

07 Apr 2001

the guardian

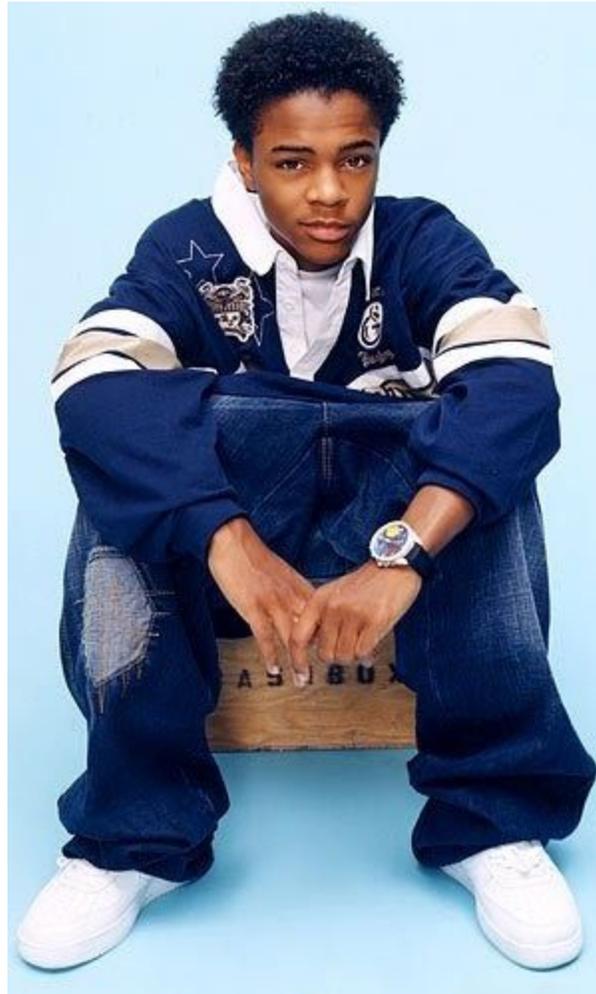
The Guardian Guide

Scars in their eyes: Lil Bow Wow is the latest in a new wave of super-talented teens to hit the big time. Just now he seems happy, balanced, protected. But child stars can pay a high price for their fame.

By: Lulu Le Vay

It's Saturday morning and Ant & Dec are up to their usual trademark high jinks. Sitting between them on the SM:TV sofa is 4ft-nothing, 14-year-old rap superstar Shad Moss, aka Lil Bow Wow, the latest addition to the history of child stars - his wee bonce boasting some serious cornrow braids. At four, Lil Bow Wow memorised the entire works of NWA. At six, he was discovered by Snoop Dog, mid-tour, when he was pulled out of the crowd and lifted up onto the stage. He may now be the toast of US hip-hop - his debut album having already gone double platinum across the Atlantic, wooing the likes of Madonna and Destiny's Child in the process - but he sits there in silence, appearing uncomfortable in his surroundings, the creases under his eyes evidence of a hefty work schedule. But he's a star. That's what they do.

Most kids Shad's age save up their pocket money for months in anticipation of their next bike/scooter/Nintendo game. At his mom's gaff in Columbia, Ohio, LBW happily settles for all of those, but with added basketball court and jacuzzi. He's the envy of his friends. And his prepubescent fame has made him an idol to all the starry-eyed kids across the globe who swagger about in baggy sweats rhyming into wooden spoons.



Aside from LBW, the sweeping wave of teen stardom has lately witnessed many fresh additions. Puff Daddy's gyrating Britney-inspired proteges Dream, aged 14-16, who recently smashed the US charts with their debut single He Loves U Not, have schedules that, according to band member Ashley Poole, require them to "work like adults". The career of 11-year-old Daniel Radcliffe, soon-to-be star of the hyped Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone adaptation, almost met a premature demise when delayed filming ruffled white collars at his local education authority. In contrast, 14-year-old pirouetting pin-up Jamie Bell has just skipped away with a Bafta for Billy Elliot, but has shrunk back from publicity so he can concentrate on school. Meanwhile, black Billie

Piper wannabe Lisa Roxanne, also 14, has just been signed to Palm Pictures for a whopping pounds 1m. And then there's 15-year-old Charlotte Church, whose autobiography *Voice Of An Angel (The Story So Far)* is published next week - before she's even started plucking those eyebrows. It's obvious the girl hasn't yet lived.



The Fame Game. So many talented young players. But the pitfalls for young stars in later life are often overlooked, all those involved blinded by the big bucks and shiny lights. However, it has been boo-hoed into the media spotlight via Michael Jackson's tissue-grabbing speech at the Oxford Union last month. "When I was young I wanted more than anything else to be a typical little boy, but fate had it otherwise," he snivelled. Out of all the child stars the canon of popular culture has fired at us over the years, such as Drew

Barrymore and Macaulay Culkin, right back to original screen darlings Lena Zavarone and Shirley Temple, Wacko Jacko has been the most visibly mutated by fame's grip.

Lena may have died at 35, having developed an eating disorder at 13 after her agent told her she was "too fat" (she died weighing a hefty three-and-a-half stone), and Drew was snorting lines at 12 rather than writing them, but at least neither of them resorted to turning to the knife (hatchet, whatever) in such a bizarre pursuit to resemble fellow former nappy starlet Liz Taylor.

But Jacko's teary speech did highlight several points. The majority of kids thrown into the "fame" arena do suffer their childhood development, emotional maturity and education being brutally disrupted. "We have found with most child stars that their journey into adulthood isn't successful," states Dr Michelle Elliott of children's charity Kidscape. "Children need to be children, and that time being a child is invaluable."

Back in 1982, Birmingham boy band Musical Youth, aged 10-15, shot to stardom with their No 1 smash Pass The Dutchie. Three years later, interest plummeted and the band split. The eldest member, singer Dennis Seaton, now 34, recalls: "I had a breakdown - it was all going wrong and I felt empty inside. I felt like a failure, but luckily I managed to catch myself in time and start again." Dennis now runs a car rental company outside Birmingham. The others aren't so fortunate - bass player Patrick Waite died while awaiting a court appearance on drug charges in 1993. His brother Junior and Kelvin Grant both live at home with mum.

The cast of US sitcom Different Strokes also crumbled when the series ended and their fame flame fizzled. Dana Plato (Kimberly) ended up working in a dry cleaners, overdosing on painkillers in 1999. Gary Coleman (Arnold), despite successfully suing his trust-fund-swindling parents and managers for \$3.8m, now works as a security guard in an LA mall.



Pushy parenting can also be damaging to a child's psyche. Frederick Waite, father of Patrick and founder of MY, was highly ambitious for his young sons, as was Joe Jackson. One only has to look at Michael to see what emotional (and physical) scars prevail. Macaulay Culkin and Drew Barrymore separated from their manager parents. Drew, whose godfather is Steven Spielberg, barely remains on speaking terms with her mother after escaping from her clutches at 15. Macaulay quit acting at 14 and went back to school after a similar split with his father, only returning to theatre in the UK late last year in the sell-out show Madame Melville. A brave step for someone whose persona, to the outside world, will forever be associated with that smart Alec brat in Home Alone.

"It's been hard for him, he will always have that brand on his shoulder," sympathises Mark Borkowski, Macaulay's UK publicist. Last year, Borkowski PR were approached by GQ, inviting Macaulay to their annual Style Awards. "They inquired whether he would need to bring a guardian," says Borkowski. "I just couldn't believe it - he's 20! It's amazing how people will always focus on you as that child star."



Over the last few years, the pre-adult thirst for fame has become ever more insatiable. Applications to the Sylvia Young Theatre School have tripled. Teen-read Bliss has seen sales rise since it re-launched last July, with its tag "the magazine that makes you famous". And in February, 13m people tuned in to see the final five out of 3,000 hopefuls strike gold in Popstars.

If there's one glimmer of hope, maybe it's that new role models Hear'Say will act as a warning to the mounting horde of sparkly-eyed youngsters, with the intense media attention and brash succession of "exclusives" the band has endured being enough to make them rethink their ambitions. Exposure to fame is hard enough to deal with as an adult. Let the kids tra-la-la into their wooden spoons in peace.

Lil Bow Wow's debut album, Beware Of Dog, is out on April 16. The single Bow Wow (That's My Name) is out now