Ashlee Simpson's career comes courtesy of Daddy dearest

By Renée Graham, Globe Staff | January 11, 2005

If an innate tenet of parenthood is to protect one's offspring, why does Joe Simpson insist on repeatedly tossing his youngest child to the wolves?

That's Joe Simpson, father of the alarmingly untalented Ashlee Simpson. Ever since her lip-synching debacle last year on "Saturday Night Live," the pop star wannabe has been a perpetual punch line, and the disparaging words grew even more ferocious after her screechy, off-key performance at the recent Orange Bowl halftime show. By the end of her song, "La La," a spectacular chorus of boos rained from what sounded like a good portion of the 70,000 people in attendance.

Before the camera quickly cut away, Ashlee looked so stunned it was as if someone had backhanded her across the face. Now, Ashlee will begin her first headlining tour next month, and it'll be tough not to feel some sympathy for her since it's her greedy father who, in his capacity as her manager, keeps offering her up for public ridicule.

Having struck gold with older daughter Jessica and her reinvention as a dumb blonde on the MTV reality show "Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica," Joe Simpson, the show's executive producer, immediately began foisting kid sister Ashlee on us, like she's part of some two-for-one package deal. Before you could say nepotism, Ashlee had her own self-titled MTV show (which, like "Newlyweds," returns for a new season Jan. 26) detailing the making of her debut album, "Autobiography." That she didn't have a lick of talent was instantly apparent, but there was her father encouraging her to sing songs in various ways.

Still, Joe Simpson's smug vision was validated when Ashlee's album entered Billboard's 200 album chart at No. 1; it has since sold more than 2.5 million copies. (According to Nielsen Soundscan, which tracks record sales, "Autobiography" was 2004's ninth best-selling album.) Of course, album sales are one thing, singing ability quite another. Last summer, I saw Ashlee perform on the second stage at the KISS concert, and she was so awful, yelping her fake little punky songs, I thought it was a jokey stunt. She made Britney Spears sound like Aretha Franklin.

Behind all this is Joe Simpson, a former Baptist minister who gave up his calling to pimp out his daughters as pop stars. Certainly, he isn't the first out-of-control stage parent to manage his child's career and, in the process, nearly wreck her life. For example, some maintain Judy Garland's lifelong problems with drugs began when her overbearing mother allowed MGM studio bosses to prescribe various diet pills for her daughter when she was a teenager. And
then there's Kit Culkin, whose aggressive management style wrecked his son Macaulay's career as a child star faster than puberty.

Of course, there's no indication Joe Simpson has permitted anything as insidious to happen to his daughters. Yet, one has to wonder just how much national derision he can expect Ashlee, who's barely 20, to endure. (This sample from Jay Leno: "I guess you know they had two problems during the Orange Bowl halftime show. Kelly Clarkson's mike wasn't working, and Ashlee Simpson's was.")

Then again what should anyone expect from a father who isn't beyond promoting -- and commenting in unnerving detail -- about his daughter Jessica's sexiness. In a GQ interview last month, Joe said, "Jessica never tries to be sexy. She just is sexy. If you put her in a T-shirt or you put her in a bustier, she's sexy in both. She's got double D's! You can't cover those suckers up!"

Is your flesh crawling yet? And that's not the first time he's mentioned Jessica's ample cleavage in terms way too familiar for comfort.

Rather than follow her older sister's boilerplate pretty blonde route, Ashlee dyed her hair and sells herself as a raven-haired fist-pumping rebel for those who find Avril Lavigne too musically challenging. All well and good, except Avril, behind her surly affectations, has some discernible talent. All poor Ashlee has is a father pushing too hard and too fast.

Certainly, he did the same with Jessica, who began singing Christian music in her early teens. But at least Jessica, when she isn't delivering songs with all the nuance and subtlety of a fog horn, can carry a tune. Ashlee jumps and screams, and couldn't find a key with a global positioning system. All this seems lost on Joe Simpson, who, in making his children into his corporation, seems most concerned with squeezing every dime possible out of Ashlee's dubious fame. If he's conning the public, it's nothing compared to what he's doing to his misguided daughter, who thinks herself a pop star when she's little more than a bad joke.

Then again, that's the cost of being controlled by a man like Joe Simpson, who's more concerned with being a rapacious manager than a protective father and prefers tossing his daughter into the public fires rather than shielding her from its flames.

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