Naked Lunch Box

ROBIN GREEN

DAVID CASSIDY, THE NUMBER 1 TEEN IDOL OF THE EARLY SEVENTIES, HAD HIS HEART SET ON A COVER STORY. SO WE GAVE IT TO HIM.

The first time I opened up a ROLLING STONE, I was living in New York. This was in 1968. I was working at Marvel Comics as Stan Lee's secretary. It was pretty much my last straight job for a good many years.

ROLLING STONE came out of the Bay area in those days. Maybe I moved out to Berkeley partly because the magazine made it sound like such a party out there (it was). Or maybe ROLLING STONE had nothing to do with it. I can't remember. Whyever, my boyfriend and I got into his Pontiac Firebird convertible (overhead cam 6, Cony shocks—how and why do I remember such details?) and headed west, stopping to visit friends in New Mexico, camping naked like savages for a week near some caves in the Jemez Mountains by a natural hot spring.

A couple years later I was still reading ROLLING STONE, stoned, cover to cover. I'd had it with waitressing and jewelry lessons, and my old college roommate gave me the name of someone at the magazine, Alan Rinzler, the associate publisher. I borrowed a jeans jacket from a friend that had

an emblem of people fucking on the back and took my dog and went across the bay to ROLLING STONE, which had its offices in a converted brick warehouse. If they didn't want the fucking jacket and they didn't want the fucking dog, fuck 'em. Alan had his dog at the office, too. Now *this* was hip.

I told Alan I'd do anything to work there—secretary, receptionist. He said they just hired a receptionist. Was there anything else I could do? I'd written some good short stories in college (Brown), so I said, "Well, I can write." (Interestingly, a receptionist who came soon after, Harriet Fier, rose to be managing editor of the magazine.) Alan arranged for me to meet Jann Wenner.

My meeting with Jann lasted about three minutes. He was short, cute, endomorphic, a nail biter who talked fast and thought fast (a speed freak?) and sent me out the door with an assignment to write about Marvel Comics.

I came back with 10,000 words, for which Jann paid me five cents a word. What's that—$500? So what? My rent was $60 a month. By then I had broken up with my boyfriend and was sharing a house in Berkeley I found off a bulletin board at a food co-op. They put Hulk on the cover of ROLLING STONE.

My price went up to ten cents a word, and I was made a contributing editor—the only woman writer on the masthead for some years, years in which Joe Eszterhas, for instance, arrived at the magazine from the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* with a bowie knife hanging from his belt and a pipe in his mouth, writing prose like "the great stone canyons of New York City." And Hunter Thompson, high on mescaline, swilling down Wild Turkey, drove Route 1 on the wrong side of the road at night with the lights out. (What was I doing in that car? Well, I lived.) Years in which it didn't seem all that unusual to hold an editorial retreat at Big Sur or all that untoward for most of the editors and writers to drop mescaline and bathe together naked in sulfur baths at Esalen at night in a cave in the side of a cliff overlooking the moonlit Pacific while in the distance whales migrated south.

Writer David Felton (a.k.a. the Stonecutter, because he was slow, very slow) was my editor. I never thought of working for any other magazines. Well, once I did have a meeting with *Esquire* in New York. The guy wanted me to write about a woman who kept winning blue ribbons at cat shows because she had the only cat of its breed. He thought he was giving me a chance to move into the big time, but I thought, "Huh?" It sounded so . . . straight.

My beat, if I had one, was irony. I wrote about a cut-rate yet evil guru (way before Jim Jones), Dennis Hopper in his good old, bad old unreformed days (*Esquire* called after the article came out and said, "Who's

the new bitch?"), a whorehouse in Nevada and the following story—a fairly thorough exploration of the marketing and selling of a teen idol, David Cassidy (who actually was in his twenties).

David Cassidy's PR man had approached ROLLING STONE about the article. David was getting old for the Partridge Family, the Partridge Family was getting old period, and David wanted now to be considered an adult talent. Since the media had created the teen idol he was in the first place, it seemed logical, I suppose, to call on the media to transmogrify his image. And what groovier vehicle than a cover of ROLLING STONE? So we gave it to him.

I spent five days on tour with the fellow—first-class flight to New York, rooms at the Plaza, a pleasant, actually uneventful five days. But still . . . other ROLLING STONE writers were traveling with the Stones, Dylan, the Dead, Neil Young, for chrissakes, and here I was with this kid and his mom, Shirley Jones, who always seemed to be somewhere around. Go be ironic.

After the article ran, there were a few unhappy letters from young girls because photographer Annie Leibovitz had persuaded David to pose naked—he wanted to be hip, didn't he?—and one photograph revealed David's pubic hair, which his young fans said he couldn't possibly possess.

I heard David's PR man got fired as a result of the article. David himself, after *The Partridge Family* got canceled, dropped out of sight for four or five years. He went to Hawaii, I think. But he had a small comeback in 1990, even reaching the Top Forty with a song called "Lyin' to Myself."

As for the title, "Naked Lunch Box," Cassidy's people marketed a line of David Cassidy lunch boxes. But it's also important to note that the article ran in the same issue as an interview with William Burroughs.

The article ran 10,000 words. I counted every word. I always did. It was one of the most satisfying parts of the job.

As for me, my ROLLING STONE career pretty much ground to a halt around 1974. It had been four years, and it wasn't fun anymore, and I was blocked on this article I was trying to write on the children of Robert Kennedy. I'd been taking months, and Jann said now or never, and even this failed to move me to the typewriter. I moved instead to Iowa City for a couple years of R&R at the Iowa Writers Workshop.

It was an amicable parting. Jann and I both happened to be in Israel at the time. We were at a nightclub with some people, and we went outside on the patio, and Jann said, "You realize I have to take you off the masthead." Kind of like a sergeant being stripped of his stripes. I shrugged and said, "Okay." He put his arms around me, and we hugged, and then he said: "Do me a favor, Robin, will you? Don't ever write about me, okay?"

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"Drive over to the Hippopotamus," Henry instructed.

"Aw, Henry, let's go back to the hotel," pleaded David Cassidy, who sat slumped down in the back seat.

"Heeey," chided Henry. "We're in the Big Apple. Let's just see what's happening."

David slumped further in the joyless back seat, muttering his consent. He was exhausted, stoned and drunk, and dizzy from the antibiotics he was taking to drive away a flu. It had been a busy day—two hour-long interviews in the morning; a press conference at New York City College; a rehearsal all afternoon; a session with gossip columnist Earl Wilson; and pictures for the Cancer Society. Then an impromptu tap dancing lesson in his hotel room with a lady he'd met at rehearsal that afternoon. Then dinner, dope, wine, and now this climbing in and out of the back seat of a car looking for what? New York action?

Well, he had his action and he wanted to go to sleep. But that wasn't what the others were into, except for Jill, who sat close to him. The Lincoln limousine pulled in front of the third discotheque they'd been to that evening. They hadn't stayed at the others because Henry didn't think they were quite right.

"We'll just go in and check it out," said Henry. "Just one more. If we don't dig it, we'll leave."

David mustered a small protest.

"*Try* it," laughed Henry. "You'll *like* it."

So David was herded into the Hippopotamus.

"Wait here," said Ron, David's valet. "I'll go take a look."

Ron climbed the steps to a room which poured out music and cigarette smoke, lit purple and pink.

"Where do you think you're going?" demanded the doorman, who barred Ron's entrance to the room.

"You don't understand," Ron said. His voice had a bitchy edge on it now. "I'm here with Mr. Cassidy, my employer. I have to see if the place is all right. You see, there he is right there, standing with those people just inside the door. David Cassidy."

"Where?"

"Right there," Ron was almost screaming. "In the blue coat."

The doorman squinted at the slight figure in the dark hallway, then looked back at Ron.

"That's David Cassidy!" Ron said.

The doorman looked at David again. He shrugged. "Who's David Cassidy?"

Only three weeks earlier that same David Cassidy had set an attendance record at the Houston Astrodome, selling 56,723 tickets to two matinees on the same day.

I

Baboom, Baboom, Boys and Girls, Zing!

Madison Square Garden was filled five balconies full an hour before the matinee with 20,650 excited females—the same girls who more than 20 years ago would have wept for Sinatra and 10 years ago for Elvis. Average teen age girls who keep diaries, go steady and chew gum. And many younger ones, eight- and nine-year-olds, some with their mothers. David Cassidy's audience—who never miss a Partridge Family episode, who devote scrap books to him and wallpaper their bedrooms with his face and body.

Now they held up banners reading "David Spells Luv."

"I hope I brought enough Kleenex," worried a 16-year-old wearing a tight sweater and hot pants. "I'll probably cry. I cried when I got my ticket."

"Ooooh!" cried one small voice inside the hood of a pink and red snow suit. Eight-year-old wide-eyed Amanda Lewis clutched a $2.00 David Cassidy program to her undeveloped bosom. "He's so sexy."

One fan didn't know if David was sexy. "I'm a boy," explained Elliot Fain, age 11, from Forest Hills. "I think he's a very interesting person though."

The girls were there to scream. They screamed whenever so much as an equipment man mounted the stage. One news photographer approached a cluster of ladies. "Scream!" he directed. They screamed. He took a picture.

Aproned vendors coursed through with screams of their own: Posters! Programs! Hot dogs! Popcorn!

When the lights dimmed, the show's MC—a fave DJ on WABC radio—strutted onto the stage, long-legged and agile as a circus barker. "I just saw David backstage!" he announced.

"EEEAAHHH!" went the crowd.

"Now, when I count to three I want you to say 'Hi, David!' One, two, three!"

"HI, DA-VID!" The auditorium shook.

"And now I want you kids to show the world that children your age can behave and not go crazy. Yell and scream, but stay in your seats. Let me hear you say 'I will.' One, two, three!"

* * *

In a windowless cinderblock dressing room, all David's people were assembled. Wes Farrell, record producer; Ruth Aarons, manager; Jim Flood, PR man; Steve Wax, A&R man; Sam Hymen, David's roommate; Ron the valet; Henry Diltz, pop photographer; Steve Alsberg, road-manager. No Jack Cassidy, David's father, but Shirley Jones, his stepmother, with two of her three sons, and his mother Evelyn Ward with David's grandfather, 84 years old, in a grey three-piece suit.

In a corner, a pile of gifts from fans four feet high: stuffed animals, plastic flowers, incense and scented candles, shirts and hand-printed messages of undying love.

David signed autographs for promoters' and policemen's daughters, and chatted with well wishers. It was a high moment for him; a triumph, he called it. "Here I am," he said. "I've arrived."

"Think about it," said Henry Diltz. "The karma is fantastic. David was an actor, looking for a break, and then this Partridge Family TV show comes along. He wasn't a singer, but he evolved really nicely into one. Take the Stones, or Cream. After being into folk music, the blues, and rock and roll for ten, 12 years, they fill Madison Square Garden. Well, David's filling it, too, and *he's only been singing in front of people for a year!*"

Minutes before showtime, Ron helped David into his costume, a $500 white crepe jump suit slit to the navel and decorated with fringe, beads, bells and sequins around the waist.

"I wish," said David, "that anyone who has ever put down someone in my situation—the Beatles, or Presley or anyone—I wish that they could be where I am, could jump into my white suit for just one day. It's such a rush, they'd never come down to think about it.

"It's a high going out on that stage. You look around and it's all there for you, people loving you like that. My friends are there with me, I'm doing what I love to do most, singing and I'm singing for people who would rather have me sing than anybody else in the world.

"There's one song I do, 'I Woke Up in Love This Morning,' and I find a little place where I can sort of point to them. And they each think I mean *them,* and I do. Whew, I can't wait. Let me get out there. Let me do it!"

David sang into the mirror as he applied pancake make-up to his face, chest and arms. He said he didn't think of anything before a concert. "I'm in a state of, 'Well, here I go,' like a runner before a race, an athlete before he takes the big dive. The roll of the drums, baboom, baboom, and then, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls!' And I take the baton and zing . . . !"

Flanked by his valet and his road manager, David was off and running. He leapt onto the stage, welcomed by a blood curdling screech. The continuous blinking of flash bulbs gave the place a strobelit effect.

"I love you, I love you," David screamed back at them. "I love *everybody.*"

On stage this mild, quiet guy was transformed into a glistening white superstar. He gave it everything, his 5′7″, 125 lb. body had. Like a young and healthy animal of no particular gender he moved as he sang, in a graceful, almost choreographed way.

"I never get tired of watching David's act," said his roommate Sam Hymen, looking on from the sidelines. "And I've seen it 50, 100 times. Something's happening out there. The white costume, the big band behind him." The band played perfectly, wearing sedate matching maroon blazers. "I like to watch the audience, too, they're so turned on and happy."

In the first row, Shirley Jones sat with David's family. "It's like a revival meeting," she said, "the way he excites the audience, then calms them down."

Fans tossed stuffed animals and dolls onto the stage, and one girl managed somehow to elude guards and climb up there herself. Once there, she froze. David jumped when he noticed her, a plump girl in a blue chemise. Gracefully, he took her hand and kissed her cheek.

Though no one fainted, as 24 had in Detroit, the energy was high. The girls went wild in place. The young ones grew restless when David crooned the slower ballads in a small, but soothing voice. Many older girls wept.

If David was emanating heavy vibes, they escaped one 24-year-old observer. Jill watched the show on a backstage TV screen. "It's so weird," she said. "Last night, he was really nice. He was a really good fuck." Jill shook her head. "But seeing him doing his act, I can't believe it's the same person. This act is so Las Vegas. He's like a male Ann-Margret."

Twenty thousand girls were satisfied, though, transfixed by their idol. When the hour set was over, they sat in darkness and groaned in disappointment. But not for long.

When the lights went up, they recovered and set to furious but businesslike pursuit of their fantasy. Guards blocked off the backstage area, but some fans were small enough to race under their arms and between their legs, overturning one cop.

Finally, they swarmed through, searching for David, who had made good his frantic escape covered with a blanket on the back seat floor of a Japanese sedan. One vendor sold programs along the escape route, getting in a few last-minute sales.

II

Twitchy Thighs and Sticky Seats

In two years, David Cassidy has swept hurricane-like into the pre-pubescent lives of millions of American girls. Leaving: six and a half million

long-playing albums and singles; 44 television programs; David Cassidy lunch boxes; David Cassidy bubble gum; David Cassidy coloring books and David Cassidy pens; not to mention several millions of teen magazines, wall stickers, love beads, posters and photo albums. Among many things, including those wet theater seats.

As David himself puts it, "This is very filthy, but when the hall empties out after one of my concerts, those girls leave behind them thousands of *sticky seats.*"

Virtually unknown in the older world of rock audiences, David is an idol to television multitudes and teenage millions. The rise to fame began more than two years ago when he appeared in television programs like *Ironside, Bonanza* and *Marcus Welby MD.* And when he landed the role of a dying boy on *Medical Center,* he unmistakably began to capture viewers' hearts. Then came Keith Partridge, a weekly situation comedy role in *The Partridge Family.*

When *The Partridge Family* started, David was 20 years old. But with his exceptionally pretty face and tiny voice, he passed as the bouncy 16-year-old son in a family of four children who lived in the suburbs and made their living as a rock and roll band.

Only two years before, the show's producers had created the Monkees. With *The Partridge Family* they planned to dub the singing when the band performed, but they soon discovered—to the delight and surprise of everyone—that David himself could sing.

Soon, the television company began putting out Partridge Family records, which sold well. Soon enough, David emerged as a solo performer, cutting his own records, on tour with his own band.

"I was an actor," David explained later, thinking back to his decision to forget Broadway and return to Hollywood. "I was out to earn the bucks. I wanted to be a working actor—one who works all the time, who other actors look at and say, 'Well, he's pretty good.' Honestly, my goal was not to be a star."

Five weeks after his return to Hollywood he went from earning $150 a day to television guest-star roles. And then came the script for *The Partridge Family.*

"When I first read the script, I thought it was terrible," David recalled. "I was thinking about saying these dumb lines like 'Gee, Mom, can I borrow the keys to the car.' I just couldn't bring myself to do it after doing all those heavy things I'd done.

"I called Ruth and said, 'You gotta be kidding with this.' And she said, 'Read it over again and call me back.' Well, I'm so soft. I read it over—twice—and then I called her back and I said, 'I guess it's not so bad.' Only because I'd gotten used to it."

And he had the same reaction to the music he was being asked to

perform, first as part of the Partridge Family and later on his own. "When I first got in the studio, I said to the producer, Wes Farrell, 'I don't want to cut bubble gum records.' And he said, 'No, man, we're not going to cut bubble gum records.' Me and my friend Cookie were jamming at the time, the blues, and all of a sudden I'm gonna sing, 'I Think I Love You!' "

At first, radio stations hadn't liked the song either. But it has now sold over five million copies. "When that record came out it was only Wes and Larry Uttal, head of Bell Records, who thought it was going to be a smash.

"What happened with that record was we got secondary air play on it, small towns. The primary stations didn't want it. They said, 'Let the TV show break it,' which I can understand."

Finally one town, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, played the record, and it went from 40 to one in two days.

"Now everybody cuts it. Percy Faith, the Boston Pops. And it was written for *me.* I've got good writers writing for me.

"I want people to know that I like to sing that song. I stand naked—that's the best word I can think of—and say 'This is how I am.' "

Interlude:

A Fig Leaf Doesn't Fall

Both teenaged girls wore hot pants, silver stars pasted on their red-polka-dot cheeks under heavily painted eyes. The two had camped out in front of the elevator door on the sixth floor of the Plaza Hotel all evening, waiting for David to return to his suite. When he appeared with his entourage, the girls rose. They didn't rush to David, but ran instead into each other's arms where, according to some apparent plan, they arranged themselves in a provocative pose. They smiled.

"Hi," David smiled. "What're you girls up to?"

"You!" they squealed, and kissed each other passionately. Arms around each other, the shorter girl moved one leg between the other's thigh, and with her free hand began to caress her friend's bosom.

David took Jill's arm and led her past them down the hall. The two girls stared after him, disappointed. They pleaded with Henry to intercede for them.

"David," Henry ran down the hall. "Where are you *going?"*

"Aw, Henry," David said, "Chicks like that don't turn me on."

Henry talked to him in earnest tones, gesturing occasionally towards the two girls who smiled hopefully at David each time Henry pointed their way.

"But Henry, I mean, after I got done making love to that, I'd feel shitty. I couldn't look at them. I couldn't wait to get them out of my bed so I wouldn't have to see them there, and face them, and myself, too."

When David emerged from his hotel room the next morning he saw that the two bizarre would-be groupies still stood draped around each other leaning against a wall outside the sixth floor elevator door.

"You think they were there all night?" David asked Henry in the limousine en route to Madison Square Garden.

"Naw," said Henry. "I let them camp out in my room on the floor. They were strange little girls. I had to drag it out of them, but they're from New Jersey. Just two ordinary girls during the week. The big one with the moustache is a telephone operator, and the little feminine one works in a store."

"Oh, no!" groaned David, "there they are in that cab behind us." From the yellow cab following them they could see two excited females waving and smiling.

"Get rid of them Caesar. See if you can lose them." David's voice was urgent. "I don't want them around me. I don't want them near the dressing room. My *family* is going to be there."

Smoking a joint and drinking wine ordered from room service at the Plaza Hotel, David watched the March 10th episode of *The Partridge Family*.

Keith and his family were driving to the country for a week's vacation from their busy schedules as rock and roll stars. En route, their psychedelic painted bus breaks down. They seek help from a country couple, who recognize them and plot to keep them there so that they'll perform at a benefit for a neighboring Indian reservation.

"Watch," David predicted. "Here's where I do my pouting schtick. I always have to do one of these things."

On the screen, Keith is annoyed at the delay, and puts up a fuss when his mother suggests he take his younger brother Danny fishing. While cleaning the fish in their captor's garage, Keith finds a case of the stuff needed to repair their bus. He realizes that the couple is lying to them. Holding one of the fish he has caught in his hand, he says to Danny, "There's something fishy here." Laughter, on the television and from David's corner.

Keith stalks into the couple's house to confront them. But the two still hide their intentions, and Keith is chastised by his mother for being suspicious.

The next day, the couple takes the Partridge Family to the Indian reservation, where they see the plight of the Indians.

"Someone should do something," says Keith's mother.

"That's what everybody says," moralized the country woman.

Keith's mother apologizes and asks what she can do to help.

"Well," replies the woman, "there is going to be a fair for the Indians this afternoon. Perhaps you could entertain."

Just then, the younger son, Danny, finds a leaflet announcing that his family was scheduled to perform that afternoon. Everyone laughs, realizing that there has indeed been a plot all along.

The plot thickens when the Partridge Family manager finds one of the leaflets, which has reached him somehow, in Las Vegas. He drives out to prevent the concert which is against the terms of the family's contract. Discovering this, the couple send the manager on a wild goose chase.

"Watch this," David laughed. "This is really funny."

In full color the manager is scared foolish by a band of Indians pretending to be on the warpath. Meanwhile, the Partridge Family performs on a stage atop their bus, and everything works out for the best.