An eye to *the future*

Education and an inspiring mother got him out of the ghetto and made him successful enough to eventually get his whole extended family out of there too, but he's always looking for the next thing. **Julia Molony** meets musician, entrepreneur, philanthropist, TV talent judge, and now eyewear designer, will.i.am

He's a millionaire hip-hop hitmaker, an entrepreneur who dreams up tech innovations from his black-lacquered, ultra-contemporary HQ in Hollywood (which he has named The Future), a philanthropist, and a judge on ITV's *The Voice UK*. So what, I'm wondering on my way into will.i.am's giant hotel suite overlooking the Thames, is he doing as the new face of Specsavers? It's not exactly an obvious collaboration — the boy from the ghetto made good and the British high-street opticians.

But he has, he insists, been a "glasses fanatic" for most of his life. He's worn them "for dress up" since childhood, long before he ever needed a prescription. Back then, it was a way to play a character. "My mom wears glasses, my uncle wore glasses. I always wanted to be like [them] so I would wear glasses. And now, I'm a little squinty when I'm reading... so it turns out that I need them."

As soon as he could afford it, he started collecting them, "vintage ones, unique pieces". He's had his own high-end glasses line ill.i, a "limited, ultra-art collection", since 2012. And now, thanks to Specsavers, the masses can get their hands on a piece of high-concept face candy designed by the frontman of the Black Eyed Peas.

I find him sitting upright on a plushly upholstered couch, surrounded by the 17 frames from his collection. He's wearing a grey beanie, thick, black-rimmed spectacles, a parachute-silk jacket in candy stripes of dusty pink and khaki green, and a rather remote expression — those glasses double as a style accent and a shield. But he warms up quickly, and his face changes dramatically when he smiles — that goofy, boyish grin that endears him to the millions of viewers of *The Voice UK* on which he has been head judge for seven years. This spring, he shocked Britain when he announced that he may not return for another series.

A good boy who escaped the ghetto thanks to hard work and the fierce, unstinting love of his mother, will.i.am has always eschewed trading on the tough-guy street cred that is the stock-in-trade of many of his contemporaries in hip-hop. If anything, with his eccentric style and giddy laugh, he's more of a dandy.

Geek streak

He also has a massive geek streak, is obsessed with anything new and cutting edge in tech, and having achieved fame in the music industry while still a teenager, he channels most of his energies these days into developing tech gadgets. Though how far or near he is to becoming a serious rival to Elon Musk remains to be seen. His smartwatch, dial, (launched in 2016) was savaged by the critics. But late last year, it was announced that the tech start-up he's launched to develop an AI voice-operated assistant for the corporate computing market had successfully raised $117m in funding.

Needless to say then, he's not just into glasses for the way they look. But rather because they represent the future of technology. "Fifteen years from now," he says, gesturing to the thick black pair on his face, "this is your computer. I'm not going to get involved in something that doesn't go with the other things," he says, referring to his adventures in augmented and virtual reality. "Glasses, whether they're lenses or contact lenses, will have a layer to be able to augment the world. That's the future moving forward as far as how we engage with computation, augmentation, so I want to play in that space early on. And these are the steps. When you put all the pieces together, whether it's curation, the device with which you experience that curation, and then the platform that powers the system."

He's been fascinated by science and tech since his school days. He grew up in Boyle Heights, a rough, mainly Hispanic neighbourhood in East LA, where his single mother raised her four kids on welfare. (His father left when he was a baby). But his mother had high expectations of her children, and she arranged for William to attend a school in the affluent Brentwood area that specialised in science and technology. It was a four-hour round trip on a bus every day, but the experience altered his fate. To this day, he remembers the names of the teachers who taught and shaped him there: "They taught us physics, oceanography, computer lab, anatomy. It wasn't like your basic public school... I remember all these guys that were a big influence on my life and they would force us to ask questions and try to solve problems in every course. That was an amazing experience. And I think it helped form my curiosity. My ability to pattern, match and forecast."

It was at school that he met his Black Eyed Peas collaborator Allan Lindo — known as apl.de.ap. Together they founded the band and started working on hip-hop tracks with catchy beats and upbeat lyrics, geared to appeal to the college campus kids living in LA. He was 17



"In every ghetto there's a mom who takes care of everybody's kids. My mom was that lady. So I share her with a lot of people"

when he won a record deal. He mother was initially not impressed. "I came home with a cheque. She was like, 'Boy, who gave you that money?' I was like, 'I got a record deal!' She was like, 'Ain't nobody told you to go get a record deal!'" But she must have been persuaded of the soundness of his judgment when, at aged 30, he was making enough money to move his whole family (aunts, uncles, siblings; about 30 people) out of the ghetto in one fell swoop.

His mother has always been a huge influence on him. "My mom is philanthropic at heart," he says. "In every ghetto, there's the neighbourhood mom who takes care of everybody's kids. So my mom was that lady. We were on public assistance, government assistance growing up — welfare. My whole life, my mom never worked, her kids were her job." But when William turned 18, she decided to get a job. "My mom said to me, 'You know Willy, I've been thinking about it, I'm going to get me a job'. I said, 'You're going to get a job? For what?' And she was like, 'You know, I just want to do something else. I'm going to teach an after-school programme, to keep the kids off the streets'. So that's what she did, and she was amazing at it. Everyone that she takes care of, they end up calling her mom. So I share my mom with a lot of other people, other kids that are now adults, and it's our mom." He's clearly inherited her values, has a keen sense of social justice, and has launched a number of philanthropic initiatives, including the i.am scholarship, which has given over $500,000 in financial aid to college students from poor backgrounds.

Arts appreciation

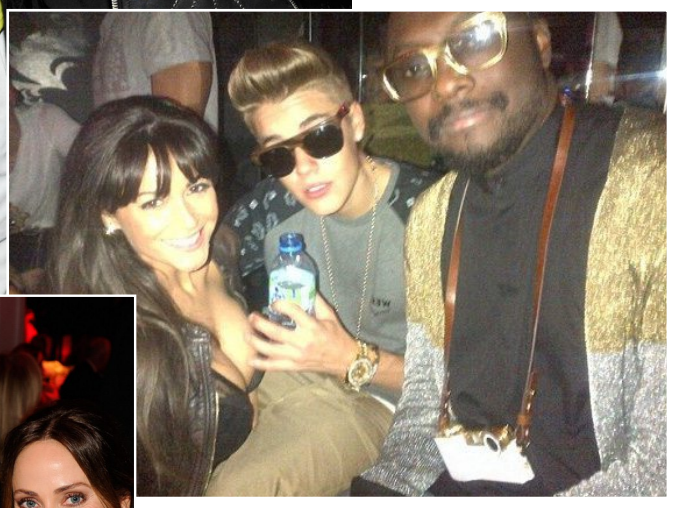
Despite the demands on his mother's attention, they remain "super-close. It makes me realise how behind I am," he says. He's 43 years of age now, and "when my mom was 43, I was already touring. It's crazy! I can't even imagine having a freaking 23-year-old now!"

Would he like to have kids? He gives me a wry look and then gestures at the glasses spread out on tables in front of him. "I have 17 kids now... if you see the collection here," he says with a laugh. He's proud of his "children". "They have foresight. They have focus," he puns. "They could see into the future."

He spends much of his time these days in Britain to film *The Voice UK*, but can't explain exactly why he seems to connect so well with the UK. "I like the appreciation for the arts. I like the appreciation for history, and people are really nice. There are no words for it, other than I like this place. If I try to find a word, I'm trying to BS. It's obviously not the weather. It's not like, 'Yo man, I like it when the sun peeks out for two minutes and then you get an hour of cloud. Nope. But I like the fact that I can wear a lot of layers. Because I like my accessories. I like jackets and scarves and beanies and glasses. Yeah. I'm a layered kind of guy."

He's been linked romantically in the past with Natalie Imbruglia and *Celebrity Big Brother* star Casey Batchelor. Does he find there's much of a difference between dating in the US and in Britain? "People are people," he says. "And now that we live in this social world, everything is pretty much looking the same as far as behaviour. Everyone selfies, no matter what country you are in. People post more than they converse." Does that bother him? "No," he says. "Because I'm not lacking conversation. I have my core. I don't socialise on social media. I don't know who the people are talking and commenting on social media. Why do I care about those opinions? And if somebody says something negative, am I going to get stressed out? I don't even know who they are! Why do I even care? When there's people that I actually care about and I'd rather get scolded or guided or appreciated and given little perspective nuggets from them."







LEFT: will.i.am with The Edge, Justin Bieber and Bono at the Billboard Music Awards in 2011

BELOW: will.i.am hanging out with Justin Bieber and reality-TV star Casey Batchelor, who he was reported to have dated

BOTTOM: The hip-hop star with TV personality Robin Antin (centre) and Australian pop star Natalie Imbruglia, with whom he has been romantically linked

So he stays off social media and connects to the people that matter by instant message instead. He takes out his phone to show me the current ongoing instant-message conversations he's engaged in — though, sadly he doesn't hold it close enough to view any detail. There is, he says, his "music thread for my UK connection. My Pea family thread, we just thread it out. Threads, threads, threads. We just be threading... on Saturdays, it's like, baby pictures. So that's wonderful, and then it skips to the most rambunctious rants about what's going on in society. Then it goes to like, music. Then it's reminiscent. Then it's all over the place. But it's great. Because what it's not is, 'Who is that person with that random comment? Everyone on the threads cares. And they're either really, really close friends or adjacent, and about to be close friends. But if you can make it through the thread... I mean, the thread is what it's all about."

Welfare angst

At this point in his life, it's having "things to do," that brings him most happiness. "When you grow up on welfare, the stress, the angst, the panic came from — I had desires, but no way of actually materialising them. And once you make it, you're never really quite happy, because you're like, 'is it going to go away?'" He's working on trying to learn to just "like the present. I'm Mr One Day," he says. "Always focused on the next thing." But he's not sure he's made much progress. "The present is boring," he says. "It's not as fun as over there. Because that energy... that's what attracts the over there to be actual. But once it's actual... it's always like, but there's something else! That's the gift, and the curse."

The will.i.am collection is available exclusively at Specsavers stores nationwide now. €189 per pair including standard single-vision lenses and included in Specsavers' two-for-one offer. See specsavers.ie