

RISING STARS>

They're all under 25, and they're taking on more mature roles and challenging new projects



Rising Stars were photographed exclusively for ESSENCE by Darien Davis, November 28, 2007, in Los Angeles.

EVAN ROSS

HOLLYWOOD FIRST: Portraying the hardheaded kid brother of T.I. in 2006's *ATL*.

NEXT UP: At 19, Ross continues to step out of the shadows of his iconic mom, Diana, and big sister Tracee Ellis, to build a name—and résumé—for himself. He's set to star in a handful of indie films, including *Life Is Hot in Cracktown*, *Greta* and *Brooklyn to Manhattan*. "I feel as if it's always been my passion to act and sing. I used to watch my mom on tour and in her movies, and I was just inspired by her," says Ross.

JURNEE SMOLLETT

HOLLYWOOD FIRST: After kicking off her career as a toddler by modeling with her five siblings, Smollett is best known for bringing the drama while uprooting deep-seated family secrets in 1997's top-grossing indie *Eve's Bayou*.

LAST SEEN: Holding her own alongside Oscar heavyweights Denzel Washington and Forest Whitaker in last December's *The Great Debaters*. The 21-year-old recalls, "It was the perfect marriage: feeling that I was right for the part and feeling so passionate for an issue."

TRISTAN WILDS

HOLLYWOOD FIRST: Wilds made his debut in the teen-friendly miniseries *Miracle's Boys*, but lately the 18-year-old has been tugging at our heartstrings as a troubled teen who succumbs to the streets on *The Wire*. When it comes to his growing popularity, Wilds says, "At first, honestly, I didn't think I had any fans—until I saw my MySpace page and I was like, 'Oh snap, everybody's watching this!'"

NEXT UP: Filming an adaptation of the best-selling novel *The Secret Life of Bees*.

RAVEN-SYMONÉ

HOLLYWOOD FIRST: She appeared in Cheerios commercials and a few Sears catalogs, but she's most remembered for stealing scenes from Bill Cosby on *The Cosby Show*, and using her psychic powers for good on the Disney sitcom favorite *That's So Raven*.

THIS MONTH: Raven, 22, shares the big screen with Martin Lawrence in *College Road Trip*, and she's no shrinking violet. When working with established comedians, Raven says, "I think my ego is like, 'I refuse to be the background.'" —R.R.R. >