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David Cassidy, shown here in a 1971 photo, starred in “The Partridge Family.”

The unlikely teen idol

David Cassidy’s popularity with girls shocked his colleagues — and him

BY CAROL DYHOUSE

When David Cassidy died in November at age 67, media reports suggested that legions of middle-aged women were plunged into mourning. Cassidy, whose career was kick-started with the role of Keith Partridge in the 1970s musical-sitcom “The Partridge Family,” enjoyed explosive success during that decade as singer, songwriter and musician, but most sensationally, as the love interest of swaths of adoring teenage girls across North America, Europe and many other parts of the world.

These days we are fairly knowledgeable about fangirls and fandom and male pop idols, from Elvis and the Beatles to Justin Bieber, but Cassidy’s stardom was surprising at the time — not only for the size of his fan club, but also for the nature of his appeal.

History reminds us that although the phenomenon of females going wild over male musicians was not new — after all, 19th-century women had swooned in their droves over Franz Liszt’s piano playing — 20th-century conditions made for differences in experience and scale.

In the 1950s, for example, the career of young musician and rock and roll star Ricky Nelson hinted at what was coming. Ricky Nelson’s fan mail was said to fill an entire room in the Hollywood post office, and his family was allegedly driven to construct an electric fence around their home to keep out love-crazed female intruders. Life magazine ran a cover story on Nelson, coining the term “teenage Idol.”

There was money in all this, but it wasn’t easy for a new breed of music managers to get the formula right and to predict what — or who — young girls would go for. When, in the 1970s, a tidal wave of youthful female passion built up around David Cassidy,

threatening to engulf him altogether, he himself was astonished, and many observers, particularly men, were gobsmacked. To many of them, Cassidy looked like a girly-boy, with his Bambi-like innocence and his penchant for knitted tank-tops worn over flowery cheesecloth shirts. Cassidy was *pretty*. Although he briefly experimented with an edgier, bad-boy image in his 1972 solo album *Rock Me Baby*, he soon reverted to sweet, baby-faced form.

And it was his peculiar quality of sweetness, bordering on androgyny, which underlay much of his appeal. Cassidy was *nice*. He felt *safe*. Teenage girls stuck up posters and built shrines to him in their bedrooms. They diligently studied his tastes, researched his preferences and tried to discover what his favorite colors were. He was almost one of them.

The marketing of male heartthrobs had been standard practice since Colonel Parker had famously worked to turn Elvis into a brand name in the 1950s, licensing the production of all manner of memorabilia: charm bracelets, lipsticks and plastic guitars. Teenage bedrooms silted up with Cassidy-themed merchandise in the 1970s. And the very titles of Cassidy’s hits both encapsulated and distilled the ache of youthful desires and passion, the terrible uncertainty about teenage romance and trust: “Could It Be Forever,” “How Can I be Sure.”

In fact, Cassidy’s sweet indecision showed how much women’s heartthrobs had changed through the 20th century. In the 1920s, it had been the smooth and masterful charms of Rudolph Valentino in “The Sheik” (1921) which had young women weak-kneed with passion. Even Elvis had tried to draw on Valentino’s potent legacy of “Oriental” exoticism. In the film “Harum Scarum” (1965) for instance, Elvis swashbuckles his way around “Babel-

stan” wearing a burnoose, his sideburns slicked into kiss-curls under various styles of keffiyeh or a turban. Hollywood endlessly recycled the sheiks, cowboys, pirates and buccaneers who proved enduringly popular with women. But the teenage revolution and, particularly, the purchasing power of young female consumers, helped to reconfigure the landscape of desire.

David Cassidy didn’t find it easy to be the object of mass adulation, especially when fan behavior ran amok. His concerts attracted the massive audiences (reputedly some 56,000 at the Houston Astrodome in Texas in 1972) that gave organizers terrible headaches and generated epic problems of security and social and civic control. These turned into something worse than a nightmare in 1974, when a pile-up at London’s White City Stadium resulted in many fans being crushed and trampled over; one 14-year-old girl tragically died from her injuries. Cassidy quit touring soon afterward. Thereafter he seems to have suffered intermittently with depression, struggling to escape being defined as a teenage heartthrob for the rest of his adult life.

At the height of his fame, Cassidy’s fan club was judged to be bigger than that of the Beatles or Elvis Presley, and he was said to receive some 25,000 letters per week. Fan ratings of present-day singers and boy-bands dwarf these numbers, judged from Facebook and Twitter. But for many women now in their 60s and 70s, the memory of David Cassidy still evokes nostalgia, a time of longing for romance, the poignancy of flowers pressed in blotting paper, the dream of first love.

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