From muscle to Hustle

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Former rapper Ashley Walters talks about doing time, working out and being a good dad

Ashley Walters is full of surprises. As he shakes hands he apologises for his husky voice; he's feeling fragile after a heavy night. It's just what you'd expect of the former So Solid Crew rapper: clubbing all night, overdoing things. But not a bit of it: it turns out he'd been at home reading a script until after 3am, then up at 6.30am to get his three kids ready for school.

Walters, 24, is a reformed character. Five years ago he was widely condemned as a gun-toting criminal when he was sent to prison for possessing a gun. Now he's the new boy in one of BBC One's most popular drama series, *Hustle*, which gets top ratings both at home and in the US. *Vanity Fair* has already singled him out as a bright young talent to watch.

As he tucks into something junky out of a polystyrene container, Walters explains that he's too busy to worry about his diet; he lives on take-aways. Yet he takes his appearance seriously. He works on his six-pack twice a week with a personal trainer (a friend who gives him a bargain rate), goes to the gym three times a week, jogs every morning and plays football on Sundays. He says he doesn't drink or take drugs but smokes about ten a day, despite his father's death from lung cancer 18 months ago. "People think it's easy to give up, but it's not," he says ruefully.

Walters may be best known for his So Solid Crew days and the prison sentence, but first and foremost he's an actor. He started as a child, with parts in everything from *Grange Hill* and *The Bill* to a docudrama about the murder of Stephen Lawrence and several movies, including *Bullet Boy*, about East London gangland, which won him Most Promising Newcomer at the British Independent Film Awards in 2004.

Yet when he was 19 and already had two children with his girlfriend Natalie, Walters's career seemed to be over. In fact, prison proved to be a turning point: seven months inside allowed him space to take a long hard look at his life. "Prison was really hard but it gave me the opportunity to reflect. I missed my son and daughter desperately. I never got used to it. I knew I had to change my perspective on life and I came to recognise that my family – and providing for them – is the most important thing.

"Before I went to prison I was still growing up, I was trying to be a man with no father figure. And I was angry with the way a lot of things were and because I was facing a lot of intimidation. You carry that with you, and sometimes you take it out on the people you love the most, rather than the people who are doing it to you. I realised that it was down to me to change things. Not to change myself; as far as I'm concerned I was always a good person. But I had to say I'm going to do something different, regardless of what anyone thinks. That means going to work and staying out of trouble, although there's still

peer pressure, no matter how old I get. I have to be strong enough to know that one mistake could end my career and could make things bad not just for me but for my kids." Within three months of his release, Walters had to go back to the same young offenders unit to make *Bullet Boy*, a film that mirrored many of his own experiences. He denies it was cathartic, although it certainly reinforced his determination to turn his life around.

Walters has never been religious, although at one point he read the Koran and considered converting to Islam. His determination to go against the grain comes largely from his mother, now head of personnel at Croydon Council. A teenage parent herself, with just Ashley to look after on her own in their council flat in Peckham, southeast London, she insisted on extra tuition in French, English and maths, plus piano lessons and drama classes at the weekend. It paid off: Walters got ten GCSEs, all As and Bs.

Mother and son remain close, despite the conflict during the So Solid days, when Walters used to climb out the window and sneak off to a radio station without her knowing. "I was pretty bad, pretty rebellious. During that whole period when I went to prison she never knew anything that was happening to me or how angry I was because I hid it all from her. Me being arrested was a big shock and she's made a point of being very involved with what I do now." Walters's father left when he was a baby and they saw little of each other; Walters later discovered that he was in and out of prison. As a result, his closest male role model was the drug dealer next door "because he had nice cars and jewellery".

Father and son were reconciled just before he died, and it's had a lasting impact. "By the time we started talking properly I had my own kids so I was adamant that I wasn't going to do the same to them as he did to me. People say it's a good thing because it made me more determined to do right. But at the same time I missed out on something." Walters is closely involved wth his own children, Shayon, 7, China, 6 and Paniro, 3 (his name is a combination of De Niro and Pacino). When he's not working he takes over the childcare; his girlfriend Natalie is at college studying midwifery.

He and Natalie were 18 when their first son was born, and Walters admits that his single friends' freedom is sometimes hard to watch. He misses having a role model for fatherhood. "I suppose I'm making it up; I'm doing what I think a man should be doing. Which is scary, because you never know whether you're doing the right thing. I've done a lot of things wrong. When my son cries and says I always break my promises, it really hits me in the heart. But it's the nature of my work; a big audition comes up and you can't be at the school play. And because my kids see me more as a friend than as a father it can be hard to discipline them.

"But as a dad you know you're never going to be perfect. So you have to get used to that and be happy in yourself that you're doing the best you can, but be willing to always learn."

Walters doesn't regret his time with So Solid because it was fun, raised his street credibility and established him in the public eye, as did his spell in prison (at least five other So Solid members also ended up in jail). Yet for the past five years he has

campaigned against guns and he wants a complete ban. The day we met he was off to a round-table discussion about crime with MPs and kids in a community youth centre in Brixton. Generally he prefers to go into schools on his own rather than being linked to larger campaigns because he's wary of being used as a kind of gimmick.

It's an indication of the fine line he has had to tread since he was a child, between winning the respect of his peers and doing what he's good at. When he was younger he kept quiet about the piano lessons, but his TV appearances led to him being bullied, mugged and even stabbed. As a result, he overcompensated. He admits: "When I was out with my friends I'd try to be a bit more bad than everyone else just to make people think I was in with the crowd. Sometimes I would be too hard, and that got me the sort of attention I didn't need."

Having gone against the grain, he is now a role model, and a link between black kids and the rest of the world because he's highly articulate, wise beyond his years and has inside knowledge of a slice of life that people want to understand now more than ever before. "Things have changed a lot since I was 13. I think we need to focus on the source, on why guns are so accessible now; why can a 13-year-old kid buy a handgun? The kids are only using what's put in front of them. If you put something positive in front of them they'd probably use that. I'd love to build people a youth club or a studio or bring back football pitches on the estates."

He's already fretting about his children's future, worrying about the area and finding good schools. He and Natalie have just bought a house in a slightly smarter part of South London, but it's still a stone's throw from his old patch in Brixton. "My eldest will be going to secondary school in four years and I'm really worried. I watch 11-year-olds going off on the bus and I don't think I'll ever be able to let Shayon go on his own. I can't even imagine myself letting him out of the house to play on his own."

Walters last saw his own father the day before he died. He recalls: "For years I was angry with him for not being around. Before he passed away he made a big effort – as much as I shrugged him off and pushed him away – to make things up with me. He followed me to Canada where I was making the 50 Cent movie (*Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*) and he stayed with me for three weeks. I got to know him in those weeks better than I'd known him before, which was a great thing. The day after he flew home he passed away.

"But we never got to know each other like a real father and son; we were still uncomfortable hugging each other and talking. I'm not going to whine about it like I'm a special case, because there are loads of young boys out there in the same situation, probably worse. You've just got to get on with it."

The new series of Hustle is on BBC One on Thursdays, 9pm

Bad boys made good

EMINEM

Marshall Mathers, 35, became infamous for his homophobic, misogynistic lyrics. On his last album, *Encore*, in 2004, he apologised for his racial and sexual slurs.

ICE T

As lead singer of the rock group Body Count, Ice T, 49, angered President Bush Snr with his song *Cop Killer* just before the LA riots in 1994. He now plays a cop in the hit US TV series *Law & Order*.

AL GREEN

At the peak of his fame in 1976, the soul singer had a religious awakening, turning his back on wine, women and pop songs. He now preaches at his own church in Memphis.

http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/families/article1852622.ece