Theater in New York 30 years ago?

"THERE'S A LOOK to what kind of face is marketable these days," said Cassidy's personal manager, Jim Flood. "With David, it's a positive sexual quality, a youthful, clean-cut look that is threatening neither physically nor emotionally to young girls."

Flood smiles remembering that when he first met Cassidy two years ago, Cassidy wanted no part of teenybopper fan magazine interviews. Flood had to remind him that teenyboppers don't read Newsweek or Esquire—but 3.5 million of them do devour a dozen teen fan magazines every month.

No one knows this better than Chuck Laufer, a former high school English teacher who publishes Tiger Beat (monthly newsstand circulation 400,000), Fave (285,000) and The Partridge Family (300,000). He also recently bought the Partridge Family Fan Club (200,000 members at \$2 each a year) from Screen Gems and markets his own Cassidy products through advertisements in his magazine.

Not long after Laufer started pushing Cassidy—and Cassidy's fan mail jumped to about 10,000 letters a week—the president of Bell Records, Larry Uttal, put his Western regional promotional director, Harvey Cooper, on the road with instructions not to come home until the Partridge Family's first single was a hit.

THE RECORD was one of about 300 released by various companies that week—and every week—and most top-40 stations are willing to play only three or four. The others wither unaired. From program directors in Los Angeles, Phoenix and San Diego, Cooper received the same answer: "I'll never play that record."

It was not until Seattle that Cooper found a station, KJR, willing to give the single a test run. The listener response was immediate, the reaction spread overnight to other stations across America and "I Think I Love You" was on its way to becoming a 5 million seller.

In the spring, Miss Aarons and Flood will move Cassidy from the tank-town circuit to large auditoriums only in major cities. The hysteria over a young star seldom lasts much longer than two years, they say, and already they are casting about for a solid movie that will challenge Cassidy's acting ability and elevate him from the teenybopper level, a role some other performer and his agent always wait to fill.

Only last month, in fact, the baleful face of 20-year-old Michael Gray ("To hear his husky, sexy voice and look into his deep green gray eyes will entrance you!") peered from the pages of Tiger Beat.

The teaser headline asked: "He's alone . . . he's lonely . . . can you love him?" Thousands of girls wrote to say they could. Some of them, perhaps, would even be interested in bubblegum bearing his name.