Partridge pares old image



David Cassidy was a teenage idol when he starred in the TV series "The Partridge Family." After the series ended, he spent three years in a selfimposed exile from show business. Now he's back, trying his luck as a stage actor, playing the lead in a 1904 George M. Cohan musical, "Little Johnny Jones."

By DIANE HAITHMAN Free Press Staff Writer

here are two kinds of fame. First, there is the ordinary kind, which seems to have some logical link with some product the famous individual is able to provide. The kind one gets for, say, playing Hamlet or the oboe, for discovering a polio vaccine or inventing the telephone.

Then there is the kind of fame teen idol David Cassidy had 10 years ago. Not for doing anything, in particular — just for being David Cassidy. Huge, astonishing fame that gave Cassidy a huge fan club, 18 gold records worldwide and made him a millionaire before he turned 21. It is a kind of fame where the fame itself is more interesting than the famous.

You might argue that, in the days when

teenage girls were buying David Cassidy love beads and bubblegum cards, and swooning (and, on one unfortunate occasion, having a heart attack and dying) over Cassidy, that it was because he was a singer. True, he sang — but not well enough to Cassidy



warrant that much attention. Or maybe it was his looks — although 125-pound androgynous boys with shag haircuts and long lashes were not in short supply in those days. Remember Bobby Sherman?

But more likely it was just a peculiar twist of fate and skillful marketing that made David Cassidy, the singing star of the television series "The Partridge Family" alongside stepmother Shirley Jones, into the kind of guy you mail yourself in a box to during those years. He was not the first - and not the last. His stardom only lasted about five years.

But Cassidy knew what to expect. Rather than trying to remain teendom's "fav" (that's what they called the hottest of the hot in fan magazines like 16 and Tiger Beat), he simply disappeared from showbiz for several years, hoping to return in a new identity — as a serious actor. He points out that he was an actor first, a heartthrob second.

Cassidy, 31, is in Detroit now, and no longer has to hide in the bottom of his limousine to keep his hair from being pulled out by teenage hands with painted nails. He is the star of George M. Cohan's 1904 musical, "Little Johnny Jones," at the Fisher Theatre.

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Cassidy sheds teen image

CASSIDY, from Page 1C

Though it's a frivolous show, it's a demanding role, written by song and dance man George M. Cohan in his own image. The question is, after seeing heavy weights James Cagney as Cohan in the film "Yankee Doodle Dandy," and Joel Grey onstage as "George M.," will audiences take it seriously from Keith Partridge?

After 10 years, Cassidy thinks he can be Cohan - if only the critics will let him.

"I got a few reviews in Los Angeles that were just terrible," says Cassidy frankly, backstage at the Fisher. No matter how nonchalant Cassidy is about criticism, opening night is near and reviews are on his

"You know, they just tore me apart, up and down," he continues. "And they made no mention of anything I was doing on the stage. It was, 'How dare somebody who was a recording star, a television star, get up onstage — just because he has 18 gold records, we're supposed to like him?'

"They didn't say I couldn't sing, they didn't say I couldn't act, they didn't say I couldn't dance nothing. They were tearing apart my former career, you know? And that's stupid. That's real silly.

"And we did very well. We broke the house record the last two weeks we were in town in Los Angeles, and they looked like horses' a----. It's just pointless to

"What's going on is what I'm doing today — on the stage," Cassidy explains. His clothes — a tweed cap, pale yellow Izod shirt and tan leather jazz shoes don't lend themselves to being taken seriously, but his manner does. There is nothing left of Keith Partridge except an occasional twinkly smile. Cassidy smokes.

"A lot of people have seen me on television," he says. "It's nice that people remember that, and cared about that and were moved by that and want to come and see me — I'm flattered that they want to do that. But that was years ago — one moves on.

"I was really an actor before I was a recording star - that just sort of happened because of the nature of the television show. I made the decision that I really didn't want to be a recording star - it was not what I wanted to do with my career.

"You have to concentrate your energy - otherwise you fail at everything. In my case, it was going back and being an actor."

AFTER LEAVING "The Partridge Family" and the concert touring circuit, Cassidy went into a selfimposed exile for more than three years, which he spent on his Hawaiian estate and his Santa Barbara ranch. He married actress Kay Lenz in 1977, and in 1978 made a brief return to television in the series "David Cassidy — Man Undercover."

"There's not a lot of good work to be done in television," Cassidy says. "I don't want to do schlocky stuff, you know? And when you make that commitment, you have to stick by it, and it's very difficult to do that in a country where quality is not the commod-

"I watched, for about a year, the stuff that crossed my desk, and I did a couple of schlocky movies-of-theweek — not embarrassing, but schlocky. But then, I thought, this isn't the way to do it. I don't want this. If this is what it's going to be, I'd rather sell shoes. There is some good work being done, but it's being offered to Pacino and Hoffman and those guys . . .

"I turned down a couple of successful television series, which I will not mention, because it's pointless and unfair to the people who are doing it now to say 'By the way, I could have done that.' And sitcoms, commercial, exploitative sorts of films, the horrorfilm genre of today. It's frustrating — every time



Free Press Photo by JOHN COLLIER

David Cassidy appreciates the people who remember his singing from television, but now he's concentrating on being an actor. "I was really an actor before I was a recording star that just sort of happened because of the nature of the television show."

something new crosses your desk, you think maybe this is the one. But - alas." He laughs.

CASSIDY'S FATHER AND favorite actor, the late Jack Cassidy, warned his son at the height of his success that things would not always be this good, only to receive an impatient "Yeah, I know," in response. But Jack Cassidy also told his son to remember that real talent survives the low points, and Cassidy, who believes he has real talent, always remembered.

"Talent is not why you're being offered something - it's a business proposition," Cassidy points out. "I've gone from completely leaving the business for three years, not wanting to be in the business any more, to coming back to find that all those doors that were open to me were not open any longer. You have to reassess what you want to do, and reassess who you are in terms of the business, and look at yourself as a commodity.

"If people are willing to invest a million dollars in you, there's a reason. It ain't just because you've got

"Little Johnny Jones" is the first good thing to come along for a long time.

Aside from a brief stint in a show called "Fig Leaves Are Falling," "Johnny Jones" is Cassidy's first professional stage role. Cassidy admits that six weeks of daily lessons have not made him into an expert tap dancer, but he thinks he can make it work.

"I have come into a couple of towns and said, 'Look, if you expect to see James Cagney on that stage, you're not gonna see him," Cassidy says. "There is no way I could possibly compete with that. That film that he did - it's a legend, really. And he was such a hoofer, to begin with — I'm not a hoofer, you know?"

But, just as he managed to change a career path that controlled him to one he could control, Cassidy has created his own style for the part, and is proud of the achievement.

"I can't say that it doesn't disappoint me when people don't like what I do — I wish I could be that detached from it, but I'm not. You know. I'm not. I suppose if tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow I get panned — really panned, I would be concerned about it. But I can't worry about it now. I just have to go out there and do what I like doing, and do it well."