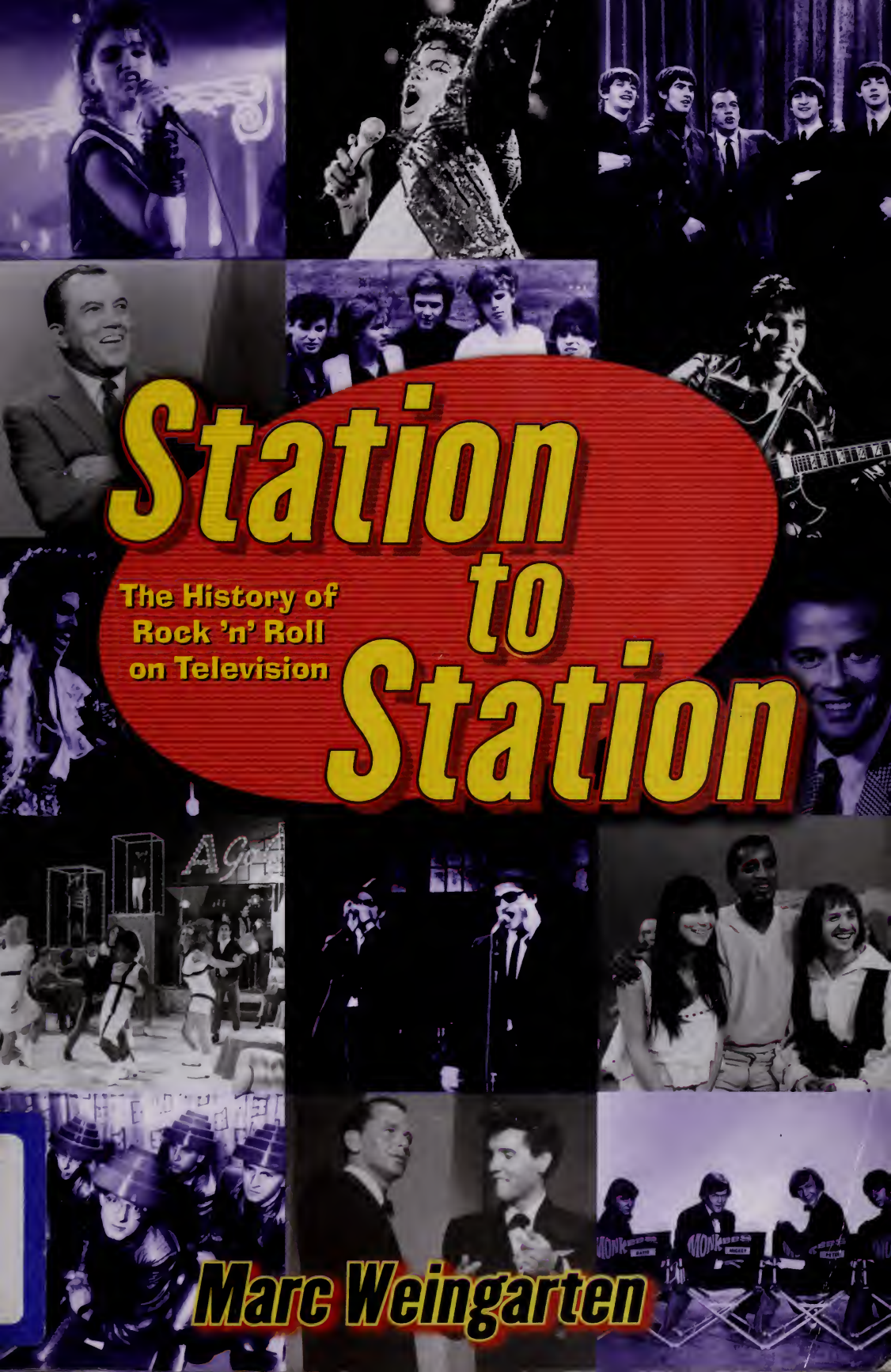

Station to Station
The History of Rock 'n' Roll on Television
Marc Weingarten

11

Naked Lunch Box

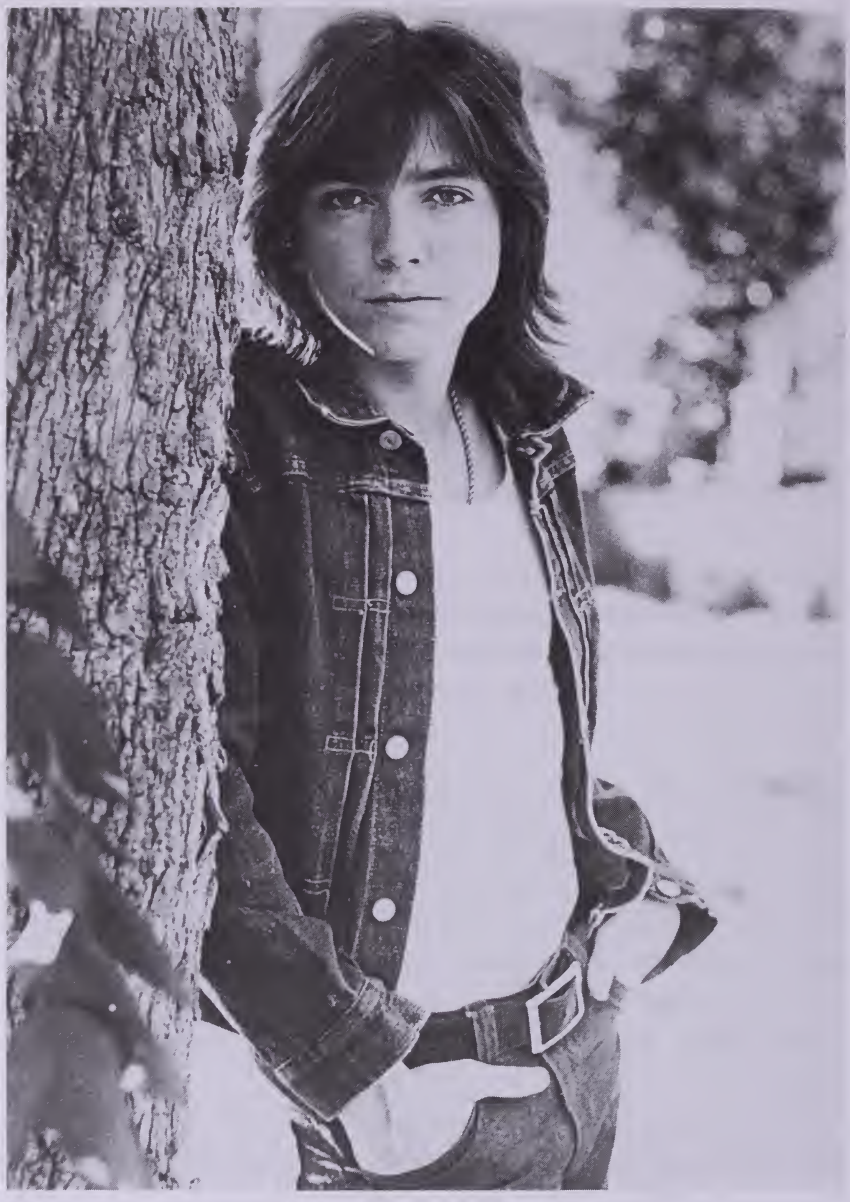
DAVID CASSIDY AND THE CULT OF THE TEEN IDOL

A fake will always be a fake. Anything prefabricated or just an accident will turn out to be just that.

—Partridge Family songwriter Wes Farrell, 1976

The picture-perfect nuclear family is one of television's most powerful and enduring myths. During the late 1960s and 1970s, a time of unprecedented social upheaval in America, viewers clung to the well-ordered domestic rituals of idealized TV families like lifelines to a rapidly vanishing idyll—namely, the well-ordered domestic tableau of 1950s America. Über-clans as seen on shows like *The Flintstones, Family Affair, My Three Sons,* and *The Brady Bunch* thrived in prime time.

The music business, too, had its own subset of family bands that catered to pop fans who felt themselves estranged by psychedelic rock and emerging heavy metal behemoths like Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin. Sibling singing groups like the Osmonds, the Jackson Five, and the Cowsills sold millions of records by catering to an audience that found some measure of comfort in bands whose family ethic stressed working together for the greater good. Never mind that these groups were, in reality, hatched in dysfunctional domestic environments that placed an unhealthy emphasis on show-biz success over family values. In the early 1970s, nobody knew or cared about such things.



"Do I make you horny, baby?" David Cassidy. (Photo: Henry Diltz)

Few TV producers reaped more success from unsullied domestic virtue than Bernard Slade. As a writer and producer on such shows as *Bewitched* and *The Flying Nun,* Slade was already an old hand at wresting mild laughs out of quaintly prosaic familial situations when he had the notion to create a TV show about a family that kept it together by playing pop music. Inspired by the Cowsills and *The*

Sound of Music, Slade in 1969 sold the idea of a singing family to Columbia's TV division Screen Gems, the same company that had produced *The Monkees*.

Slade and co-executive producer Bob Claver, who had produced the Bobby Sherman vehicle *Here Come the Brides* in the late 1960s, originally thought of casting the Cowsills, who had scored two top-ten hits with 1967's "Rain, the Park, and Other Things" and a cover of the theme from "Hair" in 1969. But the band couldn't act, and were perhaps a touch too physically homogeneous to cast a wide enough demographic net. "I think it would have made us crazy," observes Susan Cowsill, "and we're not actors, as [the producers] found out pretty quickly upon their visit to our house."[1] Instead, the producers decided to cast actors in the roles, and then lip-synch studio singers for the musical segments. That way, Screen Gems could avoid the kind of cast mutiny that nearly sabotaged *The Monkees*.

The show would be called *The Partridge Family* (working title: *Family Business),* and would center around the travails of a traveling rock band that shared adventures and a surname taken from an old British school chum of Slade's. Slade quickly wrote a pilot script and sent the first copy to Shirley Jones, an Academy Award-winning film actress (1960's *Elmer Gantry)* with no background in pop music or episodic television, but whose chaste sensuality and matronly demeanor made her ideal ballast for the show. For Bob Claver, Shirley Jones was the perfect TV mom: "She was a clean-cut, nice-looking, pretty woman, and her movie career wasn't exactly booming at that point."

Just as Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson had conducted a cattle call to cast *The Monkees,* Slade and Claver looked at over 800 child actors to play the Partridges, eventually settling on five: two inexperienced adolescents named Jeremy Gelbwaks and Suzanne Crough, commercials actor Danny Bonaduce, teen model Susan Dey, and Jones's stepson David Cassidy, who had already racked up an impressive list of credits on various TV shows.

The casting of Cassidy, of course, would turn out to be Slade and Claver's masterstroke, but the actor was hardly an overnight sensation, having been weaned on show business at an early age. The son

of Broadway actors Jack Cassidy and Evelyn Ward, Cassidy was raised by his mother from the age of five after his parents divorced (Jack Cassidy married Shirley Jones in 1956). "I had a lot of rejection from my father when I was young," Cassidy told *Rolling Stone* in 1972. "I never saw him after he divorced me and my mother."[2] This '70s poster boy for family values was in fact the product of a broken home, and would tell all about his troubled relationship with his father ad nauseam during his post-Partridge years.

Cassidy skated through high school, dabbled in drugs ("I did a lot of fucking around . . . not smack, but grass and speed and psychedelics")[3] and petty theft, dropped out of Los Angeles City College, then went the route of so many show-biz kids: he tried acting. After appearing in a small role on Broadway in Allan Sherman's play *Fig Leaves Are Falling,* Cassidy began landing small parts in episodic TV shows like *Medical Center, Marcus Welby, M.D.,* and *Ironside*. "I was out to earn the bucks," Cassidy confessed to *Rolling Stone* in 1972.

As an actor, Cassidy was solidly competent, not unlike many bit players for hire who did guest shots on TV in the 1970s. But he was uncommonly good-looking—small-boned and effete, with a white-pearled smile and an au courant shag 'do—and that started to get him noticed. The teen magazine culture that centered around such magazines as *16* and *Tiger Beat,* in their never-ending search to feed the pop idol maw, anointed Cassidy the bell-bottomed demigod of the moment in mid-1970. And he hadn't even made a record or landed a recurring TV role yet.

"David had been in an episode of *Bonanza,*" says Randi Reisfeld, a former editor at *16* magazine, "and what happened was readers wrote to *16* requesting more information on this really cute guy they had seen on TV. That alerted our editor in chief Gloria Stavers that David was something to start looking at."

Adds Cassidy, "The business of creating teen idols was in the hands of merchandisers and teen magazines. Before *The Partridge Family* ever aired I was on the cover of teen magazines from doing guest TV appearances. I started getting fan letters a good nine months before *The Partridge Family.*"

The most successful TV teen idols tend to emerge from family

shows that aren't star vehicles; girls like to feel as if they've singled out their heartthrobs from the brood to embrace them as treasured objects of desire. That stratagem worked well for Ricky Nelson, and David Cassidy also benefited from it. Like Nelson, Keith Partridge's sex appeal was neutralized by a strong sense of civic-minded do-goodism and an awkward, ditzy disposition. Producer Bob Claver correctly surmised that safe sex always plays more smoothly in prime time. "David was handsome bordering on pretty, and we made him a loser," says Claver. "He didn't get the girl, he didn't win the school election. That vulnerability made him more appealing to the audience."

The Partridge Family, which premiered on September 25, 1970, and followed *Nanny and the Professor* at eight-thirty on Friday nights, was pure sitcom Similac, featuring the usual procession of lovably eccentric guest stars, family crises, feel-good moralizing, romantic subplots, and the requisite pop piffle or two in the second act. But it represented TV's ultimate triumph over rock's rebel spirit. With *The Partridge Family,* youth culture had at last been tamed within the tender bosom of the family hearth. For younger viewers, *The Partridge Family* was the perfect conflation of family values and rock 'n' roll careerism. The Partridges were pop stars and pillars of the community, cashing in but also giving something back. They were living the dream of every school kid who ever sang into a hair-brush in front of a mirror.

The show's music was an afterthought for Claver, who gained control of the show when Bernard Slade left shortly after the pilot was shot, but the show's main songwriter, Wes Farrell—hitmaker, producer, and rakishly elegant rogue—proved to be a crucial catalyst in catapulting Cassidy to superstardom. A native of Brooklyn, Farrell was a street-smart hustler with an unerring capacity to gauge pop market trends and capitalize on them. "Wes was a high school dropout, but he dressed like a million bucks," recalls Cassidy. "He was super-slick. He produced Paul Anka, married Tina Sinatra, bought a house in Beverly Hills. He was the personification of poor boy makes good."

After dropping out of college in 1960, Farrell rented an office on Broadway for fifty dollars a month and set his sights on writing hits.

None came, so Farrell took a job as a manager for publishing company Roosevelt Music, where he was hired to find potential hit songs for the company's roster of artists—a list that included Chubby Checker, Dionne Warwick, and Bobby Vee. "The writers for Roosevelt just weren't coming through with songs, so I started signing young writers that I was associated with when I was walking the streets," Farrell told the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* in 1976. "I got [Neil Diamond] for $35 a week, and when he asked for a $15 a week raise, my boss said no and Diamond split."[4]

Farrell's Midas touch made him a music business legend in short order. He landed twenty-six Top 40 hits for Roosevelt artists during his three-year tenure, and left the company in 1963 to start Picturetone Music. Three years later, the songwriter started the Wes Farrell Corporation, which he subsequently turned into a music industry giant. As a publisher, Farrell cashed in on hits by the Rascals, Tony Orlando and Dawn, and Wayne Newton. As a songwriter, Farrell co-authored hits like the McCoys' "Hang On Sloopy," Jay and the Americans' "Come a Little Bit Closer," and "Boys," the B side of the Shirelles' "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow," which was recorded by The Beatles in 1963.

Given the fact that one of Farrell's specialties was bubblegum pop (as music publisher, he also represented the writers of Paper Lace's "The Night Chicago Died" and the Cowsills' "Indian Lake"), it only followed that Columbia's label subsidiary Bell Records would hire Farrell to be musical producer of *The Partridge Family.* Claver would have been content to lip-synch everything and use studio singers like Jackie Ward and John and Tom Bahler, who had shored up the vocals for the Brady Bunch and other singing TV stars in the 1960s and 1970s. But Cassidy, an amateur musician who also fancied himself a songwriter, wanted to try his hand at vocals, and auditioned for Farrell by singing along to a Crosby, Stills, and Nash record.

Farrell was drawn to Cassidy's tremulous, feline croon, and agreed that he should sing lead on all of the tracks. Shirley Jones, for her part, had it written into her contract that she contribute background vocals on all the Partridge Family material. "Shirley did those *oop-oop*s so she could get some extra money for those records," says Claver.

For the Partridge Family's "records," Farrell hired the cream of L.A.'s session heavies, many of them veterans of producer Phil Spector's legendary Wrecking Crew—drummer Hal Blaine, keyboardist Larry Knechtel, guitarists Tommy Tedesco and Louie Shelton, and bassist Joe Osborn. Farrell contributed songs, as did Brill Building legends Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, Paul Anka, Bobby Hart, and Mike Appel, future manager of Bruce Springsteen. "I worked on the show all day, then went to the studio at night," says Cassidy. "We had five hours to record three tracks, and there was no time to redo anything. Fortunately, the musicians were so good, they could read charts quickly, and there was never a problem." There were, however, many studio laughs at the material's expense; Larry Knechtel's chuckles during the harpsichord solo on "I Think I Love You" had to be wiped out of the final mix.

"I Think I Love You" was a shimmering declaration of puppy love that rose to number one on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 chart in November 1970 and sold over 4 million copies. Other hits followed—"Doesn't Somebody Want to Be Wanted," "I'll Meet You Halfway," "I Woke Up in Love This Morning"— all of them characterized by Farrell's wide-screen arrangements and Cassidy's pleadingly pretty vocals. "Wes really taught me the economical approach to songwriting," says Cassidy. "His only downfall was that he wasn't willing to go further with the songs. He wouldn't develop a lyric enough, or the track. He would say, 'OK, that's good enough,' when sometimes it wasn't."

Not that it mattered: As *The Partridge Family* crept into the Nielsen top ten and the records sold in the millions, Cassidy became a massive star, aided and abetted in no small part by the teen mags. Now Cassidy was a ubiquitous presence in *16* (he appeared on twenty-four consecutive covers), *Tiger Beat, Fave,* and *Spec,* with headlines promising "David's After-Dark Confessions" and articles that taught young girls how to be "David's Summer Love." "Teen idols like David Cassidy are a very safe fantasy for girls," says Randi Reisfeld. "He was just so pretty. Very few are that pretty." Fan clubs sprouted up all over the country; the official fan club had 100,000 card-carrying members by 1971.[5] "I lost my identity, because of those magazines," says Cassidy. "They made an

image to prey upon the innocence and naiveté of young kids, and I resented it."

"The magazines would just make up stories," says Henry Diltz, a friend of Cassidy's who frequently photographed the teen idol for *Tiger Beat, Star,* and other magazines. "Once, David and I spent a week in Hawaii, and this little puppy wandered into our yard, so I took a picture of David with the dog for *16.* When we got back, this writer Don Berrigan wrote this story about how there was this little Hawaiian girl next door whose dog had wandered over to David, and how this girl gave David the dog with tears in her eyes. It was pure fiction."

On the *Partridge Family* set, which was located at Columbia's Burbank Ranch, swarms of underage girls would wait patiently outside the studio gates until shooting ended, hoping to graduate to groupie status with a tryst in Cassidy's house trailer. Extras had easier access and consequently were a bit luckier. "If they were doing a classroom scene, there would be, like, fifteen boys and girls hanging around," says Henry Diltz, who spent a lot of time on the *Partridge Family* set. "It would be like going to a party. You'd pick out who you wanted to talk to, and in between shots make conversation. David would sometimes invite a couple into his trailer. There was a lot of down time on the set."

Cassidy's face was plastered on everything Screen Gems merchandising guru Ed Justin could think of—lunch boxes, toys, paper dolls, beach towels, and so on. Cassidy's live shows sold out within minutes; in the spring of 1972, he sold 113,446 tickets to two matinee shows at the Houston Astrodome. That same year, twenty-four zealous fans fainted during a performance in Detroit.[6] "It was hysteria, and my life was turned upside down," says Cassidy. "I was a twenty-four-year-old guy living the life of a twenty-four-year-old guy. There was no such thing as AIDS or being PC then. I also wasn't with sixteen-year-old girls, but with consenting adults—sometimes two, three, or four."

Cassidy was reveling in the perks of his newfound fame: "I would leave my hotel room, and there would be, like, seven girls over the age of eighteen, bra-less and ready to rock." But he wanted to have it

both ways: to luxuriate in his success, but lose the teen idol image that had turned him into a locker door pin-up. "Perpetuating this white knight thing, and being robbed of your own identity is wrong," he says. "It was untruthful."

Eager to distance himself from his media-made love-child alter ego, Cassidy agreed to be interviewed by *Rolling Stone* magazine, the early 1970s ultimate arbiter of cultural cool, in the spring of 1972. The resulting article, cheekily titled "Naked Lunch Box," ripped the lid off of the Cassidy construct, portraying the TV star as a jaded, overworked marketing tool beholden to his handlers and various hangers-on. But it was Annie Leibowitz's photos that attracted the most attention. In the cover shot, Cassidy lies nude on a field of grass, a beatific smile on his face. The inside gatefold was even more revealing, with a hint of pubic hair teasingly peeking out from the bottom of the page.

"It was an anti-establishment magazine, and that was cool to me," says Cassidy. "The photo shoot was awkward, though. Annie was unmarried, and I was unmarried, she's taking photos of my body. She

Backstage at a London concert, 1974. (Photo: Henry Diltz)

was really uncomfortable." But the Cassidy marketing machine was too powerful to be derailed by a mere magazine article, and Cassidy's young audience didn't read *Rolling Stone,* anyway. There was some corporate fallout: Coca-Cola pulled out of sponsoring an hour-long David Cassidy special after the *Rolling Stone* piece was published. "That was OK with me," says Cassidy. "I didn't want to do the special, anway." Cassidy had tried to crack his persona wide open, but it remained too impermeable a myth to deconstruct.

The arena shows turned into stadium shows; in England, Cassidy became a huge star after *The Partridge Family* began airing there in March 1972. He scored two monster U.K. hits with the Rascals' "How Can I Be Sure" and "Daydreamer," which had eleven- and fifteen-week runs at number one, respectively. But the fanaticism was starting to curdle into something ugly and menacing. Henry Diltz, who frequently traveled on the road with Cassidy, would observe everything from the wings while snapping photos.

"It was like the Beatles, just screaming hysteria," Diltz recalls. "In the big soccer stadiums in places like Australia and England, they would have festival seating, and the girls would shove forward to try to get a better look at David. Thousands of them would be jammed up against the railing, and it would knock the wind out of them. The security people would be pulling unconscious girls out of the crowd. They would have to stop the show to tell people to move back. Backstage, there would be cops with stretchers tending to semiconscious girls, or girls who were sobbing hysterically. I mean, it was like Korea or Vietnam back there."

Under siege, 1974. (Photo: Henry Diltz)

Cassidy, meanwhile, was trying desperately to reinvent himself as an interpreter of legitimate rock. "He would be singing these Dylan

songs and stuff during the shows, but it's not really satisfying for a performer when no one's listening," says Diltz. *The Partridge Family* continued to do well, so ABC moved the show to Saturday nights opposite CBS's powerhouse *All in the Family* at the start of 1974 season in an attempt to cut into that show's huge viewership. But it turned into a knockout blow; *The Partridge Family* slipped from the top twenty and became a Nielsen cellar dweller. "I imagine that some ABC vice president in charge of annoying me pulled the Friday-Saturday switch in the hopes that the teeny-bopper passion for David Cassidy . . . would gnaw away at Archie Bunker's popularity," wrote the *New York Times'* TV critic Cyclops. "As usual, this kind of creative programming has ended in disaster, and the culpable vice president should be sentenced to 40 years of Orange Bowl half-times."[7]

Four months after the scheduling change, during a sold-out David Cassidy concert at London's White City athletic stadium, a fourteen-year-old fan named Bernadette Whelan suffered a fatal heart attack. "That really crushed David," says Diltz. "He quit touring after that." Cassidy, exhausted and disenchanted, quit *The Partridge Family* in May 1974, only to find himself lost in a show-biz Siberia of his own devising. The show was canceled, and the teen Icarus fell back to earth. "I didn't know what to do," says Cassidy. "I refer to those years as my dark years. I was pretty lost."

Intent on becoming a legitimate artist, Cassidy began hanging out with a few members of L.A.'s music mafia—the Beach Boys' Bruce Johnston and Carl Wilson, Flo and Eddie, and Gerry Beckley of pop-lite band America. He wrote songs for his solo albums with Richie Furay, Harry Nilsson and Brian Wilson, got shit-faced with John Lennon and jammed with the ex-Beatle in Cassidy's Encino home, and abused lots of substances. "I went crazy," says Cassidy.

Cassidy returned to acting in 1977, and earned an Emmy nomination for a guest role in an episode of the NBC anthology series *Police Story*. That led, in the fall of 1978, to a starring role in *David Cassidy: Man Undercover,* a standard-issue crime show starring Cassidy as an undercover L.A. cop. "The series was done in the middle of the year, when all the good writers and directors were booked," says Cassidy. "It was thrown together and put in a horrible time slot.

And the cherry on the cake was that they called it *David Cassidy: Man Undercover*. I just went ballistic when I heard that." When the show was canceled after twelve episodes, Cassidy vowed to never act on television again. From that moment on, Cassidy, like Ricky Nelson, was destined to live in the shadow of his idealized former self.

Although he found some measure of success as a theater actor in the musicals *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Blood Brothers*, in which he co-starred with his half-brother Shaun, David Cassidy in 1999 found himself producing NBC's biopic *The David Cassidy Story* and appearing in something called *David Cassidy at the Copa* in the main room at Las Vegas's Rio Casino Resort. His name now a potent, nostalgically charged trademark, Cassidy continues to cash in on his former glory even as he struggles to be recognized as something more than Keith Partridge.