

A Roller Derby View of a Pop Singer's Prison

By ANNA QUINDLEN
Home News Staff Writer

David Cassidy should be a happy man.

The 22-year-old pop star is chased by girls wherever he goes, has made millions on scores of hit singles and albums, and packed in a capacity crowd June 24 at the Garden State Arts Center.

Yet for all his money and adoring fans, Cassidy seems to be a prisoner of his own popularity. He is a good performer, even excellent at times, but he has been trapped into making mediocre music by the demands of his audience.

The fans at his concert in Holmdel were a show in themselves. The audience was primarily girls between eight and 16, accompanied by their parents. Most carried cameras and autograph books; nearly all had bought the David Cassidy programs and buttons or the "I Love David" pennants being hawked at the front of the amphitheater.

"We love him," a 14-year-old with braces on her teeth said while four friends nodded in agreement. "We watch him every Friday night and buy all his records. Why? Because he's cute and he sings good and he's so sexy." Her friends giggled and continued to nod.

"We tolerate him," someone's mother said. "At least he's wholesome and doesn't use drugs or anything."

"WE think he's dynamite," four high school seniors squealed. "We waited all day outside his motel but he doesn't want anything to do with us."

That afternoon apparently he didn't, but by 9 o'clock when Cassidy flew out onto the stage in front of his back-up of brass, piano, organ and drums, the 10,000 screaming fans seemed to be something he wanted to have a great deal to do with.

"Oh wow, I love you all," he screamed, with a plastic sincerity that all those girls seemed to really believe.

It's great seeing all of you," he added, and then swung into a rendition of "Heartbeat" accompanied by the incredible strutting, weaving and bowing that characterized his entire performance.

The singer is just as handsome and child-like as he is pictured on his album covers, but his stage movements are far from innocent. His almost choreographed boogaloo, while attractive, is at the same time obviously suggestive, and he can send his audience into screams or tears with a wiggle of his thin hips much the way Elvis Presley did in the '50s. He jerks the preteens in the audience around like a master puppeteer with every smile, every raised eyebrow, with each sultry look from his eyes.

But occasionally Cassidy does stop the posturing to do a song with some value to offset the bubble gummy quality of hits such as "Could It Be Forever" and "I Think I Love You." Although his voice is

rather small and breathy most of the time, in the lower register he can belt a song masterfully.

His execution of an old rhythm and blues song called "Stop" was excellent. For this number his frantic bumps and grinds slowed to a measured tread and he seemed to enjoy himself. Next was the song, "Beginnings" originally done by the Chicago Transit Authority, and although his back-up group was not equal to the rigors of the number's extensive solo spots, Cassidy's voice was.

Two songs which he had written himself, though not crowd-pleasers, were exceptionally good. "Ricky's Tune," written for his mother, actress Evelyn Ward, is especially touching, with the slow sweet melody and no fancy back-up effects. And although he introduces the number, "Fool For You," with the hackneyed sentence, "I wrote this while I was in the middle of an unhappy love affair" (bringing sobs and gasps from the girls who can't imagine how anyone could put The David Cassidy down), it, too, is a beautiful number, a song with feeling moving through the words and the melody and the piano accompaniment which Cassidy plays himself.

These are the numbers which Cassidy seems to enjoy the most, and it is sad to watch him forced time and time again, between good and excellent numbers, to return to the tinny, syncopated Partridge Family music that has made him a golden boy with his prepubescent fans. He goes from performer to travesty when he is doing these songs and it is not an attractive transformation.

Cassidy feels this too, and almost hurries through the bubble gum numbers. He puts two of the worst, "Doesn't Somebody Want to Be Wanted" and "I Woke Up in Love This Morning," in a medley together and disposes of them happily in a matter of minutes. The others go the same way — presented to the 13 and 14-year-olds for a momentary frenzy of screams and tears, then speeded up to get them out of the way of a performer who deserves much better.

"How Can I Be Sure," his most recent hit, is the only song which is both well-received and well-done. Cassidy gives the song a personal touch and in place of the faked sincerity of the concert's beginnings, there is a warmth in his voice and his movements — in this number, at least, he does speak to the audience.

Unfortunately, however, he has picked "Cherish" as one of his closing songs, and it is in this number that the prison constructed around David Cassidy by his own success is most obvious. The struggle over whether to do this song well or to jazz it up a la Partridge must have occurred to Cassidy — he puts some of his other songs over too well not to have considered it — but the by-now-hysterical au-

dience wants it just like on the radio and whatever the fans want, they get from Cassidy.

As a result, "Cherish" is a juvenile mockery of the beautiful love song it is, accompanied by uncontrollable wiggles and sultry glances so intense that a girl in the third row stood up and took off her blouse before being led from the auditorium by an usher.

By this time, everyone who keeps tabs on the top pop songs knows by omission that "I Think I Love You," Cassidy's biggest hit and perhaps the most bubble gum of all the numbers he has recorded, will be his last song. When the opening song bars of the number begin, the response is immediate, hysterical and frightening. Although there are six policemen and as many ushers barring the stage area, they are not enough to hold back the mass of fans that rush toward the stage when David decides he thinks

he loves them. More than one girl manages to break through the barrier and climb at least part of the way onto the platform before being dragged down by police. One preteen makes it all the way up to the microphone and while Cassidy draws back at sheer panic at the size of the group mobbing the stage, she wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him on the cheek then runs off the stage crying.

The song comes to a tumultuous ending, with girls screaming and David grinning and yelling that he loves everyone and then he runs offstage and everything stops.

There is no call for an encore and some of the parents sit in disbelief at this. The lights come on and all of the teenage girls start to walk out or mob the stage for perhaps one last glimpse of David Cassidy, superstar, and a few older folk who have been through this sort of thing before with Sinatra, or Elvis or

even the Beatles sit startled that there is no spontaneous outbursts, no cries of "more" or standing ovations.

But David's fans understand, as the outsiders to the phenomena do not, that there is no reason to call for more. David Cassidy has no more of what they want. All of the bubble gum songs that he introduced on the Partridge Family show have been sung, and even if he wanted to sing an encore, one of the songs by Jeff Beck or Chicago that he does so well, most of his audience would not care. They did not come to see how well he could sing, but how well he comes up to his television and radio image — and in spite of slight lapses into the realm of real performing, he has done very well for them tonight.

David Cassidy should be a happy man. But if he has ever compared his potential as a performer to his concert output, he probably isn't.



David Cassidy — more than bubble gum