

David Cassidy: Teenage Idol

From That Certain TV Family

BY ALJEAN HARMETZ
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When David Cassidy had his gallbladder removed, cynics in his entourage were heard to say: "If we could only auction it off, we could make a fortune."

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

Although Screen Gems turned down requests to bronze David Cassidy's gallstones and to imbed his hair clippings in plastic, they do 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 record albums two of which 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 FALL 1970, "Partridge Family" was 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 any of TV's situation comedies.

"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.

"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.

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 Slade's mind but, at one time or another, it was in the minds of most people connected with "Partridge Family" — both as a goal and a warning.



The Partridge Family: A television phenomenon. "David Cassidy is the 'Partridge Family' phenomenon," says one of his agents. But among viewers under 12 — male and female — Danny Bonaduce (upper right, in a scene from the show) is the attraction. And according to show writer, Bernie Slade, "It's Shirley Jones who makes it all happen." Whoever it is, the "Partridge Family" is a success and they're happy about it. At center right, Susan Dey as Laurie with Bob Reiner; lower right, Howard Cosell interviewing Shirley Partridge (Jones).

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

"The mistake we made on 'The Monkees,' says Justin, 'is that we didn't poison the four actors the first week.'"

The script was sent to Shirley Jones. "I thought it had the best chance of success of any pilot script I'd ever read," says Shirley. She was never to waver in her absolute certainty that the show would be a success — even when everyone else connected with it was sure it would be a failure.

Producer Claver had to find five children: a male teenager to attract teenage girls to the show, a female teenager, 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. Claver interviewed 850 children before deciding to test 10—two for each role.

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, finished in December 1969, was "a smashing success," and the network decided to go ahead. But, a few months later, when the first six shows were shown to a

similar audience, the results were not exactly smashing. "In fact, they hated it," says Claver.

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 Nielsen 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," says Claver.

"It's the emphasis on teenage music," says Ed Justin.

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

"Let's face it," says one of Cassidy's agent-managers. "David Cassidy is the 'Partridge Family' phenomenon."

CASSIDY IS a frail, courteous 21-year-old boy with hair the color of bronze.

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," says writer Bernie Slade. "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," says Shirley. 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, 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 has ever gotten."

In the hierarchy of the show, "the little ones" are Danny, Chris (played this year by 10-year-old Mark Forster) and Tracy (eight-year-old Suzanne Crough). The big ones are Keith (David Cassidy) and Laurie (Susan Dey). For script purposes, 21-year-old Cassidy and 18-year-old Dey 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, 'Now, 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."

Needless to say, everyone connected with the show is convinced that audiences will continue to love it.