

Tween Stars Wanted: Must Be Primed for Pressure

Sherri Ziff

As a life coach in Hollywood of RockYourLifeCoaching who works with celebrities and actors, I feel like I have to respond.

There are so many points missing from this discussion but I will raise a few.

First, hear this: there is no such thing as a child actor – because the minute a child begins the auditioning process – forget about actually landing an acting job - the childhood is over.

Simply, a “child” does not have the inner resources or maturity to handle what is required of him professionally. So, the child fast-tracks adulthood. He starts acting like a grown up, talking like one, he interacts with adults all day at work, and he gets a lot of positive reinforcement for being adult-like. Have you noticed when child stars appear on talk shows, the host always notes how articulate and poised the kid is and then the audience applauds?

The truth is it's very unnatural and very unhealthy. A human being needs a childhood and when a kid misses out on growing basic life skills, he pays dearly for it later in life.

That, and the family dynamic is forever altered. The “child” has gone from the protected, taken care of role to that of being the possible source of enormous income. At least one of the parents has become focused on the child's success, possibly has become the “manager”, has moved to Hollywood in support of the child's dreams, devotes countless hours and endless financial resources to propelling the child to fame. It's all about the child. What could be healthier for the child and the family?

What's worse and the damage of this is less easy to track and often doesn't appear for years is that the guiding message to the child becomes, “What other people think of you matters most. You will be important, a success, special, when a casting director, a producer, etc thinks you're special.”

This creates an internal void and kids who grow up with this belief spend their lives trying to get outside confirmation and acceptance – but what they get is never enough. The more they pursue it, the more the void grows.

“Our family is extremely close knit, and the minute her mother and I or her older sisters sense the slightest whiff of diva behavior, we will jump all over it,” Mr. McClain said.

That’s a beautiful idea and I’m sure he means it. And it will never happen, for many reasons. First, have you looked at your contract, Mr McClain? There’s no yanking your kid off a show because you think she’s becoming a diva.

But becoming a diva is only one of many, many damaging issues that can arise. Here's one: what will happen is as your daughter changes, you will, too. You’ll start to enjoy the attention you get for having a famous daughter. It happens very, very slowly – you won’t notice it. You’ll enjoy production assistants catering to YOUR every whim set. You’ll like being treated special because your daughter is the star of the show. You'll like the perks and you'll think being interviewed is fun. You will not see the freight train coming until you and your family are flattened. That’s how it goes.

The examples of parents losing their way are endless. Here’s one: you have to wonder, for example, when did the tight knit Cyrus family think it was okay for their 16 year old (or was she 15?) to date a 20 year old man, a man Mr. Cyrus introduced her to??? What??? Isn’t that illegal in every state??? I believe it happened because as Miley changed, so did her parents. They didn’t see her as a teenager anymore. They saw her as the exception – she’s mature for her years. She’s different than kids her age. And they were right - she’s been living as an adult for years so why not have an adult boyfriend? Except that she’s a teenager who on the inside hasn’t developed adult life skills, judgment and the like.

My unsolicited advice to all the parents of these kids: ask yourself some real hard questions. What's to gain and what's at stake? Is it really the end of the world if your kids grow up on your income and pursue their entertainment industry "dreams" when they're adults? Stay out of the limelight. Don't give another interview. Don't go to a party. **BE THE PARENT!!!!** Not a manager, not a friend. **BE THE PARENT!!!**

I have a unique perspective: not only am I a life coach in Hollywood, I was a staff writer on Beverly Hills, 90210 when the show exploded into a worldwide phenomenon. I can assure you: there is no such thing as a child actor. There is no one who comes out of this unscathed. A few are rich, but all are scathed in some way, visible or invisible. Sooner or later.

By [BROOKS BARNES](#)

Published: May 10, 2011

LOS ANGELES — China Anne McClain, 12, was taping a scene for her new Disney Channel comedy here recently, when fiction and fact collided. As the cameras rolled, her character — heading off to start big, bad high school — got some parental advice.

“Just be prepared, Sweetie,” her television mom warned. “There’s going to be a lot of temptations here.”

The same counsel applies to Ms. McClain in real life, as she prepares to make a full-tilt, Disney-backed charge for the title of Next Tween Queen. Pretty and talented yet nonthreatening, Ms. McClain, as an actress and singer, clearly has the potential to commandeer prepubescent culture. “A.N.T. Farm,” the series Disney tailor-made for her, will have a preview on May 22; the premiere is in June. She also has a record deal.

Children’s television is at a transitional moment when it comes to female stars. At Disney, the Big Three — Miley Cyrus, Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato — have all moved on. Miranda Cosgrove, the star of “iCarly” on Nickelodeon, turns 18 this month. Both companies are feverishly trying to mint new headliners capable of drawing the attention of tweens, roughly defined as viewers 9 to 14.

But the manufacture of child stars is not as easy as it used to be. There was a time when all it took was a perky personality, a little talent and a slot on the Mickey Mouse Club. Now child stars have to anchor TV series and movie spinoffs, churn out hit songs, write books and headline global concert tours — when they’re not introducing their signature line of clothing at Wal-Mart.

There is also more competition, and not just between Nickelodeon and Disney. Add “Glee,” ABC Family, MTV, CW and almost every record label into the mix; Justin Bieber ascended via YouTube. There are also more opportunities for teenage stars to screw up in a world where Twitter and Facebook stand ready to document every roll of their eyes.

It remains to be seen whether Ms. McClain will be able to absorb fame without becoming yet another teenage train wreck.

Disney and Nickelodeon executives worry about pushback from parents who are fed up with a situation that has become all too common for tween stars: actresses sold as role models who quickly become the opposite. At what point do skeptical parents stop allowing their children to tune in?

Jamie Lynn Spears of Nickelodeon's "Zoey 101" became pregnant at 16. Vanessa Hudgens ("High School Musical") had a nude photo scandal. Ms. Cyrus abruptly adopted a sex kitten persona, a transformation inexplicably backed by the Disney-owned Hollywood Records. Ms. Lovato, famous for "Camp Rock" and "Sonny With a Chance," has recently been in rehab.

"These channels are starting to lose my trust in this department," said Tara Shannon, a Denver mother of a boy, 8, and a girl, 11. "We've taken the bait time and again, and time and again it has left us as parents with a mess to clean up."

Michael McClain doesn't blame parents who feel that way. He's one of them. He promises that his daughter, who goes by China Anne, will follow more in the footsteps of Ms. Gomez, who as the star of "Wizards of Waverly Place" has successfully navigated fame.

"Our family is extremely close knit, and the minute her mother and I or her older sisters sense the slightest whiff of diva behavior, we will jump all over it," Mr. McClain said.

He added that he and his wife, Shontell, have sought advice from Ms. Gomez's parents. "Selena is my role model," said China Anne McClain, sitting primly on a sofa in her dressing room. "I'm never going to disrespect myself — never."

That's easy for her to say now. Fame, not to mention puberty, has only begun to hit her, and she only recently relocated with her family to Los Angeles from suburban Atlanta. Even so, Gary Marsh, the president of

entertainment for Disney Channel, said that his gut told him that Ms. McClain would be different.

“She is probably the most talented comedian we have encountered in 10 years, but there is something that she was born with that allows her to be very humble,” Mr. Marsh said. “Her parents are also warm and loving and caring and involved. You would be shocked to know how often the opposite is true.”

Indeed, Mr. Marsh has started screening parents as carefully as potential stars. Too fame-hungry themselves? Too reliant on their children for income? Maybe Disney should move on to a different candidate.

Creating a breakout tween superstar takes years of careful grooming that hark back to Hollywood’s studio system days. Disney, scouring audition tapes and the Web, looks for various elements: presence, a genuine interest in show business and raw talent in acting, singing or dancing. Good looks are a must, but so is a certain blandness. Tween viewers gravitate toward actresses who they think have best-friend potential; the slightest mean-girl whiff can prevent a star-in-the-making from reaching the stratosphere.

Disney encountered Ms. McClain in all of her bubbly glory about five years ago. She auditioned for a TV movie called “Jump In,” about a boy who discovers a hidden passion for jumping rope. She won the role but turned it down because she had a better offer: Tyler Perry, the Atlanta movie and television mogul, wanted to cast her in his TBS series, “Tyler Perry’s House of Payne,” and a film, “Daddy’s Little Girls.”

But Disney didn’t give up, and before long Ms. McClain was on the company’s child star assembly line: making guest appearances on shows like “Hannah Montana,” taking lessons on how to interact with the news media, popping up in a Web video here and there. Meanwhile, Disney toiled to build a show entirely around her.

That series is “A.N.T. Farm,” created by Dan Signer. It focuses on a group of 12-year-old prodigies who join a high school’s Accelerated

Natural Talents program. Ms. McClain plays Chyna, a music virtuoso. The series co-stars Sierra McCormick and Jake Short, young people who both have impressive comedic skills.

The prodigies have to navigate a new and scary world. (Sample dialogue: “Do not anger the big kids. They will kill us, make jewelry out of our bones and then sell us at craft fairs. I do not want to end up around the neck of a middle-age woman in a jean skirt.”) Like most children’s shows, “A.N.T. Farm” is designed to be aspirational — all the better to lure young viewers and soothe parental concerns about television as junk food.

The backing of Ms. McClain, who is African-American, comes at a time when children’s channels are working harder to find minority stars. It’s shrewd marketing, signaling to parents that diversity is a priority. But Nickelodeon and Disney also want to hold a mirror to a diversifying viewer base. “We have taught children to look for themselves,” Mr. Marsh said.

Other actresses vying for tween superstardom are Zendaya, a biracial 14-year-old who co-stars in Disney Channel’s budding dance hit, “Shake It Up.” Coco Jones, 12, is an African-American singer. (Combine Jennifer Hudson with Rihanna and give the results a middle school gloss.) Ms. Jones has become a darling of Radio Disney. Nickelodeon is developing a series around Cymphonique Miller, a 14-year-old African-American singer and actress, called “How to Rock Braces and Glasses.”

Still, nobody appears to be getting the star-in-the-making treatment quite as much as Ms. McClain. There’s no talk of “Hannah Montana”-level success yet — Ms. Cyrus powered that series into a \$1 billion annual brand — but Disney certainly hopes that she will blossom quickly into a star with the wattage of Ms. Gomez or Ms. Cosgrove of “iCarly.” Disney recently picked Ms. McClain to showcase at an important advertiser presentation in New York.

As soon as “A.N.T. Farm” gets off the ground, Ms. McClain will begin work on a Hollywood Records album. Her two older sisters, Sierra and

Lauryn, will join her, and the group will be called III, according to Mr. McClain. The sound? “Kid-friendly urban music,” Ms. McClain said.

“I like to mix it up a little,” she said, a comment that prompted an arched eyebrow from her dad. “But not too much!” she added.