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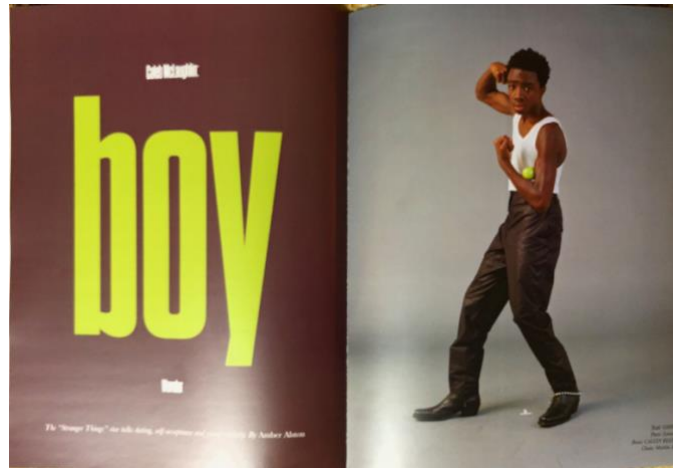
NEU NEU MAGAZINE

THE YOUTH ISSUE



**AZEALIA BANKS
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*Article appears in print



Caleb McLaughlin: Boy Wonder.

By Amber Alston

The “Stranger Things” star talks self-acceptance, social media and young celebrity.

“Keith Sweat, please!” asks a bubbly Caleb McLaughlin. He’s just arrived on set and the ‘90s break-up music he requests is in sharp contrast to the energetic dance moves the young teen begins as music fills the room. At sixteen years old, McLaughlin may be too young to remember the connotations that swirled around the term “child star,” a label that often reduced young celebrities to one-dimensional figures that conjured up images of bad attitudes, tabloid scandals, lawsuits and fractured dreams. After all, he is part of a generation that is actively transforming the image through day-to-day social media updates that showcase the much harder practice of just being yourself. The star, who landed his dream role as Simba in *The Lion King* on Broadway at just ten years old, has cemented his place in the modern pop culture canon by playing Lucas on Netflix’s hit series *Stranger Things*. While his days are spent living the Hollywood dream -- posing at photo shoots, doing interviews and taking trips around the world where droves of fans are clamoring to meet him -- McLaughlin has made it clear that he’s content both in and out of the spotlight, though he’d “honestly, rather be home listening to R&B and chillin’.” That laidback spirit follows him to Instagram, where he’s made it his mission to remind his fans that he’s still just a kid, and doesn’t want to be anything other than that.

“I put myself in the right environments, where I can be myself instead of forcing my way into adult environments where I know I can’t,” says Caleb, looking up from his video game as a stylist plays with his hair.

Still, with over four million followers, staying humble is no small feat. For Caleb, however, hyper-visibility has given him the unique opportunity to “show that there are still good people out there.” At every courtside appearance (he’s usually rooting for the Knicks) or press event, and even through *Destiny* (his favorite video game) references on his profile, there is a message about self-acceptance and happiness, ideas supported by his campaigns #EmbraceYourFace and

#BeYourBiggestFan. The hashtags were actually born out of happenstance, on a day when Caleb suffered a breakout and decided to embrace what he refers to as a “natural part of puberty,” by going live on social media and showing that even stars get pimples. The idea has now grown into a viral movement that encourages teens to accept even the ugly sides of adolescence and escape the bad habit of comparing themselves to other people online.

“People said I’ve saved their lives and that’s very inspiring,” he says as hops around set, stopping to show his more playful side to the camera.

But it’s McLaughlin’s most powerful tool that can’t be shared or found on the internet. In an age where it’s often hard to be authentic, the sixteen year old stands out for his confidence and apparent immunity when it comes to negative comments and people. Instead, he’s focused on promoting good vibes, getting through school and building a lasting career on all sides of the camera. We sat down with the actor to talk about the future and find out how the young New Yorker ended up on TV and computer screens around the world.

I saw you were recently in Paris. What’s it like to experience new cultures as a teen?

It’s cool, a lot of people don’t get to do that as teenagers. I’ve been privileged to go to [places like] Paris, London and Hawaii. I’m still young and trying to have fun, but maybe I’ll appreciate it more when I’m a lot older.

How did you end up with your role on Broadway?

My parents took me to see The Lion King two years before I got the job. I just knew that I wanted to be Simba. A few months later, I started community theater and then I was the right age to audition. There were like, five auditions before I got the part. I was young and I realized I was blessed to get it. So many kids auditioned more than once, some ten to eleven times.

I heard you’ve been in the studio and taking dance classes. What creative endeavors are you working on right now?

I’ve been professionally dancing in a class with someone teaching me the basics, but I haven’t been dancing too much lately because of my schedule. I like music and I want to get back into that more.

What kind of music are you interested in making?

R&B.

Who are your favorite musicians?

I like R&B groups like New Edition, Mint Condition, Jodeci, Joe and Chi.

When you aren’t working, what’s a typical day like for you?

I’m in my room with a video game on and the door closed. I also play with my indoor basketball hoop and listen to loud R&B music, just chillin’.

What does a normal work week look like for you?

Photoshoots, meetings, interviews, auditions, scripts to read and school work, of course.

Do you go to school?

Homeschool. Monday to Friday and sometimes Saturday and Sunday, if I want to double up. My friends ask, “Do you ever go to school?” Yes, I do! I just don’t have the same schedule as [them]
-- I get to make my own.

What’s it like being so young and having to manage a professional career?

I have my parents to help me manage my schedule. I want to know the day before; I don’t want to know the week before. It gets overwhelming and makes me start thinking about school and tests. But I go with the flow and do pretty well with that.

What is it like to have more than four million followers on Instagram?

Cool! I remember when I had something like 700 followers and thought that was a lot. But I don’t think about it too much; it just tells me, “Okay, you’re doing good.” Now I get to show people more positivity and bring energy and good into the world. I get people to come to my page to look at my life and see what I want to contribute to the world other than just, “Look, I’m famous!”

Do people expect a lot from famous people on social media?

They do. That’s why I want to show that not everyone is perfect. People make mistakes—don’t shame them for it. Especially a celebrity. I hate that word—I’m still getting used to it.

Tell me about the #EmbraceYourFace campaign. What was your goal with starting the hashtag?

I had bad acne one day on set. I had a pimple on my face and my mom and I were going to Publix in Atlanta. She asked, “Are you sure you’re going to go in there with your skin looking like that?” And I said, “Yes, it’s a process. This happens.”

What process were you referring to?

The process of removing pimples off of your face. It’s going to happen and I can’t just hide it from everyone because everyone has [acne]. I told her, “I’m just going to go in there, go on live and tell **people, ‘Hey! Embrace your face!’**”

Is #EmbraceYourFace just about clear skin, though?

It’s bigger than that now. A lot of people don’t like their face and think that they’re ugly if their skin tone isn’t like this person, or they don’t have that jawline or eye color. I said, ‘No!’ because not everyone is the same. You are your own person. You look how you look. Don’t try to be something you’re not.

Self-acceptance can be a life-long struggle for some. How did you get to a point where you could empower other people to embrace themselves for who they are?

My parents have been telling me this my whole life and they still do. Now I have the platform to speak up and speak out.

You take your personal style seriously. What do you like about fashion?

It's not that I like fashion -- I like things that make people say, "Oh okay, that's how he is!" when they look at me, things that reflect my colorful personality.

You also have a large female following. Describe your dream girl.

A girl that is nice, smart, not aggressive and doesn't like to show off.

What actor would you love to collaborate with?

Michael B. Jordan.

Do you think the upside-down is a metaphor for something?

The bad things. Your fears. Everyone has their own upside-down world and Will has his upside-down world.

What is yours?

Bad things, bad people, negativity, the world today. But you also have that good in it which keeps us up.

What are you looking forward to in season three?

I'm just looking forward to seeing what they have in store and what's next for Lucas.

You don't know anything about it?

Nope. It's all a secret.

What do you see yourself doing in the next fifteen years?

I see myself acting on a different level than I am now, directing, writing and producing.

What message would you send to your future self?

Don't give up. It's going to be a long ride and it's not as easy as people think. Spending years trying to get booked and continuing to work is going to be challenging sometimes. People are going to doubt you and some days you're going to doubt yourself. But just keep that beautiful, optimistic spirit that you have now.