the manufactured idol who broke the mold

(Marilyn Beck has written about Hollywood for 13 years, establishing a reputation as one of the top reporters on the West Coast. This series about behind-thescenes Hollywood is excerpted from her new book, "Marilyn Beck's Hollywood," to be published in September by Hawthorn Books, Inc.)

By MARILYN BECK

Third in a Series

"Screen Gems might not want anyone to know it, but I actually do more than sit home and chew bubble gum. U use four-letter words, I have relationships with women. I go to the bathroom—just like everyone else.

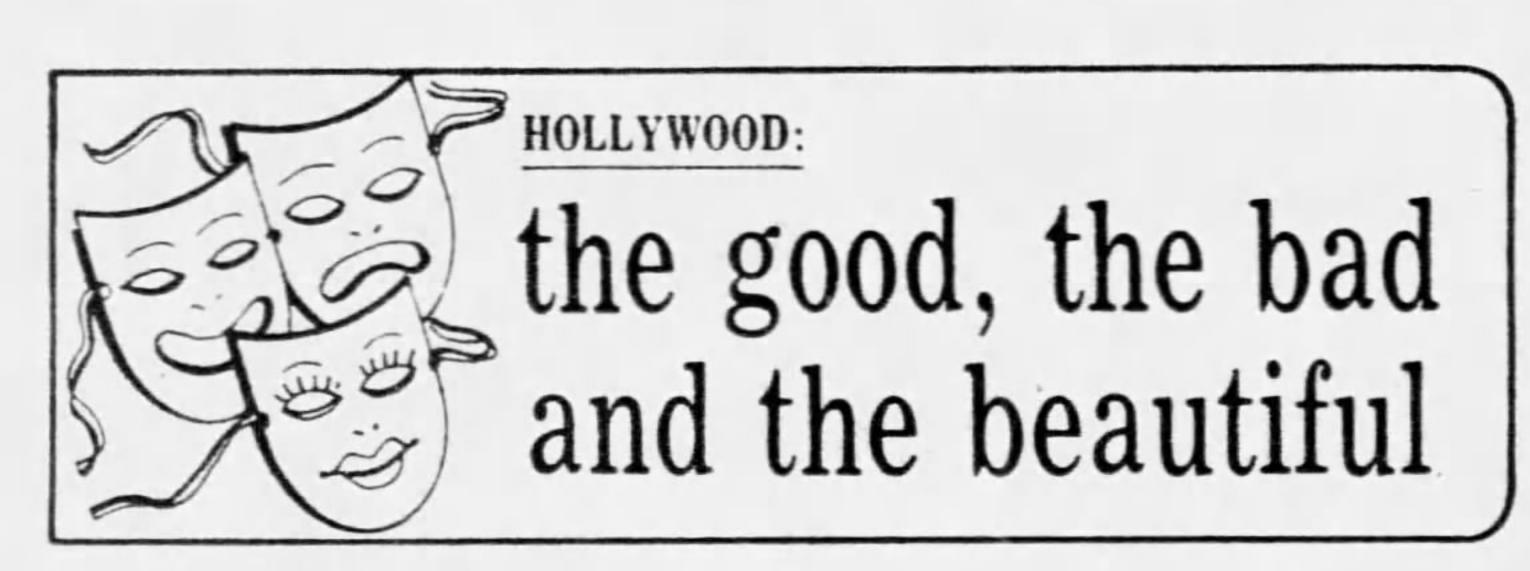
"I want people to know I'm for real. If I can help it. I'm going to be around for a while."—David Cassidy, teeny-bopper idol supreme, 1972-73.

The Now Hollywood didn't invent the idea of creating idols to order for the preadult market. It might have streamlined the system, but it had plenty of samples from which to pattern its models.

Times had changed, but the made-to-order instant heroes of Today all seemed to have been stamped out of a mold developed back in the fifties.

Put them in tight pants and cut-down-to-the-bellybutton shirts, set them upon a stage and turn them on, and they were all guaranteed to shake, rattle, and roll or your money back.

Bob Marcucci served as Gepetto to Fabian Forte and



Frankie Avalon, two handsome young men who got paid while they learned to sing on key for audiences of the late 1950s; who spent the better part of their adolescences listening to teenage girls scream at their labored sounds and fending off the advances of their adoring masses.

OTHER SHARP PROMOTERS did it with other pretty boys, with Bobby Rydell and Bobby Vee and Ricky Nelson. They were real live dolls millions of little girls dreamed of taking to bed.

And, of course, it was supersharp, one-time carnival show operator Colonel Tom Parker who primed and packaged a country boy from Memphis named Elvis Presley and turned him into the most salable commodity in show business.

Remarkably, it was Elvis who was destined to become the one history would record as having changed the spectrum of the music world. The Now Hollywood referred to him in reverence as the progenitor of the rock'n'roll revolution that swept the world in the fifties and brought the surging new sexuality to the pop music field whose influence was still being felt two decades later.

He was the made-for-the-masses rock singer who went on to become the darling of the sophisticates, as powerful a star in his time as Frank Sinatra was in his — in spite of his own insecurities and in spite of the string of brash, insipid, cheaply manufactured films to his discredit.

Because Elvis was the one who survived while all the rest faded into oblivion as yesterday's heroes, because Elvis made the transition from swivel-hipped wonder to headline champion, he's the one whom the manufactured idols of Today turned on to. It was he they looked upon as a god in whose image they wanted to be created.

"I want to be like Presley. I want to score like he has."

DAVID CASSIDY'S LINE of vision was narrow when it came to charting the future.

He could look up — and he frequently did — to the shimmering example of professional longevity set by Elvis.

He could look down — and he had occasion to do that often, too — at the sad examples set by those teenybopper idols who preceded him in glory as Screen Gems Studios' own specially packaged version of the Manufactured Doll.



Presley: He set the pattern and in the end survived them all.

ALL THE OTHER Screen Gems products — Bobby Sherman of "Here Come the Brides" fame, and Micky Dolenz, Davey Jones, Mike Nesmith, and Peter Tork of "The Monkees" — had been relegated to the cast-off shelf reserved for washed-up rock wonders whose TV shows go off the air.

David Cassidy was determined that such a fate wouldn't await him. He was going to move up, not down. And he didn't care if he incurred the wrath of studio bosses to insure that future.

He was going to set the course for continuing success by attempting to make the transition from teen delight to mainline entertainment attraction while he still had the showcase of his existing "Partridge Family" series to assist him.

HE'D SHOW THE WORLD he was more than the shallow, simple, young teenage type he portrayed each week as the oldest son of ABC's "Partridge" clan. He'd show them, even if he had to shock them in the process.

His campaign to act all grown-up began in the spring of 1972, and before he knew it he was suddenly Peck's Bad. Boy around the studio. "I got them all shook up just because I started to let people know I'm for real."

Shook up was a mild understatement for the attitude of ABC network executives and Screen Gems' brass who reacted to David's big-boy behavior with everything from threats that he might lose his series job, pleas that he stop his misbehaving, to fatherly advice that they knew best what was right for him and that what he was doing was wrong.

THEY WERE REFERRING particularly to the showand-tell games in which he engaged for an interview that appeared in the May 1972 issue of Rolling Stone magazine.

The pictures the pop periodical used to accompany the article displayed a David hugging his underdeveloped bare chest, his nude body exposed all the way down to the first, faint vision of pubic hair where — much to the frustration of his worshippers — the art had been delicately cropped.

The quotes contained in the accompanying article became the talk of the town.

Shattering the virginal image of the five-foot-seveninch, 125-pound hero forever, one of Cassidy's girlfriends informed the Rolling Stone reporter that he was good in bed.

And from David himself came accounts that he was not — in spite of the Prince Valiant hairdo he favored — a pure white knight with no faults, no hangups. He confessed that he had been seeing a psychiatrist since age 14 when he had been experimenting with drugs.

The 22-year-old Cassidy recalled his not-so-distant youth for the magazine as a time when "I didn't know who I was. And I did a lot of f---- around, experimenting — not smack, but grass and speed and psychedelics. I had some bad trips — tripping for kicks to the worst, most paranoid places."

HIS TRUE CONFESSIONS also included the fact he had been among those 16-year-olds, who, in 1966, were going up to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district "to see what was going on."

When the article appeared, it just about broke the hearts of the studio brass who'd been molding his career and who had profited handsomely through their two-year association with the son of actor Jack Cassidy, the stepson of "Partridge" mother Shirley Jones.

David made it clear he appreciated the devotion of all those little girls who had made his concerts sellouts and who had left behind in the arenas and concert halls proof of their feelings through, as David put it, "thousands of sticky seats."

BUT HE WAS DETERMINED he would not be a love object who failed to provide for the inevitable rainy day when America's little darlings regrouped around next year's version of the teenybopper delight.

With the encouragement of a management team headed by Ruth Aarons and publicist Jim Flood, David continued to take what he referred to as "a ballsy stand."

The studio's reaction to his "ballsy" behavior became evident immediately.

MY CURIOSITY PEAKED by the New David Cassidy who had exposed himself in Rolling Stone magazine, I phoned to the studio to request a meeting with their young moneymaker.

They'd be happy to arrange a luncheon session, I was assured. But I was also assured that David did not want to discuss "that story."

Being young and impetuous, he had simply made a mistake in judgment, I was informed, and one that he wouldn't repeat.

Like heck!

Jim Flood, the publicist who had arranged "that" other interview, had also been notified by Screen Gems that David would engage in no further candid discussions about dope or sex.

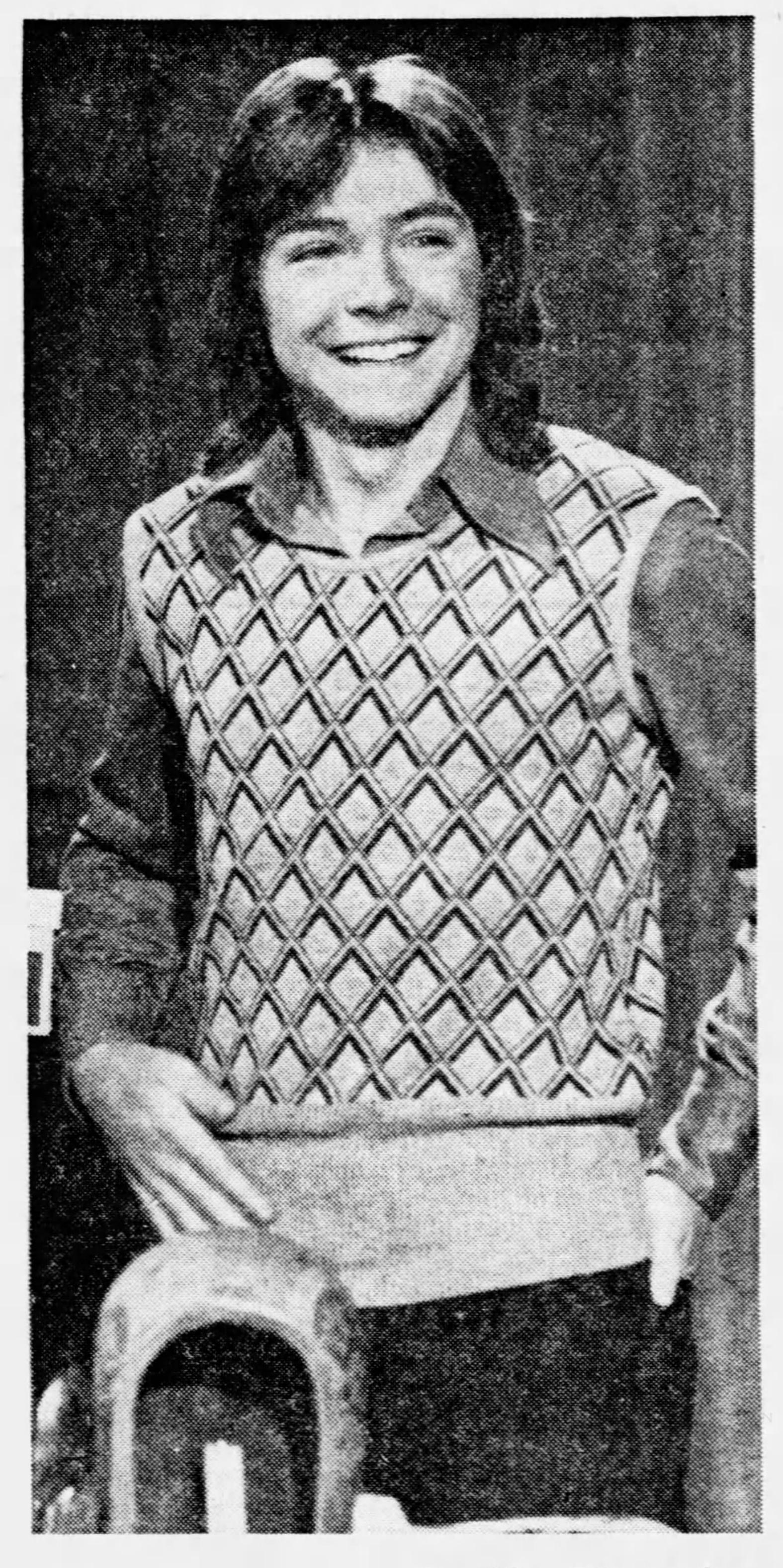
And, just in case either of them forgot the rules, Screen Gems made plans to have a studio publicist sitting in on our luncheon meeting.

Those plans fell apart.

THE DAY AFTER the ground rules were set, I received a call from Flood informing me that our conference would be called to order the following afternoon at a Toluca Lake restaurant near the Columbia ranch where "The Partridge Family" show was shot.

I was there on time. So were David and Flood. And when I asked about the absence of Screen Gems' representative, the fellows shrugged and said she'd probably show up later, but that we might as well go ahead and order our lunch.

We did, but David spent the next hour engaged in such rapid-fire disclosures that he hardly took time to eat.



Cassidy: His confessions broke the hearts of the studio brass.

WITHOUT URGING and with only slight encouragement from his publicist, young Cassidy began immediately to discuss the very subject Screen Gems had warned me he didn't want to talk about.

He thought "that" article's description of his prowess in bed was "well, heck, it was flattering." And he considered the overall tone of the story accurate and favorable.

"I don't know what all the fuss is about," he insisted. "Sure, the article had a sensationalistic approach, but it was generally factual." He did take exception to the fact that "I was made to sound like I condoned drug usage, and I don't."

But he did admit, "Sure, I experimented around when I was in high school, just like everyone does. I'd never advocate the use of drugs to anyone, though. It's something you have to make up your own mind about. For me, personally, I did it and I'm glad, because now I know it's not where I want to be."

I found out later that afternoon that Screen Gems apparently never even knew where David had spent that luncheon hour.

Somehow wires had gotten crossed. Somehow it seemed the studio hadn't been clued into the fact the meeting was scheduled to take place.

It appeared that their young charge had once again outfoxed his keepers.

NEXT: Manufacturing Four Idols at One Time

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