My "David Cassidy" Hair

My sisters made me do it.

And so it was, shortly after I became 12 years old in April, 1974, I became the first boy in St. Germaine School to have his hair parted down the middle the way '70s pop star David Cassidy parted his.

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As painful as it is to recall, Cassidy was a big deal in the '70s.

He'd been a nobody until 1970, when he got the starring role in "The Partridge Family," a sitcom about a widowed mother, played by Shirley Jones (Cassidy's step-mom in real life) and her five children.

The family, which lived in the fictional suburb of San Pueblo, Calif., made its living driving around in a psychedelic bus performing smarmy soft-rock music, such as "I Think I Love You."

This is a song about a lovesick fellow, who, so the song's lyrics go, wakes in the middle of a dream because something keeps knocking on his brain.

Before he goes insane, he holds his pillow to his head, springs from his bed, then screams the words he dreads:

I think I love you
So what am I so afraid of
I'm afraid that I'm not sure of
A love there is no cure for
I think I love you
Isn't that what life is made of
Though it worries me to say
That I never felt this way

Today, judges grant restraining orders against such fellows, but nobody was yet troubled by love-sick madmen in the '70s.

So popular was the song, it shot to No. 1 on the U.S. Billboard Pop Singles chart. It was the biggest selling record of 1970 — bigger even than "Let It Be" by the Beatles!

What's worse is that The Partridge Family's first five albums, released between 1970 and 1972, went Gold. The first three made it to Billboard's Top 10.

Cassidy soon had the highest Q rating — which measures how well a personality is liked by the public — of anyone on television.

His Q rating held a particular power over teenyboppers — despite him being in his early 20's, every teenybopper in America had a crush on him, including, regrettably, my older sisters, Kathy and Krissy.

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Ever since the beginning of time, you see, teenage sisters have experimented on their baby brothers, dressing them in the fashions of the time.

Kathy and Krissy tried to treat me as their personal Ken doll (Barbie's high-fashion boyfriend). They tried to get me to wear pastel-colored silk shirts, gold chains and other comical trends that nobody yet knew were comical, but I fended them off for some time.

My primary role model, after all, was my father, a manly fellow who came of age in the '50s. His only dalliance with fashion of any kind came as a teen when he, and all his pals, dressed liked rebel-without-a-cause-actor James Dean.

We still have a photo of our father with his coal-black hair slicked back (we never knew he'd had hair, as he was bald by his late 20's), wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt with a pack of Lucky Strikes rolled up in the sleeve.

If our dad ever had any bout with coolness, that was it, but it surely didn't last long. He soon evolved into a typical '70s dad with the olive-green leisure suit and white patent-leather shoes and belt, an outfit he'd continue wearing to church every Sunday years after the "Six Million Dollar Man" fashion had passed.

Such dads were mostly suspicious of fashion trends — and of any son of theirs who would eagerly embrace them. And so, for the most part, I, like my father, wasn't much interested in the fashion trends my sisters foisted on me.

Until I started falling for girls.

It was during the fifth grade that it happened. I don't recall exactly when I stopped thinking girls were icky, but in the fifth grade, I remember, I become keenly aware of two things: 1) I was suddenly interested and curious about girls, and 2) I was suddenly aware that they showed no reciprocal interest in me.

And who could blame them?

Like every boy in my school, I wore blue pants, a checkered blue and green blazer and a clip-on blue tie. There was no hope to improve my lot by dressing better.

I lacked the "GQ" good looks that made the more popular kids stand out, and the brown mop of hair atop my head didn't help matters any.

Worse, I had two floppy ears that, many kids reminded me time and again, looked like two car doors left open. Timmy Schmidt called me "Elephant Ears" or "Dumbo,"

after the cartoon elephant who could fly by flapping his large ears.

It didn't take long for Kathy and Krissy to home in on my self-doubt about the ladies and my horrible insecurity about my ears. They, being of the more cunning sex, soon found their opening.

"If you get your hair cut like David Cassidy, you will blow dry it until it is thick and full!" said Krissy.

"Yeah, and when you blow dry your hair as thick and full as David Cassidy's, you'll be able to cover your big, floppy ears!" said Kathy.

I could cover my floppy ears!

And so it was that I was persuaded to become the first boy at St. Germaine School with guts enough to get a David Cassidy shag haircut.

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The shag involves parting your hair down the middle and, in a "V" shape, feathering it to the sides over your ears — though you don't necessarily have to part your hair.

So long as it looks shaggy, you're good to go.

The shag's carefree, messy style, says ezine.com hairstyle expert Jason Hughes, is all about youth — and, with baby boomers all over the place in the early '70s, youth was in abundance.

But here's what made the shag truly unique for that time: it was a "unisex" style.

Both men and women were embracing variations of the cut — a sameness of style that had been unimaginable during the conformist '40s, '50s and much of the '60s.

And if you were a 10-year-old kid, say, in 1972, yours was mostly a "1950s" upbringing — but, boy, would the world change during your formative years, as male and female fashions got really confusing.

Jane Fonda was the first female star to wear the shag. She didn't part hers down the middle, but it was shoulder-length and feathered over the sides. Fonda displayed her new look in the movie "Klute" in 1971.

Though Fonda was the first famous *woman* to sport the shag cut, Cassidy was among the first male stars to sport it — he did so at least a year before Fonda did.

Cassidy was soon joined by the Bee Gees, Rod Stewart, Andy Gibb, David Bowie and many other famous males who used blow dryers, once the sole province of women, to fluff out their locks.

By the late '70s, with the success of "Charlie's Angels," most every woman in America, including my five sisters, was sporting the Farrah Fawcett look — a long, thick, fluffy shag that was a slightly enhanced version of what the male pop stars were sporting.

In any event, somewhere in there a new era had been hatched — one in which the hard lines of the 1950s that had separated men and women in general, and male and female fashions in particular, would be blurred forever.

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It is worth noting, at this point, that hairstyles have changed plenty throughout history for both men and women.

Roman men wore their hair over their shoulders. Our country's founders liked their locks long, too. Ben

Franklin sported a ponytail. George Washington and other well-to-do fellows of his era wore long white wigs.

Men parted their hair down the middle during the Roaring '20s, as a photo of my grandfather shows; it was taken on the Lake Erie shore in 1922, when men also wore striped swimming trunks *and* striped swimming shirts.

My grandmother wore her hair relatively short — she curled it with rollers and it fell just below her ears. She wore that style — the look of the silent film stars during the Flapper era — until she died in 1972.

All of this is true. But what is also true is that the years following World War II were a homogenous, conformist time in America.

Most women wore their hair long and flowing — or at least in a distinctly feminine manner.

Most men wore their hair short — parted on the side, or combed straight back, or in a butch cut or crew cut, like Sgt. Carter's hair in "Gomer Pyle," which my Uncle Mike wore throughout the '60s. I emulated my Uncle Mike's cut one summer, as he was my favorite uncle.

Throughout this period, the only look that in any way approximated the shag's tangled youthfulness was the James Dean pompadour — which, as I said, my father had sought to emulate when he'd been a teen.

Dean's pompadour was greased up and combed straight back and straight up to create a curl above the forehead that looked like a breaking ocean wave.

The pompadour was made possible by oil-based products, such as Brylcreem, made famous by its jingle:

Brylcreem, a little dab'll do ya,
Brylcreem, you'll look so debonair.
Brylcreem, the gals will all pursue ya,

They'll love to run their fingers through your hair.

The point is that from the '40's through the early '70's, most people's hairstyles were as strait-laced, homogenous and conformist as everything else was during that period.

During the early '70s, many men were still sitting around barbershops, getting their hair cut short as they grumbled about politics, the price of bread and whether or not the Pirates were going to make it to the World Series that year. They passed around the coveted Playboy magazine, which the barber kept hidden behind the counter.

You never saw a woman in a barbershop, except to drop off or pick up her sons — and the place would get deadly quiet until all women were gone.

In the early '70s most women went to female hair salons. They sat under large hair dryers, wearing curlers and nets. Marge, the chain-smoking salon owner, covered their mugs in green and blue goop, filed their nails, scraped gunk out of their toes and applied paints and chemicals of every variety — all while a Virginia Slim dangled from her lips.

That all began to change with the advent of the unisex hair salon — such as the one in the back parking lot of the Murphy's Mart Department Store — that era's Wal-Mart — where I would pay $4.50 to have my hair cut like David Cassidy's.

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I had to scrounge every last penny before I could do it.

Up to that point, my father had cut my hair at no charge. He used a dull pair of 1950s hair shears that yanked as many hairs out by the roots as they cut.

Since I only had a few dollars to my name, I borrowed a dollar apiece from my older sisters, then rummaged through my father's change drawer and penny jar to make up the difference.

I jumped onto my Murray five-speed and pedaled the mile and a half to the salon. It was a rainy, overcast March day — a possible omen for what was to come?

I locked my bike to a utility pole near the back door of the salon, then peered inside.

There were women everywhere — women smoking, women having their hair preened and nails done.

This was no place for a male. Good God! What if my father found out?

I had nearly unlocked my bike and headed back home when my sisters' words overtook me again:

"You'll be able to cover your big, floppy ears!"

I opened the door and walked inside. An older woman with a bleached yellow beehive stood behind the counter. She smoked a cigarette while chewing gum. She'd just finished ringing up a customer when she looked at me as though I were lost.

"May I help you?" she said, blowing smoking through her nose.

I moved closer to the counter and dumped four dollar bills and a fistful of change onto the counter.

"Make me look like David Cassidy."

She washed my hair, then conditioned it. She clipped and cut, styled and set. She washed my hair again, then applied goops and sprays and ointments.

She instructed me on how to use a blow dryer. She gave me another goop that I'd need to use for six weeks to "train" my hair to stay in place.

She taught me everything I'd need to know to achieve David Cassidy's feathering and fullness.

But she was just being gracious.

"What do you think?" she said as turned the chair around so I could face the mirror.

What did I think? I was horrified!

I didn't look like David Cassidy.

I looked like Danny Bonaduce.

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I raced home on my bike and hid in my bedroom the rest of the day, ignoring my sisters' insistence that I let them help me style my hair.

I finally had to come downstairs when my father called me repeatedly for dinner. I took my seat to his right, praying he wouldn't notice.

My father never was the most attentive fellow — especially after getting home from a long overtime shift at the phone company, which he worked every chance he could to keep up with our astronomical water and electric bills brought on by my sisters' Farrah Fawcett hair.

But even he sensed something was off. As he chomped his burger and washed it down with a gulp of Pabst Blue Ribbon, he kept looking over at me. He had the puzzled expression of a dog trying to do calculus.

Then his eyes got bigger.

"What happened to your hair?" he finally said.

"I got it cut."

"It's parted down the middle."

"Yes."

"Who parts hair down the middle?"

"David Cassidy."

"David who?"

"David Cassidy, the Partridge Family guy."

"Who did this to you?"

"The hair salon."

"You went to a ladies' hair salon!"

"It's a unisex salon."

"A uni-what?"

"It is a salon that cuts hair for both sexes."

"You got your hair cut at a women's salon?"

"A unisex salon."

His mouth was still full of burger and Pabst Blue Ribbon. He forgot he still needed to chew for a few moments.

He didn't know a lot of things. But he knew, as did all men who were 25 or older in 1974, that if you let your son get his hair cut at a ladies' salon, it wouldn't be long before you came home to find him wearing women's makeup and undergarments.

He finally remembered to chew, but he couldn't break his stare.

"But it's parted down the middle," he said.

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I nearly abandoned my David Cassidy hair after dinner that night, but I was so eager to cover my floppy ears that I was willing to endure any amount of humiliation and embarrassment.

I assumed a healthy dose of mockery would await me at school that next Monday, but the mocking never came.

Something totally unexpected did happen: The girls in my class were looking at me differently.

I certainly wasn't transformed from dork status to the fifth grade's most popular kid, but I was greeted with a gentle affirmation, a hint of gratitude, even a subtle acceptance among some of my female classmates that my bold fashion move was "cool."

Of course, the very next week, Michael Kissinger got his hair parted down the middle, and it wasn't long before the dam burst and most every boy in our school — every boy on the planet — was rushing to unisex hair salons to be embrace the David Cassidy shag.

By the ninth grade, almost EVERY boy in my high school class — 300 or so — was sporting the Cassidy shag — easily confirmed by looking through my ninth-grade yearbook.

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I would wear my David Cassidy cut for many years afterward — until I was 30, in fact.

As it happened, my best friend's fiancé — whom I'd not yet met — was a flight attendant. She was to be the attendant on my flight from Pittsburgh to Los Angeles one night.

She had asked my friend to describe me so she could recognize me in the air.

"That's easy," my friend had told her. "He'll be the only one on the plane with his hair parted down the middle like David Cassidy."

So embarrassed was I about my lack of hipness, I went to the nearest upscale hair salon after landing in Los

Angeles. My stylist was a young, highly fashionable L.A. lady.

I told her about my predicament — how I'd come to have the David Cassidy hair and how I now wanted something more current.

It was 1992 and, by then, the rock-star look of the '80s was long gone — mullets were out, too, thank goodness — and a more minimalist style was in: short hair, slicked straight back.

There would be no more need for a blow dryer, she explained. I was in!

And so it was that she washed my hair, then conditioned it. She clipped and cut, styled and set. She washed my hair again, then applied a contemporary mix of goops and ointments, so she could slick my hair straight back.

"What do you think?" she said, as she spun my chair around so I faced the mirror.

I was shocked by what I saw.

I looked like Eddie Munster.