

**Bow, Clara** (29 July 1905-27 Sept. 1965), film actress, was born Clara Gordon Bow in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, New York, the daughter of Robert Bow, a frequently unemployed waiter and handyman, and Sarah Gordon, his mentally ill wife. Bow attended Public School 98 in Sheepshead Bay until the eighth grade, when she left to become a doctor's receptionist. Bow regarded herself as "the worst looking kid on the street," but at age fourteen she won a personality contest, and in 1921 she received a prize from *Fame and Fortune* magazine: a small part in *Beyond the Rainbow*, starring Billie Dove. Bow was cut from the film, but another director saw her photo in a movie magazine and cast her as a spunky stowaway in *Down to the Sea in Ships* (1922). The show business daily *Variety* noted "It is Clara Bow that lingers . . . when the picture has gone."

Signing for \$50 per week with producer B. P. Schulberg's Preferred Pictures in 1923, Bow sometimes worked on three films simultaneously. In 1924, the year she was chosen by the Western Association of Motion Picture Advertisers as a WAMPAS Baby Star, or star of the future, Bow appeared as Orchid McGonigle, a reformed gang member, in *Grit*, based on an [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) story. A representative, according to British film historian David Thomson, of "the first generation to be raised on films," she became a symbol of the exuberance and moral emancipation of the Roaring Twenties. Thomson called Bow "the first actress intent on arousing sexual excitement who is not ridiculous."

Bow's reputation and range grew with *The Plastic Age* (1925), produced by Schulberg. As the fierce-kissing Cynthia Day, she was "the hottest jazz baby in films," ruining college student Hugh Carver's athletic ability and concentration, mending her ways in time to save the big game--and regain Hugh. She played Marie Grizzard, a divorce lawyer's secretary, in *Kiss Me Again*, an [Ernst Lubitsch](#) comedy that the *New Yorker* called "a champagne picture in a beery world" and voted one of 1925's ten best films.

In 1926 Bow followed Schulberg to Paramount Pictures and to fame. In *Mantrap*, based on a [Sinclair Lewis](#) story, she sat in a tent and saucily lured the sleepy object of her affections by reflecting sunlight into his eyes from a crystal. Her come-hither winks complemented the image. By the end of the year fans were sending Bow over 40,000 letters every week.

In 1927 Bow portrayed Betty Lou, the salesgirl heroine in Schulberg's film based on Elinor Glyn's "hard-breathing" novel *It*. Betty Lou was spirited, able to laugh at a too-late marriage proposal and later to save the proposer's fiancée from drowning, an impulsive act that eventually won him back to her. (Vigorous swimming was a feature of several Bow comedies.) Defining "It" as a generalized sex appeal, social historian J. C. Furnas called Bow "an incarnation of girlish gaiety on the loose." Glyn remarked, "Of all the lovely young ladies I've met in Hollywood, Clara Bow has 'It' " (see J. C. Furnas, *Great Times* [1974]). For the rest of her life, Bow was "The *It* Girl." Bow's fellow star [Louise Brooks](#) called everything she did "completely original." "Sliding across a desk in *It* was just *her*," she commented. Director Terence Badger claimed that the camera seemed to cause Bow to grow. At 5' 3½" tall, plumpish in contrast to the flattened-breast look of the time, with Cupid's bow lips, a hoydenish red bob, and nervous, speedy movement, Bow became a national rage, America's flapper. Noting her "gum-chewing sex appeal," Schulberg wrote that she "gave off sparks." At the end of 1927 she was making \$250,000 a year.

Fitzgerald wrote in *Motion Picture* (July 1927) that thousands of flappers patterned themselves after Bow: "Pretty, impudent, superbly assured, as worldly wise, briefly clad and 'hard-berled' as possible." In describing her "ideal flapper" for *McCall's* (Oct. 1925), [Zelda Fitzgerald](#) might have had Bow in mind: "someone who is seen by and in a crowd, but is intimate with no one, fully airing the desire . . . for dramatizing herself. . . . She is an artist in her particular field, the art of being--being young, being an object."

In 1928 *Vanity Fair* called Bow "orchidaceous . . . the hyper-reality and extra-ideality of a million or more film goers . . . the *genus* American girl, refined, washed, manicured, pedicured, permanent-waved and exalted." She drove a red Kissel roadster filled with red chow dogs and once invited a college football team to a midnight practice on her lawn. In the classic flying film *Wings* (1929) Bow progressed from girl-next-door to ambulance driver, with a failed seduction in between. In 1928 she made another Glyn film, *Red Hair* (with a color sequence), and in *The Fleet's In* (1928) Bow played a dime-a-dance girl with a heart of gold. Further successes included *Kid Boots* and *The Saturday Night Kid* (1929), and *Her Wedding Night* (1930). All told, between 1922 and 1930 Bow made fifty-two films.

Bow's personal life was complicated. Never a Hollywood "insider," she nevertheless collected famous, simultaneous suitors. She also supported her father in various failed businesses. Novelist, playwright, and screenwriter Budd Schulberg, B. P.'s son, called her home a nonstop open house, with poker games, friendly cops, and favored bootleggers: there were blackmail threats about love letters and gangsters trying to collect gambling debts. B. P. Schulberg began to call Bow "crisis-a-day Clara."

Bow had long feared that she might inherit her mother's mental instability, and with the onset of talking motion pictures she began to suffer nervous breakdowns. Though Louise Brooks called Bow's voice charming, not "too Brooklyn," the demands of the fixed microphone apparently hindered her freewheeling, improvisational style. Nevertheless, she sang in three 1930 musical films: *Paramount on Parade*, *Love among the Millionaires* (in which nine-year-old Mitzi Green performed an impersonation of Bow), and *True to the Navy*.

The 1931 trial of former friend and secretary Daisy Devoe for the misappropriation of Bow's money, jewelry, and letters was Hollywood's "most sensational since [Fatty Arbuckle](#)." When more litigation and notoriety arose from an alienation-of-affections accusation and a book by Devoe focusing on her sex life, Bow suffered another breakdown.

Concluding that Bow now seemed notorious instead of a public favorite, Paramount fired her in 1931. B. P. Schulberg wrote to her "it has never been my good fortune to have anyone as sweet and loyal, as conscientious and as courageous to work for us as yourself." Six months later she married one of her suitors and defenders, cowboy film star Rex Bell (George F. Beldam), in Las Vegas, Nevada, and retired to his ranch in Searchlight. He became the state's lieutenant governor, and they had two children.

Comeback attempts in 1932 (*Call Her Savage*) and 1933 (*Hoopla*) proved unsuccessful. Bow returned briefly to public awareness in 1947, when she was identified as "Miss Hush" on the radio program "Truth or Consequences." After a number of stays in sanitariums, she died of a heart attack in her home in Culver City, California, though acute drug intoxication was listed as a contributory cause. In any frame of her films, Bow is the irresistible center of attention. But a widespread revival of interest in these films has never come. America's first motion picture sex goddess--a girl with bounce--is imprisoned in her short-skirted, Charleston-kicking era.

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## Bibliography

Clippings and papers relating to Bow are in the libraries of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, and the American Film Institute, Los Angeles, Calif. Joe Morella and Edward Epstein, *The 'It' Girl: The Incredible Story of Clara Bow* (1976), is a useful biography. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald's assessments of Bow and flappers in general can be found in Matthew Bruccoli et al., eds., *The Romantic Egotists* (1974), and Bruccoli, ed., *Zelda Fitzgerald: The Complete Writings* (1991). Various movie memoirs and autobiographies, such as Budd Schulberg, *Moving Pictures* (1981), Sheila Graham, *The Garden of Allah* (1970), and Garson Kanin, *Hollywood* (1979), are helpful. The contributions of Adela Rogers St. John (originally in *Photoplay* [1928]), Louise Brooks, and many other Hollywood pioneers can be found in Kevin Brownlow's 1984 television series *Hollywood*, particularly the twelfth program. The best obituary is Jack Smith's in the *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Sept. 1965.

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