

ABOVE: Take That's Gary Barlow. In his memoir, 'A Better Me', he says, "My growth as a human being had been stunted by the strange life of a pop star. For 10 years, I felt very little other than euphoria, ambition, and that most addictive of states — in demand"

RIGHT: The singer with his wife, Dawn, during Mikey Graham's wedding in Dublin in 2004. In 2012, the couple's fourth child, Poppy, was stillborn

PAGE 16, TOP: The five members of Take That in the band's heyday

PAGE 16, BOTTOM: Gary poses with supermodel Kate Moss in London in 2009

Never *forget*

In his three decades in the spotlight, Gary Barlow has survived fame, failure, breakdown, heartbreak and grief. As he approaches 50, he talks to **Julia Molony** about taking stock, how he has reassessed his priorities, and grown into his look

In Take That's heady heyday, Gary Barlow was always the adult of the band. He was the earnest one, a level-headed foil to Robbie Williams's maverick rock-star persona. Now, as they celebrate their 30-year anniversary, he's more than grown into the role.

Boy-band pin-ups often struggle with the transition to adulthood. But Barlow, who is 48, wears his 40s better than he did his 20s. Today, when I meet him in a plush sitting room deep inside the historic Abbey Road Studios in St John's Wood in London, he's pulling off double denim, and is even, if such a thing is possible, making it look distinguished.

But though maturity suits him, it has been hard won. Last year, he published his memoirs. In *A Better Me*, he gives a searingly honest account of the wilderness years, after Take That collapsed. Robbie Williams became a megastar and Barlow turned to overeating and bulimia as a way of coping with his feelings of worthlessness and shame after his career took a nosedive.

"The day I joined Take That, someone pressed the stop button on my personal growth," he writes in the book. "For most people, between the ages of 20 and 30, the boy becomes the man. Me, I was burped out at the back-end of the 1990s the same as I was at the beginning. My growth as a human being had been stunted by the strange life of a pop star. For 10 years, I felt very little other than euphoria, ambition, and that most addictive of states — in demand."

When the party ended, Barlow was unmoored. He ate, he confesses, as a shortcut to comfort, but also to hide. Being overweight, he felt incognito. "I am totally an emotional eater, but there's an added

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complexity," he writes. "There's the fact that most of my eating at this stage is also a form of protest, because I want people to stop recognising me; by eating, I can make them leave me alone... I wear my disguise under my skin. Not being recognised feels wonderful."

First he retreated into anonymity, and then, bit by bit, away from the spotlight, he grew up. He sold the 20-bedroom pop-star mansion he had bought at the age of 25. He gave up the fad diets and food plans, and got fit the old-fashioned way — by working out and learning to cook from scratch. He learned about patience and forgiveness and humility from his wife Dawn and the family they share, and from the tragedy that struck them in 2012, when his fourth child, a daughter named Poppy, was stillborn at full term. In 2016, he collapsed from burnout, an event that precipitated a personal reckoning. All of these things he recounts, with unsparing sincerity, in *A Better Me*.

Before meeting Barlow, I am warned that much of what was discussed in the book is off-limits. Twice I am reminded that there must be no questions about eating, no questions about depression. No questions about the loss



of his daughter. The book, he tells me himself, was his last word on the subject. "I think that's why you do it," he says. "There were so many little minefields, that I thought, 'I've just got to put this to bed now'. And especially with my audience, because these aren't just people who have been interested for six months. They've been with me for years. And they've been right there, involved in everything we've done for 30 years. And so you definitely have that side where you go, 'I need to speak about this now, because they want to know'. And they deserve to know what's going on. Because they genuinely worry about you. They do. And so I'm always conscious of the audience, whether it's making the tour of doing interviews. I think about them all the time."

He's gratified that his story has resonated with so many people. He's known success and failure in equal measure over the course of a 30-year career, but with the book, he had a feeling from early on that it would strike a chord. "With the book, I stopped worrying about it," he says. "Because I thought, 'It will find its audience, this will'. If someone reads it, I feel like they're going to say, 'You've got to try this'. So I did feel quietly confident that people would like that."

The Gary Barlow I meet is, quite literally, a different man to the one he was 10 or even five years ago. Lean, composed, self-possessed and evidently very comfortable in his own skin. His priorities and values have changed, as have his tastes. As an arrogant young pop star, he furnished his Cheshire mansion with ornate and garish decor and filled his driveway with sports cars. When he got rid of all the stuff he'd accumulated, it was like a rebirth.

"The place I found myself in, I was there because I thought it was expected," he tells me. "This is what you do when you become this successful... and so I got all those things, bought all those things. Had the drive full of cars and then looked one day and went, 'I don't want any of this'. And it felt, I can't tell you, it felt so good getting rid of it all. It really was. It was like emptying an address book of all the people you don't want to see again; it was



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beautiful. It was so nice seeing it all go down the drive. And actually, moving house for me... I just wanted to live in a house like the one I'd sort of grown up in. It was like, 'How many rooms can you live in?' It just became ridiculous.

"I think it's one of those things — you have to have a swimming pool to not want one. You have to have the fast sports car to realise, 'This is just a bit of a waste of money. I don't even like it, I'm not even a very good driver'. So I did it, and those years have passed. We live in London, so obviously the value is completely different from Cheshire, but it's just a house like anyone else's, really. And our kids have bedrooms like anyone else's, and once or twice a week we all sit at the dining-room table, and other than that, they take their food to their rooms, and it's just like anyone else, really."

His children are 18, 16 and 10 now. Gary's own early life was simple and modest. His father worked in a warehouse and his mother was a lab technician. Does he worry about his own children growing up in the shadow of his success and fame? "I don't think any generation ever repeats the one before, so my kids are never going to have my childhood," he says. "They are never going to have it. And not because of who they are or who I am, it's because the world's changed.

"It was the 1970s when I grew up, so it's a really different world now. I had a great childhood, but when I see how my kids have grown up, they've had an equally good, different childhood. And you just hope that you are teaching them the values and the right and the wrong that you have been taught and that has got you to here. And that's not about being wealthy or poor or any of the rest of it, they're just core values. So we've tried to do that as parents. Whether we've done it or not... " he pauses.

"We're told we have, because people who meet our children say how nice they are and all the rest of it, but we'll see."

Four years ago, after a phase of denial, Barlow bit the bullet and got a pair of prescription glasses. Now they've become a part of his grown-up look. "I was doing that thing where I had a magazine and I couldn't read it, so I took a picture of it on my phone and zoomed in. I did that for about two years. And then I realised that my arm now wasn't long enough to be able for me to read to the text," he says ruefully. "I really held off, getting headaches, all that stuff. And then I thought, 'I've got to do it'. And oh my goodness, it was like a brand-new world. I actually looked forward to putting them on so I could actually see things again. All of sudden, it's just like a pleasure to work again," he says.

He struggled briefly with this definitive transition to middle-age. "There was definitely a point where I went, 'Am I old now because I've got glasses?' And of course, people wear glasses — my daughter, who is 10, wears glasses. So it's not an age thing at all. But when I first started wearing them, I thought it was. But actually I really enjoy it now."

Which is just as well, because he's joined forces with Specsavers to be the face of their new Osiris Eyewear collection. The release of the promotional images feature Gary in full silver-fox mode, and have caused a predictable hormone-quake among the same fans who pinned posters of Barlow on their walls as teenagers.

He's focusing now on trying to achieve balance and on avoiding over-stretching or over-subscribing himself. He was supposed to be going on a world tour with Take That this year, but he scaled back, due to family illness, so the band will just do Europe instead. "The best work I've done is when I've had complete focus on it," he says. "We're definitely in danger, all of us, of taking on too much... So at some point you've got to say no, this is enough. And I think that probably comes with experience, being able to say no.

"I think that's been the hardest thing of all, of all the things I've done through my life; saying no is the hardest. It is. If you think about your job and what you do, it's so easy to say yes. I love announcing things. 'We're going on a world tour!' The announcements are brilliant. But then you've got to do them. 'We're doing a new film!' 'A new musical!' And then I've got four years..."

Sense of relief

But with 30 years of hits behind him now, he feels he's learning to put aside the anxiety and take things in his stride. "I do feel like, a bit of a sense of relief this year. It is 30 years, so it's a big celebration. But it's also like, 'Oh, we made it. We got here'. Because whatever happens next, we've got this. And no one can take it away from you. And it's there, and it will be there forever. I feel very relaxed about what happens next. Normally what happens with us is we'd go on tour, but we'd already be starting the next album. So we'd already be starting to worry about that. But this tour, I've promised myself, is going to be a worry-less tour. It's going to be something where I focus just on the tour, getting on stage every night. Being with that audience for two hours solid without having to think about records or promotions coming at Christmas. I don't want to be thinking of any of that, I just want to be on stage."

So often, he admits, he struggles to be present, especially with his family. So that's another thing he's trying to change. "I'm really guilty of that. I'm guilty of it at home, and it's something I've been really, not working on, but I've been enjoying, like stupid things like hockey games and being there, taking pictures and shouting. Simple things, but being there. Not being there while checking your BlackBerry or whatever. It's just like: be there. Simple."



Gary Barlow for Osiris Eyewear, available now exclusively at Specsavers stores nationwide, priced from €149 for two sets of frames. See specsavers.ie/osiris-gary-barlow