

AMERICA'S MOST TURNED-ON FAMILY

How did "Partridge Family," a show which looked like a sure-fire bomb, suddenly explode into a Top 10 winner? Is it the appeal of David Cassidy to pubescent girls — or the more mature charms of his stepmother . . . ?

By Aljean Harmetz

"If we could only auction off his gallbladder," said a cynic, "we could make a fortune."

"Auction off the whole gallbladder, hell," said a more businesslike cynic. "We should sell each gallstone separately."

Although Screen Gems has turned down requests to bronze David Cassidy's gallstones and to embed his hair clippings in plastic, they are doing a brisk sale in *Partridge Family* coloring books, lunch boxes, paper dolls, comic books, wiggle postcards, children's dresses, paperback mystery novels, "Patti Partridge" dolls and two record albums that have sold over a million copies each. During April and May of 1971, Screen Gems' royalties from *Partridge Family* bubble gum alone were \$59,000.

In September, 1970, *Partridge Family* was merely one of 23 new prime-time television shows hoping to make it through the year — a situation comedy about a widow (Shirley Jones) with five children (including her real stepson, David Cassidy) who is forced to become a permanent member of their rock group when their girl singer gets the mumps.

It was neither more or less artificial than the situation comedies that surrounded it or opposed it.

Partridge Family belonged to that large subgroup starring beautiful/handsome widows/widowers with large numbers of adorable children. The music was

pleasant enough, sweetly sentimental under its rock surface. In the time sequence of childhood, the music was a cut above bubble gum music, a cut below Three Dog Night.

"By the fifth Nielsen, I knew we had a winner," says executive producer Bob Claver. That fifth Nielsen (Oct. 23, 1970) showed *Partridge Family* with a 17.5 rating and a 30 per cent share of the audience, its competition a footstep behind at 16.8 (Andy Griffith's *Headmaster*) and 16.3 (*Name of the Game*).

By December the show was in the Top 10; *I Think I Love You*, the show's first record, was well on its way to selling 3.5 million copies; and David Cassidy as Keith, oldest of the five Partridge children, was well on his way to having a million pubescent girls fighting over his gallbladder.

Since adults rarely chew bubble gum, it might be easy to dismiss *Partridge Family* as another in the series of children's hours from *Davy Crockett* to *The Monkees* that have their hot season in the sun and then melt, leaving something of a chocolate mess behind.

A Nielsen "audience composition" survey did indeed call *Partridge Family* the highest rated TV program among children 6 to 11. But the NAC breakdown also showed that, although 38 per cent of *Partridge Family* viewers were children, 28 per cent were women over the age of 19 and 19 per cent were grown men.

Partridge Family started as *Family Business* in the typewriter of Bernie Slade in August, 1969. Slade, who had already created *The Flying Nun*, *Love on a Rooftop* and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, had a contract with Screen Gems, Columbia's TV subsidiary, to create three pilots a year.