



**GO ON AND CRY** This photograph of a digital billboard honoring David Cassidy captured the emotions of people around the world. It was taken in Myrtle Beach, S.C., on Nov. 22, 2017.

Photo courtesy of JOHN HUMPHREY

# Teardrop requiem

## How a billboard tribute went viral

**By Mark Wyckoff**

Saying goodbye's not easy — especially when the person you're grieving has made an indelible impression on your heart.

David Cassidy left that kind of impact: On his children, his brothers, his family and his fans across the globe. When the news broke on Nov. 21, 2017, that Cassidy had died of organ failure in a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., hospital at the age of 67, tributes began pouring in. They appeared by the thousands on television and radio; in newspapers and magazines; and across the internet, from Cassidy's own website to Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. "This loss is huge," wrote Cassidy's "Partridge Family" co-star Danny Bonaduce. "Love & Mercy to David," said Beach Boys legend Brian Wilson. Cassidy's brother, Shaun, remembered "all of the funny/sad/extraordinary days we shared, none more filled with love than these last few at his side."

In the months since Cassidy's passing, the posthumous accolades have continued to mount. He was featured in video tributes shown during the Emmy,

Grammy and Olivier awards. Morrissey gave him an in-concert shoutout, and folk-rock artist Sun Kil Moon penned a tribute song called "David Cassidy." Two memorial benches were dedicated in his honor at the National Museum of Racing in Cassidy's beloved Saratoga Springs, N.Y. And at the Phoenix Theatre in London's West End, where Cassidy starred in "Blood Brothers" with Petula Clark in 1995-96, a plaque was erected above the backstage door. Plans are currently in the works to secure Cassidy a star on the Walk of Fame in Las Vegas, where he performed in "EFX" and "At the Copa," and created and produced "The Rat Pack Is Back!"

Seemingly out of nowhere, one of the most heart-tugging tributes began appearing the morning after Cassidy's passing. Spotted by United States motorists from coast to coast, it was a 20-by-60-foot digital billboard featuring the yellow-winged Mama Partridge from the animated opening of "The Partridge Family," a tear running down her crestfallen face as she turns to see the dates of Cassidy's life, 1950-2017.



AMAZONHOTWAX/Instagram



2RDALED/Instagram

## EVERYWHERE A SIGN

On Nov. 22, 2017, a tribute to David Cassidy began appearing across the country on digital billboards owned by Lamar Advertising. The billboards were spotted everywhere from Pittsburgh, Pa. (far left) to Midland, Texas.

It's a simple image, which is why it packs so much power. Cassidy's name isn't used anywhere. It didn't need to be. Anyone impacted by Cassidy's 49-year career as a singer, songwriter, actor and producer would get the message, and they would mourn along with this feathered matriarch. That single tear represented the millions welling up in eyes around the country and around the world.

But who created the billboard, and how did it go viral? Internet conjecture suggested it was paid for by Shirley Jones, Cassidy's stepmom and co-star on "The Partridge Family." Others said it was Shaun Cassidy. But neither had a hand in it.

Instead, credit the billboard's impact to a perfect digital storm, one that began with a lightbulb moment in the very same Pacific Northwest town where David Cassidy had performed his first concert.

This is the story of the tear seen around the world.

## Drawing power

Eclectic doesn't begin to describe Randy Fung's taste in music. Flip through his CD collection and you'll find

everything from Elbow to Echo and the Bunnymen, the Psychedelic Furs to Queens of the Stone Age. Tucked between all of these rock discs are a couple of CDs by The Partridge Family.

Though Fung was only 2 years old when "The Partridge Family" debuted on ABC in 1970, he became a fan by watching the series in syndication when he was growing up in the Seattle suburb of Renton, Wash.

"The show was fun, it was entertaining," he said. "And it had the musical element to it, which I loved. It was just good, fun family entertainment."

When pressed, Fung says his favorite Partridge song is "I Think I Love You" and his favorite episode is "Soul Club," the 1971 classic featuring Richard Pryor and Louis Gossett Jr.

"It's amazing seeing Pryor and Gossett so young," Fung says.

Even as a kid, Fung was knocked out by the now-legendary animated title sequence Sandy Devore created for "The Partridge Family," featuring an egg cracking open to reveal Mama Partridge. After coolly kicking away the shell, the bird gives her head a jaunty shake before walking across the

screen with her five-member brood tagging along behind.

"I love it," Fung said. "I've always loved it. The birds have a real tactile feel to them, and I love the half-tone images of the cast members that are shown as their names flash by. It's got such a '70s feel."

Given his appreciation for the look and feel of "The Partridge Family" opening, not to mention the animated graphics used in shows like "I Dream of Jeannie" and "Bewitched," it's hardly surprising Fung grew up to be a graphic artist.

In his spare time, he pours his love for music into his art, creating concert posters for some of his favorite bands. The gig posters he's designed for My Morning Jacket, especially, have become prized collector's items among the group's fans.

Fung, who lives in Seattle now, is art director of the city's branch of Lamar Advertising, an outdoor advertising company that operates logo signs, transit displays and, yes, digital billboards in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico. His main focus is on designing billboard advertising for local businesses in Seattle and Tacoma. But when time



Digital illustration by RANDY FUNG/Lamar Advertising

**BIRDS OF A FEATHER** Randy Fung's digital tribute to David Cassidy, above, was inspired by the animated partridge, below, that Sandy Devore created for the opening credits of "The Partridge Family" in 1970.

permits and the inspiration strikes, Lamar gives their artists the leeway to create digital tributes to public figures who have passed.

Word that Cassidy was critically ill began to surface on Nov. 18, but Fung had missed those reports. So he was blindsided when he came home on Tuesday night, Nov. 21, 2017, and his wife, Leah, told him that Cassidy had died.

"It was shocking to me," he said. "My wife and I love watching 'The Partridge Family' together."

He quickly decided to funnel his love for the show into a tribute.

"I thought I'd put something together," he said simply.

### Bird man of Seattle

Fung immediately began mulling concepts, and quickly settled on a "Partridge"-themed illustration.

"I remembered the egg cracking in half and I thought, 'Well, that wouldn't really be a good graphic.' Then I thought the single partridge would be the best one. I was debating whether or not

to incorporate the egg somehow, but the egg was kind of extraneous and didn't really do anything. I dismissed that idea without even trying it."



After settling on the single partridge, the idea for the single tear came almost immediately. Now all he had to do was draw it. To do that, he went to YouTube and watched the opening frame by frame, searching for a moment where Mama Partridge was perfectly positioned. He settled on one where the bird is looking backward.

"Initially, I was debating whether or not to use the whole body of the bird, but I then I thought, 'It doesn't need the whole body,'" he said. "I don't think I

ever considered using all of the birds. I think that would be too much. Suzanne Crough had passed away, and now David's gone, so it wouldn't make sense to have all of

them on there. So I figured it had to be the mother partridge and she had to be sad, because she was grieving the loss of her baby partridge.

"To me, on the bird I chose, the angle of the beak and the line that was forming the beak and the mouth made it look like it was sad — like it

was frowning," Fung continued. "I know that wasn't the original artist's intention, but to me it gave the illusion that it was sad. When I added the tear, it really emphasized that."

Once he found the perfect pose, he took a screen shot of the partridge, imported that into Adobe Illustrator on his Mac and began tracing the figure with his mouse to create a vector file.

"The hardest part, for me, because the screen grab I was working with was so blurry, was getting the plume just right on top of her head," Fung said. "I wasn't too concerned about getting it

exact ... I knew if I got it close enough that people would instantly recognize it. I modified the eye a little bit. If you look at the eye I created, it's more of a crescent moon kind of shape and it goes to little tiny points at the end. I don't think the original one was like that. I think it was more of a curved line. I did it because it emphasized the sadness a little more for me."

When the figure was complete, he added the bird's yellow wing and drew the tear. All that was left were the years, and for those Fung knew he wanted to use the same font featured in the TV show opening. He Googled "Partridge Family font" to learn the name—it's called Kalligraphia, created in 1902 by German font maker Otto Weisert—and then downloaded the font to his computer. A few keystrokes later, it was complete.

"I like how the curve of the bird's neck focuses your eyes backward to the dates," he said.

From lightbulb moment to completed design, the whole process probably took about 45 minutes, Fung estimates. He was done before midnight.

The next morning, Wednesday, Nov. 22, 2017, Fung zapped the digital file to his boss in the corporate office. She loved the concept and quickly sent it out to all of Lamar's offices nationwide, giving local markets the option of adding it to their digital billboard mix through Friday, Nov. 24. It didn't take long for the illustration to go live, and soon it was being spied everywhere from Victorville, Calif., to Pittsburgh, Pa.

## On the road

Fung isn't sure how many markets picked his illustration up, but Lamar has offices in over 40 states and operates a network of more than 2,900 digital billboards. That's a lot of potential eyeballs.

Four of those eyeballs belonged

to Marnie and John Humphrey. On Nov. 22, the morning the billboard went live, the Wilmington, N.C., couple was cruising southbound on U.S. Highway 17 in their red Toyota RAV4. They were making the hourlong trip to Myrtle Beach, S.C., in search of Christmas presents.

A few blocks from their first shopping stop, John Humphrey spotted the billboard, which towers over Elite Coastal Landscaping.

"I saw it first and said to Marnie, 'Look at that sign! It's a tribute to David Cassidy!'" She saw it and said, "Oh, that's great!"

A graphic artist himself, Humphrey was impressed by the visual. "I thought the design was brilliant," he said. "Very simple and powerful. A design any David Cassidy fan would recognize immediately."

After dropping his wife off to shop, Humphrey went back and snapped six photos of the billboard. It was 1:10 p.m. Minutes later, he texted one of the images to his sister Carol Humphrey, a longtime David Cassidy fan who lives in Maryland.

Knocked out by the compelling illustration, she posted the image on Facebook and Twitter. Within the hour, it went viral, touching bruised hearts still trying to make sense of Cassidy's death.

"Couldn't have said it better," wrote New York City's John Henle. "Beautiful tribute to the world's best pop idol," commented Scotland's Morag Burke. "That just brought me to tears," said South Carolina's Sheree Posey. "What a powerful image for me, and for the millions of other people whose lives were positively impacted by David Cassidy," said Michael Kosterman, a singer-songwriter from British Columbia, Canada.

Members of the Cassidy family were just as touched. Shaun Cassidy posted Humphrey's photo

to Facebook on Nov. 24, 2017, with a one-word caption: "This." It received 785 comments and 1,962 shares. Patrick Cassidy used Fung's graphic when he debuted his one-man show, "Just Another Family Tree," at Florida's Wick Theatre in December 2017; the illustration was the final image shown in a photo montage that accompanied Patrick's heartfelt rendition of "Danny Boy," which he dedicated to his late brother. It was a powerful moment, that digital tear falling just as real tears were spilling from every human eye in the theater.

## Etched in bronze

Six months later, the billboard was still causing a buzz, and Fung and his wife found themselves sitting in a packed ballroom at the JW Marriott in Austin, Texas. It was May 8, 2018, and they were waiting for winners of the Outdoor Advertising Association of America's 76th annual OBIE Awards to be announced.

In the world of outdoor advertising, the OBIEs are like the Oscars. And Fung was psyched that his Cassidy creation was up for an award.

"It's extremely hard to even get nominated as an OBIE finalist," he said. "Competition is always strong, so I didn't really expect to win anything."

Imagine his surprise, then, when the illustration nabbed a Bronze award in the Nonprofits & Public Service category.

Fung's mind is still reeling from the events of the past year.

"It all seems so surreal," he said. "When I created that original mock-up, I never thought it would gain so much traction and resonate with so many people. Totally caught me off guard. David obviously meant a lot to his fans, and it's been a real privilege to witness that firsthand."