

David Cassidy — The teen idol at 50

Scripps Howard News Service

PASADENA, Calif. — He may have been the sacred calf of the '70s, but David Cassidy insists it's much better to be part of the herd.

Hurled to fame by TV's smash "The Partridge Family," Cassidy plummeted from a teen idol to a booze-bedazzled veteran in just 12 years.

"Talent survives, but the people may not," he says over lunch in a quiet restaurant here. "I've seen so many people self-destruct and at the time — in 1986 — I was in the darkest, most unhappy, most unhealthy (place). I'd just gotten out of a divorce. I was broke. I was almost a million dollars in debt. I'd left all my personal belongings — everything I owned except for what I could carry — with my ex-wife."

Now a headlining performer in "At the Copa," a show he executive-produces and stars in at the Rio Casino Resort in Las Vegas, and creator of "The Rat Pack Is Back!" playing at the Sahara in Vegas, Cassidy has resurfaced in full force.

But his 268-mile journey from Hollywood to Las Vegas makes Marco Polo's look like a Sunday walk.

"That kind of life is not what it's cracked up to be," he says of the celebrity flush following "The Partridge Family." "A lot of people aspire to that, and I can only tell them it ain't all that it appears. It was pretty sudden. In those days, network TV was the only thing in town. There was no

video. And 95 percent of all people 17 years and younger that were home watching television were watching me. It was almost required viewing, everyone has told me. That was a really cool thing. It was all over the world, too. It's been a fascinating life, I have to say," he shakes his head.

The fame brought with it money, power and overindulgence. "I was never a drug addict," he says, placing his fork down. "I was just into excessive, self-destructive behavior, and I'm not alone. It was everywhere, all the time. It was actually horrible. I can't think of anything more unpleasant than being around a bunch of stoned, smelly people who haven't showered. I can't characterize it by any movie that one has seen, I can only characterize it as its own hell..."

Cassidy, 50, says he was present enough to know that the troupes of women he attracted were not there because of his sweet character or jolly personality. "I didn't mind hanging out with people like that," he says, shaking his head. "But I knew — with women — I knew. But that didn't matter to me. I actually preferred it. I didn't have to get involved."

But it didn't work forever. Two sour marriages, a daughter out of wedlock, no work, no money and no possibilities greeted Cassidy when he woke up in the apartment of his best friend's sister and looked back on what had happened.

He'd been an eager fledgling when, 15 years before (just two weeks out of high school), he'd auditioned seven times for theater great George

Abbott before he snagged a job.

Working in the mail room of the Deering-Miliken Textile Factory, Cassidy gave up the chance to screen test for a Hollywood TV show in order to do the play.

But the play closed in three weeks. "I called and said, 'My show closed.' And (the agent) said, 'I'm sending you a plane. I want you out here now.'"

"I was 18 and looked 14. It was the part of a college student. I was good, but I was way too young. They cast an actor by the name of M.K. Douglas, Michael Douglas. He was 20 and looked 18 or 19."

Still Cassidy, who was the son of actor Jack Cassidy and actress Evelyn Ward, started lining up TV gigs in shows like "Marcus Welby, M.D.," "Bonanza," and "The Mod Squad."

When "The Partridge Family" — in which Cassidy was cast with his stepmother, Shirley Jones — arrived, no one predicted its massive popularity.

During the hysteria that followed, Cassidy met his current wife, Sue, on a trip to England. "We met originally in 1973 and dated then. She lived there. Then we didn't see each other for 13 years, then we dated."

It was a series of hurdles that brought Cassidy back from the purgatory he'd designed for himself. Through a friend he managed to rent a 12-year-old Chevy for \$100 a month; he continued to live in the apartment of his friend's sister; and he began to run.

"Running became very therapeutic for me. I used to drive down to

Venice. Most of the running I began doing was to keep me from falling apart. I would make it my job because I didn't have a job. I'd run six days a week. I ran in Venice where there were a lot of homeless people. I had glasses on and would pass them and thought, 'If I don't do this, that's where I'm going to be.' I'd say, 'I'm that close. Keep going, keep going.' I made that my mantra."

A chance meeting with an agent in a restaurant offered Cassidy the chance to perform with Laurence Olivier back in London. "I got on an airplane and was there for seven months and paid back all the debt. I had the confidence that I believe every actor has who believes in something beyond getting lucky. If you can just carry on for more than 15 minutes. I had a lot of confidence in myself and my work. It bailed me out. From that I went and made a record. I had a hit record, and got a publishing deal."

When he returned to the states he starred with his half-brother, Sean, in the play, "Blood Brothers," a successful turn which stunned the show-business community.

After that he took over for Michael Crawford role in the Vegas extravaganza, "EFX."

Today Cassidy appears nightly in "At the Copa" with Sheena Easton.

"I've had a chance to really evaluate it," he says of his life so far. "And I think I've got a double E ticket. For that, I feel very fortunate. The highs have been incredibly high and the lows have been really pretty low."