

Gary Deeb *'Police Story' Spinoff Series: Hype for David Cassidy*

If police novelist Joshy Wambaugh had any idea that his "Police Story" television creation eventually would serve as a springboard for a detective series starring that cute David Cassidy, he'd probably spend a week getting drunk at his favorite Irish pub.

For most of five years "Police Story" was the best cop show ever telecast. Even its lesser episodes — featuring the stereotyped car chases, screaming sirens and raging gun battles — usually were taut, suspenseful stories. The acting was uniformly excellent and the writing was several cuts above the level of "Starsky & Hutch," "Baretta" and "The Rookies."

About one out of every four "Police Story" episodes

was a mini-masterpiece, an emotionally riveting tale that revealed a lot about what it's like to be a cop in a big city. The series demonstrated time and again that psychological violence — not physical violence — is a policeman's most dangerous enemy.

In addition to being a moderate hit with viewers, "Police Story" got to be a cult favorite among Hollywood actors. Many jockeyed for position to snare character parts on the show.

Meanwhile, quite a few talented screenwriters, who were fed up seeing their work sliced into indistinguishable sausage links by thickheaded producers, found a home at "Police Story." The same was true of a lot of

cops, who discovered that they could make a few extra bucks by relating some of their more interesting experiences to the producers and story editors of "Police Story."

Alas, all of that ended 20 months ago when Wambaugh left the show to devote his full time to writing more books and developing them into full-length movies.

Last year "Police Story" disappeared as a regular weekly series, resurfacing only sporadically as a 90-minute or two-hour special. Most of the stories were no better than those of any other crime program. The writing was hack and the acting level degenerated miserably.

One of the more inept "Police Stories" in that post-Wambaugh period starred David Cassidy, the former heart throb of "The Partridge Family" and half-brother of current teen idol Shaun Cassidy.

David played a young police detective who stalked the city's high schools in a hunt for teen-age dope pushers. Naturally, this gave the producers ample opportunity to play in some pulsating rock and disco music on the soundtrack. It also gave Cassidy a chance to show that he can't even hold a gun properly.

The absurdity of the program didn't matter one iota to NBC executives. The only thing that counted was the Nielsen audience rating, which was quite high.

That was less than six months ago. Now, because NBC is in such deep trouble with only a few hit weekly programs, network boss Fred Silverman has plucked Cassidy and his "Police Story" role as the basis for a regular Thursday night series. The unintentionally hilarious title: "David Cassidy — Man Undercover."

So, at 29, Cassidy is shooting for a rebirth of his career as a TV and record star. In fact, much of the TV series will be a mere publicity vehicle to push Cassidy's new records.

In cooperation with Warner-Curb Records, NBC is letting the series be used as a blatant attempt to revive Cassidy's moribund recording career. Silverman & Co. apparently believe that if Cassidy's records start selling again, it can only help the audience appeal of the TV show.

Such obvious hype was a major factor in the success of "The Partridge Family" and "The Monkees." Those programs, however, were lightweight comedies. "Man Undercover" supposedly is a dramatic series.

But with Cassidy just finishing recording the "Theme from 'Man Undercover'" and working on a bunch of other songs that will be integrated into the TV show, it's painfully clear that the program will be less a rock-solid cop meller than an adolescent exercise in the packaging of a pretty face with rather thin talent.

So keep your eye on "David Cassidy — Man Undercover." And join us next week when we examine that new ABC Western series, "Redd Foxx — Frontier Rabbi."



Former Teen Idol David Cassidy
Stars in New, Dramatic NBC Series