IN PERFECT HARMONY

SINGALONG POP IN '70s BRITAIN

WILL Hodgkinson

particular very much wanted to be famous. And he realised that he was never going to be famous by appearing in the pages of *Gandalf's Garden* magazine.'

Although it wasn't essential to have the looks of Donny Osmond, David Essex or Marc Bolan to make it into *Jackie*, it was certainly a bonus. 'We did have photographs of hairy blokes taken by Harry, who used to say of his shots, "Every one a Rembrandt,"' says Myskow, adopting a hearty Manchester growl. 'But what really sold were the heart-throbs. And you liked one or the other, so there was a lot of rivalry between the Donny Osmond fans and the David Cassidy fans. You couldn't put them on the cover every week but you could always find a way of getting them into the magazine.'

Donny Osmond and David Cassidy shared certain qualities: androgyny, boyishness and cheerful can-do optimism, nothing like the hirsute rockers in make-up who were turning up on *Top of the Pops* at the same time. Cassidy was slender and lithe, with floppy hair and a delicate, rather feline face; attractive in a feminine way. Donny Osmond, with his kind eyes and cute chipmunk smile, was ideal fantasy boyfriend material. Myskow's lightbulb moment, one which helped pushed the circulation up to a million, was to print sections of posters of Osmond and Cassidy over a three-week period, so you would have to buy the magazine each week to get those tantalising feet and legs, then the slender body and finally the gorgeous face, which could only then be Sellotaped together and pinned up onto your wall in a delirium-inducing whole. A March 1973 edition of *Jackie* features a report from a shoot on a boat by Tower Bridge, during which several of David Cassidy's fans jumped into the Thames in a desperate, life-threatening attempt to get close to him. 'Honestly, the ladies here are just fantastic,' was the American pin-up's media trained response. The reality was quite different.

Playing the sensitive, musically gifted elder brother Keith, Cassidy was the breakout star of *The Partridge Family*, the hugely popular American TV show about the five children of a Californian widow who decide to form a singing group. Based on a real-life family band called the Cowsills, *The Partridge Family* was harmless enough, with its tales of the kids zipping about America in their converted school bus and dealing with everything from sibling rivalry to Mum's potential paramours. It had, to use a Partridge-type phrase, some pretty neat pop songs, too. 'I Think I Love

You' has the wrought, sophisticated drama of a Bacharach and David easy-listening classic, yet the fame it brought to David Cassidy all but destroyed him.

'Girls are following me around – they're ruining my whole life!' complains Keith Partridge in one episode. It was a rather more pleasant mirror of Cassidy's unpleasant truth. Girls were squeezing themselves through the air conditioning vents of his house, breaking into his hotel room and attacking him whenever he stepped out in public. Among the fan letters he received were the claims, 'You were adopted and I'm your real mother' and 'I'm your long-lost brother', alongside the ominous announcement, 'I have to have your penis'.[4] The producers of the show squeezed Cassidy's appeal for every penny they could get – paying him $600 a week for the right to do so – by making him film for twelve hours before transporting him to recording studios to pump out singles and albums. There was David Cassidy stationery, lunch boxes, cereal boxes, watches, pendants, jigsaw puzzles, paper dolls and plastic guitars, none of which he had any quality control over or financial remuneration from. After being photographed wearing a necklace made of shells, which he had strung together one afternoon on a beach in Hawaii, there was a rush mass marketing of David Cassidy puka shell necklaces. The American children's clothing manufacturer Kate Greenaway introduced a Partridge Family range, sold with the message: 'David Cassidy will love you in these Kate Greenaways'. A former English teacher called Chuck Laufer, who got in on the teeny bopper market in the mid-'50s with magazines like *Tiger Beat* and *Fave*, started the Partridge Family Fan Club and its accompanying magazine, and as Cassidy recalled in his really rather tragic memoir, *C'mon, Get Happy* (1994), Laufer came up with the brilliant idea of charging members of the fan club an extra fifty cents for 'rush handling' . . . 'And countless girls in the thrall of puppy love – imagining they'd be making contact with me that much quicker – would gladly cough up the extra four bits. All those extra 50 centses sure added up.'

None of this was anything Cassidy, who was only called in to sing the songs on the show after it was discovered that he had a surprisingly good voice, wanted or particularly benefitted from. His parents, the actors Jack Cassidy and Evelyn Ward, divorced when he was five and Cassidy grew up with his maternal grandparents in a blue-collar household in New Jersey. That set the scene for some classic dad hero worship, with Jack Cassidy

playing the ‘hail-fellow, well-met’ charming actor while failing to provide such basic needs as child support or turning up to be with his son when he said he would. After Jack married Shirley Jones, a more successful actress who would go on to play David’s mother in *The Partridge Family*, he moved to Los Angeles and his career began to take off, widening the gulf between himself and his son, which he tried to make up for by assuming the role of the disciplinarian on the rare occasions he remembered his fatherly duties: ‘If he had $50,’ David Cassidy remembered, ‘my mother used to say he’d spend $40 on a suit for himself and leave $10 for us to live on.’[5]

When his son started rebelling and became a hippy, albeit one with a low-paid job in the mail room of a textiles company, Jack Cassidy decided to straighten him out by taking him to get fitted at Roland Meledandri, the most expensive clothing store in New York. David was just happy to be getting all this attention and largesse from his father, as the bill came to an astronomical $800 – until Jack told him that he would be paying for it himself, in $15 weekly instalments, over the next two years.

Such a less-than-secure upbringing meant that Cassidy was a long way from the character he played, goody two-shoes Keith Partridge. By the time he moved to Los Angeles in his mid-teens, he had discovered the acid rock of Jimi Hendrix, Cream and Jeff Beck . . . and the acid to go with it. ‘By the time I went to get something to eat,’ he said of the first time he took LSD in 1966, ‘I was hallucinating vividly. The hamburger was dancing on my plate while the french fries were standing up and conducting music.’ Promiscuous even by the free love standards of the day, he lost his virginity at thirteen and proceeded to take advantage of the fact that from then on, women and girls just kept throwing themselves at him – ‘It wasn’t uncommon for a woman to come up to you at a concert or love-in and say, “Hi. Want to fuck?” I’ve always liked that kind of honesty.’

Cassidy, by then building up a reputation as a serious actor, was twenty when he had to be talked into taking on the role of sixteen-year-old Keith Partridge, after which he signed away his name, voice and likeness to Screen Gems, the production company behind what became America’s biggest show. And Screen Gems had signed over recording rights to the Bell record label, which meant that Wes Farrell, the producer chosen to produce Partridge Family records, essentially owned Cassidy as a recording artist, with the recordings all falling under the umbrella of his $600-a-week pay package for doing the show.

Farrell had co-written ’60s standards like ‘Hang On Sloopy’ by the McCoys and ‘Come a Little Bit Closer’ by Jay & the Americans. As far as he was concerned, the young actor was little more than a face for his ’70s pop vision, speeding up the tape of Cassidy’s double-tracked vocals to give it lightweight appeal and making him sing ‘I Think I Love You’, with its comical harpsichord solo, and the soppy ballad ‘Cherish’. It meant that Cassidy was not in control, not only of his life and career, but of his very being: ‘I no longer trusted anybody. Everyone I met wanted me for my sex, or for their alignment to me to make themselves more important, to be with someone that famous or successful. Or for money, to enhance their own personal wealth. I distanced myself from almost everyone.’

By the time Nina Myskow met Cassidy in 1974, at a press conference in Glasgow, his career was pretty much over in the US but reaching its peak in the UK: ‘There were twenty or so journalists, and he looked up at us and blushed to the roots of his hair. He was an extremely sensitive soul who was crippled by the fact that his alcoholic father had been a big TV and Broadway star, and all David wanted was love and recognition from him. The problem was that the more famous David got, the more his father resented him. They hadn’t talked for a year when Jack Cassidy burned to death after dozing off on the living room couch with a lit cigarette. David did have an overinflated sense of his own importance, comparing himself to Frank Sinatra and so on, but he was defined by this awful relationship with his father and it crippled him all his life.’

‘I was pigeonholed as a teen idol and there’s no credibility,’ wrote Cassidy on how his acting career dwindled away in the wake of such inoffensively pleasant hits as ‘The Puppy Song’. ‘I paid a tremendous personal price. It’s a very empty, isolated, lonely existence.’ An endless stream of blow jobs from extremely willing groupies seemed to be the sole sordid relief from his teen idol entrapment. ‘Once I became really famous,’ accepted Cassidy, ‘virtually the only real contact I had with humans was with women who’d want to have sex with me.’

By 1972, increasingly burnt out and embittered at what he felt was the exploitation of his very soul, Cassidy was posing naked on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in a portrait taken by celebrated photographer Annie Leibovitz and talking with the journalist Robin Green about how he liked drinking and taking drugs much more than he did being a teen idol. ‘There’ll be a time when this whole thing will be over,’ he said, sounding

like he couldn't wait for that day to come. 'I won't wake up in the morning feeling drained, and I won't be working a punch card schedule. I've had them with a gun at my head, almost, saying, "Record, 'cause we've gotta get the album out by Christmas."'[6]

Danny Fields, an editor of America's *16* magazine and the future manager of the Ramones, was assigned to write the original *Rolling Stone* profile on Cassidy. At *16*, cover stories were based on how many letters came in and Cassidy had by far the most during Fields' tenure – followed, bizarrely, by fan letters for Elton John, whose teenaged fans insisted that his announcement that he was bisexual was false and wrote in their droves to *16*, demanding the magazine print the truth about Elton John's unquestionable heterosexuality. As *16* dealt in teen pop and *Rolling Stone* was America's leading magazine for serious grown-up music made by people in too much denim, when Danny Fields got the call for the Cassidy assignment, there was always going to be a caveat attached: '*Rolling Stone* rejected my story about David Cassidy as being too nice. They wanted to take him down. But I couldn't. He was smart, a great mimic, easy to hang out with, nice to his family, nice to his fans. I had been with him for a while and I had a little cocaine with me, so I gave him a bit to perk him up and he said, "Ooh, I've never done this before."' The endless drugs making an appearance in his autobiography *C'mon, Get Happy* makes this assertion from Cassidy seem rather unlikely. 'The main feeling I got from him was that he was trapped as Keith Partridge and he hated it. It felt like a curse that had been stamped on him.'

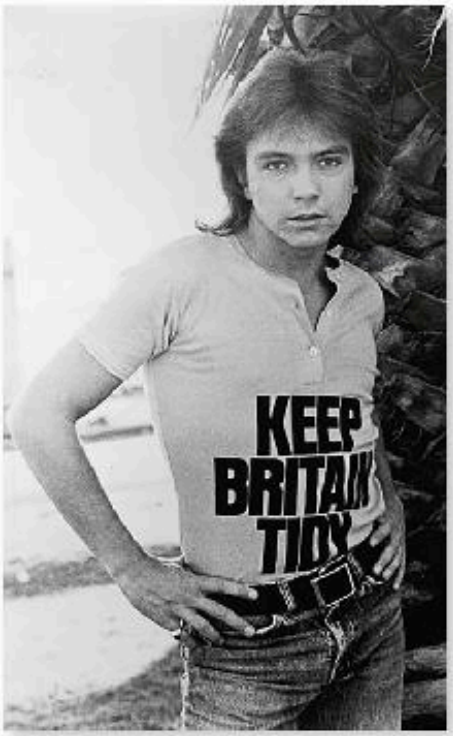
The turn came when, at what was intended as Cassidy's penultimate farewell concert in 1974, 800 people were injured and a fourteen-year-old fan called Bernadette Whelan was crushed to death among 35,000 fans at a stadium at White City in London. The DJ Tony Blackburn, working as MC for the night, said later that he had never seen so many people leave a concert on a stretcher. Nina Myskow was in the crowd when she became aware that the screaming, the mania, the desperate urge of young girls to get to the object of their desire was creating a potentially disastrous situation. She had previously been in a car with Cassidy when it had been mobbed by girls, crushing the roof and tearing off the windscreen wipers and wing mirrors, so she was aware of what hysteria looked like. The concert collapsed into chaos the moment Cassidy walked on stage, with the fans surging forward to create a suffocating crush and the ushers being left with

the job of hauling over 200 injured girls over the safety barrier to be taken away on stretchers.

A few days after the concert Cassidy wrote a letter to Whelan's parents, who were processing grief through a coroner's verdict of accidental death as a result of asphyxiation and 'contrived hysteria'. He expressed his regret at a death he said he felt responsible for, but which was really a product of being put into a position he never asked for or appeared to enjoy in the slightest. 'Had you seen the thousands of fans pushing hysterically toward the stage that night,' wrote Cassidy in *C'mon, Get Happy*, 'you would have concluded as I had: you simply can't contain teenage girls who are out of control with their emotions.' David Cassidy's final words to his daughter Katie in 2017, after a life punctuated by three divorces and two decades of alcoholism led to the liver failure that killed him, were: 'So much wasted time.'[7]

Cassidy's story makes it seem like Simon Turner, Britain's own potential David Cassidy, dodged a bullet. Turner was a teenage actor who auditioned for Cassidy's role in *The Partridge Family*, and after he didn't get it, impresario Jonathan King had the idea of marketing him as a homegrown alternative to America's number-one heart-throb. A navy officer's son from Cornwall, at fourteen Turner was sent to Arts Educational Trust in Hyde Park Corner (alma mater of Ayshea Brough and Sally James) to train as a dancer. He moved into a family home opposite Selfridges on Oxford Street, as a paying guest to a woman his mother had found in the back pages of *The Lady* magazine: 'I was in the heart of it. Straight into a ballet school, tights and jock straps, with 120 girls and thirty boys, taking trips to Soho, which was very seedy back then. It was a treasure trove for the hormonal teenager, even though I didn't understand girls in the slightest. Girls in Cornwall had been like boys: they wore trousers and climbed trees. These girls were a different thing altogether. I would be picked up by a girl one week and chucked a week later. I was going, "But I thought that was love!" They would say no, and by the way now you're passed on to her. It was pass the parcel. And I was the parcel.'

All good training for life as a teenage pin-up, which Turner, with his pretty looks and air of mischief, was very much suited to. Arts Educational Trust had an agent and before long he was getting radio and television work, starting out in 1971 as Ned East in an adaptation of Thomas Hughes' novel about the tortures of public-school life, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*.



Teen dreams: reluctant American heart-throb David Cassidy does his bit for Britain; Donny Osmond drives his devotees crazy; fans of the Bay City Rollers fail to contain themselves.