

Jones took long road from church soloist to TV star

By LAWRENCE LAURENT

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WASHINGTON — Shirley Jones wasn't always interested in show business. She didn't even start to sing "until I was 3 or 4."

She was a church soloist in her hometown, Smithton, Pa., at the age of 5. The teen years were spent in high school plays and operettas and she never did get to college. Show business intervened.

At 19, when many girls are pressing orchids into books to remember the college prom, Shirley Mae Jones was memorizing her seven year contract with the composing-producing team of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. She went into the chorus of "South Pacific," into the road company lead of "Me and Juliet" and into "Me and Juliet" on Broadway.

She was the star of her first motion picture, singing the role of Laurey opposite Gordon MacRae in "Oklahoma!"

Her fifth movie was "Elmer Gantry" and it resulted in an Academy Award "Oscar" as the best supporting actress of 1960. By then, she was a doddering 26 years old.

Ten years and 12 motion pictures later, bone weary from supper club engagements and summertime tent show tours, Shirley Jones settled down to a television series. Everyone knew that "The Partridge Family" didn't have a chance. It was scheduled against a new Andy Griffith series on CBS-TV and everyone knew that Andy's shows had always ranked among the 10 most popular shows on television.

Andy knew what hit him. His "Headmaster" series was a preachy attempt at "relevance" and, worse, for Andy, "The Partridge Family" unleashed one of those phenomena of the early 1970s. It was David Cassidy, a shooting star among the tenny bopper, pre-pubescent girls whose tastes change faster than the Washington weather.

"The Partridge Family" was openly modeled on a mother-and-children musical group called the Cowsills. Shirley was the mother and included among the five children was David Cassidy, Shirley's step-son.

The first 1970 season found the fan magazines — read almost entirely by the very young — switching from Bobby Sherman to David Cassidy. A song introduced on TV, "I Think I Love You," demonstrated quickly that David Cassidy was going to have one of those three year runs as the idol of young girls. "I Think I Love You" sold 5 million copies and it sent young (20) Cassidy into a man-killing schedule of working on "The Partidge Family" by day, rehearsing and

recording by night and singing at concerts every weekend. He was quickly selling point for posters, pictures, magazines and even special stamps for fan mail.

The craze is now running out and David Cassidy—a very rich young man — can start trying to move from bubble gum to beefsteak.

Equally great changes took place for Shirley Jones. When we talked, she said: "I went from a soloist to a group singer. I went from a pop singer to a rock singer. I even had to learn to drive a bus." She had never driven a vehicle with a gearshift.

She needed the series, however, she had worked too long to quit, and besides, she was convinced that a career helped her marriage to Jack Cassidy. They were married in 1956 and 10 years later she told an interviewer: "It's good for the marriage. . . Jack and I are never bored with each other. In fact, the marriage is still terribly romantic."

"I have," she said, "an honest relationship with my children."

That honest relationship may have been troubled this year. In January, Shirley Jones and Jack Cassidy agreed to a trial separation. Each made clear that no formal legal action was planned.

Meanwhile, "The Partridge Family" rolls merrily into a third season.