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"The Partridge Family" principals from left (front row): Shirley Jones, Brian Forster and David Cassidy; (back row) Danny Bonaduce, Suzanne Crough and Susan Day.

'Partridge' High In TV Tree

By ALJEAN HARMETZ

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"IF WE COULD only auction off his gallbladder," said a cynic, "we could make a fortune."

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.

Last September "Partridge Family" was merely one of 23 new primetime 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 Neilson, I knew we had a winner," says executive producer Bob Claver. That fifth Neilson (Oct. 23, 1970) showed "Partridge Family" with a 17.5 rating and a 30 per cent share of the audience its competition

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They Think They Love You, Partridges

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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 3,500,000 copies; and David Cassidy as Keith, eldest of the five Partridge children, was well on his way to having a million pubescent girls fighting over his gallbladder.

BECAUSE ADULTS rarely chew bubble gum, it might be easy to dismiss "Partridge Family" (ABC, Channel 2 Friday) 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 Neilson Audience Composition survey did indeed call "Partridge Family" the highest rated television program among children 6 to 11. But the report 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 television subsidiary, to create three pilots a year.

To get his new show on the air, he would have to create something different enough to be interesting, familiar enough to sell to a network. Remembering "The Sound of Music," he decided "to try a combination that hadn't been tried before on television, a show that had a straight story line but also had music."

"The Monkees" may not have been in the back of Slade's mind as he sat down at his typewriter but, at one time or another, it was in the back of the minds of most people connected with "Partridge Family"—both as a goal and a warning.

The emphasis on teen-age music had made a success of "The Monkees." But the success had come apart in Screen Gems' hands long before it should have. Ed Justin, head of merchandising for 16 years at Screen Gems, said that was partly due to the rapidly enlarged egos of the four performers.

"The mistakes we made on 'The Monkees,'" Justin said, "is that we didn't poison the four actors the first week." As soon as he read the pilot script of "Partridge Family," Justin knew that the show would be highly merchandisable. "I've been at this so long I can smell it."

THE DAY THE SCRIPT was out of Slade's typewriter, it was sent to Shirley Jones. "I thought it had the best chance of success of any pilot script I'd ever read," Shirley said. "For a situation comedy, it was written honestly; and the Partridges weren't a fairy-tale, candy-box family." She was never to waver in her certainty that the show would be a success—even when everyone else connected with it was sure it would fail.

Bob Claver, the executive producer—a sensible, intelligent man with a teen-age daughter of his own—now had to find five children. There would be a male teen-ager to attract teen-ager girls to the show, a female teen-ager, and three more-or-less-little children. Although the Partridge children were supposed to sing or play musical instruments, Claver did not look for children with musical talent.

"If we were to have looked for five kids who could act and sing, we'd have been looking for five years." As it was, Claver interviewed 850 children before deciding to test 10—two for each role. They were tested and chosen "in relationship to each other—for the chemistry."

From the beginning, Shirley Jones was aware that her stepson was being considered. The only person at Screen Gems who knew of their relationship was casting director Rene Valente. She withheld that information until Cassidy became a finalist.

Success in television comes from small accidents. Lucky as producer Claver was with David Cassidy's ambience and singing ability, he was equally lucky with 11-year-old Danny Bonaduce's ability to make anything he says sound funny.

A random sampling of children in West Los Angeles shows that almost all children under the age of 12—male and female—turn on "Partridge Family" not for David Cassidy but for Danny Bonaduce. In fact, for young children, David Cassidy runs a poor third to Shirley Jones.

THE PILOT was finished in December 1969. ABC policy then demanded that it pass an audience research test. The pilot was "a smashing success," and the network decided to go ahead. But when, a few months later, the first six shows were shown to a similar audience, the results were not exactly smashing. "In fact, they hated it," Claver said. The network was gloomy. Claver was gloomy. "How could they like the pilot and hate the other six shows?"

Claver soon had reason to be even gloomier. ABC had decided to put "Partridge Family" opposite Andy Griffith's new show.

What ingredient or combination caused "Partridge Family" to rise like a helium balloon above its competitors while so many seemingly similar television shows huddle forlornly in the Neilson doldrums? "A lot of kids would like to be in that family. It seems like fun. I'd like to be in that family if I were a kid," Claver said.

SHIRLEY JONES and her stepson, David Cassidy, who portray mother and eldest son in ABC-TV's "The Partridge Family" each Friday.

"It's the emphasis on teen-age music," Ed Justin held.

"You can't just say the music is responsible," David Cassidy said. "It's the chemistry between the actors. The show's positive. We're not trying to bring anyone down."

CASSIDY IS a frail, courteous, 21-year-old boy with hair the color of bronze. It is Tuesday, Aug. 10, Cassidy's first day back at work since his operation. His gallbladder was removed at 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 13. By dinnertime his fans were hiding in the diet elevator of Mount Sinai Hospital, perhaps in hope "of seeing me with the intravenous still in my arms."

During his two-week stay in the hospital, he received 5000 get-well cards and several hundred presents, including a large number of candles, incense, love beads and "more stuffed partridges than I ever knew existed."

Of his own success, Cassidy—who opens doors for ladies, seems spotlessly wholesome—muses, "Who can say why one person is singled out? Maybe because of the way I talk or look. Possibly because I'm uncomplicated, clean. There's no threat involved."

There is still the question of how much of "Partridge Family's" success is due to David Cassidy and how much of David Cassidy is due to the show's success.

"IT'S SHIRLEY JONES who makes it all happen," writer Bernie Slade said. "Kids loved 'The Monkees' but their parents hated it and the result was no more Monkees. Shirley is our adult point of view, a parent figure who appeals to adults for her beauty and her warmth and her brains."

"I've always felt that I'm right for television," Shirley said. She looks rather like an oversized canary — yellow slacks, yellow shirt, yellow sandals propped up on a scarred wooden coffee table in the living room of her Beverly Hills home. "People trust me and you have to be trusted to be in television. When you're in someone's house each week, they have to know they can trust you."

Unlike most actresses who, even in their living rooms, seem to be rehearsing for a picture—their carefully decorated houses and splendid little art collections being an extension of their last role or their next one—Shirley Jones seems quite capable of mashing a clove of garlic.

For the first time in a career that started as an apple-cheeked Rogers and Hammerstein heroine ("Oklahoma," "Carousel") and included an Academy Award as a prostitute ("Elmer Gantry"), Shirley Jones is notorious. "I get more fan mail in the teen magazines than any other adult."

From the beginning Shirley Jones has felt that the success of the show depended on "the honesty of the characters and the rapport we have as a family."

ON THE BIG, COOL STAGE at the Columbia Ranch in the San Fernando Valley, the rapport is apparent. Because it is David Cassidy's first week back at work, the burden of the script centers on "the little ones."

In the hierarchy of the show, "the little ones" are Danny, Chris (played this year by 10-year-old Mark Forester) and Tracy 8-year-old Suzanne Crough). The big ones are Keith (David Cassidy) and Laurie (Susan Dey). For script purposes, Cassidy, 21, and Miss Dey, 18, will "stay in high school forever, like Little Orphan Annie."

Shirley balks at "the usual mother image of male television writers, the little woman in the kitchen stirring something on the stove and patting the little dear on the head. "I refuse to allow my own children to wallow in self-pity, so I won't allow it of my television children. I won't say, 'No, Danny, honey, let mother help you. What's your little problem?' The producers were afraid I sounded too harsh with the kids, that the audience wouldn't like it. But the audience loved it."

On Sept. 17, "Partridge Family" starts its second year after a summer of very high Neilson ratings on the show's reruns. This time, despite the competition of "O'Hara, Treasury Agent" and "NBC World Premiere Movies," everyone connected with the show is convinced that audiences will continue to love it.

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