

Who is **JUSTIN BIEBER?**

He's the floppy-haired teen at the top of the pop music tree, but is Justin Bieber a formidable talent or a marketing ploy? Whatever the answer, **David Leser** discovers that Bieber Fever is here to stay.

ART STREIBER/AUGUST/RAVEN & SNOW.



THE TENDER HEARTS of Australia's female youth are probably still palpitating, but now that he has departed our shores it might be a good time to get some perspective on the phenomenon that is Justin Bieber.

Never mind if there are those of you who have only just heard of him – I, too, was living under a rock marked “Paleolithic” until recently – this is the 17-year-old from Stratford, Canada, who is now redefining fame and the history of pop culture.

Consider this: nine million albums sold worldwide in his first year as a professional performer; earnings of more than \$100 million in 12 months; one billion viewers on YouTube; 9 million Twitter followers; nearly 17 million Facebook friends; a best-selling book; a 3-D movie about himself; two performances at the White House; appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Ellen Show*, *Late Show With David Letterman*, *Saturday Night Live* and a host of others; sell-out tours across America, Europe and Australia. And all this before the singer with the Cupid smile can vote or drink in his own hometown.

Think Frank Sinatra in 1942 when he nearly caused the walls of the Paramount Theatre in New York to cave in, such was the commotion from his teenage fans. Think Elvis Presley in 1956 after he sparked near riots with his smouldering good looks and voice, not to mention his on-stage gyrations. Think The Beatles who, during the 1960s, triggered a worldwide hysteria that was to become forever known as “Beatlemania”.

Yes, think all the pop acts of contemporary history that have caused the tween thermometer to sizzle and melt – Ol' Blue Eyes, The King, the Fab Four, The Monkees, David Cassidy, Michael Jackson, the Backstreet Boys (for a moment anyway) – and Justin Bieber is now a glittering star in the same firmament. Only he's done it faster.

Justin Bieber is the first artist to have seven songs from a debut album chart on the Billboard Hot 100. He is the youngest male soloist to have a number one album since Little Stevie Wonder in 1963. He

is the first 16-year-old to perform at a sell-out concert at Madison Square Garden, natural home to rock gods like The Rolling Stones and U2. He is the first artist to garner more than half a billion YouTube viewers for a single song, *Baby*. (At the time of writing it was 533,644,280!)

Thanks to online social media, Justin Bieber is now the most popular teenager on the planet, and he is responsible for an earthly pandemic known as “Bieber Fever” which has literally infected the hearts and minds of tens of millions – make that hundreds of millions – of (mostly) female young girls and teenagers.

Known as “Beliebers”, they share the same highly contagious, difficult-to-isolate symptoms. They buy Bieber fragrance, nail polish, key chains, bracelets, beach towels and teddy bears. They scream, hyperventilate and faint at his concerts. They weep at the sight of him, *the thought of him*, dream of him often – more often than is probably healthy – and they wear purple in his honour because, well, that's his favourite colour.

They also cut their hair like him – at one time the “perfect swoop around”, as *Vanity Fair* magazine dubbed it, a Vanessa Price “do” that has spawned an international fashion trend and a most unlikely website called wholooklikejustinbieber.tumblr.com.

That was until February this year when young Justin decided to chop off his locks in a gesture to his favourite animal rights charity, the Gentle Barn Foundation. It was a haircut that one website proclaimed breathlessly might have “altered the fabric of the universe”.

Certainly it altered something, given that a strand from his crowning glory ended up being sold at an eBay auction for more than \$40,000. That was after 98 bids. The hair then travelled across America inside a glass box – signed by the pop superstar himself – for special appearances in cities and towns. Love-struck fans queued for hours to pose with Bieber's hair and as long as they were prepared to donate to the tsunami

relief effort in Japan they could be photographed with it. Two bodyguards flanked the encased box the entire time.

THIS IS A STORY for our times. Cherub from broken home in Canadian small town teaches himself to sing and play music. At two, he's so mesmerised by the drums he's bashing away on anything he can find. At eight, he's beating time to standard jazz tracks at a local benefit.

At 12, he begins busking in the streets, singing like an angel to a strumming guitar. The good burghers of Stratford open their windows to let the music waft through. In early 2007, he sings American R&B singer, Ne-Yo's, number-one hit, *So Sick* at a local singing competition. His mother, Pattie Mallette, posts the video on YouTube.

And there it begins. Suddenly all these clips of a crooning boy are being uploaded by his mother onto the internet, mainly for friends and family. Yet in 2008, Scott “Scooter” Braun, a big-time talent scout in search of the next kid superstar stumbles on Bieber's videos while looking for a different singer. “I saw this little 12-year-old singing Aretha Franklin's *Respect* ... and that is when I got the buzz,” he declared in the new biopic of Bieber's life, *Never Say Never*. “I actually cancelled all my meetings the next day and said, ‘I'm going to find this kid today’. I became obsessed with him.”

Scooter tracked down Bieber's great-aunt in Canada, then a local theatre, the school board and, finally, his mother, Pattie

Mallette who blanched, initially, at Scooter's persistence and his Jewish background. A devout Christian, herself – a faith she

has imparted to her son – Pattie asked for guidance. “God, I gave him to you,” she implored. “You could send me a Christian man, a Christian label ... you don't want this Jewish kid to be Justin's man, do you?” Apparently He did because, within days, Justin was flying to Atlanta to meet Scooter and record demo tapes with him. A week later he was doing an audition for his hero, the multiple Grammy Award-winning singer and producer, Usher Raymond IV. “Who is ►

“I'M GOING TO FIND THIS KID TODAY.”

From busking to the big time: tween megastar Justin Bieber became an overnight sensation thanks to YouTube and other social media.



ART: STREIBER/AUGUST/RAVEN & SNOW.

this kid?” Usher asked Scooter, before they signed him to their joint venture record label, Raymond Braun Media Group, (RBMG) beating out Justin Timberlake in the process.

Usher and Scooter then took Bieber to see Antonio “L.A.” Reid, the Grammy Award-winning record producer at Island Def Jam Music Group, the same L.A. Reid who’d helped guide Rihanna, Kanye West, Pink, Dido and Usher, himself, to multi-platinum album sales.

“He came in and soaked up all the air in the room,” L.A. Reid would say later, “and he sang pretty well. But it wasn’t even that. It was the face. It was the hair. He was brave ... and when it was all said and done I was beyond convinced.”

The rest, as they say, is history. Recent history. Bieber was signed to L.A. Reid’s Island Records in a venture deal with Braun and Usher’s group, RBMG, prompting Bieber and his mother to move to Atlanta and Braun to become Bieber’s manager. Bieber was 14 years old. He was leaving

his home, his friends, his grandparents – to whom he was devoted – in order to become the “next big thing”.

That was October, 2008. Within months Bieber’s first single, a sweet pop ballad called *One Time*, was released to radio as Bieber was still working on his first album. The song peaked at number 17 on the Billboard Hot 100 and, at last count, had been seen on YouTube by 12.5 million viewers.

*When I met you girl my heart went knock knock
Now them butterflies in my stomach won’t stop stop*

Hardly Dylan-esque, but no matter. The juggernaut kept rolling. A string of appearances on live shows across America was followed by a visit to the Oval Office and a performance for the Obamas at the White House for Christmas in Washington, where he sang Stevie Wonder’s *Someday At Christmas*.

“Like you Mr President,” the comedian, George Lopez, told his star-studded audience in introducing Bieber, “this young man has many fans trying to shake his hand without permission.”

Four months later, in April 2009, Bieber was at the White House again, this time for the Easter Egg Roll where he wowed the crowd – and the First Lady and her two daughters, Sasha and Malia – by cutting loose on the drums and then performing a medley of songs.

On March 23, 2010, Bieber’s debut album, *My World 2.0* was released and instantly went to number one on the US Billboard 200, as well as the Canadian,

Irish, Australian and New Zealand album charts. The new David Cassidy had arrived, a teen idol with androgynous good looks who could trigger mass hysteria with a smile and a flick of the hair.

ANDY WARHOL ONCE famously said that “in the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes”. Given the spectacular rise of celebrity culture and reality

television in recent years – not to mention the onslaught of social media – it looks like a prophetic statement from the one-time

philosopher-prince of American pop art.

What the Beatles achieved after years of grinding it out in the clubs of Liverpool and Hamburg, Justin Bieber has managed to realise almost overnight, thanks, in large part, to the pervasive influence of YouTube. Michael Usher, the Nine Network’s *60 Minutes* reporter whose story on Bieber went to air in April, sees the teenager’s success as inextricably linked to social media, with an avoidance of traditional approaches to music video networks and big television shows.

“His clips, his music, his thoughts, his new releases are all channelled through social media – YouTube, Facebook, Twitter,” he tells *The Weekly*. “It’s a phenomenon. He’s a product of the social media generation.”

Which is not to say the Canadian teenager doesn’t have huge talent. He does. He can sing, rap, dance, play guitar, drums, piano and trumpet. He can also play chess, shoot hoops – practically from the bleachers – and, of course, he’s as cute as a button.

Yet there are plenty of kids with precocious ability – Jack Vidgen, for one, the 14-year-old from Manly in Sydney, who raised the roof last in May with his performance of Whitney Houston’s *I Have Nothing* on the Seven Network’s *Australia’s Got Talent*. Within six days nearly half a million people had viewed his audition online. “Go back a generation,” says Michael Turtle, entertainment producer for the Seven Network’s *Sunrise* program, “and you would have to tour the world and do small concerts and appear >

“THE NEW DAVID CASSIDY HAD ARRIVED.”



Justin on stage and (below) some of his adoring fans.





At just 17, Justin Bieber and his career are floating effortlessly at the top of the charts.

on radio. You would have to connect with people face to face.

“Justin Bieber performs in Hicksville, Canada, and you can see it anywhere in the world because of YouTube.”

Turtle witnessed the eruption of Bieber Fever in Australia 12 months ago when the songster came to Sydney to perform for the *Sunrise* show.

His pre-dawn arrival at Sydney’s Overseas Passenger Terminal caused such pandemonium – girls fainting and being crushed – that the organisers were forced to cancel his appearance. He later performed his hit song *Baby* inside the Seven Network’s studios.

“We underestimated the scale of what was going to hit us,” Turtle explains to *The Weekly*. “If we had known that many fans were going to be there we would have done things differently. But no one understood he had that big a fan base in a country he’d never been to before.”

Michael Usher from *60 Minutes* also underestimated Bieber Fever. “We tried to film in the crowds before the [London O2 Arena] concert and we were mobbed,” he says.

“Security shut us down. They were shouting on loudspeakers to get the girls to calm down and they escorted us back through a side entrance to the

sanctuary of the backstage. They [security] were furious and said if the crowd of girls had become any more hysterical they would have stopped the concert.”

After Bieber’s national sell-out tour of Australia last month – in effect his Second Coming to our shores – his fan base is now even bigger. Not only did Bieber reveal his musicality, he also revealed his heart. At his first Melbourne concert in the Rod Laver Arena he invited Casey Heynes onto the stage to honour the Australian teenager’s stance against bullying. Casey is, of course, the boy who became an international hero to millions when his decision to fight back against one of his school tormentors was filmed on a mobile phone and posted on YouTube. It was a case of one internet sensation meeting another.

And, of course, this is where we find ourselves today – on an information superhighway leading everywhere, pointing to everything and everyone. There is no escaping the virus. Just check out the young girl in his new film, *Never Say Never* who says, “I think about him 99 per cent of my life”. Then she screams.

Or the three-year-old crying over Justin Bieber on YouTube (more than 22 million people have viewed this video already).

OTHER TWEEN SENSATIONS



Elvis Presley

Elvis was the first big rock and roll heart-throb, sending bobby-socked girls into a frenzy with his gyrating pelvis and swarthy good looks.



The Beatles

The sound of girls screaming at Beatles concerts was so loud, it drowned out their music. So-called Beatlemania lasted a decade.



David Cassidy

The Partridge Family TV show launched David Cassidy into the teen sensation firmament. At one live concert, 650 were injured in a crush.



The Bay City Rollers

Known as the “tartan teen sensations” from Scotland, the BCRs were hailed as the biggest – and the most screamed at – group since the Beatles.

“Why are you so sad honey?” the crying toddler is asked by her mother.
 “Because I love Justin Beever [sic].”
 “Does that make you sad?”
 “Yes.”
 “Why?”
 “Because I don’t get to see him all day.”
 “Why do you love Justin Bieber?”
 “Because I know he loves me back.”
 “Honey, you do know you’re only three years old?”
 “Yes Mummy I do.” (crying loudly)
 “Well, when you’re three you’re not supposed to cry over boys.”
 “I know [wail], but I love [wail] Justin Beever.”
 It’s enough to make anyone cry. ■