

David Cassidy

irked by his earlier image

By Jerry Parker

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David Cassidy

IN THE early 1970s, millions of American girls put away their Barbie dolls and took up David Cassidy.

They watched him on "The Partridge Family," bought his records, attended his concerts, read David Cassidy comic books, chewed David Cassidy bubble gum, put David Cassidy posters on their bedroom walls and took their peanut butter sandwiches to school in David Cassidy lunch boxes.

Thanks largely to his sometimes hysterical prepubescent following, David Cassidy, at the age of 21, was earning more money in a single night than most people make in years. He sold 5.5 million copies of his biggest single, "I Think I Love You." One afternoon in Houston, he filled 56,000 seats in the Astrodome twice.

His career brought him a Corvette, a mansion in Encino, Calif., and an income in excess of \$250,000 a year. Of course, he hated it. A year and a half ago, he decided that he could not stand it another minute.

"I walked away from it," he said. "I stopped touring, stopped doing concerts, stopped doing the merchandising. Stopped doing the television show, stopped doing interviews, stopped recording."

"What I really stopped doing," he says, "was feeding a machine that was creating an image that was manufactured, fabricated, false."

He is a mellow 25 years old now, and though he says that he is rich enough not to have to work again, he has recently emerged from self-imposed oblivion to resume his musical career. RCA has just released his album, the first that Cassidy has made in two years, and he has embarked on an international tour to plug it.

As he sprawled in a corner of his suite at the Plaza Hotel the other day, Cassidy's choirboy looks seemed to have taken on a touch more strength, a little maturity; though he still retains the essential delicate prettiness that young girls might envy as much as lust after.

He looked very much the kid mogul, with his white Keds propped up on the coffee table and his dark glasses firmly in place while he talked business into a telephone cradled against his cheek.

A photographer was present, and Cassidy's dark glasses stayed in place as long as the shutter clicked. "I woke up late and my eyes are swollen," he said, adding that he had got 15 hours' sleep the previous night and none the night before. "And you

didn't tell me I was supposed to have my picture taken," he said, wagging a finger at his publicity woman. "Naughty, naughty, naughty."

Cassidy has occupied himself with a number of things since he dropped from public view. There are the horses that he keeps on a ranch two and a half hours out of Los Angeles, his new house in Hawaii, his music, and, he says, "a couple of nervous breakdowns."

Defining his terms, he says that, no, he was not hospitalized for emotional problems and never sank into an alcoholic or drug-induced quagmire. He did seek psychotherapy and he did, he swears, take to his bedroom and refuse to come out for three months.

"I took a long time reevaluating what I wanted to do as an artist," he says. "I took a long time reassessing my relationship with friends I had lost because of devoting so much time to a career that was ... fabricated."

Although he once told a reporter, "Listen, if they're going to buy lunch boxes, they might as well buy David Cassidy lunch boxes," he came to hate the thought of himself as a commodity being peddled to children. And he came to hate the music that he was singing to them.

"My record company didn't care about me as an artist," he said. "They didn't understand my saying, 'I don't want to record this anymore. It's all the same.' They said, 'You're making money, why not?'"

Cassidy and his friend, Bruce Johnston, coproduced the new album and wrote several of its songs. Called "The Higher They Climb (the Harder They Fall)," the record is a kind of tongue-in-cheek chronicle of the rise and fall of a teen idol.

"It's like putting a cover on the last five years of my life," Cassidy said. "I lived the personification of the American dream. People no longer want to become movie stars," he said, scratching his nose with his thumb as he talked, as he does quite a lot. "People want to become rock and roll stars."

The seven gold record albums that he did for Bell Records notwithstanding, Cassidy calls his new effort "the first album I've made that's representative of me as an artist." RCA, in its publicity material, says it is the album that "finally allows Cassidy to emerge as the knowledgeable, mature musician his stalwart fans always knew him to be."

Well, maybe, but the most obvious trait about the new David Cassidy is the intensive bad-mouthing of the old David Cassidy, the one to whom the stalwart fans were attracted in the first place.

What was so dreadful about being the idol of millions of juveniles? "I took a part in a television series ('Partridge Family') when I was 19, playing a 16-year-old," he said. "I finished at 23, playing a 17-year-old. That's the way television is, you don't grow up. They don't let you grow up."

"In the beginning it was sort of fun. It was like a loon. I never thought it would be anything that would be taken seriously. I never thought people would look at me as that person on the television show."

In the midst of it all, Cassidy rebelled via a cover story in Rolling Stone. The counter-culture publication photographed him in the nude, then further shattered the image by reporting that he watched a "Partridge Family" episode while smoking pot and quoted a 24-year-old woman, with whom he'd had a casual, on-the-road affair, complimenting him on his sexual prowess.

"The network went berserk," Cassidy said with a mean grin. "The Kellogg's people almost didn't want me to do the Rice Krispies commercial. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite as effective as I wanted it to be."

"Every day that I was on the set," Cassidy said, "I related to myself as the Billy Gray of the '70s."

"Remember Billy Gray? He played Bud on 'Father Knows Best.' All that 'hey, Mom, can I borrow the keys to the car? Hi, Pop, can I go to the prom?' Screen Gems does it again, folks. Fifteen years later, but still in all, they've found themselves another Billy Gray."

"I wasn't living at home in a family situation like that. My parents got divorced when I was 4 years old! Nothing was real about it."

Cassidy is the son of actor Jack Cassidy and actress Evelyn Ward. He saw little of his father during his boyhood and has said that he felt shunned. Although he maintains a good relationship with his former stepmother, Shirley Jones (who played David's mother on "The Partridge Family" and is now divorced from Jack Cassidy), he is currently not speaking to his father.

"I'm incommunicado with my old man," he said. "I've never known him, and I never will. You can't miss something you never knew and I don't care to, quite candidly."

His own adolescence was far removed from Keith Partridge's "hey, Mom, can I borrow the keys to the car?" wholesomeness. At 16, Cassidy was one of the thousands of dropouts who converged on San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. He was "experimenting" with various drugs — marijuana, amphetamines, LSD, he says, but never became a "serious" user.

Mononucleosis took him back home to his mother's Los Angeles house. He finished high school, decided against college and came to New York to be an actor. He worked in the mail room of a garment-district textile firm and took acting lessons from Philip Burton, Richard's mentor and father-figure.

Perhaps the nicest thing that his father ever did for him occurred at that time. Jack Cassidy asked his own agent, a savvy show business veteran named Ruth Aarons, to look after David. Through her, he got a part in a Broadway flop, "Fig Leaves Are Falling."

When that show folded, Aarons reportedly offered him a choice: "Stay in New York and become an actor, or come back to Los Angeles and be a star." Cassidy went to Los Angeles and right away landed several good television shots. A juicy role as a hemophiliac on a "Medical Center" episode sent letters pouring into the editorial offices of Sixteen Magazine, and that was six months before the premiere of "The Partridge Family" in the fall of 1970.

When David Cassidy appeared at Madison Square Garden in 1972, he also stayed at the Plaza. Then, swarms of girls kept the lobby under siege. Two girls in hot pants found their way upstairs and lurked outside his room for hours.

On this visit, no groupies littered the hallways and he walked the streets of Manhattan without fear of molestation. He said that he prefers it that way; that he will measure the success of his new album, not in terms of units sold, but in media response and in "getting people to listen who wouldn't ordinarily listen to a David Cassidy album."

"If they're liking you, or if they're not liking you, at least it will be for something you've accepted the responsibility for," he said.

The album was released last month. Soon enough he'll know whether they're liking him, not liking him, or asking their mothers, "David Cassidy?"