

*Dreams  
& Drama*

**What America's  
Most Popular  
Singing Competition  
Tells Us About  
Ourselves**

Bruce A. Smith

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by

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For Sharron

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## Introduction

It is January 2007, and the nation is revving itself up for the sixth season of *American Idol*. You can find *American Idol* everywhere, from magazine covers to office conversations. My coworkers and I exchange CD's by Taylor Hicks, Chris Daughtry, and Dianna Degarmo. We reminisce about past seasons and speculate about what this one will bring.

In anticipation of the show, my wife and I play the *American Idol* PlayStation game. We have created characters that look similar to the real life versions of ourselves, although slightly younger. My character has a medium-sized gut and a goatee. He also has salt and pepper hair. I suspect that if it weren't for Taylor Hicks, this last option wouldn't be available. My wife's character is more flattering. Her outfit matches her shoes. She's curvaceous, and she wears mirrored sunglasses that are pulled down just enough so that, from a certain angle, one can see the flash of her eyes behind them.

For the first round that takes place in the virtual audition room, I choose to sing Kelly Clarkson's "Breakaway." My wife chooses "Love Will Keep Us Together." Even though we both receive platinum record scores, the animated judges are quick to bring us down.

There's a flaw in the game's animation that causes Randy Jackson's tongue to flap unnaturally in his mouth. My wife and I laugh at it and immediately make up random sentences, which we say with our tongues hanging out.

When Simon's turn to judge comes, he is as harsh as he is in real life. But Simon's criticism, whether real or simulated, has lost its sting. It has become cliché. He has run out of

ways to say “terrible,” “horrendous,” and “awful.” Someone needs to come up with new words for these things and add them to thesauruses everywhere, just so Simon has new ways of expressing himself.

Even at this stage in the competition, we worry if we will make it to the finals. By the fifth round, we have run out of songs that we know and choose songs that we only know the choruses to. The verses leave us flummoxed and with terrible scores. At this point, Simon’s critiques are justified, and we are thrown out of the game — our dreams of becoming the next simulated *American Idol* crushed. If we weren’t in the mood before, we are now.

What I don’t realize is just how immersed in *American Idol* I am about to become. I have always been fascinated by the psychology of the show, but in-between day one and day two of the season, it will occur to me that it contains so many examples of human failings and strengths, and it provides so many opportunities for commentary, that one could write a book about it. Could I pull it off? Living within driving distance of Los Angeles would allow me the opportunity to go see the show live and give behind-the-scenes info.

I toss the idea around with some of my coworkers. One of them asks, “So what would you say about *American Idol*? Is it good, or is it bad?”

“That’s not the point,” I answer. That’s not the point at all. This isn’t some kind of black-and-white/judgmental issue. Sure, judgments will inevitably be made along the way, but this is more a matter of looking at something that millions of people are familiar with and trying to see beyond the superficial. The big question is, what can we learn from *American Idol*? The behaviors of people involved in the show, the way America responds to the show, and the events surrounding the show would be a perfect springboard for observations, commentary, and object lessons galore. The very act of looking at something in such a way is a lesson in itself. It is far

healthier and much more beneficial to glean what we can from the world around us rather than to judge it in artificial terms such as good, bad, right, and wrong. And it leaves us feeling a lot less angry. You could do this with any number of topics, but *American Idol* is an ideal subject because of the situations it creates.

This discussion helps me to solidify the idea. I review the tape of the first show and begin to write it up. I'll follow the sixth season of *American Idol*, which will provide continuity and a story line. Mixed in with that will be commentary and a series of reflections on what we can take away from the show.

I will discover that this is one of those ideas that takes on a life of its own. Over the following weeks, our house will become flooded with *Idol* memorabilia, and my wife will grow sick of watching the same episodes over and over again. I will become an *American Idol* junkie whose habit is willingly fed by the media. But if I'm going to be addicted to something, it's not a bad way to go. The fixes are cheap, the highs are great, and I won't have to go through withdrawal until late May.

In the end, unlike many other addictions, this one proved to be beneficial. I learned a few things along the way. I hope that for you, the reader, it provides the same: a lot of entertainment and a measure of insight.

## **Part I: Auditions**

## Chapter 1 – Beginnings

Simon Cowell sat on the steps with his head in his hands. He couldn't believe it. He had come to "The States" with an idea for a television show called *American Idol*. It was based on a show, which was already up and running in Britain, called *Pop Idol*. Simon knew it could be a great success, and he had envisioned that once he put the idea out there, the networks would be engaged in a bidding war for the show. Instead, here he was sitting on the steps of the second major American television network to turn him down. They had said no because they weren't interested in a "music show."

Disappointed, Simon returned to England and continued on with his role as the "mean" judge on *Pop Idol*. *Pop Idol*, itself, was loosely based on another show, originally from Australia, called *Popstars*. People auditioned for the show and were selected to become part of a band. Once the band was formed, the cameras followed them around to watch their progress.

*Popstars* was a big success in its own right, but when Simon had been offered the role of one of the judges on that show, he turned it down. It was a move he regretted once he saw how successful the show became. He watched the show, nonetheless, partially because his girlfriend had become obsessed with it. In the process, he noticed a couple things. For one, the show seemed to lose most of its drama once the band was selected. Picking the winner was the exciting part. Simon also felt that it would be better if the show centered on a solo artist rather than a band.

Meanwhile, Simon was busy as an A&R man for RCA records. The “A” in A&R stands for artists, because A&R men are the ones who sign artists to a music label. The “R” stands for repertoire, because they also pick out the material and find a producer for an artist. In the process, A&R men have to keep up with what is going on in the industry.

Simon was already a millionaire. He had achieved that, in part, by realizing the potential for television to sell musical artists. Prior to that time, recording artists were mainly promoted through radio stations. The good folks at MTV understood the power of television, but the record labels still hadn’t caught on. When Simon signed on such talent as the Power Rangers, the British television puppets Zig and Zag, and wrestlers from World Wrestling Foundation, he was met with ridicule and derision. When he signed on TV actors Robson and Jerome, who recorded a number one single, people began to take him seriously. After that, signing up a band called Westlife made Simon one of the top-selling A&R men in all of Britain. He knew the music business, especially the pop music business.

Another man in a similar position was Simon Fuller, who managed the Spice Girls. The two Simons, Cowell and Fuller, got along well together and discussed collaborating on a project. When they sat down to do it, that project became *Pop Idol*. Simon Fuller created the format for the show, but both of them worked together on the concept. They hired a production company, FremantleMedia, to produce the show.

Many people think, or have said, that Simon Cowell is an executive producer of *American Idol* (and of *Pop Idol*), but that was never the case. He could fairly be called a co-creator, but he isn’t one of the several executive producers for these shows.

When Simon Cowell and Simon Fuller approached the British television networks with the idea for *Pop Idol*, it was an instant sell, which was one of the reasons why Simon Cowell was

so surprised that the American networks wanted nothing to do with it. But while Simon returned to his role as a judge on *Pop Idol*, Simon Fuller remained persistent in his attempts to get the show to the attention of an American network.

Finally, he got a bite from Fox TV, who agreed to put the show on the air as a summer replacement series. The show started on June 11, 2002 with an audience of nearly ten million. By the time Kelly Clarkson was crowned the winner of the first season in September of that year, *American Idol* had amassed an audience of twenty-two million and was already an important part of television history.

Now, years later, Simon Cowell no longer has reason to sit dejectedly on the steps of *any* building. But, no doubt, we'll still see a few frowns and grimaces from him as the auditions begin.

## Chapter 2 – The Good and the Bad

When I settle into the recliner for the opening of the sixth season, I know that, across America, literally millions of people are doing the same — sitting down on sofas, recliners, and bar stools, eager to see what's in store.

The two-hour premier of *American Idol* begins in the city of Minneapolis. The pop singer, Jewel, is a guest judge. Jewel, whose songs have won her multiple Grammy awards, is also the author of a book of poetry called *A Night Without Armor*. The title is a clever pun, and clearly the armor spoken of is metaphorical. Jewel is not without it at the beginning of the first episode of the *American Idol* season. She sits erect, smiles, and offers criticisms cautiously. You can picture a publicist selling her the idea of appearing on the show, but her instincts telling her to be careful because it could easily be a fiasco. Somehow, she manages to pull this off while simultaneously showing sympathy for some of the contestants. Jessica Rhode, the first contestant featured on the show, is one of these.

Jessica is young and works in a beauty parlor. The cameras follow her to her place of work and we see her doing makeovers for people, making them look “like supermodels.” I want Jessica to succeed. So do the judges. The fact that a cameraman went to her hometown to videotape her makes you feel as if she might make it through. But the audition does not go well. Jessica performs a song by Jewel — a high pressure situation made even more extreme by the fact that Jewel is Jessica's idol and Jewel is sitting right there — and the audition bombs.

When asked for comment, Jewel's face is pained. "I don't want to talk right now," she says.

Jessica is rejected and sent out to the lobby, where she breaks down in front of the cameras, wailing the loss of her broken dreams. I want the camera to cut away, not just for my sake, but for hers. I want to yell at the cameraman, "Give her privacy already!" Her family circles her, and, after many more tears, they lead her away.

Of the ten thousand people that show up for the Minneapolis auditions, only seventeen are told the magic words, "You're going to Hollywood!" We can see why. We witness an Amish gentleman with an unkempt beard, who has never before watched the show. He performs a song that sounds like an absurd nursery rhyme. We watch the catastrophic failure of a young man who talks about how good he sings, but whose audition focuses on his juggling and dancing.

We see a man dressed as Apollo Creed, the fictional character from the *Rocky* movies, which means that the contestant is actually dressed like Uncle Sam — head to toe in red, white, and blue. Wearing boxing gloves, he dodges and jabs at the camera, but when his turn comes to sing, he belts out an Italian aria. There are too many incongruous images here, none of them relating to pop music, and it doesn't work for the judges.

Two people, who claim to have taken vocal lessons for years, fail miserably. Afterwards, they demand that the judges explain why they failed. "You can't sing," is one of the answers.

Fortunately, there are some people who do pass the auditions — the obligatory cute young women with good voices and a couple of contestants with military backgrounds. I'm sure that the producers would not have put the military people on screen if they had not passed their auditions. The American public is increasingly less supportive of the current war in Iraq, but the

troops are sacred, and for good reason. One of these contestants, Rachel Jenkins, tells Simon that she likes his personality.

“You have to go through boot camp to like Simon’s personality,” Jewel quips.

There are moments during the auditions when I put myself in the place of the contestants who don’t make it through and wonder how much I am like them. It makes me self-conscious and causes me to question my own artistic abilities. I don’t like the feeling.

The show is almost over when my phone rings, and I pick it up from beside the recliner. It is my wife on the way home from her night classes. She asks me how the show is, and I tell her that it isn’t very good. It’s almost painful to watch.

But then, I haven’t turned off the TV. I haven’t gotten up and walked away. So what’s keeping me here? Why am I watching?

I already know the answers to these questions. I know where the show is going. If anything, *American Idol* always gets better as it progresses. *American Idol* is a so-called reality show, but when you view anything through the lens of a camera, it changes. During the auditions, we see a view of America as one might see it in a funhouse mirror — distorted and sometimes comical — with human failings and human emotions vividly on display. As the competition moves to Hollywood and the performances get better, the picture becomes prettier, and our interest becomes more intense. We get a chance to see people face incredible odds and overcome them. As we get to know and like the contestants, we pick some and root for them. We may follow their careers for years to come.

But the camera lens is also reflective. *American Idol* provides a mirror for us to look into, and when we look into it, we will see our most attractive features juxtaposed with our imperfections. *American Idol* is more than just a contest. It is the American psyche on display.

Throughout it there are underlying themes and deeper issues that continue to intrigue. We will see textbook examples of what psychologists call, “cognitive distortions.” It has often been said that we learn more from our failures than from our successes, and as the auditions progress, there will be plenty of these to learn from. People show up for auditions thinking they have talent when it should be obvious that they do not. People will claim that they “Will be the next American Idol!” when they have no way of actually knowing it’s true. The odds are more than a million to one that it isn’t. People will scream at the judges when the judges are right. Sometimes the judges will be wrong. We may discover that we enjoy seeing someone’s dream get squashed, and yet we may also find joy in seeing someone else’s dream come true.

We may not physically be onstage with the contestants, but the observer is never entirely separate from the observed. The camera goes both ways. Each of us shares traits and emotions with the contestants. As they learn about their abilities and their limitations, as they learn about how their dreams hold up against reality, and as they learn more about who they are, we are given a chance to do the same.

## Chapter 3 – How We See Ourselves

The initial reaction of someone who has never heard themselves on tape is often, “Eeww... I don't sound like that!”

Actually, yes, you do.

One of the first things that every radio and television communications major has to get used to is the way that he or she looks and sounds on tape. This was certainly the case for me as I spent massive amounts of time filming videos and working in the college radio station. The sound of our own voice, as we are familiar with it, is not the sound that others hear because the sound must make its way through layers of muscle and bone as it travels from our throats to our ears. Nor do we look the way we think we do. Even the image we see in the mirror is flipped around horizontally, so that it is not the same image that everyone else sees. Seeing yourself on video can be as disconcerting, if not more so, than hearing yourself.

My advice to anyone who ever thinks they want to appear on *American Idol* is this: Before you do, videotape yourself and watch it. Do you like what you see? Do you like what you hear? Even though the video presents a version of yourself that seems strange to you, it is what other people see and hear every day. Their impression of you is based on this, and probably does not agree with the isolated view of yourself that you experience from the inside.

There are many major Hollywood actresses and actors who hate to watch themselves on film because it is so incongruous with their personal experience and because it makes them

understandably self-conscious. The difference between these performers and many failed *American Idol* contestants is that the actors are *aware* of how they look and sound to others.

Back in the 1980's, I worked as a soundman and Master of Ceremonies for the Miss LaVerne Pageant. I have a vivid memory of one contestant who had chosen to sing for the talent portion of the contest. I was working sound, and the contestant asked us to play a tape of a song while she sang along with it. Unfortunately, the song already had vocals in it; so basically, she was singing along with the vocals rather than providing them. As the song progressed, she told us to turn the music up and then she had us turn it up again. By the third time, it became painfully obvious that she was trying to recreate a situation in which she thought she sounded good – singing along with a song on the car radio with the volume cranked. It didn't work on a stage setting. Fortunately, she realized that she should choose another talent before we had to tell her so.

I think that if people did videotape themselves to see how they actually look and sound, the crowds of people who show up for *American Idol* auditions might well be cut in half. Of course, the producers never mention this because then there would be a lot less material for them to exploit. They put people with no talent (and in some cases, anti-talent) through to the auditions so that the rest of America can laugh at them. As I watch the introductory episodes of every *American Idol* season, I feel sorry for these contestants, and I feel somewhat guilty for my voyeuristic part in their humiliation. I attempt to assuage my conscience by telling myself that the contestants only have themselves to blame. They signed a contract giving *American Idol* (and, therefore, the rest of America) permission to make fun of them.

The current *American Idol* release form says, "I understand that I may reveal, and other parties may reveal, information about me that is of a personal, private, embarrassing or

unfavorable nature, which information may be factual and/or fictional. I further understand that my appearance, depiction and/or portrayal in the Program may be disparaging, defamatory, embarrassing or of an otherwise unfavorable nature which may expose me to public ridicule, humiliation or condemnation.” Sadly, the majority of the contestants don’t realize that this is what is going to happen until it is too late.

In this year’s season opener, Jewel asked one of the contestants, “So are you serious when you’re doing this, or is it to be funny?” She had difficulty believing that the man performing really thought he was good. I often hear people in the office say that some *American Idol* contestants “couldn’t be for real,” and that the producers must have sent in ringers who intentionally put on bad performances. Sadly, there’s no need for the producers to do this.

This situation of people placing themselves in embarrassing positions and allowing themselves to be victimized is created, in part, by unrealistic self-perceptions. The way that you look and sound are merely two superficial ways in which others may view you differently. Others may also have an entirely different perception of your personality, your attitudes, and even your intelligence.

What we see from the inside is never quite what people see on the outside. Psychologists talk about this in terms of self-concept. In order to be psychologically healthy, you should have a realistic understanding of how other people see you. This does not require that you agree with what others think of you; it simply means that you are aware of it. It’s probably impossible to view yourself as everyone else does, because there’s a good chance that some of them may have starkly contrasting opinions about who they think you are. People you work with or go to school with may think you are quiet and shy, while your friends and family know otherwise.

Resolving the differences between how others view you and how you view yourself is important, as is maintaining a realistic self-image. Self-image, alone, can present its own problems. A person who views himself negatively will lack motivation and confidence, which will have dramatic results when it comes to accomplishing what he wants in life. Low self-esteem can devastate one's personal relationships and impair a person's ability to cope. An unrealistically high self-evaluation can result in arrogant and overly selfish behaviors, or it simply might make you show up for an *American Idol* audition thinking that you're fantastic, when just the opposite is true.

But what can we do about all this? How can we develop a realistic self-concept? This is not a problem that can be solved with a video camera or a tape recorder. Simon Cowell isn't going to walk up to us and tell us that not only is our singing ghastly, but we need to work on our personality as well.

One answer is to pay attention to how people react to you. Watch their body language. Listen to them. It should be noted that how effective this is may depend upon a person's environment. A child in an abusive environment does not get realistic feedback on who he or she actually is and may need counseling to sort out the differences. Someone with incredible skills may work in an environment where those skills go unrecognized. In order to get a realistic self-concept, one may first have to look at the bigger picture or find an environment that is hospitable and supportive.

Even then, there are obstacles to achieving a realistic self-image that are caused by the mind's own defense mechanisms, which serve to protect our sense of self worth but often backfire in the long run. Behavioral psychologists have observed, tested, and cataloged many of these cognitive biases and distortions, demonstrating that they come naturally to us as human

beings. Overcoming them requires a certain amount of introversion and self-awareness, and it is by no means an easy task.

When it comes to other people misunderstanding you, sometimes there is nothing that can be done. The source of the problem is that no one can read your mind. Luckily, there are times when the solution is simple, and all you need to do when your actions are misconstrued is to tell people what you are thinking or to explain your actions.

The contestants on *American Idol* who succeed are generally the ones who know who they are. As a competition, *American Idol* is not solely based on appearances and one's ability to sing. It is also based on popularity, charisma, and Simon's equally undefined "X factor." All of these are linked at a very basic level to a person's self-concept.

But the *American Idol* auditions have just begun. Before the successes, we will see far more examples of the opposite. Most of these will be people who clearly are not aware of how others see them in contrast to how they see themselves. This will also give us the opportunity to look at another piece of the equation — the human tendency to think of one's self as better than others.

## Chapter 4 – The Superiority Circus

The Seattle auditions turn out to be a freakshow. You almost expect to hear a carnival barker shouting, “Step right up, folks! Come see the bearded lady and the thin man. Come see the donkey with two heads!” Apparently very few of the normal people seen in the video of contestants standing in the Seattle rain were interesting enough to make it to the final edit.

Instead, we see people like the woman who refers to herself as “The Hotness.” I can only imagine that this name was applied to her via someone’s sense of cruel irony. Her singing is equally unappealing, and the judges are quick to tell her so. She argues with them. Simon tells her that she should “get a job down in the port,” but he is even tougher on a boy who appears later in the show. Simon describes this contestant as a bush baby, saying “You look like one of the creatures that live in the jungle with those massive eyes.” The boy reports to Ryan Seacrest that Simon said he looked like a monkey.

Later, there is a tall girl, Anna Kearns, who stands seven feet, four inches tall. Thank goodness, she sings well.

I had to watch most of the second episode on videotape because I was at a writer’s group during the first part. When I got home, I asked my wife how the auditions in Seattle were going.

“Everyone is arguing with the judges,” she answered. I sat down to watch, and sure enough, the very last guy in the show — Steven Thoen, a young man with a bright red beard — was getting into it with Simon. Steven had squeaked, literally, through a high-pitched rendition of “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

Simon reaction was to say that it was “possibly the weirdest (audition) I’ve ever heard in my life... It was like a one-year-old singing that song.”

Steven disagreed.

I know that, in previous seasons, there have been times when the contestants have been instructed to argue with the judges during the auditions, but I don’t believe this is a regular practice. Some contestants are probably taking a cue from what they have seen other people do when they watched the show on TV. Simon has said that one of the big differences between the people who audition in Britain versus the United States is that the people in the States are not afraid to stand up for themselves (right or wrong). From my own experience with people, I would imagine there is a decent percentage that doesn’t require any prompting. For the purposes of this book, I will assume that those who argue with the judges are doing it of their own initiative. It’s not farfetched given that people in everyday life often exhibit the same behaviors we see on the screen. If some of the debates that I use for examples from *American Idol* aren’t entirely real, then you can find a parallel incident elsewhere that is.

In the debate between Steven Thoen and Simon, Steven said that Simon didn’t know what he was talking about, that he never saw Simon get up on stage and sing, and that Simon should “Bring it!”

We can only hope that Steven was starting to realize that maybe he was mistaken about how good he was. If this is true, then perhaps he had decided that being confrontative was the best way to get out of the embarrassing situation he had put himself in. If he seriously believed that his objections held any weight, then he only multiplied the ways in which he was wrong.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I later met Steven in San Diego where he was auditioning for the seventh season. For the record, he seemed to be a good-natured guy. I still don’t know if he truly thought he was a good singer, but the second time around, he didn’t even make it past the preliminaries.

Simon was definitely right on this occasion, as were the other two judges and — I'm speculating here — the rest of the country who were also watching. (I realize it doesn't take a majority to make something right, but, sometimes, it is a good indicator.)

Some people laugh hysterically at the *American Idol* auditions. Laughing at the misery of others was conditioned out of me at an early age. When people trip, fall, or do other embarrassing things, I can't help but think how bad it must feel, and that saps the humor right out of it. But as I was watching Steven Thoen with the judges, I thought, *what a doofus*.

The thought gave me a nice warm fuzzy feeling inside. Really, I felt good about it. And then I felt bad for feeling good about it. *What is it inside of me*, I wondered, *causing these conflicting emotions?*

The answer is that feeling superior to others is a basic human trait. It is also common to feel that this is in some way reprehensible. Perhaps that is because most of the time we have to repress such feelings and keep them to ourselves. Most of us don't want to go around looking like a snob. Yet that doesn't change the fact that this feeling of superiority is something that many (maybe even all) of us experience regularly. It's the dirty little unspoken secret of human nature. There's even a name for it. It has been dubbed the "Lake Wobegon Effect."<sup>2</sup>

In one of his books, author Steven Brust communicates this point in a dialogue between two of his characters:

"Feeling superior to someone is, I believe, as necessary as breathing and eating."

"You think so?"

"I am convinced of it."

"Perhaps you are right."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Lake Wobegon" is a fictional location often referred to by Garrison Keeler on National Public Radio's *A Prairie Home Companion*. It is described as a place where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

<sup>3</sup> Steven Brust, *The Paths of the Dead* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, LLC., 2002), p. 278.

What I like about Steven's quote is that it emphasizes just how universal this trait is. When we realize the full extent of this tendency and just how far-reaching it is, it becomes insightful. The dynamics of relationships in which there is a lot of one-upmanship and competition revolve around this issue. Whether we are right, wrong, or somewhere in-between, it surfaces in how we express our opinions about controversial issues and about those groups of people who disagree with us. You'll find it in colleges, in churches, in ghettos, in the military, in restaurants, in hair parlors, and in nail salons.

The point at which it becomes difficult to swallow and to digest, is when we realize that if we feel this way about others, they also feel that way about us. No one that I know of likes to be looked down on. Yet, whether or not we are aware of it, it happens all the time. The angry and bitter person that no one likes at the office may feel it about everyone around him. The criminal may feel it towards the police officer. The poor man may feel it towards the wealthy. The person with only an elementary school education may feel it towards the scientist. It comes from the least likely of sources and is reflected every which way.

Whether in a movie or real life, when some thug pushes up against someone and says, "What? You think you're better than me?" I think, *Yup. Of course. All kinds of people think they're better than you. Get over it.*

Looking down on others is a natural human behavior, and it has the extra bonus of being fun. The audition episodes at the beginning of each *American Idol* season take advantage of this. Justified or not, we can sit back and say, "Wow, look at monkey boy" or the alternative, "I'm sure glad I have better manners than Simon Cowell." And for a moment, we all feel better about ourselves.

That is, unless the guilt kicks in...

## Chapter 5 – Rudeness, Honesty, and Criticism

There's an interesting bit of dialogue that takes place between Randy and Simon in the first season of *American Idol*. Actually, it's more of a confrontation. It takes place during the episode in which the final ten contestants of the Top Thirty perform for the judges. Simon responds to America's selection of the top six by saying that two of the contestants who got through are "losers," and they got through because of a sympathy vote.

Randy objects saying, "You keep insulting people. You can't call these people losers!"

To which Simon answers, "I can call them whatever I like."

The exchange becomes increasingly heated until Randy stands up and challenges Simon. "You want to do something about it!" he says.

The fight diffuses, but tension is still in the air. The show goes on.

Assuming this exchange wasn't faked, then it was quite possibly a pivotal moment. It is one of those moments they refer to in management books as "storming," a period of time when new people in a group get used to each other and work out their differences. This is sometimes necessary before the group can move on as a whole. In Simon, Paula, and Randy's dysfunctional family, this was such a time.

Since then, Simon Cowell has refrained from referring to contestants as losers, but it hasn't stopped him from using a plethora of other negative terms. Invariably, he will qualify such comments by saying, "I'm not being rude; I'm just being honest." The way he says it varies, but the message is usually the same. He's not the only person on the planet to make this claim

immediately before saying something derogatory about another human being. It is a common disclaimer used by multitudes of people and perpetuated by the media.

Do you buy it? I don't. Let's dissect it and see what is really happening.

Pretend I'm walking down the street and some woman walks up to me and says, "Your mustache looks stupid. You should shave it off because you look like a teenage boy trying to compensate for his boyish face. You're an idiot."

Is she being honest? Yes. Is she accurate? Quite possibly. But is she also being rude? Why, yes. For two reasons. The first is that her opinion was not asked for. The second is that she used words like "stupid" and "idiot." If she wanted to avoid being rude, she would have waited for me to ask her before she offered her opinion. She also would have tried to phrase her comments more diplomatically. The conversation would then go like this:

"What do you think of my mustache?"

"Well, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I think it's a little bit thin. I don't think I'd keep it."

In the first instance, the woman is being honest and rude simultaneously. In the second, she is being honest without being rude.

Simon Cowell is lucky on one count. Anyone who appears before him on *American Idol* is, by default, asking for his opinion. He escapes being rude on that score, but he still manages to be rude because of the words he chooses and the way he delivers them. He is being both rude and honest at the same time.

If Simon really believes what he says, then he has misunderstood what it means to be rude. He may think that because he is honest, any statements he makes cannot be considered rude, but he is wrong because they can be both.

Alternately, when Simon says, “I don’t mean to be rude,” he may be trying to say, “Don’t let your feelings get hurt because of what I say.” Although this, too, would imply a misunderstanding of what it is to be rude. When you say something that could potentially hurt a person’s feelings, and you don’t go out of the way to change the words or phrasing you use in order to spare that person’s feelings, you are still being rude. Rudeness is partially a failure to be diplomatic.

There’s no doubt that Simon is being rude. Rather than hiding behind the guise of honesty, which has nothing to do with whether he is being rude, he should say “Sure, I’m being rude. But what I’m saying is also accurate.” When he says he is not being rude, he inadvertently makes himself a liar. (And when I say that, I *am* being rude, but at least I’m being honest about it. Do you see the difference?)

Instead of making excuses for his rudeness, Simon should give himself permission to be rude and simply admit that is what he is doing. Rudeness may not always be a bad thing.

There are plenty of times when I absolutely abhor rudeness, but there are other times when it is a necessary evil. A balance can be found. Simon’s job, I think, calls for rudeness. In many cases, he’s doing the contestants a favor. They need to hear what people have been afraid to tell them, and they need to hear it put bluntly. When you disguise criticism with civility, sometimes the impact is lost, and it doesn’t register. Contestants in the show also need to learn to deal with harsh criticism, because, the more they find themselves in the limelight, the more often they will be criticized with no regard for their feelings. Such is the price of fame.

What this brings to mind is the closely related topic of whether people should “talk bad” about other people. I’d prefer a world in which people didn’t talk smack, and I, certainly don’t like it when people badmouth me. But here again, a sense of balance is required. There are many instances — hear me out before you raise your objections — where I think that speaking poorly of people is a healthy thing to do.

Imagine a situation in which you’re at work and your boss asks you to do something in a way that will be far less efficient than the way you normally do it. You tell him this and show him the advantages of doing it your way. He says, “No, I expect you to do it as I instructed.”

Let’s say this particular boss is a boss who is very authoritarian.<sup>4</sup> You have probably overstepped your boundaries by challenging him once, and if you do it again, you are likely to get written up or fired. What do you do? Do you still try to convince him that your way is best? Do you do it your way, regardless of what he told you? No. Both of these options will get you fired. Which leaves you with your last two choices: you suck it up, do what he says, and don’t say anything to anyone about it, or you do what your boss told you to, but you complain to your coworkers, friends, or a significant other in private.

You can do the first of these two options, but you’re probably going to end up harboring some hostility and resentment. Or you can vent to people you know and get it out of your system. In my opinion, using the last option of privately venting to people is the best way of handling this particular situation. Is it passive aggressive? Sure it is. But given all the options, it is the best. The very nature of our society is that it often leaves no other option than the passive aggressive one. When violence, direct confrontation, and sometimes even direct/diplomatic confrontation are not possibilities, that’s all that left.

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that I use an authoritarian boss as an example, and it is in no way indicative of my personal work experience. My boss is the best boss ever.

I have found that those who say, “I don’t want people to talk about me behind me back; they should say it to my face,” aren’t always saying what they really mean. What they really want is for people not to speak ill of them at all. The test of this is to bring an issue to them and see how they react. Usually, it’s not pretty.

One of the reasons we, as humans, often choose not to say bad things about other people is because we are aware of our own failings. None of us is perfect, so it may feel hypocritical to criticize others.

Sometimes people qualify their criticisms of other people by saying, “I know I’m not perfect, but…” They’d be much better off if they dispensed with the qualification.

It should be obvious that none of us are perfect, but it is also irrelevant. Because I have flaws in one area, does not mean that I cannot identify or comment on the flaws of another person in some other area. If I’m an alcoholic, I may still be able to identify another person’s gambling problem, and when I recommend them to gambler’s anonymous, it doesn’t make my recommendation any less valid. They might still benefit by going.

As an auditor at my day job, I know which people do their work well, and I know which ones have serious problems getting their work done correctly. On occasion, when I have criticized the extreme underachievers, people have said, “Well, I’ve made that kind of mistake too, so I can’t judge them.”

Mentally I respond, *Sure you can. You know why? Because you don’t make the same mistake over and over again and because the overall quality of your work is better than theirs.* Criticizing other people does not automatically make you a hypocrite.

Those who are afraid to criticize others sometimes fall into a Catch-22. This happens when they act as if others should adopt the same attitude. The second they get mad, act

condescending, or criticize someone else for “judging someone,” they have become guilty of the same thing. They haven’t stopped judging. They’ve merely displaced the judgment so that they are “judging the judges.” When this happens, the judgment falls upon those who are less deserving. The only way you can escape this trap is to realize that sometimes it’s okay to judge other people, so long as it’s done fairly and accurately.

I will talk about balance a lot in this book, and this is one instance where it applies. Most of the time, we’re better off if we don’t spend our time being outwardly critical of people, but even this can be carried to an extreme. Some people believe that a person who comes to you and criticizes someone else is very likely to turn around and criticize you when you’re not around. It may be true sometimes, but it is definitely not true in all cases. It depends upon the person and the situation. There are other issues of trust, confidentiality, and loyalty at play.

I have learned that, sometimes, the people I cannot trust are the ones who refuse to say anything bad about anyone.

One of the departments at a company I worked for held interviews where we interviewed job candidates as a group. After one interview, another member of the staff said that I always found something wrong with the applicants. Of course, I did. That is one of the main goals of an interview. You’re trying to find out what’s wrong with people so you don’t end up with poor employees. There are times when it is acceptable to judge, evaluate, and criticize other people. There are even some occasions where that is what we should do.

Dating is another instance in which you need to critically assess, evaluate, and be picky about your fellow humans. If you don’t, you could easily wind up with someone you’d be better off without. When such judgments are necessary, we should not inflict any unnecessary guilt

upon ourselves. Remember that guilt I talked about in Chapter 4 where people feel bad for feeling superior to others? Here is another instance in which it may be uncalled for.

For the most part, there remains a vast number of times and situations where it is best that we do not say anything negative about our fellow human beings, and we just let them be. But this should not be an absolute (and it's definitely not a rule of thumb when talking about *American Idol* contestants). I take a few shots at people in parts of this book, but that's okay. I've given myself permission to do that. I've acknowledged that's what I'm doing, and it's completely appropriate within the context of this book.

On *American Idol*, it is not uncommon for Paula Abdul to be so overly diplomatic that she fails to say anything useful to contestants who could be aided by useful advice. You know contestants have done poorly when Paula struggles to find something good to say about them. Over the years since their first confrontation, Randy has become more like Simon, buying into Simon's copout that rudeness and honesty are inseparable. Simon has changed very little, and is still capable of reducing a contestant to tears by being unsympathetic. There is a happy medium that has yet to be found.

On an individual level, you and I are best off if we can bring our inner Paula Abduls in line with our inner Simon Cowells and achieve a working compromise.

## Chapter 6 – Dreams, Realism, and Confidence

Much of the buzz surrounding this season has centered on Jennifer Hudson's success with the movie *Dreamgirls*. Jennifer won a Golden Globe for her performance. Over the weekend, it was announced that she has been nominated for an Academy Award in the category of best-supporting actress. It is a well-deserved nomination. Her performance in *Dreamgirls* is fantastic. In the third season, she was voted off *American Idol* when she was one of the top ten finalists. Of all those who did not make it to become *the American Idol*, Jennifer has made the most impressive comeback. It is more than a little ironic that in order to get the role in *Dreamgirls*, Jennifer beat out *American Idol* winner, Fantasia Barrino.

I have always had mixed emotions about Ms. Hudson. My reaction to her when she first appeared on *American Idol* during the third season was that she was arrogant. At the time, Paula Abdul said as much, chastising Jennifer on national television for how disrespectful she was to the judges. As far as I was concerned, when Jennifer was voted off the show, it was her attitude that was her downfall.

She regained my respect with her performance in *Dreamgirls*. I was temporarily happy for Jennifer, until I heard comments from her interviews. In an interview with ABC she said, "To me, this is testimony to say you can do it. I'm the example God has chose to say you can do it." This kind of statement is no departure for her. She says things like this all the time. I feel obliged, though, to point out that it is risky theology, in addition to being terribly presumptive, to

ascribe thoughts and motives to God. Jennifer is a good singer, and, now, a good actress, so I guess it's okay that she's not much of a philosopher.

But there's another problem with Jennifer's statement. It implies that anyone and everyone can live their dreams. To give Jennifer the benefit of the doubt, I will assume that she is simply trying to inspire people. However, there's a fine line between being inspirational and setting people up for disillusionment. It helps to be clear about it, because this is not a world in which everyone can be successful in the way that they want to be. We see this demonstrated on every *American Idol* audition show. If you want to be a singer, you have to be able to sing, which some people are simply not physically able to do. A person who has been deaf since childbirth is not going to be able to become an accomplished singer, no matter how much they desire to. It's a false sell to say that everyone can achieve their dreams. Dreams are great, but they have to be balanced with a healthy dose of realism.

Insistence that *everyone* can achieve their dreams implies that those who don't achieve their dreams are doing something wrong. After all, the reasoning goes, Jennifer Hudson achieved her dreams despite tremendous obstacles, why can't everyone else? Again, there are a multitude of practical reasons why people cannot achieve their dreams. A woman in another reality series, "*Grease: You're the One that I Want*," reports that she was on the way to becoming a dancer when she broke her toe. Because of the broken toe, she was no longer physically capable of dancing "on point" (on the tips of her toes, as is required for ballet). It stopped her dream short, so she changed her dream and pursued another one.

One of the important differences between a dreamer and a doer — especially when the "doer" is not lucky enough to make the right connections, to be born with money, or to get the visibility they need — is that the doer is taking action while the dreamer is not. Dreams are

nothing without ability, determination, persistence, and a decent measure of luck. The same goes for confidence.

Far too many potential *Idol* contestants show up with all the confidence in the world (or “confidentiality,” as one contestant called it) but without the other characteristics I mention above. Confidence is emphasized far too highly, or mistaken for one’s ability to boast, while these other traits are ignored.

When it comes to the contestants on the show, *American Idol* is partially to blame for this. The judges sometimes ask, “Why are you going to be the next American Idol?” when what they should be asking is “What is it about you that makes you a good candidate for *American Idol*?” or any other variation that does not imply that contestants need to indulge in some sort of bravado. In the first show of this season, a whole auditorium full of people was prompted to shout, “I am the next American Idol!” Well, no. Only one of them can be the next American Idol. There’s even a good chance that none of them will and that someone from another state will become the American Idol instead.

There’s no denying that a degree of confidence is important. My brother, Doug, who has a degree in music and taught it for years, has said that a certain kind of confidence is vital in order to sing on stage before an audience and do it well. The mistake people often make is that they don’t understand what real confidence is. Confidence isn’t bragging. Confidence doesn’t involve saying that you will be a success or a winner when you have no actual way of knowing if that is true. On a show like *American Idol*, that kind of confidence is likely to be shown for the foolishness it is.

Last night, during the Memphis auditions, there was a young girl named Melinda Doolittle who had only performed in the past as a backup singer. She seemed shy upon entering

the audition room, but once she started singing, her reticence fell to the side, and we saw someone who could deliver a vocal. Simon commented that the judges had seen all kinds of people who were brimming with confidence, but here was this quiet young woman who blew them away.

One of my favorite *American Idol* contestants, who made it to the Top Ten but didn't win, was LaToya London. She appeared on the third season along with Jennifer Hudson. I was impressed with her because she did not go around spouting off about how great she was. When she got up to sing, her voice and stage presence said it all. It was almost as if she became a different person.

This is what genuine confidence is. It has little to do with what you say. It has everything to do with how you perform. Performance also makes the difference between dreamers and those who accomplish their dreams. I'd trade a thousand pounds of bravado and a head full of wishes for an ounce of hard work any day. But even then, there are no guarantees.

## Chapter 7 – Excuses, Denial, and a Little Bit of Perspective

*American Idol* seems to thrive on controversy, and the New York auditions provide more of this. The main source of controversy is the airing of an audition by a young woman who is not on psychologically firm ground. Her name is Sarah Goldman, although a coworker of mine called her “bipolar” girl.

The first impression we get of Sarah is good, because she is seen comforting Nakia Claiborne who auditioned before her and is in tears. Sarah is sensitive, but maybe a tad bit too much.

When Sarah enters the audition room, she first peeks around the corner of the doorway at the judges and then prances, in an odd sort of way, to the stage. But it really goes to hell when she sings.

The judges question Sarah afterwards, asking her how she thought she did, and Sarah admits that she knows she is tone deaf and can't sing. She then tells the judges that she could become the first *American Idol* who can't sing, while at the same time insisting that “they” could teach her to sing. When asked why she thinks she could become the next *American Idol*, her voice reaches a hysterical peak, and she screeches that she is unique. From that point, her behavior disintegrates to being nothing more than outright raving.

On *The View* the next night, Rosie O'Donnell says that the *American Idol* process is nothing more than making fun of the mentally ill, causing Randy Jackson, who was scheduled to appear on *The View*, to cancel his appearance. Admittedly, it was in poor taste to put Sarah's

audition on national television. It's not the choice I would have made, but Rosie's statement is an exaggeration. It makes it sound like *American Idol* does nothing else but make fun of the mentally ill, which is patently false. The show involves a lot more than that.

In my mind, the most interesting facet of Sarah's irrational rant is that, minus the hysteria, what she had to say wasn't that different than what we hear from many other contestants whom we would be less likely to identify as "disturbed." The rationale she used was very similar to what we hear on the show all the time.

Why did she think she should be on the show? Because she was "unique." Over and over we hear that from contestants. "I am unique!" they say and are surprised when their uniqueness does not get them past the auditions. Part of the problem is that they are not looking at the big picture. Being unique isn't enough. You have to know how to sing, you have to be good at it, and you have to be likable.

One could argue that we are all unique, because, technically, it's true. No two people are the same, not even "identical" twins. But what the judges mean when they say they want someone unique is that they want someone who stands out in a good way. By "unique," they do not mean "freak." They don't want someone who is bland, or boring, or who sounds like everyone else, but they don't want someone who sounds like a sheep that is getting run over by a tractor, either. You should be unique, but not too unique. As we have seen with confidence versus arrogance, and belief versus realism, a balance needs to be achieved. The solution lies somewhere in the middle. Nikki McKibben (from season one of *American Idol*), with her punk rock edge, and Taylor Hicks, with his gray hair and quirky soulful style, are two examples of what the judges mean when they say, "unique."

Another woman who failed her audition during the New York tryouts was dismissed because her performance, while not terrible, was not very different from a thousand other bluesy type performances that the judges had heard. The judges were in a foul mood. On a different day, perhaps, she might have gotten through. But that obstacle would have been overcome if the contestant had delivered an audition that “wowed” the judges, as others have done. Then she would have been unique in the right way.

Our mentally disturbed contestant said another thing that reflected an attitude that people often bring with them to *American Idol*. She thought “the show” could teach her to sing. Far too many contestants come to the auditions hoping that *American Idol* will “make them a star.” They talk about contemporary vocalists disparagingly, saying that such singers don’t really have any talent, but are made to sound good through the use of echo and other studio recording tricks. In an earlier season, a girl by the name of Kristin expressed it this way, “I realize that maybe I’m not the perfect person, but you look at some people who are out there, and you put synthesizers in, and you drown ‘em out with music, and you pay them a ton. Take me! Put synthesizers with me! Give me a choreographer! Give me a trainer!”

There are two issues here, the first is that successful singers really do have talent and almost always have something to bring to the table. A good vocal coach and a sound engineer can work wonders, but they can only do so much. They can’t take a person who is tone deaf and teach them to hear differences in sounds that they are incapable of hearing. Plus, why should anyone pick this girl over anyone else? There’s no reason to spend your time attempting to train somebody without talent or trying to make them sound good when you can start with somebody who sounds great right from the beginning. Nor is that really what happens in the industry.

Let's switch over from that tirade and back to Sarah Goldman's. She also launched an attack on the judges, criticizing them for staying up late the night before at some bar. "That's just rude!" she exclaimed, however irrelevant that is. Irrelevant accusations are a staple of the auditions. Contestants criticize Simon because he doesn't know how to sing and because we never see him getting up on stage to deliver a vocal. Other contestants rip into Paula and her past performances, especially her biggest selling single, "Straight Up."

The behavior of the contestants who react this way is often transparent. They are trying to direct attention away from their own flaws. There are some who may be aware that they are doing this, but it worries me to think that *any* of the contestants do not realize that the judges' singing ability has nothing to do with anything. The judges can tell if someone else is a good singer, regardless of whether they can sing themselves, in the same way that a person can tell if someone else is a good cook even though they, themselves, are not.

Throughout the auditions, we repeatedly see the human tendency to be in denial and make excuses. As the show progresses into the other phases of the competition, there will be less of this, and more admirable traits will come to the forefront. But during the auditions, "Bipolar girl" takes us to the baser end of the *American Idol* spectrum. Through her, we see the show at its lowest, where human failings are put on display for a national audience. If we are to extract anything of value from it, perhaps we might do well to heed the hidden warning that the human capacity for denial lies within all of us, and is readily available whenever there is something about reality that we do not like, especially when it is someone else's negative assessment of us.

In the Seattle auditions, one of the contestants, by the name of Amy, exhibited another form of denial. When she told her husband about the auditions, he said she shouldn't waste her time, but according to her, his "real" reason for not wanting her to go to the auditions was that he

didn't want to be without her when she went to Hollywood. "I think it's actually kind of sweet," she added.

It's an interesting rationalization, but it remains a rationalization nonetheless. Amy's husband has obviously heard her sing. She wasn't good enough, and her self-talk was keeping her from seeing what was clear to those around her.

Nakia Claiborne, the contestant who auditioned before Sarah Goldman, was also in denial about her abilities, but there was another error in judgment added on top of that.

She began her audition well. Her energy and enthusiasm temporarily overshadowed her vocals. But when the judges asked her to sing a slow song, it became evident that she did not have the vocal talent necessary to succeed on *American Idol*.

When the judges told her no, she pleaded with them, telling them that she would be letting a lot of people down if she didn't make it to Hollywood. Perhaps she did not see that the same was probably true for many contestants. It did not seem to occur to her that whether she let people down made no difference in regard to whether she could sing.

After her audition, Nakia lamented the judges' decision, weeping out the words, "You get tired of hearing no and it's not just for singing. You get tired of hearing no." I wondered if she was playing back what she had heard some self-pitying adult say or if it was simply a speech she had repeated many times in her head. It also caused me to talk back to the television, as I sometimes do. "You think it's rough at your age?" I said. "Just wait until you're in your forties!"

Nakia's error was that she couldn't see the bigger picture. As far as I know, everyone suffers. Everyone gets told no. Everyone wants to succeed and sometimes feels as if they are letting others down.

As we all do at times, Nakia had forgotten to use “the perspective periscope.” If we raise that periscope up and look around, we see a big wide ocean around us. It is filled with others who have problems equally as bad, if not worse, than ours. Typically, we are afforded no special privileges above them, but we are also not alone, and that is sometimes all the knowledge we need to make us feel better and to keep on going.

## Chapter 8 – False Support

Despite their sometimes unrealistic self images, the excuses they make, and any other failings, I find it easy to sympathize with many of those who audition for *American Idol* and who fail to make it to Hollywood.

For one thing, they've already been through a lot. Of the thousands (often ten thousand or more) of people who audition at a big city venue, only two or three hundred will actually see Randy, Paula, or Simon. Prior to this, potential contestants line up, usually at a series of booths in a large stadium, and sing in front of judging panels (music professionals and *American Idol* staff members). It is at this point that most of the would-be contestants are sent home. The several hundred contestants that survive are then seen by the producers of the show, but this doesn't even happen during the audition weekend when the *Idol* machine arrives in a city. It may happen weeks later. After the producers screen this second group, those who remain are given a date and location where they will finally get a chance to perform before the three famous judges. The whole process varies in length according to the *American Idol* production team's schedule, but it never takes place over the space of a single weekend.

This explains a couple things. This is why the audition room you see on TV often looks like a hotel conference room rather than something you'd find in a large stadium. It also explains why we see video pieces, filmed in the contestants' hometowns, about contestants who don't survive their auditions. The videos are filmed after the contestants have been screened by the producers, but before the auditions with Paula, Randy, and Simon.

For the contestants, all these steps are significant. It is a grueling process, and they've managed to stand out (as either extremely good or extremely bad) amongst a group of ten thousand or more people. For those who mistakenly think they sing well, it is very misleading. At every step along the way, the idea that they are good is reinforced when they make it through.

Many of them are young with high hopes. Their friends, their families, and their parents have told them that they have great voices and that they should go for it. People they respect, as well as a multitude of movies and TV shows, have told them that they should pursue their dreams. They may have been told if they try hard enough or believe in themselves that they can do "anything" they want.

When Simon, Paula, or Randy tell them they are terrible or worse, it comes as a nasty shock, and it can be hard to accept when everyone else has told them they are great. They have also been told that they should be persistent and that they should stand up for themselves.

When the contestants are told "no" by the judges, it should come as no surprise that they ask for another chance, to sing a different song, or that they argue with the judges. All of their life, everyone has told these contestants that chasing their dream of singing is what they should do, but when they are faced with the hard reality of a national competition against tens of thousands of other contestants who are in the same position, and they face judges who are trying to pick out the best among all these people, then the equation changes. When contestants don't succeed, it can be devastating. I'm sure that many of them think, *What happened to "You can do anything you want?"* *What happened to living your dream?* It may feel as if everyone who has tried to encourage them over the years, and who has told them that they could do it, has lied to them. It can be a tremendous letdown that calls everything into question — from one's own

abilities to the promises of success offered by a world that so constantly pays lip service to the dreamer. On top of this, the contestants may feel small and belittled.

The overall scenario shines a light on a failure of American society. We have gone to an extreme where beliefs and empowerment are so over-emphasized that our sense of realism has been misplaced. We have overcompensated when trying to build self-esteem and provide support.

The husband who told his wife Amy not to waste her time with an *American Idol* audition may seem callous to some, but what he was not necessarily wrong for saying it. Amy may have felt that she owed it to herself to try anyway. Quite possibly, she learned a lot about herself in the process, and she'll go back to her husband and child and be a wonderful mother. But had her husband lied to her and said "Yes dear, you have a wonderful voice, and I'm absolutely positive you will win," he would have done the wrong thing. When you think about it, it was actually kind of sweet.

Matthew Kelly, the author of *Perfectly Yourself*, has this to contribute:

"Have you ever been told that if you set your mind to it you can achieve anything? That's a falsehood, one I believed for a long time. When I was young and I was told this, as were my siblings and friends, I believed it and set my mind to do things, and I failed. I wanted these things so badly and I still came up short. And with these failures came feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing.

"Sometimes we fail at things because we are simply not well suited to them. But we are seldom told such things when we are young. The maxim that we can do anything if we just set our minds to it is so absolute and so often reinforced that when we follow it and fail, we are left with one conclusion: There must be something wrong with me. Many of us struggle with these feelings of insecurity throughout our whole lives, and they affect our relationships, the way we progress professionally, the way we manage our time and whether we dream or don't dream."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Kelly, *Perfectly Yourself*, Beacon Publishing, 2006. Excerpt is taken from January 2007 issue of Ladies' Home Journal.

Yes, we should encourage people. Yes, we should stand behind our loved ones when they attempt to follow their dreams. But just as there's a balance between rudeness and honesty, between being a dreamer and a doer, and between confidence and bravado, there needs to be a healthy balance here as well.

## Chapter 9 – Role Models

The Birmingham auditions are remarkably mellow in comparison to the auditions in previous cities. A number of the contestants leave the audition room gracefully, saying “Thank you” to the judges after receiving their harsh comments. As one of them is leaving, Randy Jackson asks, “Are you going to take that?” She stops in her tracks, thinks about it for a second, and decides that, yes, she is. She turns and leaves the room.

Rather than a wide panorama of circus acts in Birmingham, there are only a few oddballs.

Highlights include a large African American woman dressed in a frilly yellow outfit. Ryan Seacrest describes her as “Big Bird’s long lost cousin” while the music from *Sesame Street* plays in the background. Her name is Margaret Fowler. She initially claims to be twenty-six but turns out to be fifty.

Simon’s response to her is, “I have got no idea what this show is anymore.” Simon sees *American Idol* as one thing: a way to find a music artist that will sell records. When it digresses from this, it confuses him. To some of us, it’s obvious that Margaret is more interested in being on national television than being in a singing competition. As long as she’s on screen, the show is about mutual exploitation.

The escapades continue with a southern belle, by the name of Jamie Lynn Ward, who has a shocking story to tell. When she tells it, Paula Abdul’s mouth drops wide open. Apparently, the girl takes care of her father who is paralyzed from the waist down because he shot his wife when he caught her cheating, and then he shot himself.

Emphasizing the positive, Paula extricates the girl from the awkwardness created by this revelation. All Simon cares about is if the girl can sing. She can, and she passes her audition. I'm thinking, if she's going to sing, she should sing the Blues... or country.

Jamie's home life is obviously very different from Victoria Watson's. Before we see Victoria, we see her hair. The camera shot is from the back and shows that Victoria's hair reaches her ankles. That's when she is wearing heels.

When Simon asks Victoria why she wants to be an American Idol, she says, "I think I could be a good role model."

"You're a genuinely nice person, aren't you?" Simon asks. He seems surprised that such a thing could exist.

Victoria has a good voice, but it is cautious and studied. It doesn't "wow" the judges enough for them to send her through. The only reason she has made it on national television seems to be the length of her hair. The judges can't stop talking about it. Her hair, which she has grown all of her life, has made her a novelty act. It has inadvertently become a distracting gimmick, not unlike the costumes that some contestants wear. If I were her, after all this I would be tempted to get a haircut, just so people would pay attention to me for who I really was.

Having been rejected, Victoria leaves the audition room and sobs in her father's arms. She doesn't seem like the kind of person that would have the strength to deal with the realities of Hollywood. The qualities that make her nice, and make her think she would be a good role model, would probably hinder her chances for success.

The comment that she thinks she would be a good role model is interesting. It is a reason for wanting to be an American Idol that I haven't heard before. No doubt, it is based on

comments made by people (Victoria's parents probably included) about the Paris Hiltons, the Lindsey Lohans, and Britney Spears' who have come up short in this respect.

Saying that you want to be a good role model is an awful lot of pressure to put on yourself. Do you want the responsibility of having to live up to extremely high standards because people are going to scrutinize you, judge you, and try to be like you? I certainly wouldn't.

The bigger question is whether we should expect it of celebrities like sports stars, movie stars, and singers. I see no problem with wanting people to be good role models. That almost goes without saying. I would love it if all the rebellious, smart-mouthed, roll-their-eyes-at-everything teenage girls suddenly turned around and became more refined and respectful, but I doubt that is going to happen.

At the same time, I think it is unfair to assign the responsibility of being a role model to someone just because he or she is famous. It is terribly presumptive. Most famous people did not become famous because they wanted other people to copy them. They became famous because they loved music, or they were good at acting, or they enjoyed playing a certain kind sport and were skilled at it. The next thing they knew, people were pointing at them saying, "You have to act a certain way because you're a role model."

I'm sure many of them think, "Hold on a moment, I never signed up for this."

Before she goes out to a bar, Lindsay Lohan probably doesn't say to herself, "Hey! There's some thirteen-year-old out there who is going to want to try to be like me, so maybe I should stay inside and read a book. In fact, I should change my whole lifestyle!"

We are free to tell the famous what to do and how to act, but they are no different from us because they are free to live their lives as they please. It is unfair to foist responsibility on them and ridiculous to expect them to accept it.

On occasion, parents will point the finger and say, “Look! My daughter is dressing like a slut and acting like a tramp because of all those celebrities we see in the news.” That is when the whole “role model” issue becomes a copout. If parents are doing their job, then their children should already have a sense of decency and appropriateness ingrained in them, and they will be less likely to behave badly. Moreover, the child is responsible for his or her behavior, as is the child’s parent, not some celebrity that they have never met.

Still, I agree that it would be nice if we saw more positive behaviors demonstrated by those in the spotlight. Yet, I have to qualify that as well, because I think that the problem isn’t so much the person who is caught in the spotlight, but the spotlight itself. The spotlight moves and those who it shines its glare upon have little control over it.

It is guaranteed that people are going to have problems, and because problems and misfits are interesting, that is where the spotlight is going to swing. We see this same thing happen in the *American Idol* auditions. Thousands of normal people who enter the audition room are overlooked, but the camera zooms in on those who are odd and quirky. The media, especially the tabloids, the high gloss magazines, and numerous “entertainment” shows, seek out the rebels, the partiers, and the troublemakers. If they’re out there, and it’s certain they will be, that is where the spotlight will turn. In the process, it passes right by all those people who should be the role models. Their quietness and their good behavior almost guarantee it.

Maybe we should start having TV shows about people who don’t go out and party, who don’t drive their cars into streetlights, and who don’t yell at the cops while in a drunken stupor. I doubt, though, that such a show would get very good ratings.

The whole thing is a feedback loop. If we buy magazines that contain celebrity gossip and mug shots, or if our viewing habits contribute to the ratings of television shows that feature the exploits of celebrities, then we become part of the loop.

People often attack celebrities because they are jealous of them. That psychology contributes to the issue as well. We want to hear about their failings and mishaps because it makes us feel better about ourselves in comparison.

What can we learn from this? We can learn to be fairer. We can learn to see another issue from a larger perspective that includes the viewpoints of all parties, and an understanding of the circumstances that create the situation.

On the second day of the Birmingham auditions, Paula Abdul is missing due to family obligations, which is what you would expect from a good role model. Notice that in order to be a better role model, she has to disappear from the spotlight.

Before the Birmingham auditions are over, we get one more example of how people can be in denial and how they will look to blame anyone or anything for their problems other than themselves. When Brandy Patterson does badly in her audition, she says, “Maybe it was the floor or something.” Okay... So, Randy and Simon have her step off the wooden floor and onto the carpet where she tries another song. Standing on the carpet, Brandy’s singing is no better, but she thinks it is. When rejected, a plethora of excuses and attacks flow out of her mouth, but none of them are directed in the right direction — inwards.

## Chapter 10 – The Winner

The Los Angeles auditions are less freakish than one might imagine, given the proximity to Hollywood. The first audition is the oddest. Before Martik Manoukian, who goes by the name “Eccentric,” enters the audition room, we see him crawling up a flight of stairs demonstrating “The Panther Crawl.” When it is time for his audition, he struts into the room, tosses a book onto the floor, strikes a pose, removes his shirt, and follows this up with a series of bizarre dance steps, which includes slashing at the air like a wildcat. The editors of the show have thoughtfully provided sound effects that highlight the absurdity of it all. “Eccentric” seems to have forgotten that *American Idol* is a singing competition. When it comes time for him to sing, his performance is severely lacking.

Mariana, who auditions after him, sings better than he does, but still isn’t good enough to impress the judges. When she thinks they aren’t going to pass her through to the next round, she falls on her knees and begs them to give her a chance. Her pleading is to no avail. Even when her mother, who was once one of Dean Martin’s “Gold Diggers,” comes in the room to vouch for her, it’s not enough to change the judges’ mind.

Amongst the singers who make it through are a woman named Alaina Alexander and a guy named Brandon Rogers. Brandon has plenty of experience as a backup singer, as did Melinda Doolittle who got through during the Memphis auditions. Part of the excitement at this point is that one of these people, you never know who, may go on to be a nationally known star.

These are the exceptions, though. Most of the singing is bad, if not downright awful. Phuong Pham provides a perfect example of this. She talks about Taylor Hicks and does a bad impression of him, which is not surprising given the fact that she is Asian and female (as opposed to being a white male from the South). Phuong claims that her mother hasn't been supportive because her mother sat her down and told her she shouldn't audition. It only goes to show that sometimes we should listen to our mothers. It also illustrates a point I made earlier. Phuong's mother did the best thing she possibly could do. She was honest with her daughter. But when her daughter refused to listen and went to the auditions anyway, Mom was there.

All of these contestants and all of their struggles are overshadowed by one man. His name is Sherman Pore and he is sixty-four.

Over 300 people have signed a petition for him to appear on the show. Sherman had people sign the petition while his wife of twenty years was in the hospital with cancer. He got the idea to do the petition and to try to get on the show after his wife had gone into the hospital. He found that pursuing the goal and sharing his progress with her brought a smile to her face as she lay in her hospital bed. "It eased her passing," Sherman says, for his wife died several days before the auditions.

Sherman appears before the judges and tells them his story. Paula's eyes fill with tears. In our living room, I hand my wife a Kleenex, and she dabs at her eyes.

Sherman sings a song in memory of his wife. His voice is clear, mellow, and sincere. The judges thank him when he's finished, and Simon offers to shake his hand. Sherman hugs Paula, shakes hands with Randy, and leaves the room. There's no voting. No decision needs to be made about whether he is "going to Hollywood." He did what he set out to do.

The obstacles faced by the contestants who will appear throughout the season will pale in comparison to what this man has been through. Everything is immediately thrown into perspective. He has fought a battle far more important, humbling, and difficult than anything that *American Idol* can throw at someone. Reality has told him “no” in the biggest way that it can. He should be the one falling to his knees. But instead he has handled it with dignity, grace, and style.

As far as I’m concerned, *American Idol* already has a winner, and it is Sherman Pore.

Of course, that is a subjective decision, and if you want, you can vote for the guy who performed his audition in a banana suit. I forget his name.

## Chapter 11 – Premature Defeat

Either I'm really getting into the show, or the San Antonio auditions are the most interesting so far.

Two of the people who sing, Haley Scarnato and Baylie Brown, are both awesome. In my opinion, Haley, age 24 and brunette, is much better than Baylie, who is age 16 and blonde, but the judges think the opposite. Simon says that Baylie is “born to be a pop star,” while Haley gets told that she is not remarkable. Either way, they're both through to Hollywood.

A set of cousins auditions. The judges laugh at one of them as he gives an oppressively slow rendition of “Amazing Grace,” but he shows remarkably good humor at the end of his audition. His cousin, Akron Watson, proves to be quite the singer and passes his audition.

There are very few oddball auditions in San Antonio, and this is probably what makes it a better show. Only one contestant, Jacob Tutor, seems bizarre, and this is due mainly to his appearance. He looks very similar to the boy that Simon described as a “bushbaby” during the Seattle auditions.

The judges do something they've never done before with contestant Ashlyn Carr. Her voice is good, but when she sings, her facial expressions are odd. The judges tell her so, and Paula tells Ashlyn that she should practice singing in front of a mirror. Ashlyn is told no and sent on her way, but afterwards Simon says, “I still think we made a mistake with that girl.” In an unprecedented move, the judges call her back into the audition room, and have her sing another

song. This time, she gets a yes vote from all of them. It's an emotional ride for Ashlyn, and she promises to work on her performance.

As some of the contestants leave the audition room, they push the wrong door of the two double-doors at the exit, prompting the judges to tell them to use the other one. This is the inspiration for a sequence of shots of people using the wrong door, which has happened in all of the audition cities. A question occurs to me. Why doesn't one of the judges, producers, or even one of the cameramen, tape a note to the door with an arrow pointing to the side that says, "Please use other door"? Haven't they thought of it, or is there an element of sadism to this? *American Idol* is, after all, a "reality" show, and any such "reality" is malleable.

*American Idol* is also often identified as "a family show," but I'm not so sure that's always the case. The auditions are filled with contestants who swear and make obscene gestures at the camera. Sure, it's bleeped out and covered up, but we all know what they're saying and doing. The judges are sometimes cruel, especially when they just sit and laugh at the contestants. The way some contestants are portrayed is also patently unfair. I have to ask, are these really "family" values being portrayed? If it were my children who were watching, I would have to remind them that certain aspects of the show should not be emulated. The next contestant and her family give us a perfect illustration.

When Jasmine Holland enters the room to do her audition, she seems sad, and the judges comment on this. Her performance is bad. When the judges tell her so, it triggers a series of counterattacks. "You don't even know me," Jasmine says. As she approaches the door out of the audition room, she says to Randy, "What do you do? I never heard of you until *American Idol*!"

As soon as Jasmine is outside the audition room, her family joins in the chorus and quickly pounces all over Simon. Jasmine's mother says that Simon needs to go back to where

he's from. She fumbles for the name of it and guesses at France. Ryan Seacrest corrects her.

“Well, he should be judging British people, not Americans,” she answers. On the way out of the door, Jasmine and her family take turns telling Randy, Paula, and Simon that they can kiss their collective ass.

Their personal attacks upon the judges have absolutely no relevance to whether Jasmine is a good singer. Jasmine's entire family demonstrate a behavior that is so commonly used by those in the wrong, that each one of them might as well hang a sign around their necks saying, “Please excuse us while we try and cover up for our own failings by pointing the finger at other people.” Of course, they would have to be pretty big signs.

But the main problem with Jasmine Holland is that she had lost before she ever began. She started with a defeated attitude, and she already had excuses in place so that, when she inevitably failed, she could use them in her own defense. It is because of behaviors like this that people sometimes adopt the opposite attitude — one of boastful overconfidence — when what would be best is a happy medium.

This habit of making excuses beforehand is one that can easily infiltrate our lives at many levels. I have seen it in others and observed it in myself while doing simple tasks. When I worked at an environmental firm doing data entry, I would sometimes come across something that I wasn't sure I knew how to do correctly. Rather than getting up from my desk and finding out the right way to do it, I would guess at how it should be done. While I was doing this, I would say to myself, “If someone calls me on this, I can tell them that I did it because...” and then I would prepare my excuse.

After this backfired on me too many times, I finally became aware of the thought process that was creating the problem. I learned that when I had a question or I wasn't sure about

something, I would be better off finding the right way to do it before continuing, thereby preventing a number of errors and the subsequent reprimands. We create excuses because we're lazy. Those who maintain awareness of their own thoughts can catch themselves at this habit. Upon correcting it, they will become more productive.

The Holland family had apparently spent far too much time sitting around the television finding fault with the judges and the *American Idol* system, while cultivating a generally negative attitude. Jasmine was prepared for defeat, but she hadn't done the necessary preparations for winning. By the time she walked into the room frowning, she had already failed the audition.

Whether or not the Holland family has learned from this, we can.

There is one more thing to be said about this, and that is that there is a difference between having a bad excuse or a good reason for what you do. The difference is in whether you have the power to do it differently and what you do with that power.

## Chapter 12 – The Shame of It

Tonight, the last of the audition shows airs. We have been to all seven cities: Minneapolis, Seattle, Memphis, New York, Birmingham, Los Angeles, and San Antonio. Tonight's show contains the overflow that didn't fit into previous shows, and is advertised as "The Best of the Rest."

No doubt, we will see some pretty embarrassing performances. People slow down when they see a car wreck, and it is the same morbid curiosity that often causes us to click over to the *American Idol* auditions and keep watching. But how does it feel to be on the other side? How awful it must be to be humiliated on national television and to have people make fun of you for who knows how long. How does one deal with that?

Fortunately for you, but unfortunately for me, I have a personal experience I can draw upon to illustrate this. When I was sixth grade, our class was called into the school cafeteria where they gave us handouts and information about the junior high that most of us would be going to the next year. On the handout was a list of things we'd need for different classes, and under PE for boys, they listed jockstraps. A boy sitting next to me asked me what a jockstrap was. I had no idea, so I raised my hand and asked. The look on the teacher's face and the laughter of my fellow students was enough for me to want to permanently exile myself into a cave for the rest of my life. As soon as the assembly let out, I left campus and went home. I had never ditched school before, but I was so mortified that I left in the middle of the day without even thinking twice about it.

My mom came home from lunch to find me there and asked what was wrong. When I told her, she called the school, explained the situation to them, and made me do the thing I least wanted to do in the world – go back to school.

Reluctantly, I went. Although some people whispered and pointed when they saw me, most people were nice. One guy even said that it was okay because he didn't know what a jockstrap was either.

Learning to face my embarrassment was a lesson that has stuck with me throughout my life, but I realize I got off easy. I wasn't embarrassed on a national stage, people forgot it quickly, and we moved to a different city shortly after that. For celebrities and some *American Idol* contestants, it may not go so well. When the Dixie Chicks made an anti-George Bush statement on a stage in Britain, their publicist told them it would boil over in no time. It didn't. It has haunted them to the present day.

The question remains, how do you deal with such a situation?

The first thing it helps to remember is that your ego and your pride are more important to you than anyone else. Nobody else cares as much as you do. Do we feel as terrible or hurt as the contestants on *American Idol* do? We feel bad for some of them, but I don't know anyone with enough empathy to completely feel their pain. This lack of empathy may not seem good initially, but it becomes valuable when you are able to turn it around and say, "if nobody else thinks my ego is all that important, then why should I?" Sometimes when our pride has been hurt or marred, the best solution is not to protect that pride, but to relinquish our grip on it even more. The more you do so, the more you realize what a silly thing pride is.

Making me go back to school was the best thing my mother could have done for me. People may make fun of you, criticize you, even hate you, but as long as they are not hurting you

physically, then you don't have to do anything but go on living. Other people's words may affect your life, but they do not change who you are, nor can they prevent you from being out and about in the world. It might even exasperate them if their taunts, teasing, or worse fail to have an effect. This is the second thing to remember — that facing up to a world that disrespects you is better than hiding from it.

While we don't automatically think of embarrassed *American Idol* contestants as winners, we may owe them some gratitude for showing us that pride is not as important as we make it out to be. Even if a person's pride is sacrificed on the national altar, the person still survives.

One of the reasons that being on *American Idol* has the potential for being so embarrassing is that a person's singing voice is thought of as an intrinsic part of his or her self. Sometimes the judges unfairly make fun of people on the show, but sometimes, the only thing they are laughing at is the person's voice. When this happens, the person quite naturally feels as if they, themselves, are being ridiculed. Singers and vocal coaches often refer to a person's voice as "their instrument," making it sound like a clarinet or a violin that you just happen to carry around with you all the time. Making this separation prevents you from being so hard on yourself when you sing poorly. There isn't something wrong with "you," just your instrument. It's like having a guitar with the strings out of tune.

This would be a useful attitude for some *American Idol* contestants to adopt when facing the judges. It also gives us a clue to how to deal with certain types of embarrassment. A failure in one area (such as one's singing) does not make a person a failure in all other areas. This season, Paula has taken to reminding contestants who don't pass their auditions that, even though singing isn't their forte, there might be other things that they are great at. If we can't be good at everything, our best bet is to let our strengths overshadow our weaknesses.

## Chapter 13 – Never Give Up?

For the final audition episode, the writers of *American Idol* create a rather facetious list of six lessons — do's and don'ts for contestants to follow. Item number three on the list is “Never Give Up.” This is one of those bits of advice that sounds good at first, but may not be good advice for everyone. It works for Gina Glocksen, who has made it to Hollywood Week on *American Idol* before. She performs her third audition and makes it through again. Hopefully, it will pay off in the long run. Meanwhile, another contestant, Jack Odanavich, blows his audition. His voice is terrible, but outside the audition room he talks to Ryan Seacrest and says, “I will never ever, ever, give up.” One may admire his will and his desire to succeed, but these traits can only carry you so far. Persistence must be accompanied by talent, skill, and the ability to adapt, learn, and change. Without these, persistence can easily become nothing more than blind stubbornness. Unless something magically happens to Jack Odanavich's vocal chords and Jack's hearing, he is doomed to failure as a singer despite his dogged determination.

One of the reoccurring themes in this book has been balance and it comes up here again as well. Giving up or switching goals is the alternative to relentless but pointless persistence. Keep in mind that when I'm talking about giving up, I mean it in regard to giving up a specific course of action rather than giving up on everything.

A man who used to be in the writers group I belong to serves as another example of what I mean. For the longest time he showed up at the group with work that, to be Simon Cowell about it, was absolutely atrocious. For every helpful critique this gentleman received, he had an

excuse or a counterargument as to why he wouldn't heed the advice. Sometimes he would just ignore people. He was stubborn in his persistence, but he was also stubborn in insisting that things be done the way he wanted. This inflexibility took its toll. He was unemployed, and he had unrealistically thought that he could bring money in by writing and by doing it in his own uncompromising style. What he needed to do was give up this course of action by putting his writing to the side, getting a job, and taking care of his family.

After years of showing up at the group and trying to self-publish a book, he finally gave up. I was greatly relieved, but another person heard about it and vehemently declared, "You should never give up!" I disagreed. Giving up was the best thing our friend had ever done. It was not a sign of weakness, but a sign of hard won wisdom.

The other day I listened to a news report about basketball players who had been playing in the minor leagues where their salaries were from \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year. They did this because they hoped one day to get to the top of the NBA where the salaries are in the millions. The man being interviewed about this was an advisor to many of these players. He was asked what he told the players when they neared an age when they could no longer be considered for a spot on a major NBA team. "It's a very difficult conversation," he said. He often had to advise these players to play in European leagues where they could make enough money to support themselves and their family. The advisor said it was tough because when he did this, he was recommending that the players give up their dream. It is a difficult choice to make. When do you give up? If you wait too long, you'll find that you have no choice. The realities of the world may deny a person their dreams regardless of how hard they try.

In the movie, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, Will Smith plays the role of Chris Gardner, who, in real life, is a self-made millionaire. In the movie, the character of Chris notes that when

drafting the constitution, Thomas Jefferson said we have the right to “pursue” happiness. This is a wise statement because it doesn’t say we are guaranteed happiness or that we have the right to happiness, only that we should have the right to pursue it. Chris Gardner did not give up, but overcame tremendous odds to achieve his dream of becoming a successful stockbroker in an environment that was unfriendly to African Americans.

The problem with the phrase “Never give up,” is that it is put forward as an absolute. A much better rendering would be “Don’t give up easily” or, as King Solomon would have put it, “There is a time to persist and a time to give up. There is a time to stay the course and a time to change.” The trick is to know where to draw the line.

As W.C. Fields is quoted as saying, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. Then quit. No use being a damn fool about it.”

If you do find yourself in a position where you have to change your plans or you cannot live out your dreams in the way you had planned, remember what I covered in chapters 6 and 8. When you put it all together, you’ll see that high ambitions should be balanced with realism. Not all dreams can be achieved. It is misleading and unfair to say that they can. The flip side of that is that if you don’t achieve your dreams, and you know you have done everything you can, there’s no reason to beat yourself up. It happens to the best of us.

Of course, this comes from someone who has always been ambitious, so my emphasis is on the problems of those who have tried to accomplish great things. For those who lack the motivation to try and achieve their dreams, a friendly push in that direction, with an emphasis on persistence, might be more appropriate.

Lesson 4 of the final audition episode is “Audition on Your Own.” This is good advice. Three girls — Heather Rennie, Ashley Cleland, and Ebony Jointer — all audition together. All

three are friends but, as the judges said, “Not after this.” Only two of the girls go on to Hollywood, and the third does not. On top of that, the judges praise Ebony Jinter’s singing so much so that I can hardly imagine being one of the other two girls without feeling some resentment. Ebony probably feels put on the spot and embarrassed as well.

The thing about the auditions is that, usually, the contestants stand before the judges and are evaluated on their own merits. It is not until later in the show, as we’ll see in the upcoming “Hollywood Week,” where the true competition begins and people are rapidly eliminated because of how they stand up next to other performers. The three friends have prematurely put the pressures of the later rounds upon themselves.

Now, with the last of the auditions in all seven cities complete, it’s time for this kind of intense competition. One hundred and seventy-two people have passed the auditions and will descend upon Hollywood for a chance at the number one spot. The personal dramas we have witnessed so far are nothing in comparison to what we will see when the group of 172 contestants is whittled down to twenty-four. Rooms full of contestants will be let go at once, bringing their journey to an abrupt and painful stop.

In some cases, personal interactions will make the difference between success and failure. Up to now, what we have learned from *American Idol* has mainly been about our attitudes and behaviors as individuals that can either make us successful or interfere with our success. Our own foibles are sometimes enough to undo us, but when we have to deal with other people, the game becomes immensely more complex. As it will for the contestants, the brutal competition about to take place on *American Idol* will give us better insight into what we’re really made of.

## **Part II: Eliminations**

## Chapter 14 – Competition

It was a busy weekend. Carrie Underwood won a Grammy award for Best New Artist. Her song, “Jesus Take the Wheel,” won two more, once again proving the power of *American Idol* when it comes to creating superstars. Carrie is also dating Dallas Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo, which is something I doubt she would have been able to do prior to becoming an American Idol.

Over the weekend, I also learned that I can get tickets to one of the *American Idol* dress rehearsals during the “Top Twelve” shows. That means there’s some behind-the-scenes information on the way. We’re going to Hollywood!

Meanwhile, potential American Idols are being eliminated by the score. In the two shows airing this week, the group of 172 contestants is being reduced to 24. Doing the math tells us that 148 contestants will be sent home during the infamous “Hollywood Week.”

Hollywood Week takes place at the Orpheum Theater in Hollywood. The pacing, at least from the television audience’s point of view, is abrupt compared to the auditions, which were drawn out over a period of a month.

At the Orpheum Theater this year, the contestants are split into two groups — males and females. There are twice as many girls as there are guys. The ladies perform for the judges on day one and are sent up to the stage in groups of six. Each woman sings, often for no more than thirty seconds, and then the group of six is asked to line up before the judges. Some are told to step forward, some are told to step back, and then one of the two lines is sent home. The first group is an exception. All six are sent home. It seems like a warning to the rest of the

contestants. Many of them leave the stage weeping. As a local DJ said, “Please cry directly into the camera.”

This is not going to be easy. Watching the show, I don’t always agree with who the judges send home. I am sure that there are some talented people who don’t make it. It is not entirely fair, and I don’t expect it to be. When you can only have one “winner,” that’s inevitable. But those who do make it through have definitely earned it.

Some of the people we saw in the auditions are among the ones eliminated. Among the women is Rachel Jenkins, the military reservist who looks far more feminine when dressed in something other than military fatigues. We also lose Ashlyn Carr, the girl who auditioned in San Antonio and was given a second chance by the judges.

Day two brings the men to the stage, and here again, we have a kind of mass slaughter. It is a seemingly pitiless process. Rachel Jenkin’s male counterpart, Jarrod Fowler of the U.S. Navy, is also cut. On the other hand, Sean Michelle from Memphis, long beard and all, makes it through, as do the beat boxer Blake Lewis and the likable Chris Sligh.

By the end of day two, the group is down from 172 people to 92, but this is just the beginning.

Next up are the group rounds. Anyone who has ever watched the show knows that the group rounds are where things get ugly. Tempers flare, personalities clash, and drama always ensues. In this trial by fire, the ability of people to get along with others can have a tremendous impact on whether they succeed, as it does in everyday life. It is made all the more difficult by the fact that the groups are not assigned. Contestants must hook up with other people and form groups on their own. We see some contestants in the difficult position of not being able to find a group to join. It brings back ugly flashbacks of snobbish high school cliques, and I feel the

contestants' pain. Everyone eventually joins a group, but the chemistry in the groups varies greatly, and some individuals in the groups do not "play well with others." Gina Glocksen, who is back on *American Idol* after being cut at the end of Hollywood Week in season four says, "I don't care about anyone else in this competition but myself."

Baylie Brown, whom Simon referred to in the auditions as "born to be a popstar," gets stuck in a group with two friends, Amanda Coluccio and Antonella Barba. Amanda and Antonella bicker about which song to sing. This delays their practicing, and when it gets late into the night, Sandra decides to take a break. She wanders around the hotel flirting with boys.

Chris Sligh, a contestant who does not look like a popstar, but who proved to have a great sense of humor during the auditions and who also has a great voice, is part of a group that gets along much better than the one Baylie Brown is stuck in. The contrast is striking.

The next morning comes. Many of the contestants haven't slept, but it's time to sing for the judges. Before they begin, Simon drives home the point that the contestants should not forget the words. We quickly see that the judges mean business. With only two exceptions that we see on screen, everyone who forgets their words is sent home.

The group performances are a unique part of the *American Idol* process. This is the only part of the competition where a judged performance is not a solo one. It would be completely unfair if the groups were eliminated as a whole, but the judges pick and choose which members of the groups stay and which leave.

Sundance Head squeaks by on a couple of performances that even he describes as not being very good. Randy and Simon tell Paula that she was generous for letting him through.

Baylie Brown forgets her words. I wonder if this is due, in part, to how the rest of her group acted and how they treated her. She gets cut, although, Sandra, the other girl in her group

who also forgets her words does not. After Baylie is cut, Sandra says it is because “God likes good people. That’s why.” I only hope that Baylie tries again next year. As she says, she did work harder than the other two girls in her group.

Young Matt Sato, whose progress has been followed since the auditions, is also sent home for forgetting his words. The *American Idol* process has been a painful one for him. His calls home and his mother’s reactions to those calls seem to indicate that he is loved not for who he is as a person, but for how successful he is. There is a much sadder story here than the loss of a singing competition.

We also lose Perla Meneses, whom Ryan Seacrest refers to as “our Columbian Diva.” She is a bit too perky and energetic, and she lacks the talent to make it tolerable.

At the end of day three of Hollywood Week, thirty-six people have been cut. The goal of the judges is to narrow down the group even further. To do this, they review videos of the performances. This seems fair and hopefully compensates for some of the unevenness in the elimination process, but the delivery of the news of who stays and who goes home is, again, full of tension.

The contestants are split up into three groups and moved into three separate rooms. The judges go into the rooms and tell each group whether or not they are staying. The first two groups stay, and the third group, who has already heard the cheers of the first two, is aware of their fate before Simon unceremoniously delivers the news. They are eliminated.

Amanda Collucio, the girl who said earlier that she got through because “God likes good people” is sent home. Apparently, the deities have reassessed their opinion of her.

Also sent home is Shyamali Malakar. She auditioned right before her brother Sanjaya in Seattle, but now the sister is going home and the brother remains.

Those who survived mix together in one of the rooms, while abject ex-contestants with tired faces find their way out of the building. Another round of eliminations is complete. The total number is now forty, but soon it will become twenty-four.

American Idol accurately reflects the music industry in that the competition is brutal in both. The same is true for the movie industry and the writing profession. There are hundreds of thousands of people who want to be writers, musicians, and actors. Out of those, there are at least ten of thousands of truly talented individuals. None of the industries I mention above can handle all the talent. In the writing world, for example, agents are swamped with more manuscripts than they could ever possibly read in a lifetime. As a result they rely on query letters, books proposals, and, more frequently, personal recommendations, to find talent they wish to represent. They have to sort through a massive amount of low quality work to do this. Then the agents have to turn around and represent the few clients they can handle to an even smaller group of publishing houses. The business cannot handle all of the legitimate talent there is out there.

Competition occurs naturally when the supply is low and the demand is high. Animals fight over food when it is not plentiful and they are afraid of going hungry. People fight over jobs, money, position, and the attention of others when these things are limited.

But there are many situations in life when this is not the case, and there is enough to go around for everyone. In these instances, competition is silly. In a competitive environment like America, and even more so in certain families and social groups, it is easy for competitive behavior to become a habit, and even easier for us to forget that competition is not always necessary.

You may know one or two individuals (you may even be one of these people) who turn everything into a contest. In addition to being irritating, it's not healthy. It adds far too much

stress to an already stressful life. The next time you find yourself on edge because someone else is doing better than you, the question, “Is this a contest?” can put it in perspective.

Psychologists have found that those who constantly compare themselves to others and who measure their success against the success of others are highly susceptible to depression and unhappiness. Striving to do better and improve yourself are excellent goals, but when someone else is wealthier than you or gets more recognition than you, it has little to do with your own success. When speaking about life in the broadest terms, nobody is playing the same game. For a moment, we may be on the same racetrack, but we all have different destinations. We all have different goals and different desires. If you were to win a million dollars, there is a good chance that you would use that money in ways that are different from anyone else on the planet. It would go towards things that you think are important and that you value. If other people’s standards don’t apply to you, then it doesn’t make any sense to judge yourself by them.

Meanwhile, contestants on *American Idol* have a short-term goal that is exactly the same as the other contestants — survive and go on to be in the Top Twenty-four. As this next round of eliminations occur, we’ll see plenty examples of how competition creates drama. We’ll also see that, just as competition can be artificial and unnecessary, so is the drama we sometimes choose to inflict upon ourselves.

## Chapter 15 – Unnecessary Drama

Sitting in chairs in the Pasadena Civic Auditorium are forty contestants. After the group auditions were done, these contestants performed one more time in front of the judges, this time with a piano and three backup singers. Randy, Paula, and Simon then sat down and reviewed the tapes of the contestants and made their final decisions about who would be in the *American Idol* Top Twenty-four. On TV, we see only the last part of this selection process, where the judges flip through Polaroids of the contestants, sorting them into piles and declaring the process finished. Their decisions, which seem casual on camera, will have a great effect upon the lives of the remaining forty. No one who has made it this far can ever try out for *American Idol* again.<sup>6</sup>

In what is usually the longest and most drawn out episode of the season, the contestants are called, one by one, to meet with the judges. They enter an elevator and go up one story, the camera on them the whole time. The elevator doors open, and each contestant walks across a wood floor to a single chair placed directly in front of the judges' table, where he or she is given the verdict.

It is not the best format for maintaining the viewer's interest, but the show this year doesn't seem to drag quite as much as the same show in season five. I believe this is because

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<sup>6</sup> The *American Idol* audition rules for season seven state that you are ineligible to participate if you progressed to any of the following levels:

- Season 1 – top 30 contestants
- Season 2 – top 32 contestants
- Season 3 – top 36 contestants
- Season 4 – top 44 contestants
- Season 5 – top 44 contestants

more emphasis is put on who won than on who lost. Plus, more time is spent showing the decisions rather than the drama leading up to them.

The clips shown before the results are misleading. A clip of a contestant singing may not be very good, but the contestant is sent on to the Top Twenty-four. The producers of the show have done this to keep the viewer at home guessing up until the last minute, but in a way, it backfires, because it makes it look like the judges' decisions are not very good. I can only assume that the judges have seen a lot more of what each performer can do than what we have seen on TV.

We lose tall girl Anna Kearns, who admits that she doesn't sing "the best," and cowboy Matthew Buckstein who also failed to survive Hollywood Week in the previous season.

Eventually twenty-two of the Top Twenty-four have been selected. For the final two slots, it is down to two girls and two guys — Antonella Barba versus Marissa Rhodes and Sundance Head versus Tommy Daniels. Cruelly, the contestants are made to sit beside each other in front of the judges for this last decision. Antonella is chosen as the final female contestant. Marissa is bewildered by the judges' decision. She really expected to make it through. For the men, Sundance is chosen. On the ride down in the elevator, Tommy Daniels says, "This is f..." His final word is bleeped out.

The Top Twenty-four has been chosen. Their names will be recorded in innumerable places, and immediately that night they will be interviewed on Fox News. For the record, the Top Twenty-four are:

- 
- Season 6 – top 40 contestants

**Men**

Sanjaya Malakar  
Brandon Rogers  
Philip Stacy  
Chris Sligh  
Blake Lewis  
Rudy Cardenas  
Paul Kim  
A. J. Talbado  
Nicholaus Pedro  
Chris Richardson  
Jared Cotter  
Sundance Head

**Women**

Melinda Doolittle  
Gina Glocksen  
Haley Scarnato  
Jordin Sparks  
Stephanie Edwards  
Leslie Hunt  
Alaina Alexander  
Sabrina Sloan  
LaKisha Jones  
Nicole Tranquillio  
Amy Krebs  
Antonella Barba

I'm sure that many of the contestants would have preferred it if the judges had simply posted a list on the wall like the one above and let the contestants run up and see who got through. It would have been a lot easier than all they have had to endure for the camera's sake. Of all the shows during the *American Idol* season, this elimination round seems the most contrived. We know the news can be delivered faster, we just saw ninety people get wiped out in a single day, and we saw tens of thousands of people get whittled down to 172 during the auditions. At the same time, we know why *American Idol* does it this way — for the build up and for the drama.

People like drama. Sometimes it's fun, and sometimes it isn't, but drama (at least good drama) is always interesting.

And that is why, ladies and gentlemen, we often create it in our own lives, even when it is as unnecessary as the long drawn out selection of the Top Twenty-four on *American Idol*. Am I

saying that we create our own problems? Well, certainly not always, but there are many times when, yes, we do.

The drama queen, a personality type you may be familiar with, exemplifies this sort of behavior. And, in order to avoid being sexist, I must hasten to point out that there are quite a few drama “kings” out there as well. (Many times men create drama in their lives via anger and the resulting temper tantrums.)

Human beings have a tendency to exaggerate their problems, dwell on them, obsess over them, and even cling to them. People also create problems where none would exist if they hadn't started creating a fuss. An example of this comes from two gentlemen I know who have recounted stories of interactions with their girlfriends. They both had the same story. When the guys found themselves in arguments with their girlfriends, they would try to calmly dissect whatever the problem was and resolve it. That makes sense to me, but it did not make sense to their girlfriends. One of the girls broke up with her boyfriend because he would not fight with her. She told him that she hated it when he peaceably resolved their differences. She wanted to fight with him. She enjoyed the excitement, the emotional interaction, and the making up afterwards. The whole process of arguing was something she wanted to do. She would even fight about not fighting. My friend did not feel the same way.

Have you ever seen someone turn a transaction at a fast food restaurant into a confrontation, so that the incident and its repercussions filled up half a day? Have you ever known any guys that went around looking for a fight, but not because they had anything personal against the people they got in fights with? It becomes a valid question to ask one's self. Am I really interested in the issues involved, or am I acting upset and angry because I like the

tension and how important it makes me feel when I turn everything into a big deal? Would this problem disappear if I simply forgot about it?

Sometimes drama is forced upon us, like when an unexpected tragedy hits or (not quite as dramatically) when you're an *American Idol* contestant in the final rounds, but there are times when all it takes to get rid of problems in our lives is to let them go.

## Chapter 16 – Chris is Sly

On the weekends, they've been running a show called *American Idol Rewind*, which is basically an edited version of the first season of *American Idol*. They've combined the performances and the "results" shows into a single hour, so that you see all of the contestant's performances, but you don't have to sit through all the falderal that they use to create suspense in the results shows.

It's interesting to watch Kelly Clarkson perform during the first season and to realize that she has no idea of the extent of the fame that *American Idol* will propel her to. When she sings before the judges, Simon Cowell says, "I don't remember you," implying that she is forgettable.

There is an innocence to the first season because nobody knows how big it will become. People are surprised and shocked at Simon's comments. Their mouths drop open, and they hold their hands up to their faces. They can't believe how blunt he is.

In the first season, there are two hosts: Ryan Seacrest and Brian Dunkleman. *American Idol* began with two hosts because it derived its format directly from the British show *Pop Idol*, which had two hosts. Originally, *American Idol* was also supposed to have four judges because the British version of the show had four.

In *American Idol*'s first season, the contestants are whittled down to a group of thirty before they became a final group of ten. The eliminations that chop the group down to ten cover a four-week period. Ten contestants sing each week. America votes and three contestants are chosen out of each group of ten to form a group of nine finalists. The last person in the Top Ten is chosen by the judges in a "wild card" episode.

In these shows, the hosts simply announce the winners, and the contestants walk across the stage to chairs that are waiting for them. It is far kinder than lining the contestants up in groups and eliminating them one by one, which has to feel terrible if you aren't one of the winners. I far prefer it to the way the contestants are usually told the results.

Another thing that is significantly different about the first season eliminations is that the contestants are accompanied by a single pianist and they stand, alone, in front of the judges, rather than singing with a full band before a live audience. It seems subdued in contrast to the shows of today.

Watching them interact, it is obvious that the first season contestants had formed bonds and friendships. *American Idol Rewind* includes interviews (filmed in 2006) with some of them. They reminisce about how exciting, suspenseful, and difficult it was. One of first season contestants recounts how being chosen as part of the Top Ten was a pivotal moment in her life, while one of the guys describes it as the happiest moment of his.

It is five years later. The audience has grown by tens of millions of viewers, and, for the contestants, the pressure has become that much more intense. The group is already down to twenty-four instead of thirty, and over the next three weeks it will be pruned down to twelve at the rate of four contestants per week – two guys and two girls. The guys perform on one night, the girls perform on another, and on the Thursday night results show, America's votes will determine who stays and who goes home.

Again, the process is not always fair. After watching the Tuesday night show, I was ready to send about eight of the guys home right away. If the girl's performances are all good, then it might be fairer to eliminate four guys and keep all the girls.

The guy's performances were bland, and the songs were slow, although there were some performances that were worse than others. At this point I would eliminate Sundance Head, who hasn't put on a good performance since his initial audition, and Paul Kim, who insists on going without shoes whenever he's on stage.

After Nick Pedro sang "Now and Forever," Randy said to him, "You want me to keep it real, right?"

"Absolutely," Nick answered.

"Always?"

"All the time."

"The truth never hurts. It's just good right?" Randy asked, falling back on the honesty versus rudeness myth that Simon has championed over the years.

"Hopefully," Nick answered, knowing that something bad was on the way. Randy went on to rip him apart.

If I were Nick, I would have been tempted to say, "No, I don't want you to be honest. I want you to praise my performance because it might have an influence on the American public and then they will vote for me. If you have any serious critiques, get back to me after the show."

In the video segment introducing Chris Sligh, he talked about how humor has helped him to get as far as he has in the competition. In an interview about the audition process and waiting outside in a stadium, he says, "We had to sing 'Sweet Home Alabama' about thirty-seven times. I didn't like the song to begin with, but, now, if I ever hear it again, I'll probably go postal." His delivery is dry.

I have loved Chris's sense of humor since his audition, but it isn't only his humor that has gotten him so far. He sings well too. The song he picked to sing started off slow, but quickly

jumped into an up-tempo pace, simultaneously showing off his smooth tones while demonstrating his versatility. Paula and Randy loved him, but Simon Cowell was, not surprisingly, a different story.

Simon began with two digs at Chris. He said that it was definitely Chris's humor that had gotten him so far, which was a pot shot at Chris's voice, and then he said that it was as if Chris was performing at "some weird student gig."

But Chris was ready for him and replied, "Just because I don't sing Il Divo or Teletubbies, doesn't mean that I'm not a good singer."

One needs to know a little about Simon's background to understand what a brilliantly researched putdown this is. Il Divo is a group that Simon currently manages. They're doing well, but they're not exactly "hip." Back when Simon began working for BMG records as an A&R consultant, he made a lot of money by signing clients such as WWF wrestlers, The Undertaker and Randy Savage, as well as the Teletubbies. As a result he took a lot of abuse from record company executives and other A&R men. Apparently, he's still sensitive about it today, because Chris's retort hit home.

When Chris said, "I don't sing Il Divo or the Teletubbies," all Simon could come up with was a fat joke, telling Chris that he could always "do the latter." Simon's entire demeanor had changed. He was pissed, and you could tell. His throat got tighter and his smile became a little more forced.

Chris saw that his joke had more impact than he had thought it would and quickly apologized, but Ryan wasn't quite so willing to let it go. "For once," he said to Simon, "instead of insulting someone else, you've been insulted." Then he turned to Chris, remarking, "Boy, that Teletubbies thing... that's a long story, isn't it?"

Chris had scored big time, and he'll be remembered because of it, but will it backfire on him? Will Simon be so mad that he will judge Chris harshly in the future? Has Chris outsmarted himself? It will be interesting to see how it plays out.

The whole incident reminded me of something that mothers across America are known for saying, "It's great fun until somebody pokes their eye out." It serves as a warning to those who are roughhousing, but also as a warning to those who use humor with abandon. Humor can win you friends. It can help you succeed, and it is a great coping mechanism, but if you aren't careful, one flippant remark can cost you dearly, overshadowing all the benefits that humor brought you in the past. A little bit of glibness can alienate a person for life. It's a shame that jokes don't come in boxes, because then they could be accompanied with the appropriate warning labels.

## Chapter 17 – Below the Surface

On Wednesday night, the female half of the *American Idol* Top Twenty-four puts their male counterparts to shame. The first contestant on stage is Stephanie Edwards. Simon responds to her powerful minute and a half on stage by saying that it is, “a million times better than any performance we saw last night.”

Even though they aren't on stage, the guys take a beating via comments like this. But not all of the girls are perfect. Of Amy Krebs, Simon says, “When you sing, you have the personality of a candle.” Leslie Hunt follows Amy, and her stage presence is described as “ungainly.”

But then Sabrina Sloan takes the stage and the dominance of the women is re-established. Sabrina's performance precedes what is probably the poorest song of the night, Antonella Barba's take on an Aerosmith tune. My opinion of her is already tainted by her association with her self-righteous friend, Amanda, during Hollywood Week, but this opening performance during the Top Twenty-four may have done her in.

After her, Jordan Sparks performs a Tracy Chapman song and does amazingly well for the youngest and least experienced of the contestants.

Next up is Nicole Tranquillo. I simply do not get her performance, and I start jotting down my own list of adjectives, which includes nasally, scrunchy-faced, squeaky, spastic, jerky, and irritating. Simon added his own set of words: indulgent, aggressive, and fake. We can thank Paula for seeing the good side. She pointed out that Nicole has a good voice, which is true. Nicole is a voice major in college.

Haley Scarnato performs the Jim Steinman composition, "It's All Coming Back to Me Now." The judges seem to think that this is a poor song choice and that it makes her seem old fashioned, but I like the song. Haley defends herself, saying the song is a favorite and that it accurately represents who she is. I'm on her side on that one. Sometimes you have to be true to yourself no matter what everyone else says. Hopefully, by doing this song, Haley got it out of the way so she can move on to other things and be more experimental.

Melinda Doolittle, who performed with Nicole Tranquillo on group day of Hollywood Week, brings her "A" game, belting out Aretha Franklin's "Since You Been Gone." Paula accurately describes Melinda as "a firecracker."

The next performer is Alaina Alexander, who sings the Pretender's *Brass in Pocket*. It's a hard song to do well, and Alaina doesn't succeed. There are some people who are a joy to watch perform, but when they are interviewed one-on-one, their personal quirks or personality make them less likable. I experience the opposite effect with Alaina Alexander. I don't like her performance, but when she talks with Ryan Seacrest, her personality shines. I don't want to see her get cut, but the song she chose and the way she sang it may mean that her one time on stage as part of the Top Twenty-four will turn out to be her only time.

Gina Glocksen brings things back up a level with her rendition of "All By Myself," but the last performer knocks the ball out of the park and blows everyone else away. The judges rave about it and rightly so. LaKisha Jones sings, "I Am Telling You," Jennifer Hudson's showstopper from *Dreamgirls*. In the time that LaKisha has on stage, she packs as much emotion and power into the song as humanly possible. The crowd goes crazy, and the competition has truly begun.

Standing beside Ryan Seacrest afterwards, LaKisha seems surprisingly humble. She talks about the birthday of her four-year-old daughter, and she thanks everyone politely. I remember the scene in which LaKisha was told she was going to be on the Top Twenty-four. Simon asked her what she was going to do if she did not go any further in the competition and she said she'd go back to her daughter and her job at the bank.

“So, no regrets?” Simon asked.

“No regrets.”

“LaKisha... I am sorry to tell you sweetheart, you're going to be seeing a lot of us.”

I can imagine LaKisha working at the bank and the people there ignoring her, shouting at her, or treating her as if she was nothing. But if she goes far in the *American Idol* competition, and I imagine she will, this will no longer be true. Yet, LaKisha will basically be the same person she was before. She will probably have the same values and still love her daughter. There is much more about her that will not change despite the recognition she receives. One of the things that I like about *American Idol* is that a lot of people who make it through to the final rounds, and even who win, like Ruben Studdard, are not people who are just pretty faces with Hollywood bodies. Some are heavy. Some are geeky. Talent and personality will sometimes overcome personal appearance.

One of my goals in life recently has been to try and see the people around me in a more positive light. Looking beyond the surface is one way to do this. Appreciating people has a number of benefits, not just for me, but for anyone. It can help us to feel less alone and isolated. Many of us are surrounded by people as we go through our days. Feeling better about those people cannot help but make our experience of the world a better one. Sometimes the difference between a good trip to WalMart and a bad trip to WalMart depends entirely upon how I view the

people around me. If I look at them as trash with bratty kids who are getting in my way, it's not going to be a good trip. If I take a moment to be a little sympathetic and realize that many of the people around me want the things out of life that I do and that the child who is crying in the shopping cart is a normal and beautiful part of the cycle of life, then I have a much better chance of getting out of WalMart with my sanity intact.

Being "a people person" seems to come a lot more easily to some of us than others, but such individuals seem, at least from what I have seen, to be happier in general. It occurred to me that maybe they were on to something. If the ability to appreciate my fellow human beings didn't come naturally, maybe it would be to my advantage to work at it.

Reminding myself to look beyond the surface helps with this. The beautiful people around us are so distracting that it is easy to forget that there is a much wider range of truly interesting people, who are everywhere.

I used to think very little of one of my coworkers who walked slowly through the halls with a dour expression on his face until I learned of all the back surgeries he had undergone and the constant pain he was in. He suddenly went from being an old grump to being someone who was facing tremendous obstacles with great courage.

I have had friends who have a knack for talking to people, and who, in the course of a single conversation, could extract all kinds of interesting information from the people they were talking to. Almost everyone has an interesting story to tell, an insight to offer, or a trait that we can learn from or appreciate. Elderly people, who are often ignored or denigrated in our society, often have whole entire lives of fascinating experiences to relate. If only we bothered to talk to them and ask the right questions.

I won't be unrealistic, though. There are many people you probably don't want to get to know, and quite a few who are filled with such negativity and so many neuroses that I wouldn't even recommend getting to know them. I can easily imagine someone reading the above paragraphs and saying, "Hey! I went and tried to get to know people better so I could appreciate them, and when I did, I was really disappointed."

That is why I must caution against a false sense of altruism. In the book *Dream Catcher*, Margaret Salinger, daughter of the famous writer J.D. Salinger, relates a conversation between her father and another author, Joyce Maynard. Maynard tells J.D. of a situation that may be similar to something you have experienced. She was at a folk concert and, "For a few minutes it felt as though everybody in the room was *good*. We were all friends. I just looked around and loved everyone. It was such a relief, feeling that way."<sup>7</sup> I have felt this way in church and in other public places when I was able to look at people from either a highly idealistic standpoint or from an emotional one brought on by music.

It's a wonderful feeling, but it ends. This is exactly the point that J.D. Salinger makes in response. "There's the catch," he says, "You can only go on for so many verses before people start remembering how much everyone else actually irritates the hell out of them."<sup>8</sup>

That's the problem with false idealism, it can all too easily lead to disillusionment.

In order to appreciate people, we need to do so realistically. That cannot be accomplished via a flash of high emotion. If you, like me, are not one of those rare individuals who naturally sees the best in others, then it's going to take some work. So let's take it to that level. One of the tricks to enjoying life is to find the good things in it and focus on those. It doesn't mean that you

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<sup>7</sup> This quote within a quote within a quote comes from Joyce Maynard, *At Home in the World: A Memoir* (New York: Picador, 1998), p. 158, which is quoted in: Margaret A. Salinger, *Dream Catcher* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), p. 103.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

are unaware of the bad things, or that you are in denial about them. It only means that you don't dwell on them. Making a shift in what you emphasize in your thoughts, words, and behaviors can change your feeling towards life in general. This trick, or technique, if you will, applies to how you deal with people as well.

If we avoid using looks as criteria, if we don't make hasty assumptions, and if we dig a little deeper, we may discover that an appreciation of the people around us can enrich our lives. Dealing with people may very well be one of the most difficult things in the world to do, but it can also be the most rewarding.

## Chapter 18 – Rushing the Results

On the front of the “Your Life” section, in the local newspaper Wednesday, there was a gigantic picture of Alaina Alexander. Alaina hails from Redlands, California, which is where I work. The story about Alaina was accompanied by snippets of information about other “Inland Empire” residents who made it far on *American Idol*.

The first of these was Corey Clark, who was disqualified during the second season when it was found that he had a criminal record. The initial charge was a domestic dispute involving an altercation with his sister, and added onto this was the charge of resisting arrest. Corey is also infamous for claiming that Paula Abdul had a relationship with him during season two while he was a contestant. The claim never stuck.

The second area resident to make it to the Top Twelve was Cucamonga’s Matt Rogers of season three who you can now see as a host on various TV shows.

Alaina, meanwhile, has a long way to go in order to reach the Top Twelve. As I went through my day on Wednesday, I kept thinking about the *American Idol* contestants and the results show that was coming that night. I’m sure that it must have been nerve-racking for the contestants to go through the day with the uncertainty of not knowing whether they would have to go home or if they would continue on in the competition. The guys have an extra twenty-four hours of this than the women, and all those who survive may experience it time and time again.

I can easily imagine many of them wanting the results show to be over and done with so that the suspense would end. It’s understandable. As humans, we sometimes get overly eager for

the things in our life to speed up. During the workday, we want five o'clock to be here right now, or we ache for Friday to just hurry up and get here! But I'm not sure that this is always wise. I say this because, by trying to rush everything along to the more pleasant times (or the less unpleasant times), one can easily wish their life away. There is some value in appreciating the moment you are in regardless of whether it is the ideal moment.

When looking up *American Idol* information before the results show, I accidentally discovered who had been kicked off an hour before the show came on the air. The broadcast is delayed on the West Coast and the results had been displayed from an East Coast show. The suspense was ruined, and as a result the show was less interesting. I asked my wife if she wanted to know who got cut and she declined. That's the smart way to go. I know that sometimes on Christmas, when I could rip into the presents at any time, I will eat a leisurely breakfast beforehand and relish the anticipation, because I know when it's over, it's over.

Some of the *American Idol* contestants who were cut probably wished they could go back to a time before they knew the voting results, and just stay there for a while. It's possible that many of the contestants will, someday in the future, wish that they could go back to all the excitement and adventure of the competition and feel the way they did during it. Many of us look back upon our earlier days, wishing it were possible to move back in time. Time goes so fast, and our lives are so short that rushing the results is not always the best course. Perhaps we should savor the anticipation a little bit more.

At the end of the day, Amy Krebs, Rudy Cardenas, Nicole Trujillo, and Paul Kim were out of the competition. It is safe to bet that when Alaina was told she was not going to be eliminated, there were cheers throughout the same Redlands pizza parlor that erupted in applause when she made it into the Top Twenty-four. By now, the remaining contestants are enmeshed in

the endless interviews, photo shoots, and preparations for next week's show. The contestants who were cut probably feel as if they have been left spinning in the wake of a whirlwind. Their minds are busy trying to sort things out as they decide what to do next. Time rushes on and we are all caught in its flow.

## Chapter 19 – Opinions

This weekend, on the stage of the Kodak Theater — the same stage where the winner of the *American Idol* will be announced on May 23<sup>rd</sup> — Jennifer Hudson was awarded the Academy Award for best supporting actress for her role in *Dreamgirls*. She was also interviewed on the Barbara Walters special that followed.

It was definitely a triumphant moment for her, but it was not the most interesting *American Idol* event of the weekend. It was overshadowed by the latest *American Idol* scandal — racy photos of Antonella Barba that were posted on the Internet. There are several sets of photos. The last set of these, which contain graphic sexual content, doesn't even look (from what you can see) like Antonella at all. If we discard those pictures, which we should, then the rest are pretty tame. A prankster friend snapped a picture of Antonella sitting on a toilet. Someone caught her and her friends sunbathing topless. Antonella is a party girl, but so what? As far as I'm concerned, that's in her favor. Now she can hang out with Britney, Lindsay, and Paris.

There is also another, far more deliberately posed, photograph of Antonella lying naked on a bed with rose petals strategically scattered over her body, a la *American Beauty*. A second set of pictures involves her posing in a fountain in a wet T-shirt. What has made this group of pictures controversial is that the fountain is a World War II Veterans Memorial, causing people to use words like “disrespectful.” That's pushing it, I think, because I doubt that her and the photographer said, “Hey, Let's go disrespect some war veterans!” More likely, they were out having fun and decided to take advantage of a convenient fountain.

During season two of *American Idol*, a similar controversy happened with Frenchie Davis, causing her to be taken off the show. There are a couple of differences between her pictures and the pictures of Antonella. The pictures of Antonella are less revealing and the pictures of Antonella were taken privately. Antonella never intended for the public to see the pictures of her, whereas Frenchie sold her pictures to an Internet site. Frenchie says she did the pictures in order raise money to get through college. The fuss about it seems rather silly to me. I don't care if the winner of *American Idol* is a porn star, just as long as they can sing.

Regardless, everyone has an opinion. Some of the silliest opinions are those that are expressed like so: "What was she thinking? What does she expect? Don't people know that if they go on *American Idol*, these kinds of things are going to come out?" These are questions (attacks, really) that haven't been thought through. Because if you think about them, you'll realize that these questions don't take things into account as they happen in real life.

The answer to "What was she thinking?" is probably, "Let's have some fun and take some sexy pictures." There's no reason why it would have occurred to her at the time that she would someday become a celebrity and a vicious ex-boyfriend would post them on the Internet.

The answers to the second two questions are equally obvious. Antonella knew the pictures were out there and probably hoped that whoever took them would be kind enough not to exploit them. But it would have been absurd for her to say, "I'm not going on *American Idol* because there's some risqué photos of me out there, and I don't ever want them to come to light." At either time (when the photos were being taken or she was auditioning for *American Idol*), she didn't have a good reason to do something different. The criticisms stated above are unfair.

But that's the kind of place America is. Criticisms and opinions are plentiful. You can hardly turn on the TV, the radio, or your computer without an opinion crossing your path.

America is a very opinionated place, and, it seems to me that it has become increasingly more so over the past ten to twenty years. Much of this is because of the media and the Internet. Television news shows, which used to focus only on “the facts,” are now sprinkled liberally with what people think. People who have interesting opinions and who can either spout them glibly on a talk show or cleverly state them on a blog have become commodities. Free flowing opinions are the natural result of a society in which freedom of speech is a value. In some ways it is healthy. In other ways it is obnoxious as hell.

I grew up in a household where opinions were repressed. Expressing an opinion was considered bad manners. The unspoken rule of thumb was, “If you can’t say anything good, don’t say anything at all,” which went hand-in-hand with the idea that children should be seen and not heard.

On a Los Angeles radio station recently, one of the DJ’s had her daughter on the show, and the daughter argued with her about who uses the most space on the TIVO. There were listeners, I’m sure, who thought it was funny and cute. To me, when seen in contrast to my own childhood, it was amazing. If I had talked like that to my parents, I would have quickly been put in my place.

Part of the problem in our household seemed to be the thought that opinions bred conflict, and conflict was to be avoided at all costs. Conditioned to think that opinions were a bad thing, I kept my thoughts to myself. At least until my teens, when the father who enforced this idea was no longer around.

Later, when in college, I went to England on an exchange program and I discovered an entire country of people who also thought it was bad manners to go around saying how you felt about everything, especially during that time in the 1980’s. Lo and behold, I had been raised

“British.” I saw repeatedly why Americans, specifically some of my fellow American students, were regarded as rude, loud, and obnoxious by people in other countries. I’m sure that when Simon Cowell began denigrating *Pop Idol* contestants in Britain, the English audiences were even more stunned than we would be.

Although I now willingly contribute to the constant deluge of voices, in this, the land of opinions, I’m still a lot more likely to express myself on paper than in everyday conversation. The two are markedly different. When someone goes out of the way to read your words, they are basically asking for your opinion, and this is usually not the case with speech.

When I talk about *American Idol* with coworkers and friends, and I read about it online, or even when I compare my opinions with those of the judges, I am surprised (although, you’d think I’d have learned better by now) at the variety of opinions there are and how varied they can be. On the Wednesday night show where the top ten guys performed, the judges absolutely loved Chris Richardson’s performance, but it alienated me because his physical gestures were far too urban/ghetto/gangsta for my taste.

A good number of varying opinions about *Idol* contestants are the direct result of gender differences. As I watch some of the guys perform on the show, I know right away that there are sixteen-year-old girls who will absolutely love these guys and who will be dialing their fingers off voting for them as soon as the show ends. I won’t. There are some of the girls on the show that I think are fantastic, but I’m sure the women in my office won’t feel the same way. The reasons for our different opinions are often obvious.

I like Chris Sligh because I empathize with his background and his humor. People who cannot relate probably do not feel the same way, although we can share an appreciation for his voice.

Of the girls, I think Haley Scarnato is great, but when I turn on “Idol Chat” with *Popstars* finalist, Rosanna Tavares, and *American Idol* season two finalist, Kimberly Caldwell, they are both making fun of how “Broadway” Haley’s musical style is.

When all is said and done, there is not one person on this planet who agrees with any other person about every single thing. If you think that’s what a “soulmate” is, you’re never going to find one.

It can also be said that there probably isn’t anything on the planet that at least one person doesn’t dislike. For that matter, there probably isn’t any person on the planet that at least one other person doesn’t like. This is a helpful bit of information for those who want everyone to like them. No matter what you do or who you are, you cannot please everyone. I remember meeting a gentleman once, and I was delighted by how friendly he was. After meeting him, another friend asked me if I had been put off by the gentleman because people often found him to be “too friendly.” Wow. You just can’t win.

There are a couple points, however, that can be made about opinions. One is that there is a happy medium between repressing one’s opinions and expressing them vociferously. A second point is that some statements are opinions and some statements are more than opinion. It’s a difference between a matter of taste and a matter of fact.

In the Seattle auditions, Simon told “The Hotness” that her singing was awful, and she said, “That’s just your matter of opinion.” Not only was her phrasing confused, so was her thinking. You can rightly and factually say that some singing is not good when it is off pitch. You can do this because pitch can be measured objectively. You can usually hear when pitch is off. If that’s not good enough, you can compare the sound with the sound of a pitchfork or a well-tuned piano, or you can run it through a computer as a sound file and compare the notes to

the actual tones a person is trying to sing. Sometimes the statement that someone's singing is bad is more than an opinion.

Regardless, opinions are here to stay. They teach us tolerance. They teach us that we are not alone and, paradoxically, that we are all very different. And there are plenty of them available if we should ever forget.

## Chapter 20 – Dedications and Inspiration

The theme for *American Idol* this week is inspiration, and it looks like the guys have found it. With the exception of Sanjaya Malakar's performance, the songs of the rest of the ten remaining guys far surpass the previous week's. Phil Stacey delivers a surprisingly melodic rendition of "Missing You." Chris Richardson rocks the house with his version of "Geek in the Pink," and Sundance Head manages to make up for several weeks of low-grade performances with a soulful but upbeat, "Ride Sally Ride." The judges proclaim "He's back!" At this point, I am glad that Sundance has been given a second chance. If you take Hollywood Week into consideration, it's probably a third or fourth chance. But it's obvious that he knows he has pushed his luck as far as it can go. He has to do well, or he won't be back.

Although Ryan Seacrest announced at the beginning of the show that it was about inspiration, by the time several people have performed, the theme of the show has become "dedications," which is slightly different.

Brandon Rogers performs the Cyndi Lauper song "Time after Time," and for the first time, I am really impressed by what he has done. I can tell he feels the song, and although I normally wouldn't use this word to describe a song sung done by a male, I would call it "beautiful."

Brandon has dedicated the song to his grandmother. Almost all of the men have dedicated their songs to close family members — their mothers and fathers, their grandparents, and in some cases a wife or girlfriend.

On and off of *American Idol*, when people are asked who inspires them, it is not celebrities, political figures, or historically famous personages that are usually chosen. Rather it is the people like the ones seen in today's dedications — parents, relatives, and teachers.

When the judges comment on Brandon's song, Randy is not impressed, but Brandon defends himself, saying that he was simply trying to "feel the song." Paula agrees with Brandon's sentiment and what he was trying to do. From my living room, I have to agree with Paula as well. It works for me.

Brandon takes a moment to wish his Dad a happy birthday. It's a nice gesture, but combined with all the dedications, it's all too much for Simon. Mockingly, he says, "By the way, it's my mum's birthday in November." He feels that everyone has lost sight of what the competition is all about. All the namby-pamby, touchy-feely stuff is irrelevant to him. "And I like puppies," he adds.

This is one moment where it seems like everyone in the room gets it except Simon. For the few minutes that he banters with Ryan and goes back and forth with the other judges, it becomes evident how impoverished in spirit he is. He is missing a fundamental appreciation of human emotions. Sure, he recognizes them, and he's capable of them, but he doesn't see the extent of their importance and how they carry through in just about everything. In this case, he has also failed to see how they are a crucial part of music. Record producer Clive Davis has often said as much to the contestants on the show, advising them to think about the words of the song as they sing it. A heartfelt performance is often a great performance, and the fact that Simon can miss this is a real deficit. Flashy showmanship isn't all there is.

On Wednesday night, the dedications continue with the girls. Gina Glocksen starts the night with a Heart song that apparently sounds better in the studio than it does at home, because the judges are far kinder than we are.

Alaina Alexander dedicates her performance to her mom, and sings the Dixie Chicks' song, "I'm Not Ready to Make Nice," a song I absolutely love. It's not the best performance, but as with the previous week, I find that I love the way she interacts with the judges.

LaKisha sings next. She is in the position of someone who has done such a great job that she can't possibly top herself. Regardless, her performance is excellent. As she's talking to the judges, I find that I like her so much more than Jennifer Hudson because she doesn't have the conceit.

The same goes for Melinda Doolittle. Melinda dedicates her song to two of her closest friends, one of whom has helped her by giving her a book with descriptions and pictures of outfits she should wear. Melinda refers to her second friend as her "stylist." We could all use friends like these. Tonight, it is Melinda rather than LaKisha who delivers the "knock your socks off" performance. She sings "My Funny Valentine" like a professional. Simon calls it "incredible" and "the best vocal of the competition." He also notes that Melinda is the kind of person who probably wouldn't change — in the way that fame sometimes changes people — if she won. In Simon's words, she is "a breath of fresh air."

Antonella must follow this and doesn't even come close to the level of excellence that preceded her. Paula and Simon disagree on how it stands up to the previous week's performance. Paula says that Antonella has improved "leaps and bounds," while Simon says it is even worse. In response, Antonella says that Simon was wrong about Jennifer Hudson, "so..."

Simon is quick to cut her off and point out that it was America that voted Jennifer Hudson off the show and not him. He says that he, Randy, and Paula, are the ones that got Jennifer on the show. But if you replay a tape of some of the things Simon said to Jennifer later on in season three, you'll see that Antonella is right. Simon did, in fact, say that Jennifer was out of her depth. He also said, "You get one shot...you ain't never gonna be seen again."

However, none of this changes the fact that Antonella's performance really wasn't that good. She should be thankful that the producers of *American Idol* have chosen not to say a single word on air about her photograph scandal, because it is never mentioned.

Jordin Sparks dedicates her song to her younger brother. She seems caught up in the emotion of the dedication and admits so after the song is complete. She tried to cover her ears so that she couldn't hear the dedication, and it wouldn't distract her, but the volume in the studio was far too loud.

She is followed by another powerful singer, Stephanie Edwards, who dedicates her song to her mother and father. Her mom and dad pushed her to audition for *American Idol* and drove her down to the auditions even though she didn't want to go.

Leslie Hunt's subsequent jazz number seems a little odd, especially the scat section in the middle. Haley Scarnato follows with an up-tempo piece, trying to recover from the "older" image she had the previous week, but it doesn't seem natural for her. Simon describes it as "a little bit manic, verging on insane at one point." Haley's eyes begin to cloud as she is told that she is one of two or three girls who are vulnerable tonight.

Sabrina Sloan wraps up the night impressively, demonstrating that she is not among the "vulnerable" group.

In the midst of all the dedications during the show, I found myself wondering who I would dedicate a song to. My mother would be a strong contender. Only one or two people besides her have had such a powerful influence in my life.

Shortly after she passed away, I found a poem my mother had written among her things. The poem is relevant to so many of the themes I have discussed so far, that I have included it here:

In the myriad sounds of the modern age  
there is much I never like.  
But you said, "Listen anyway."  
and like a star  
a few choice diamonds glitter in the night.  
So now when someone asks,  
"Your favorite group...?"  
I shake my head and smile.  
For each has some lovely line,  
or melody, or turn of phrase,  
And I can only hear the smaller parts  
that brighten up a day.  
So it's been in other ages.  
Nothing's really new today.  
People always singing the same things  
but in a different way.  
The old songs. The new songs.  
The classical. The new beat.  
And hidden under all of it,  
human sentiments repeat.

Thanks mom. This one's for you.

## Chapter 21 – From Twenty to Sixteen

The Thursday night results show brings two predictable eliminations and two minor surprises.

The first person to go is Nick Pedro. He opted out of the competition during Hollywood Week the previous year, and in an interview earlier this season, he explained that doing so had haunted him. Even though he's been kicked off the show, he can finally put that behind him. This time he stuck it out, and now he knows that he has played it through and seen how far he can go. The lesson there should be obvious.

Alaina Alexander is the first of the girls to leave the show. One of the cruelties of the *American Idol* results is that the contestants are expected to sing their last song right after they have found out they are no longer going to be on the show. In an interview on TV Guide's *Idol Chat*, Leslie Hunt later describes it as being "genius-slash-demonic." Some people handle the situation well, but Alaina is unable to keep her composure. She ends up spending more time hugging her newfound friends among her fellow contestants than she does singing. One can hardly blame her. She left her home in Redlands, California at the age of eighteen and moved to L.A. to pursue a singing career. After six years of pursuing her dream (she is now twenty-four), she considered *American Idol* her last shot. This may very well be the end of the road for her musical career. There is more at stake than just being an *American Idol*.

For the final elimination of the guys, both Sanjaya Malakar and A.J. Talbado are called up on stage. Sanjaya frowns and pouts like a child. It is clear that he expects to go, but instead it is A.J.

The last two girls, Leslie Hunt and Jordin Sparks are called up in a similar fashion. Leslie is the one to go home.

When asked what they think about the results, the judges say that *American Idol* should be a singing competition, and it looks like people have gotten through for other reasons. They don't say it specifically, but it is clear they are referring to Sanjaya, who got by on his looks and the pre-teen vote, and Antonella, who got by on her looks and on sympathy votes.

Leslie Hunt closes the show with her final song and gets a last word in as the credits roll. Perfectly in synch with the song, she sings, "Why did I decide to scat? America don't care for jazz."

## Chapter 22 – Famous Secrets

The contestants in the Top Sixteen (the final round before the Top Twelve) are asked to reveal something about themselves that people probably do not know. Welcome to fame, folks, because the farther you progress, the less private your lives will be.

One of the problems that the young and famous have is that they have to grow up in the public spotlight. Every little mistake they make has the potential of becoming a tabloid headline or being in the five o'clock news. Can you imagine your childhood mistakes being put out there for everyone to see? Can you imagine what it is like to have the false sense of powerful invulnerability that comes with fame and money, only to find that you are being talked about, judged, and even mocked by the general public? It is for these reasons that fame is not as always desirable as it might seem.

Antonella Barba has learned this the hard way, and Tuesday afternoon, the media is in a full force blitz about the scandal surrounding her and how it relates to season two contestant Frenchie Davis.

With a minimum amount of effort, I found reports on the subject from NBC News, *The View*, *Access Hollywood*, and the front-page welcome screen of America Online. Frenchie Davis was back, and she had something to say. She was thrown off of *American Idol* during season two for her topless photographs, whereas Antonella has not been.

“Do you think its racist?” reporters ask Frenchie. She doesn't say yes, but she doesn't say no. Rosie O'Donnell is a lot less diplomatic on *The View* and states that she does think it is

racist. Another panel member points out that the difference between Frenchie and Antonella is that Antonella is “hot.” Rosie counters that, in that case, it’s both racist and “weightest.”

Personally, I wonder how *American Idol* can ever be considered racist with winners like Fantasia Barrino and Ruben Studdard. Heck, at this stage in the game, it appears that five of the top six females in the contest this year will probably be women of color. Of course, with all of this controversy, the ratings for *American Idol* soar.

On Tuesday night’s show, the boys reveal very little about themselves, as people or as performers. The best vocal is delivered by Chris Sligh, whom Randy awards the “vocal prize of the night.” On the opposite end of the scale is Sanjaya Malakar. The “secret” he reveals about himself is that he knows how to hula dance, which is only a tad less masculine than his breathy delivery of “Waiting on the World to Change.” I find myself waiting for him to get off the stage.

The most interesting personal revelations come from Blake and Brandon. Blake tells the audience that he likes to do improv comedy and character acting. Brandon reveals that he is a classical pianist. Now there’s a relevant talent.

From the rest, we hear that Jared Cotter used to play basketball, that Phil Stacey hasn’t always been bald, and that Chris Sligh used to have short hair. Chris Richardson reveals that he used to be heavy, while Sundance jokingly says that in real life he is skinny, but he wears a fat suit when on *American Idol*.

As it has been throughout the competition so far, the girls greatly outshine the boys when it is their turn to take the stage. Their individual performances are worthy of comment whereas that is not true for the guys. The judges make this known right from the start.

On Wednesday evening, Jordin Sparks begins with a peppy, if rushed, version of Pat Benatar’s “Heartbreaker.” It’s not a song you would necessarily expect from Jordin, but she

makes it her own, and in some sections of the chorus, I find myself liking her version better than the original.

Although a powerful performer, Sabrina Sloan's song to follow is not the best she can deliver. I cannot help but wonder if overconfidence and poor song choice may be her undoing on this most crucial of nights.

Antonella is the first of the girls to reveal something interesting about herself, which, depending on how you look at it, is either surprising or not surprising at all. We learn that she has been playing the violin since age four. When she plays the violin on camera, she instantly goes up a notch on my personal respect scale. Sadly, her singing is not as impressive.

In the video for Haley Scarnato, we learn that she was a gymnast as a child, but injured her shoulders and turned to singing. Tonight she sings Faith Hill's "If My Heart Had Wings." She does a good job with it, but it isn't spectacular. Randy says it lacks "Yo," and soon the judges are talking about the "Yo Factor."

Yet, I like Haley and hope she goes through. She leans towards a musical style that is more formal than pop. She seems a little "Disney Princess" to me. I think she'd do great performing as Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. While the songs she sings aren't always popular with the judges, I do feel that she's being true to herself and knows who she is musically. But whether she will get into the Top Twelve and make it through the rest of the competition is another question.

The judges are much more complementary about Stephanie Edwards, but I am bored by her performance. I feel as if I will quickly forget the song. I don't care if she used to be really shy like she says in her video clip. My wife and I are bothered by her haircut. Yet, there is little doubt that she has talent and will go further in the competition.

LaKisha is the first of all the contestants to reveal something about themselves that might be viewed negatively in some audience member's eyes. She is terrified of animals. They just scare her. I find her honesty refreshing, and I like that she has given us something of substance rather than telling us how her hair used to look. She fearlessly takes on a Whitney song, but unlike some of the other contestants, she can do this without being overshadowed by the original.

Gina Glockson's quirky revelation is that she has good luck charms such as a little troll and "the pickle." She sings the Evanescence song "You Never Call Me When You're Sober," and for the first time in the eliminations, it seems as if she has come into her own.

Melinda Doolittle closes the night. She reveals that she is a little obsessive-compulsive, but does so in a funny way. We are not surprised, though, when she blasts through "I'm a Woman" with the flair and skill of a seasoned professional. She is amazing, and the judges let her know it.

I like that Melinda and LaKisha went for it with their video clips and revealed something about themselves that wasn't necessarily positive. These two women are, at this juncture, already the main contenders for the top two positions in the competition. When you're destined for fame, as it seems they might be at this moment, it is to your advantage to be open about your flaws, because when you're famous, everything about you is potentially open to scrutiny.

This, for some of us, is why fame is something to be shunned rather than gained.

It may seem odd, but when I think about fame and how it can expose you to criticism from everyone and everybody, I am reminded of the concept of "Judgment Day" that I grew up with in the churches I attended. The idea was that that every human being would someday find his or her self standing before God, and at that time, every single thing about them, good and bad, would be revealed for all the universe to see. This, for me, was a far greater threat than the

threat of Hell. What it ultimately inspired in me was a desire to be the kind of person who could stand such intense scrutiny, even if I turned out to be far less than perfect, which, of course is what I turned out to be — an imperfect human being.

At the same time, the idea of revealing our inner selves makes me think of what good writers often do. They bleed on the page, meaning that they put their innermost thoughts, their worst deeds, their insecurities, and their flaws on paper for the entire world to see.

I remember a humor column that I wrote about the process of writing humor itself. A friend criticized it because he felt I had revealed far too much about myself. Exactly! That was the goal, not something to be avoided.

When and if you do reveal who you are as a person, you will find that, yes, some people dislike you for who you are. But there are others who won't. There are others who will appreciate what you've done, who will relate to what you say and who will be glad that you've said it. When we reveal our inner selves, instead of exposing our weaknesses, we may find commonalities with other human beings.

There is something truly freeing about it as well. If you can tell the world the worst possible things there are about you and find that there are still people who love you, appreciate you, or respect you for who you are, flaws included, then you are liberated. The gay person who has "outed" his or her self can describe this feeling as can others of many different persuasions who have opened themselves up.

In the long run, you may discover that the opinions and judgments of others really don't matter that much. They can think what they want to think. Meanwhile, if you have nothing to hide, because everything is known, then you are not vulnerable to exposure.

Look at the celebrities who have done this, or who have been scandalously revealed, and, yet, have survived quite nicely. “This is who I am,” they say, “this is what I’ve done. Deal with it.” It’s not a bad attitude to take. Those who are intentionally placing themselves in the spotlight would do well to consider it, but so would the rest of us, because you never know when secrets will come out. Just ask Antonella Barba or Frenchie Davis.

## Chapter 23 – The Top Twelve and the Big Picture

Other than a remarkably terse statement about how they have to deal with this every year, *American Idol* was silent when the photographs of Antonella came out, but this was not so when the accusations of racism began. *American Idol* producer Nigel Lythgoe responded directly to Rosie O'Donnell, saying the same thing I pointed out earlier, all you have to do is look at the contestants on *American Idol*, both past and present, to see that the show is neither racist nor “weightest.”

Because of Rosie's comments, *The View* was also denied access to video clips from *American Idol*. I guess you can't get away with insulting someone when they're doing you favors.

Thursday night, March 8, is a big night in the *American Idol* scheme of things. America finds out which contestants make it to the Top Twelve. It is a significant accomplishment for those who do, quite probably garnering them a lifetime of notoriety.

The sixteen remaining contestants begin the night on one side of the stage. Four will be eliminated. Across the stage from them are empty seats where the final twelve will sit when the night is through. The stage between the two sets of seats must seem like an expansive gulf. Jared Cotter makes it halfway across the gap, but is sent home before he reaches the other side. Antonella is the second to be eliminated. Given the quality of her performances, this is not surprising, but I cannot help but feel for how much she has had to endure because of the contest. As she performs her exit song, “Put Your Records On,” she makes a mistake in the lyrics and

realizes it as she does. “The more things stay the same,” she sings, “the more things stay the same.” Well, I guess that would be a hard one to argue with.

But this is definitely not a time of stasis. Changes are happening every minute. Sabrina Sloan and Haley Scarnato are called over to stand by Ryan Seacrest. The girls are both emotional. This is amplified by the fact that the two girls are roommates, which is unknown to most of the television audience. Of the two, Sabrina is sent home. She did not deserve to go.

The last person to go is Sundance Head. He has done some remarkable performances, but other songs were so out of tune – flat, actually – that he had used up all his chances.

I would be okay with the results except for the fact that Sanjaya has gotten through to the Top Twelve. He is the one contestant who does not deserve it, and the expression on his face says that he is aware of this.

So now the Top Twelve have been selected. These are the people that we will get to know even better over the next eleven weeks:

- Melinda Doolittle (Auditioned in Memphis) – Short in stature, humble in demeanor, but when she opens her mouth to sing, she’ll knock you off your feet.
- Stephanie Edwards (Auditioned in Memphis) – More elegant than Melinda and LaKisha, this former “Savannah Star” of 2005 must still compete with their powerful vocals.
- Gina Glocksen (Auditioned in Memphis) – The dark-haired dental assistant from Chicago who has taken on the “rocker girl” image that *American Idol* has thrust upon her.
- LaKisha Jones (Auditioned in New York) – A powerhouse singer to rival Jennifer Hudson, but whose thoughts are always on her four-year-old daughter.

- Blake Lewis (Auditioned in Seattle) – The blonde spiky-haired beatboxer from Seattle who has a fondness for “grandpa” pants.
- Sanjaya Malakar (Auditioned in Seattle) – A favorite with the young girl set, Sanjaya Malakar is the bouncy little brother you love to hate.
- Chris Richardson (Auditioned in New York) – At first glance, with his round face, stubbly chin, and close-shaved head, one might think “boy band,” but Chris has higher aspirations.
- Brandon Rogers (Auditioned in Los Angeles) – Like Melinda Doolittle, Brandon is also a former background singer who has sung with major talent. His vocals are rich and in tune, but are they enough to keep America’s attention?
- Haley Scarnato (Auditioned in San Antonio) – The leggy brunette with a perfectly placed freckle and a Broadway voice.
- Chris Sligh (Auditioned in Birmingham) – With a head full of hair as curly as Justin Guarini’s, Chris often jokes about how chubby he is, but his selling point is truly his smooth vocals.
- Jordin Sparks (Auditioned in Seattle) – The seventeen-year-old with the voice of a grown up, but a bubbly personality that belies her age.
- Phil Stacy (Auditioned in Memphis) – The Navy Man who missed his daughter’s birth to make his *American Idol* audition. He was once part of the popular Christian group, the Lee Singers.

This year’s competition seems is hampered by two facts. The women have demonstrated far more talent than the guys, and even among the women, there is a great disparity in the quality

of talent. It would not be an unsafe bet to predict at this point that Melinda Doolittle and LaKisha Jones will be among the top few remaining contestants on the show. In past competitions, especially season five, it was never this clear cut, and, therefore, it was a lot more exciting. Yet, you never know. When America votes, sometimes the best performers don't receive the votes they should. They get thrown off the show, and everything changes. This is *American Idol*, and that means there will be surprises on down the line.

The comment is often made that more people vote during *American Idol* than vote during elections. This comment is often meant as a derogatory statement about the priorities of the American public, although I am not sure that it is either accurate or that it is such a bad thing.

It's not technically a valid comparison because *American Idol* voters can vote as many times as they want, there are no age or other restrictions for them, and they don't have to register or go to a polling place.

For that matter, when it comes to political elections, it's not always a good thing when everyone votes. We might be better off if only the knowledgeable people, who have taken the time to understand the candidates and issues, were the ones casting ballots.

But I also think that *American Idol* is a thousand times more interesting than American politics, and, therefore, it gets more attention. Sometimes, as far as I'm concerned, *American Idol* is more important than American politics, because we're talking about music and art, which, to me, give meaning and joy to life, unlike the choice of which congressman takes an office. Are these misplaced priorities? I'm not sure. Fortunately, neither type of voting precludes each other and, if we want, we can vote for both the next *American Idol* and for the next president.

In today's results show, which happens to be the 200<sup>th</sup> episode of *American Idol*, the political and musical worlds meet. Ryan announces the "Idol Gives Back" program, which

centers on helping the poor and needy children in our country and in Africa. Footage is shown of Ryan and Simon in Africa as they meet poor children from impoverished villages. Randy and Paula are scheduled to go to Louisiana and the Mississippi Basin. A charity drive will be held to bring money to these areas. Most of the money will be brought in during the *American Idol* show in which the top six contestants perform. For every vote cast after the show, money will be donated to the charity. Ford, a big sponsor of *American Idol*, will also be making a significant donation. The theme that night will be inspirational songs. No political/charity event would be complete without him, so Bono from U2 will be there. Quincy Jones will write a new song for the show. Gwen Stefani, Annie Lennox, and many others will also be participating.

I am glad to see that Africa has been receiving a lot of attention recently. For the longest time, its many problems have been ignored or overlooked by our government. I find it ironic that our species originated in Africa, and yet it is there that humans suffer from terrible poverty, genocide, malaria, and an ongoing AIDS epidemic. Recently, the powerful movie, *Blood Diamond*, provided the American public with some insight into the conditions there and awareness has grown.

Angelina Jolie has taken a lot of flak from the media in the past about her relationships, but if you pick up a copy of her book, *Notes from My Travels: Visits with Refugees in Africa, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Ecuador* about what she has done with the World Health Organization, you cannot help but respect her efforts. You learn about the plight of people in Africa and in other countries as well. You also begin to understand why she and Brad have adopted all those children.

An interesting tie-in between the music world and Africa can be found in *The Masked Rider*, a book by Rush drummer, Neil Peart, who took a bicycle tour through Africa and wrote

about it. Neil gives some insight into what it is like there. My brother, Phil, who went to Africa to do some work that was designed to help the economy and build infrastructure, found Neil's description of Africa as a "double-sided mask," to be especially appropriate. What you find inside of the country is different from what you see on the outside. Anyone who tries to implement changes there will find that they are met with unforeseen obstacles.

The kinds of problems that are faced in helping a country such as Africa (or Iraq) are extremely complicated. They are not the kinds of problems you can throw money at and be done. If people are starving, you can't just send in food, because that food will immediately be confiscated by tribal warlords or people will kill each other over it. If you fix the problems of lack of food and contaminated drinking water, then the population increases and a dozen other societal problems are generated. You have to provide education, health care, and even more food for all these people. You suddenly need to build an infrastructure. If you don't, then the problems you began with (like AIDS and civil unrest) just grown larger.

Social, economic, and environmental problems are inherently complex and messy. Those who propose easy "barbershop" solutions usually have not dealt with the reality of the situation at hand. I often think of the classic situation in which an island is overpopulated with rats. When environmentalists send in snakes to take care of the rats, the rat problem is replaced with a snake problem and so on. Solutions are hard to come by.

Regardless, two positive things are happening with the "Idol Gives Back" program. Awareness is growing. Something is being done. Americans are contributing to the good of the world around them while voting for their favorite contestants. It's the best of both worlds. It means that we haven't lost sight of the big picture in which there is much to be done.

Having been placed in its proper perspective, the *American Idol* contest continues. At CBS Television City where *American Idol* is filmed, the set on which the contestants have just performed is being torn down and replaced with a larger and grander stage, all in preparation for the Top Twelve.

## **Part III: The Top Twelve**

## Chapter 24 – The Red Carpet

On the night of the results show for the Top Twelve, the Fox network held a massive party for the contestants. It was a red carpet event, and as the Top Twelve made their way into the party, they were interviewed by, among other people, the cast of TV Guide's *Idol Chat*: Rosanna Tavarez, Kimberly Caldwell, and Justin Guarini. These three know what the Top Twelve will eventually learn — what life is like after *American Idol* (or in Rosanna's case, a similar show).

I sometimes worry for those contestants who are thrown into the limelight at a young age. Without the maturity and experience to deal with such a situation, it would be easy to lose one's sense of perspective. It must be an extreme head trip to go from being unknown to being in an auditorium full of people screaming your name and having a nation of fans. In the midst of it all, one would probably not realize that in months, even weeks, it might all fade away.

Fame is an incredibly fickle and deceiving thing. It is perfectly natural to be envious of the famous and to experience twinges of jealousy when people around us receive praise and acknowledgment. It is one of the quirks of human nature that we can simultaneously begrudge the recognition that someone receives while respecting that person at the same time. How we react to someone else's success may have more to do with how those around us react to their success than how we truly perceive the person who is in the spotlight.

The famous can tell you that being famous is not as satisfying as you might think. In some cases, it merely leaves you craving more. I am not famous by any means, but when my first book was published, and I got to speak at various meetings and sign books for people, I

momentarily felt like a star. It was very addicting and made me want to go around fishing for compliments and looking for ways to inflate my own ego. But it was also quite humorous, because one second people would be clamoring to have me sign a copy of my book and within minutes they might ignore me, or in some cases, criticize me. One day I would receive e-mails that made me feel good about my work. The next day I would get rejection letters from agents and snide comments from people who didn't like my work.

My wife and I developed a running joke. "Are you famous today?" she would ask. Sometimes the answer was yes. More often it was no.

While being famous means that you get more compliments and recognition, it also means that you are judged by people more often and you receive more criticism. Once you've felt what it is like to have praise poured on you from more than just one or two people, you get a new, gut level understanding of just how unimportant and transitory fame and recognition are. That may not stop you from wanting them, but it can help you to deal with them more maturely.

I feel as if I have developed a kind of immunity to compliments regarding my writing. Like a drug that one has gotten used to, compliments no longer make me feel as great as they once did. After all, there's not much you can do with a compliment except say, "Thank you" and move on. I feel a lot more satisfaction doing the work than I do getting the recognition for the work, which, when all is said and done, is probably how it should be. Recognition comes and goes. The work is always there. This is why I think the most successful artists are those who are in love with the art itself — those who have not lost sight of it and fallen in love with fame and "success" instead. Fame cannot provide the same level of gratification.

That's one of the things I like about Taylor Hicks. It rarely seems to be about him. He's always talking about the music. I do not get the same feeling from Jennifer Hudson. She was

recently scheduled to appear on *Soul Train* and called up the show to say she couldn't make it. The producer called Clive Davis (who is producing her record album), who turned around and called Jennifer, and she was suddenly able to make it to the show. I have no doubt that she's busy. These days, you can hardly turn around without seeing another Jennifer Hudson interview. In one of those interviews, she talked about *American Idol* as if it was just another job. She compared it to working at Burger King and to her jobs working on cruise ships. It's hardly a fair comparison. I doubt that Jennifer Hudson would have ever become famous without *American Idol*, contrary to how she makes it seem.

Incidentally, Burger King heard about the interview and they responded by giving Jennifer a card that entitles her to free Burger King food for her entire life. At least, if she does fall out of the limelight, she won't go hungry.

You can tell from her interviews that Jennifer has lost some of her perspective. When you do that, one of the first things to go is your humility. Sometimes it's the other way around, and lack of humility results in a lack of perspective. The two are so closely intertwined. One of the favors that Simon Cowell inadvertently does for people is that he doesn't let them get too cocky, and it really is a favor, because if he doesn't do it, sooner or later, reality will.

## Chapter 25 – Twelve to Eleven

Diana Ross is the guest star on the Top Twelve show. She listens to each of the contestants rehearse and gives them feedback. Her goal, she says, is to be a mentor rather than a critic. I cannot help but notice that, along the way, she must criticize in order to be a mentor. You cannot give someone useful advice unless you let them know what to change, and when you're telling them what to change, you're usually telling them what they did wrong. Regardless, she is kind to the contestants, and many of them use what they learn from her.

The first performance of the Top Twelve is delivered by Brandon Rogers, and, unfortunately, he starts off weak. Brandon forgets his words and doesn't show any individuality that will help people remember him. He is still a backup singer.

However, Melinda, who follows Brandon, has graduated from backup singer to first rate star. She sings "Home" from *The Wiz*, and halfway into the song I am reeling from just how great her performance is. It gives me chills. I feel as if she has already won *American Idol*, and the whole process of getting up on stage and singing every week is just a formality for her.

Next in line is Chris Sligh, who makes a valiant effort to modernize the song "Endless Love." Some of Chris's fans have organized themselves as "The Fro Patrol" and they hold up signs in the audience as he sings. Chris's arrangement doesn't work for the judges, but I think it's catchy.

The memorable moments from the rest of the show belong to Sanjaya, Haley, LaKisha, and Jordan. Unlike the others, Sanjaya's performance is memorable because it is so bad. On the pad of paper where I am jotting down notes, I write the words "incredibly lame."

Haley sings "Missing You." Randy and Paula are hard on her, and Haley is very emotional. She's had a very hard time taking the judges' criticisms. Several times along the way, she has looked like she was about to cry. Today is no exception. When Simon contradicts Paula and Randy and actually compliments her, she can no longer keep the tears in check.

LaKisha chooses the song "God Bless This Child" and delivers another excellent performance, once again separating her and Melinda from the rest of the group as the ones to beat. As Simon says, they are in a different league.

This changes, though, when Jordin Sparks gets up to sing. Her version of "If We Don't Hold on Together" from *The Land Before Time*, shows that maybe she, too, is one of the top contenders.

On Wednesday night, we learn the results of the competition. They cram a lot into the half-hour. Diana Ross sings. The Top Twelve are shown in the traditionally corny Ford commercial. It's obvious the show is running behind because after Ryan announces that Brandon Rogers is going home, the credits roll before he sings his final song.

Brandon is the first to experience what an ex-Top Twelve *American Idol* contestant must go through. On the night of the results show, they hold a dinner in honor of the person who is going home, affectionately referred to as the "kiss off" dinner. The cut contestant is debriefed by the producers and is given the option to see a staff psychologist. This is an option one might consider after all the emotional turmoil the show puts the contestants through, but it seems that

all the interviews that follow may also provide a good measure of cathartic healing. It is hard to feel too bad about yourself when everyone wants to listen to what you have to say.

I see Brandon do a couple of these interviews, and I am impressed with how he handles them. He is always smiling, good-natured, and happy. When asked how he felt when he was found out he was going home, he says that he expected it after forgetting his words. When asked what his first thought was when Ryan Seacrest said his name, he says that he wanted a drink. Now that he's said it, it occurs to me that having a good stiff drink is also a much better option than going to see the *American Idol* psychologist.

Ten more contestants will go home before the contest is over, but I have just learned that my wife and I will get to see nine of them perform live. Our tickets for the *American Idol* dress rehearsal arrived, and we will be going to it in three weeks, on Tuesday, April 3. By then, two more finalists will be gone. There is a lot of speculation about who those will be.

## Chapter 26 – A Coca-Cola Moment

It's British Invasion night for the Top Eleven and the special guests are Peter Noone and single-name star Lulu. Peter coaches the guys and Lulu coaches the girls, but after seeing the quality of coaching, you can't help but think the guys got the short shrift. Lulu's comments to the girls are insightful and helpful. She is a bundle of energy and still packs a powerful voice. She has no trouble letting go and showing it.

Lulu's first bit of advice goes to Haley. She tells Haley to make the words of the song "Tell Him" more staccato. It pays off and Haley gives what Randy calls her "best performance to date." Lecherously, Simon suggests that many people aren't going to be talking about Haley's performance at all, because she is wearing hot pants and a golden top that accentuates her figure. I suspect it will get her votes.

Peter Noone's comments about Chris Richardson in the video before he sings are a little harsh, but Chris does an admirable job, nonetheless, with "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Cryin'."

Stephanie Edwards sings a Dusty Springfield song, but given the talent that surrounds her, it is forgettable, putting her at risk in a competition that is growing increasingly tighter.

Blake Lewis, on the other hand, successfully reworks the Zombie's classic, "Time of the Season," to create a modernized version that retains the melody of the original, while achieving a newfound beatbox edge. It's a brilliant arrangement and earns him props from the judges.

The big issue for LaKisha this week seems to be one of song choice. She can't decide whether to sing "You're My World," or the James Bond theme, "Diamonds are Forever." I vote

for “Diamonds are Forever,” because I love that song, but Lulu advises LaKisha to sing “You’re My World.” In the end, LaKisha chooses “Diamonds.” As the opening notes make their way into our living room, I applaud her, saying, “Good girl, LaKisha.”

She does well with the song. It doesn’t bring the house down, but it is still in a higher category than many of the other performances.

I miss Phil Stacey’s performance because the rain is interfering with our satellite signal, but from what I’m told later, I haven’t missed much. He was in the bottom three last week, and it appears that he is still at risk.

Our TV reception has returned to normal by the time the commercials are over and Jordin Sparks is ready to sing, which is a good thing because she demonstrates, once again, that she may belong up there with LaKisha and Melinda. The song she sings, “I Who Have Nothing,” is one of my favorites because of its angst. While the other two judges comment on how great Jordin is, Simon talks about how depressing the song is. In response, Ryan Seacrest gets in the zinger of the night. He says to Simon, “To get it, you have to experience love with someone other than yourself.”

Then it is Sanjaya’s turn. Much of the talk about *American Idol* over the past week has been about Sanjaya and how he has managed to make it as far as he has. His “Fanjayas” think he is great, but he takes a lot of abuse from the rest of us.

When talking about song choice, Sanjaya says, “As soon as I found out it was British invasion week I…” He pauses, and during this pause, I anticipate his next words, hoping they will be something like, “I knew exactly what I was going to sing, and it will be great!” But, no. Instead he says, “I had no idea what I was going to do.” He also mentions that he doesn’t think he has the best voice in the competition.

The song Sanjaya decides on is “You’ve Really Got Me.” As he sings, I scribble obscenities down on the piece of paper that I am writing on, and my wife cries out in pain. “Oh my God!” she exclaims. I almost expect her to elaborate: “Please, please, make it stop! Get him off the screen.”

Poor Sanjaya, he gets no love from us.

But he does get love from somebody. The camera repeatedly cuts to a young girl who is sobbing, like girls used to do for John, Paul, George, and Ringo. She cannot contain the emotion that being in Sanjaya’s presence brings her. What different perceptions of the world we must have.

When the pain brought on by Sanjaya is over, it is Gina Glocksen’s turn to sing and, hopefully, return us to normalcy. Before she sings, though, Ryan Seacrest asks her a question from one of the viewers. When Ryan asks the question, Gina is seated on a stool beside him. On the screen behind both of them is a Coke bottle surrounded by red and white bubbles floating upwards. In the lower left-hand corner of our TV screen are the words, “Coca-Cola.” No one ever says, “It’s the Coca-Cola moment! This Coca-Cola moment is brought to you by the good folks at Cola Cola, makers of Cola Cola and other fine Coca-Cola beverages. Drink one now!” But they don’t really need to say it. It’s implied. You have to admit, Coca-Cola has remarkable product placement on *American Idol*. Red coke cups are always positioned directly in front of Randy, Paula, and Simon. The “Red Room” used in the smaller studio sessions, features a red sofa with coke bottles imprinted on the upholstery. No one says the word, “Coke,” but it’s everywhere.

I am grateful for this “Coca-Cola moment” because it gives me a chance to comment on a few things that go below the surface of the *American Idol* competition. These opportunities grow less frequent as the contest becomes more intense, and I have to take them when I can get them.

The viewer question that Ryan reads is “Has being on the show made you stronger?”

In her response, Gina talks about what Idol contestants have to go through. Their time is consumed with rehearsals, photo shoots, and show preparations. But they must also deal with the many critiques and opinions that are expressed about them in the media and the blogs.

“Do you pay attention to what the media is saying about you?” Ryan asks Gina.

“I try not to,” she says, which is a good answer.

In an earlier chapter, I talked about how it is useful to be aware of how others perceive you. There’s a catch to this, which shows why you have to be careful with advice, as well as why self-help books sometimes fail. One piece of advice doesn’t work for everybody. Telling someone they should stand up for themselves is good advice unless the person is already “high maintenance” and is very demanding anyway. If so, you would probably want to change your advice, to “Hey, maybe you should chill out and not always want things your way.” Earlier in this book, I talked about the unexpected pitfalls of telling people that they can achieve anything. At the same time, telling someone that he or she can achieve the impossible may serve as a source of motivation and inspiration. Although, in my opinion, it would be better to tell people that they are capable of accomplishing amazing things, but not impossible things. The key here is that it all depends on who you’re talking to. Who is receiving the advice, and what is their background? Dale Carnegie, who wrote the grandfather of all self-help books, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, confirms: “Nothing will work in all cases—and nothing will work

with all people. If you are satisfied with the results you are now getting, why change? If you are not satisfied, why not experiment?”<sup>9</sup>

It is partially because of this difference among individuals and the varying applicability of advice that I emphasize balance so much in this book.

The caveat to the advice that “you should be aware of how people perceive you” is that, when you’re famous, sometimes it is far healthier to act in the way that you think is best and to disregard much of the media and hype surrounding you. This depends, of course. Some celebrities might do well by listening to their critics and not partying so much, but this, by no means, applies to everyone.

For the famous, it often becomes a matter of survival that they do not pay too much attention to the media, the blogs, and all the opinions that surround them. I wish I could remember the name of the young celebrity who said that one of the best bits of advice she had ever received came from Jennifer Aniston. Jennifer told her to stop reading the magazines and ignore the tabloids.

Gina’s answer to the viewer’s question about whether being on the show has made her stronger is that it has. In general, *American Idol* does benefit the majority of those who makes it to the final rounds. It gives them opportunities they would never have otherwise. Debra Byrd, the vocal coach for the contestants, has often referred to *American Idol* as “celebrity boot camp.”

This might prompt some people to trot out the tired old cliché that “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” and there I would have to disagree. The good news is that we can take many bad situations, learn from them, and turn them to our advantage. But this doesn’t apply to every situation. Some situations, like going to war, being sexually abused, or a number of physical injuries and illnesses, can permanently damage you and weaken you for life, both

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<sup>9</sup> Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Pocket Books, 1936), p. 187.

physically and emotionally. After these kinds of experiences you will be weaker than when you started, no matter what attitude you approach them with. If it doesn't kill you, it may jack you up permanently. I don't say that to be depressing or cynical. My point is that we should avoid clichés when an examination of the facts can prove these clichés to be inaccurate. Meanwhile, make the best you can of every situation, even if it takes a lot out of you.

Oh, and drink Coca-Cola.

After her brief question and answer session, Gina sings "Paint it Black," by the Stones and remains true to the rocker image she has embraced.

In the videoclip where Peter Noone introduces Chris Sligh, we see that Chris has once again done his homework. He mentions that, in 2001, Peter Noone was awarded the title of sexiest artist alive. When the video ends, we see a shot of the audience and the music begins. Chris emerges from the crowd and walks down the aisles singing the Zombie's hit, "She's Not There." Except for getting ahead of the music a little, he works it out just fine.

Closing the night is Melinda Doolittle. In her video she echoes Sanjaya's sentiments, but a little more eloquently, saying, "When I found out it was British invasion week, my first thought was, *Oh sweet Lord Jesus, what am I going to do?*" Eventually she decided upon the song "As Long as He Needs Me" from the musical Oliver.

She begins the song sitting on the steps of the stage. With the slow start I wonder if this will be the night that Melinda proves she's human and does her first mediocre performance, but it is not to be. Soon she is standing and belting out the chorus. The girl who cried when Sanjaya sang is now weeping uncontrollably. I think, *sweet Lord Jesus, Melinda is good*. It is, in Simon's words, an impeccable vocal. Her fans have made a sign that says "Melinda Doolittle," but they have crossed out "Doolittle" and replaced it with the words, "Do Lots." Indeed.

As the credits roll, the crying girl we have seen throughout the night is allowed to go up on stage and hug the contestants. I hope the experience makes her stronger.

## Chapter 27 – Unnoticed

The bottom two contestants on Thursday night's result show are Chris Richardson and Stephanie Edwards. There are a variety of factors contributing to why they wound up there. For example, even though Chris Richardson's acoustic rendition of "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying" was great, I think it was a little too mature for the majority of his fan base. Of the bottom two, Stephanie is sent home.

In interviews of the Top Twenty-four on [americanidol.com](http://americanidol.com), Stephanie is asked what she would do if she were voted off the show. Her answer is that she would go back to school and resume her psychology major. This is very different from what quite a few of the other contestants have said. More often you hear answers about how they want to pursue their music career because their experience on *American Idol* has made them realize how important music is to them, and now they know how it feels to come very close to being a success. Stephanie doesn't seem to have this hunger. She didn't even want to audition for *American Idol* in the first place. Her parents talked her into it. Not that she won't be sad she wasn't able to go farther.

But she'll be okay. If she chooses, she can go back to school and pursue a career that is both interesting and rewarding in its own regard. Who knows, maybe she can provide counseling to others who are thrown off *American Idol*, or she can help would-be contestants with their denial and a variety of other psychological complaints.

What hurt Stephanie was that her performance was forgettable. It just didn't stick out among the rest enough for you to remember it and vote for her. For that matter, I felt the same

way about Chris Richardson's performance. Although Sanjaya should have been the one to go, he was far more memorable.

It reminds me of situations I have encountered in the workplace, at school, and elsewhere in which what matters most is not whether a person is "good" or that what they do is of high quality. What really seems to matter is how noticeable they are, and how much attention they draw to themselves.

In the workplace, you will sometimes hear managers tell employees that in order to move up in the ranks, they need to be more "visible." The problem is that "visibility," has nothing to do with quality. As a result, it is sometimes the social, the loud, or even the obnoxious employees who receive promotions and other rewards rather than those who are deserving. The deserving employees are not readily visible because they are hard at work in their office doing their jobs. In some work environments, it reaches a level of absurdity.

A similar thing happens with young children at home and at school. The bad child receives all the attention from the teachers and the parents, while the one who is doing what he or she should do is ignored. Sometimes the good child may even rebel and act up just so he or she can get the attention they want. Meanwhile the bad child is constantly being rewarded (in the form of attention) for negative behavior. As they say, the squeaky wheel gets the grease.

It helps to understand that there are many of us who would rather get in trouble than be ignored. Neglect can be a form of abuse. I realize that it is difficult for parents, teachers, and bosses to pay attention to those who are doing what they should be doing when the troublemakers are eating up all their time and attention, but we would do well to remember to acknowledge and reward the quiet ones who are doing what they should. Reward the Stephanie Edwardses of the world, and send the Sanjayas home. It's only fair.

## Chapter 28 – Tears

Over the weekend, the buzz about *American Idol* focused on two topics, the crying girl, whose name is Ashley Ferl, and the question of why in the world Sanjaya is still on the show. We'll return to the second topic later. Ashley Ferl, it turns out, is from my hometown of Riverside, where I live now. Since she was seen crying on *American Idol*, she has appeared on the *Today* show and on *Access Hollywood* among many others. There was even a *Saturday Night Live* sketch that featured a fake clip from *American Idol* and someone pretending to be Ashley crying her eyes out.

Ashley would up on *American Idol* by going through the same ticket promotion that my wife and I are using to get in to next week's show. Ashley went to go see a taping of *Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader?* and in exchange she received tickets for the dress rehearsal. (We went to see a taping of *Thank God You're Here*.) The dress rehearsal takes place just hours before the actual show. When the producers saw Ashley crying, they asked her to stay for the live show. Then they went nuts and brought up pictures of her crying whenever they felt like it. She was seen on screen more often than any other audience member in *American Idol* history. I told my wife that when we go to the dress rehearsal, she should work up a few tears.

This week, though, the show featuring the top ten *American Idol* contestants is interestingly boring (paradox intended). Gwen Stefani is the guest. Given her music videos, one would expect her to be perky and bubbly, but when commenting on how the contestants are doing with their songs, she seems withdrawn, almost robotic. The contestant's performances are

equally uninvigorating. The good thing is that the playing field has leveled out a little. Melinda and LaKisha do not do as spectacularly as they usually do, although they still do well, while a couple of the other contestants do better than they have in the past. The standout performance of the night belongs to Gina Glocksen, who sings “I’ll Stand by You” by the Pretenders.

Sanjaya, however, still manages to garner the most attention. Part of this is due to his hair, which has been styled into a faux mohawk via the use of seven pony tails that stick straight up in the air.

“What has he done?” my wife says, staring at the TV.

In reaction to Sanjaya’s “song,” Simon Cowell says, “I don’t think it matters, anymore, what we say actually...I think you are in your own universe, and if people like you, good luck.”

Simon is right. On the results show the following night, Sanjaya isn’t even in the bottom three. Instead, the bottom three consists of Phil Stacey, Haley Scarnato, and Chris Sligh. Of these, Chris is the one with the least votes and has to leave the show.

*Oh no, I think, what does this say about us? What does this say about America?* It can’t be good. Sanjaya still remains and far greater talent has been cast aside so that he can remain on the show. We have lost Brandon Rogers, Stephanie Edwards, and Chris Sligh... to Sanjaya?

I am not really surprised by it. I am just disappointed. I’m grateful this isn’t a presidential election. I’d hate to see us mess that up in a similar way. That would be terrible, wouldn’t it? Well, maybe we shouldn’t go there.

On talk shows, on the Internet, and in offices across American, people put forth many theories about why Sanjaya remains. Not that this is really necessary. Ultimately, Sanjaya’s success may reveal little more than the main demographic for *American Idol* – millions of pre-teen girls who have pictures of Sanjaya taped to their schoolbooks and mirrors. There are a

multitude of Ashley Ferls who never made it on TV, but who have plenty of experience at dialing a phone and sending text messages.

Another factor is Howard Stern, who, in conjunction with “[voteformtheworst.com](http://voteformtheworst.com)” has been encouraging everyone to vote for Sanjaya. Their main intent, as they have admitted, is to undermine the *American Idol* voting process.

What this says about us as a nation is that some of us are perverse. We like to mess with other people. There is an element of human nature that is fundamentally ornery, rebellious, and contrary. Even the seemingly nicest of individuals can, when unguarded, display such traits.

This stubborn cantankerous rebel inside of humanity is necessary for our survival. When we become teenagers we naturally demonstrate these traits because we need to learn to be independent and do things our own way, regardless of all the problems that causes. If we didn't, we'd never learn to break away from our parents and/or our upbringing and never learn to survive on our own. If someone does something we consider wrong or tries to force us to do something against our principles, we need to have the strength, will, and desire to resist and to fight back. A nation of sheep would be a weak nation. Rebellion is part of our nature for a reason, but sometimes it is exercised when there is no need for it.

You'll see our stubborn and sometimes irreverent independence in the activities of social groups as well as individuals. For every movement, there is a countermovement, and for every major social trend, there is a backlash.

In office settings, I have seen situations where management has told employees not to complain or talk amongst themselves. These orders usually cause the opposite reaction. The complainers just get more riled up and complain more. People who weren't complaining

suddenly realize that there is something to complain about and join in the chorus. The order not to complain may make them feel resentful when they didn't previously.

Nobody is about to stop complaining just because he or she is told to. It is absurd to expect them to stop. It also demonstrates the lack of a decent understanding of human nature.

Back to Sanjaya... There are a variety of conspiracy theories about why he has not been voted off of *American Idol*, such as the idea that the producers are messing with the results for the sake of controversy and ratings. I give very little weight to these theories. Who needs them? Between the ornery rebels who are messing with the system, the teenybopper fan base, and a wide sampling of other demographics who just happen to like Sanjaya, we have our explanation. Unfortunately, there's really no way to measure which one has the most weight. If I had to guess, though, I would say it is mostly the young girls. Howard Stern has long been on an ego trip, and it's not hard to imagine that he is overestimating his power, while I have long suspected that teenyboppers are running more of our country than most of us would like to imagine.

The Sanjaya controversy also shows one of the problems with democracy. Just like a dictatorship, where the quality of the government depends upon who is in charge, a democracy is only as good as the people. If the people aren't educated, or smart, or if they have misplaced values, then the system is going to have trouble. If the people haven't reached a certain level of sophistication, a democracy won't even work. We've seen this demonstrated in Iraq.

With this *American Idol* controversy, however, the temptation is to blame Sanjaya, but it's not really his fault. He's not a bad kid, and he's not the one voting. He simply doesn't deserve to be where he is given his level of talent. When I saw Sanjaya's "ponyhawk" hairstyle on Wednesday, I wondered if maybe he was trying to sabotage his own chances. Maybe he's as tired of being at the center of the controversy as we are at having him there.

Another concern is what this says about the legitimacy of the *American Idol* process. Its goal is to produce a music superstar. Can it still do this? I think so. I hope so. But we'll have to wait and see.

My wife and I will get to see Sanjaya in person when we go to see the dress rehearsal next week. At this point, my wife doesn't have to cry; I'll do it for her. When they interview me afterwards, I'll say I am mourning the American public's lack of taste. It's not too late America, you can still turn this around. Please, save me. For that matter, save us. Save us all.

## Chapter 29 – Dress Rehearsal

We're driving down the 10 Freeway through Los Angeles, and about eighty feet in front of us, a cop car suddenly swerves to the right. The police car swerves across five lanes and then back the other way across the freeway. The movements are jerky as if the officer driving the car is either angry or drunk. We immediately slow down, as does the rest of the traffic around us. We all wonder what's going on. Inwardly I panic, thinking, *Oh great! There's been a wreck or a car chase. The freeway is going to be closed down, and we're never going to make it to the American Idol dress rehearsal.*

A motorcycle cop zips by on the left to join the police car, and traffic comes to a stop. *Please, please*, I think. I don't want to be stuck on this freeway all afternoon. Our tickets are irreplaceable.

From the distance in front of us, another police car comes zipping down the freeway, driving the wrong way. He meets the other two vehicles. The motorcycle cop pulls up to a long white object lying in the middle of the freeway and kicks it to the side of the road. The first police car that was swerving back and forth earlier does a circle and also clears some debris from the roadway.

When the police are done, they speed away without looking backward. With the debris removed, we are free to proceed, and traffic speeds up again. I breathe an inner sigh of relief.

I exit on Fairfax and, before long, we are in a neighborhood filled with small shops. Several men with the sideburns, beards, and the black and white clothes of Orthodox Judaism

walk down the sidewalks. Farther north, we pass the Los Angeles Farmer's Market, making note of the tourists who flock there. Just beyond it is our destination — CBS Television City.

It is noon on a Tuesday. I drop my wife off at the curb where a line for *American Idol* has begun to form. Resting against the leg of one of the people there is a homemade sign, which reads "Kiss me Simon. It's my birthday!" I drive around the block and am lucky to find a parking spot close by.

The people in line are friendly. When I walk up, I ask what show they are in line for, just to be sure. It turns out that there are three groups of people in the line: people waiting for *American Idol*, people waiting for the dress rehearsal, and people waiting for *Dancing With the Stars*.

Like many others waiting to be let into the studio, we brought our lunch to eat while standing in line. Across the street a homeless man stops in front of a nail parlor and belligerently knocks over the sign the owners have set up to advertise their specials.

We wait for roughly an hour before the people from On Camera Audiences (OCA) come out and begin splitting our line up into three groups. They send the audience members for *Dancing With the Stars* to the back of the line, and they send the audience members for the live *American Idol* show across the driveway. This puts us close to the front of the dress rehearsal line.

Next, the OCA staff checks our tickets and IDs, confirming that we are the people who ordered them. When they are done, the line moves up and we pass by another security guard who also checks ID's. Beyond this checkpoint is the CBS parking lot. A mural picturing Bob Barker and contestants from *The Price is Right* adorns a building to our left. We cross the parking lot to where a page is stationed, made visible by her bright red jacket sporting the CBS Logo. The

pages work for CBS and are separate from the people who handle tickets and arrange seating from On Camera Audiences, but some of their responsibilities overlap. The page channels us alongside a series of trailers. For all we know, the *American Idol* Top Nine are in those trailers right now.

The line stops and we wait again, giving my wife and I another chance to eavesdrop on the two girls who are behind us. We don't intend to eavesdrop, but it's hard not to because their voices are so loud. The one girl has been complaining for a solid hour about how difficult it is in the television and movie industry. She talks about how much money she has had to spend for each part she has had. Some of her complaints may be legitimate. I recall that when I briefly worked as a movie extra, I spent more money on Thomas Guide mapbooks and clothes than I made doing the work.

The line picks up again and carries us around the corner of Studio 36 where *American Idol* is filmed. The line is slowed by a security checkpoint where guards check purses and people pass through a metal detector. Across the way, on the other side of the building, we can see the banners for TV Guide Channel's *Idol Tonight!*. *Idol Tonight!*, which features the same hosts as *Idol Chat!*, started up when *American Idol* moved into the Top Twelve phase. Early birds in line for the actual *American Idol* show are often used as part of the audience for *Idol Tonight!*

Tomorrow, Kimberly Caldwell, Justin Guarini, and Rosanna Tovaréz will be standing there, on what is presently an empty stage, interviewing people. If the cameras ever panned to the left, which they never do, they would reveal a row of outhouses on small metal trailers. We take advantage of them just before it is our turn to be searched by the security guards.

I am surprised by how thorough the security guards are. A guard digs into the side pocket of the purse belonging to the lady in front of me and retrieves a cell phone. He tags it, puts the

phone into a bin, and hands the lady a tag of her own so she can get her cell phone back after the show. She apologizes and says she didn't know about the "no cell phone" rule, even though it is written in big letters on the tickets for the show.

Beyond this checkpoint is a row of benches. My wife gets the last seat at the end of one, and I stand. As we are waiting, I overhear a lady speaking to her family. They are standing on the other side of the ropes, and the woman is wearing a studio-issued *American Idol* badge. She obviously works on the show and has gotten her family in to see the dress rehearsal. "Everyone is talking bad about Sanjaya," she says to the small cluster of people around her, "but I've met him and he's just the sweetest guy. 'But it's a singing competition!' people tell me. I don't care. I don't want to hear it..."

I hear someone talking to our left and turn to see that we are being given an introductory speech about studio etiquette and what we should expect. We are told that we will be on camera and that some of the shots filmed in the dress rehearsal may be used in the actual show. We should keep up the energy level and applaud as if we were part of the live studio audience. Those who are wearing sunglasses are instructed to take them off their heads. Anyone chewing gum should get rid of it.

Then, row by row, they let us into the studio.

We immediately turn left upon entering the studio doors and then make a right to round a corner. Along our right is a black curtain reaching up five stories to the catwalks above. Along the left are ropes held in place by clamps. They extend upwards to the catwalks, and line the entire wall forming a series of vertical lines. The narrow stream of people ahead of us continues between this corridor of ropes and curtains. Up ahead, it veers abruptly to the right. A smoky

white light shines through this entrance onto the people there. It looks as if they are standing at the gateway to another world. I wonder what they are seeing.

In a matter of minutes, we are in their place. Through the curtained-lined doorway, we see the *American Idol* stage. It seems smaller than it does on TV, but it also seems brighter. It shines in silver and white. The eye is immediately drawn to the semi-oval-shaped (my wife calls it a lifeboat) screen at center stage. On it, the *American Idol* logo spins in a flurry of blues, greens, and yellows.

The pages guide us forward to our seats. Seating is cramped, but our position isn't bad. We are in the center section, just to the left of where Simon would be sitting if he were here. We are about seven rows back. From our seats, we take it all in. The familiar towers stand on either side of the stage. The TV screens at the base of both of these are blank. The entire studio is lined with black curtains, which contributes to the illusion of it being larger when seen on TV. When you look into black, it seems as if you are looking into the distance. There are no "walls" as such, and it seems as if the silver and white components that make up the set are hanging in air, somehow disjointed and separate from each other.

High above us in the catwalks, there are too many lights to even count.

The audience fills up. Behind us are bleachers. To our right, a section fills up with a large group of young girls that look like they might have all come from the same school together. The audience is abuzz with conversation. It's cool just to be here.

The main screen that sits center stage changes. The word "calibrating" appears at regular intervals across the screen, and it becomes obvious that what looks like one giant screen is actually a collection of smaller screens linked together.

Once the studio is full and everyone is in place, Debbie, the stage manager, addresses us — “Hello dress rehearsal audience!” — and begins explaining what will be taking place. The performances we will see during the dress rehearsal are the ones used to make the montage of the contestants shown at the end of the live show. Debbie reiterates that sunglasses should be removed and gum spit out. Pages walk the rows with paper cups, collecting gum from people. The dress rehearsal is a lot of fun and a lot more relaxed than the regular show, the stage manager explains. We will get to see some of the creative process in action. Ryan Seacrest will be out in a minute, she tells us, but first, the Top Nine.

The contestants come out on stage and line up in a row, waving to the crowd as we cheer and yell. They are wearing the outfits they will be wearing on the live show. After they perform the dress rehearsal, they will go backstage, get their makeup touched up, and then come right back out and do it all again on live TV. Right now, though, it is time to put us to work. The stage manager has the crowd cheer and applaud for the Top Nine while they stand on stage. “You will be applauding for a very long time,” she tells us, and she’s right.

While we clap, yell, and whistle a camera on a long extension swoops over our heads getting various shots of the contestants to be used in intros and promos for the show. The stage manager thanks the Top Nine, and they go backstage again.

During the dress rehearsal, the judges aren’t there, but because the camera is capturing shots that may be used in the show, substitute judges are put in their places. We are introduced to the pseudo-judges. The woman in the middle wears a wig so that she looks like Paula. The two men in Randy and Simon’s positions also look a lot like the actual judges when seen from behind.

Ryan Seacrest comes out next and is soon running around the stage and reading from teleprompters at the request of the stage manager. The band fills in their positions, and I notice for the first time that there is both a drummer and a percussionist, one on either side of the stage. The strings walk in carrying their instruments, and the background singers take their spots behind the microphones.

The dress rehearsal begins.

Ryan's first announcement starts in the bleachers to our right, and he reads through his words on the teleprompter casually. I would have expected that he would try to read them the way he is going to read them in the live show, but perhaps he doesn't do that in order to keep from sounding too rehearsed. Either way, I immediately gain a measure of respect for what he does.

Ryan announces that the special guest for tonight's show is Tony Bennett who we'll only see on video clips or "packages," as they are known.

In the first video package Tony says that the songs the contestants are singing are "the best songs ever written in America." Tony is after all, eighty years old. His prejudice for the old standards and his desire to keep them the way they are is revealed in his comments to Blake Lewis, the first contestant to sing. Tony reminds Blake, not too subtly, that the song is pre-rap and advises Blake to slow down the tempo.

As the video package ends, Blake is already positioned on stage. A cameraman is on the stage with him, trailed by another man who doles out electrical cable and reels it back in depending on where the camera moves. As Blake sings "Mack the Knife," the cameramen are never more than four or five feet away from him. Most of that time they are circling around him, and he must shift his attention from the camera to the audience appropriately.

It is also immediately noticeable that the acoustics in the studio are awesome. The band sounds crisp. Blake's voice rings loud and clear. Blake handles the distraction of the moving camera well and delivers a fantastic performance. When he is done, the three pseudo-judges give their comments — all of them positive, and Ryan joins Blake on stage. He thanks Blake informally, and then casually reads the introduction for Phil Stacey from the teleprompter.

When Phil sings "Night and Day," I am surprised by how great a job he does. I have never been a real big fan of Phil, and I feel he does some remarkable things with this one. The studio audience loves it. Even Tony Bennett's introduction is impressive. He says that Phil is one of the better singers he has heard, "not just today, but for a long time." We cheer as Phil wraps up the song. The camera whizzes by overhead, and it's time for what would be the commercial break.

During film shoots, commercial breaks often feel like sudden moments of quiet after a storm, and this is no exception. Ryan and the stage manager disappear backstage, and the audience is left to talk amongst themselves. On the main screen, we see a shot of some of the contestants lined up backstage, and eventually, we hear the stage manager's voice. She announces that this is one of the creative moments she was talking about earlier, and we get to see Ryan try two possible intros: one where he is standing in front of the Top Nine as they are lined up backstage, and another where he walks through them and up to the camera. They shoot those, and then it is back to the regular show.

I'm curious to see how Melinda Doolittle turns out to be in person, and when she mounts the stage and blasts through "I've Got Rhythm," she confirms several things. These kids (although some of them are, technically, adults) really do have talent. What you see on TV doesn't really capture the full extent of what they do on stage. When the camera pans and zooms

and cuts from scene to scene, you miss the full picture of how the contestants move around on stage. You certainly don't get as much of their charisma on TV as you do in person, nor do you get the sound quality.

This also tells us that when the judges are being harsh about a good performance, they're being exceptionally harsh.

I've also wondered about the "Coke moment," in which Ryan asks questions from television viewers. Have the contestants heard the questions already and had a chance to rehearse their answers? Not from what we could see at the dress rehearsal. Chris Richardson practices the Coke moment with Ryan, using a question that is not the same as the one he'll be asked in the real show. He is next up to sing.

Partway into the song "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," the stage manager has Chris stop. There was a technical difficulty, she explains, and Chris has to start the song over from the start. As he stands at the top of the stage, silhouetted against a backdrop of white, he shakes his butt to the amusement of the women in the audience who cheer him on.

The technical glitch is fixed, and Chris is able to make it through the song the second time.

Tony Bennett's introduction to Jordin Spark's performance of "On a Clear Day," once again reveals that he is, to put it diplomatically, a traditionalist. "She sang very much in tune, which is rare these days," Tony says. "She changed a note here and there, but it wasn't outlandish."

Jordin is as sparkly and bubbly on stage as she appears on TV, and it is hard not to like her. People are speculating that she is the kind of person who will sneak up from behind and win the competition, and you can see why.

Ryan Seacrest has moved back into the audience, and as the Tony Bennett setup for Gina Glocksen begins, we are not paying attention to what is happening on the stage. Ryan is about ten feet away from us, joking with women in the audience. One of them hands him a notepad. He reads it and laughs, saying, "Well... okay, but tomorrow night?"

The woman asks him to sign the pad. He signs it, turns the page, signs it, and turns another page. When he gets to the fifth page, we burst out in laughter. At that moment I look up to see Gina Glocksen staring at us from the stage with an odd questioning look on her face. On the video package, Tony Bennett has just said that the song "Smile," makes him remember 9-11, and that's the moment we all chose to laugh.

Gina quickly readjusts and performs the song. When she's finished, Ryan warns us that, after the break, Sanjaya is up next. After the odd moment of silence reserved for commercials, it is time for him to sing. Yes, there is a young girl in the front row with a sign that says "I 'heart' Sanjaya," but when he begins his breathy rendition of "Heaven," the grown women in the audience sitting around us have to stifle their laughter. One of them covers her face with her hands.

Joely Fischer, who costars in the sitcom "Til Death," has taken Paula Abdul's seat at the judges' table. When Sanjaya walks around on the platform behind the judges' table, he does a small dance number with her, and then makes his way around the platform and back onto the stage.

After Sanjaya is Haley, who is as leggy in person as she is on TV. During the pretend "Coke moment" Ryan asks her how she feels about the chairs they are sitting in. He mentions that he thinks they are left over from the first season when there were two hosts.

There is one more break for imaginary commercials before LaKisha comes up on stage to sing “Stormy Weather.” In the video package intro, LaKisha changes the song up a bit and does a cool tag at the end. Tony tells her to do the song as it is written, but, thank goodness, she keeps her changes in.

With the last performance done, Ryan and all the contestants join LaKisha on stage. They hold their positions while, again, we clap for a very long time.

Then, suddenly, without much ado, it’s over. The stage manager says, “Thank you dress rehearsal audience.” She says it’s a shame to waste a good audience like us and jokes that we should refuse to give up our seats to the audience for the live show that is waiting outside. “I don’t think they would allow that, though,” she adds. We take the hint and file out of the studio.

Outside, a line winds through the empty *Idol Tonight!* set, and a booth has been set up selling Idol T-shirts, mugs, and keychains.

Pages direct us out of the studio parking lot, but they seem irritable and eager to get rid of us. One of them is insistent that we walk along a very narrow line of concrete next to a row of parked cars. “Okay,” they might as well say, “We’re done with you now. Get out.” It’s back to reality, I guess.

We follow their instructions, from which no deviations are allowed, dumping us out of the studio at the opposite end of where we entered it. CBS Television City is two city blocks wide, and I leave my wife to sit outside a restaurant as I go for the long walk to retrieve the car. On the way, I pass at least ten contestants from *The Price is Right* who are wearing *Price is Right* nametags in the shape of a sales tag.

It’s four p.m. We’ve got a couple hours of Los Angeles rush hour traffic to get through before we get home and look for ourselves on TV.

## Chapter 30 – The Not-so Real Thing

When we watch *American Idol* that night, the first thing that we notice is that it is far less impressive than it was live and it doesn't sound half as good.

It's also interesting how being able to watch all the performances and make up your own mind about them gives you a different impression of the show than the impression you get when you watch the show with the judges' comments.

I can't believe, for example, how they tear Phil Stacey apart in the live show, and I think they are unfair to Haley Scarnato. Her performance is a bit vampy, but it isn't as bad as they make it seem. The judges dismiss her by talking about her looks and completely ignoring her performance as if it isn't worthy of comment. Only one song is different on TV than on stage and that is Blake Lewis's. On the live show, he changes the ending and adds a quick scat-like finish.

We never do appear on TV, but I'm okay with that, especially since the spotlights were causing my eyes to tear up, and I didn't want to end up looking like David Hasselhoff.<sup>10</sup>

The following night, during the results show, we hear two songs that are particularly appropriate. The first is delivered by Michael Bublé. Tony Bennett has called in sick with the flu, and Michael fills in for him, singing the song "Irresponsible." Tony seems irresponsible for not showing up, and Michael Bublé appears equally irresponsible because he doesn't seem to care how well he does, and he forgets his words. In fact, his whole performance seems disjointed. He

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<sup>10</sup> David Hasselhoff was seen tearing up during the season finale of season five, for which he got a lot of flak. Chris Sligh joked about it during his audition.

keeps looking off to the side. Is he distracted by the cameraman spinning around him, or is there something else that is catching his attention? When Michael talks to Ryan afterwards he asks, “Am I wasting my vote by still voting for Antonella Barba?”

I have never seen Michael Bubl  before, and this is not a good first impression. With the exception of Sanjaya, every performance the night before was better than his. His joke about Antonella makes him seem sleazy rather than funny. It’s like he is one of the rat pack, ready to run off to Vegas where he can hang out with mobsters from the sixties, while gambling and drinking his life away. Totally irresponsible.<sup>11</sup>

The second appropriate song comes after the results are all in. Sanjaya isn’t even in the bottom three, but Haley, Phil, and Gina are. After 33 million votes, Gina is the one who doesn’t survive. Her song is “Smile,” and after her initial tears, she does manage to smile, even though, quite possibly, it feels as if her heart is breaking.

In interviews after show, Gina talks about how she is surprised and disappointed. She did not expect to go home at this time. Yet, she has done well. From her we learn how persistence can pay off. She tried four times to get on *American Idol*. She made it to Hollywood Week one time, but it wasn’t until the fourth that she made it to the Top Five.

The more I observe those who are “successes,” the more I see this kind of persistence. Successful people don’t take a single mistake or failure and use it as a rationalization for not trying anymore. They dismiss these things and keep on plugging away. It likes the golfer who doesn’t let the double-bogey on one hole ruin his entire game, or the guy who keeps asking women out until he gets a “yes.” They are in the habit of moving forward without dwelling on the negatives. And the more you do this, the easier it becomes.

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<sup>11</sup> If it seems as if I’m being kind of hard on Mr. Bubl , see Chapter 42 — Miscellany, where he gets a chance to defend himself.

I find it absurd when people claim that they “never lose” or that “losing is not an option.” Not only are these statements unrealistic, they also belie a complete lack of understanding of what it takes to be a winner. Those who “win” in the end may have experienced hundreds of smaller “failures” along the way. Sometimes you *have* to lose battles in order to win the war.

I’ve tried to employ a strategy of persistence in my much smaller pursuit to win tickets for the *American Idol* finale. Every day I go on the Internet and submit contest entries at several sites: SlowChurned.com — the Dryer’s Ice Cream site where there is an *American Idol* contest, Pringles.com — the Pringles Potato Chips site where there is also an *American Idol* contest, and FoxReality.com. Will I win? Who knows? If you want to succeed, not only do have to try, but you usually have to keep trying. Then all you can do is hope it pays off.

## Chapter 31 – Harder Than It Looks

*American Idol* has launched another contest. This one is for songwriters. The producers are asking for viewers to submit songs they've written. The winning song will be used as the first single for the winner of *American Idol*, and whoever is chosen to be the *American Idol* will sing it at the end of the *American Idol* finale.

The guidelines say that the song should capture an element of the contestant's journey on *American Idol*, like Kelly Clarkson's "A Moment Like This," or Taylor Hick's "Do I Make You Proud." It would also help if it had a good hook.

We heard about the contest a month ago, and my wife nonchalantly asked, "Hey! Why don't you try that?"

This weekend, I broke down and decided to give it a try. I was able to scratch out some lyrics and devise a melody, but the rest of it — playing the song on a keyboard, getting the vocals right, and recording the song — was far beyond my current skill sets. Maybe I'll save the song and try for next year. That's about how long it should take me to get it right. Inevitably, things are always harder than they look.

When Michael Orland, the associate musical director for *American Idol*, was interviewed on *Idol Tonight!*, he related how little time the contestants have to learn and perform a song. They pick their songs on Thursday and then perform them the following Tuesday. Rosanna Tavarez chimed in with the comment, "A little sympathy, huh Simon?"

In exit interviews, Chris Sligh and several others have talked about how tough it is getting songs cleared. Before they can sing a song on the show, they have to get approval from the artist to do so. If the artist doesn't sign off on it or doesn't do it in time, the contestant can't sing the song. This makes song selection all that much tougher.

Viewing *American Idol* in person reveals some of the effort that goes into making such a show. I'm sure if you were to learn what each individual technician and employee behind the show does, you would find that the show is the combined effort of a large group of people who are utilizing skills they have honed over many years. It's not easy.

This goes for so many things in life. Golf is a perfect example of how things are harder than they look. Making a putt looks like it should be one of the simplest things in the world, but an afternoon on the course is all it takes to find out that this isn't even close to true. While golf may not be physically exhausting, it is a brutally difficult game. Even after you've played it, you may think, *it couldn't have been that tough! I'll have to try again.* The pros make it look easy, but that is very deceptive.

I sometimes experience the prejudice from outsiders that writing is not that tough. When writers complain about how difficult it is to market a book and get sales, I have heard non-writers say, "Well, just write another book!" As if you can just snap your fingers and make a book appear. But any writer can tell you that no matter how long you've been doing it, it is still work and time-consuming work at that. It may get *easier*, but it is never easy. As with golf, I sometimes forget how difficult writing is, but I am reminded as soon as I start up again.

The fact that things look or seem easier than they actually are is one of the misconceptions that managers in the workplace often fall into. They can't comprehend why a project takes so much time or why their employee is having so much trouble with it. The

assumption is often made that the employee is slacking off. When I was a manager at an environmental company with a staff of data entry people working for me, I knew how tough their job was because I used to do it. They were taking chemical data from laboratory reports and transferring it to reports that were formatted according to strict government guidelines. The format of the government reports was not at all accommodating to the variables that could occur in laboratory data. The end result was that this “data entry” job became a job that required that the employee make a lot of decisions regarding very specific technical information. My boss didn’t understand this. So one day, I sat him down in front of a computer and had him enter the same data that my employees were entering. Within a couple weeks, my staff got a well-deserved increase in pay.

The phrase, “How hard can it be?” is quite often a dead giveaway that someone has no idea what he or she is talking about. People spend a lot of time criticizing other people, be it sports players on TV to contestants on *American Idol*, without a full appreciation of how hard it is to do what they do.

From this we can learn not to be so judgmental about the performance of other people in whatever endeavors they may undertake. If you are the kind of person to overestimate your abilities, it may even teach you some humility and prevent you from taking on more than you can handle. Notice that I qualified that with the word, “may.” But in the end, one of the most valuable things that this awareness gives us is a far greater appreciation of what those around us do.

As I drive down the freeway this week, I am wide-awake to pop music and of the skill that goes behind a well-crafted song. I notice, for the first time in a long time, how the music a singer is singing to is rarely the melody, but rather an accompaniment that is in the same key.

That means the vocalist is the one providing the melody. You wouldn't even know what the melody was if it weren't for the singer. Similarly, I have a greater appreciation for what the contestants on *American Idol* do because of all that I have learned about what goes into making the show.

The more we learn how difficult it is to do so many different tasks, the more we can see that our fellow humans really do some amazing things. If individual tasks in life are more difficult than they look, how much more difficult are the worries and concerns that each individual faces? In Chapter 18, I talked about my personal quest to find things about my fellow human beings to appreciate. Here is yet another.

## Chapter 32 – Back Behind-the-Scenes

It's around noon on Wednesday, April 11, and, once again, I'm on the freeway to Los Angeles. Traffic slows and temporarily comes to a complete stop. Some boxes have fallen off the back of a truck. Small red bags, like the ones that hold carrots in the produce department, are strewn across the road.

Good grief, I think. *I wonder if I'll be late this time?* Fortunately, the pressure isn't as great on this trip. I've taken the day off at the last minute, and I'm headed back to CBS studios to see a taping of the TV Guide Channel show, *Idol Tonight!*, which is taped and shown prior to the *American Idol* results every Wednesday night. I've only recently discovered that getting tickets for *Idol Tonight!* is incredibly easy. I picked up my ticket for the show on a last minute whim, only a few hours before I got on the freeway. I also have tickets for the show, *Idol Extra*, on which they interview contestants immediately after they are booted off the show. I wonder who will be on it tonight. The most likely candidates are Phil Stacey and Haley Scarnato, who have been in the bottom three more than once already.

Traffic on the freeway edges past a big pile of the boxes that were spilled on the roadway and picks up again. I make it to the studios with plenty of time to spare. As before, the lines for *American Idol* and other shows are mixed together. The wind has picked up, and it is not a typically sunny southern California day. I cross my arms across my chest and shiver. I left my jacket in the car on purpose. I can't wear it into the studio because my jacket has a Hardrock

Café logo on it. Any clothing with logos is strictly forbidden. Inadvertent advertising is not allowed.

It's a relief when they let the line inside the studio lot. We walk past the row of trailers and into the same section where my wife and I waited for *American Idol* the week before. I wish my wife was with me, but she is working and has night classes afterwards.

It is amazing how quickly one becomes familiar with locations, and I already feel like an old hand at this studio stuff. I carry a book with me and pay little attention to what is going on until the people from *Idol Tonight!* come out and start working with the audience. First out are staff members who find people that are going to ask questions during the show. The questions are prewritten for them and typed out on cards. The crew immediately gives the majority of these to young girls scattered throughout the audience. Next they identify people who are fans of particular Idol contestants. The chosen audience members are asked to prepare a brief sentence about why they like that person. When it is about time to begin shooting, the floor director for *Idol Tonight!* comes out and welcomes us. He tells us to be enthusiastic and shows us how he will prompt us to applaud. He tells about a little trick they are planning on playing on Justin Guarini. At one point where Justin introduces himself, the director is going to cue the audience to yell, "Hi Justin!"

With the introduction complete we are directed onto the "set," if you can call it that, for *Idol Tonight!*

The location for *Idol Tonight!* is just outside Studio 36 where *American Idol* is taped. It consists of a small stage, some banners, metal railings, and a couple pillars with TV Guide logos attached to them. There is enough standing room for seventy-five people, and since not enough people showed up for the taping, a chunk of the real *American Idol* audience has joined us. I am

lucky enough to get a spot near the front. A row of good-looking girls is directed to sit on the railings to the right, where they will be getting a lot of camera time.

From where I stand I can see Chris Sligh sitting in the background. He is talking to one of the members of the crew. In front of him, on the stage are two cameras. There is a tall crane-style camera off to the right of the set, and a cameraman immediately in front of me is setting up a hand-held camera. Above the stage are spotlights. The light from the spotlights is filtered through gauzy white material, so that it casts a diffuse white light upon the stage.

The soundman to my left is having trouble with his headset and someone comes over to him and talks about what he can and can't hear. They manage to work it out.

The director announces the stars of the show and we all applaud and "woot!" as Justin Guarini, Rosanna Tovar, and guest host, Paris Bennett (she is covering for Kimberly Caldwell) take the stage. Not only does the camera add ten pounds, but it makes people look bigger in general. Both Justin and Rosanna are slim. Paris is slim and really short.

Soon the taping begins. We applaud and yell on cue. The hosts read from the teleprompter and begin their recap of the previous night. It was "Latin night" on *American Idol* and the eight remaining contestants got a chance to meet Jennifer Lopez. While Jennifer was the host, it seems that the biggest pop artist associated with Latin music these days is Gloria Estefan. LaKisha sang "Conga." Haley Scarnato sang "Turn the Beat Around." Jordan Sparks sang "The Rhythm is Going to Get You." None of the performances during the night were all that spectacular, leading to a surprising conclusion. The final contestant to sing was Sanjaya and, for once, he seemed to be in his element. The result was his best performance so far, and even Simon was forced to admit that, "It wasn't horrible."

Chris Sligh is the first guest on *Idol Tonight!* He is asked about Sanjaya and answers diplomatically. He also talks about how odd it is to watch the show on TV rather than being there in person, and about how he got mobbed in New York where he thought he might have more anonymity.

There is a technical glitch, and so he and the hosts are forced to recap their conversation. It follows the same flow as before, but it isn't word for word.

While Justin and Paris are talking to Chris, Rosanna comes down into the audience and stands about a foot in front of me to interview another audience member. When the audience member talks to the camera, the cameraman brings the camera within inches of her face, and you can see her fight the urge to flinch.

"Don't worry," the cameraman tells her during the break afterwards, "It won't look as close on TV. The camera has a wide-angle lens."

*Idol Tonight!* is an exciting television show to be on because the technicians, the cameramen, and the hosts are all right there. I watch as the sound guy plugs in each of the hosts for sound. The cameraman with the hand-held camera tells certain parts of the audience what he is going to do next and where he is going to run with the camera. The hosts come down into the audience and stand right next to you.

During commercial breaks there is a flurry of autograph signing. Young girls, and one guy, rush up to get signatures. I am impressed by how gracious Justin Guarini is. He talks to all the girls that come up to him and asks them questions. He's approachable and friendly.

For the *American Idol* fan, an *Idol Tonight!* taping is a dream. A lady standing next to me has been to three previous tapings and has a book full of autographs. Today she adds signatures for Paris Bennett, Chris Sligh, and season five finalist, Mandisa,<sup>12</sup> who are all on the show.

In total, the taping for *Idol Tonight!* lasts an hour and a half, which is less time than we spent waiting in line. When the taping is complete, the director thanks us and an OCA staff member directs us back to the row of benches where people sit for the live *American Idol* show. He splits us into two groups: the people who have tickets for the *American Idol* results show and those of us who don't. Most of us who don't, do have tickets to *American Idol Extra*, but that quickly becomes irrelevant.

"What are the chances of us getting into the real show?" one of the ladies sitting next to me asks. The OCA rep is reluctant to give a definitive answer, but it seems that there might be a chance.

I'm jazzed by the possibility. On average, people wait a year or more for tickets to the real shows. I've been on that waiting list for months now. But, now, it seems, I might be able to get in immediately. Alice, the lady with the filled autograph book, tells me that, in the three times she has gone to *Idol Tonight!*, she got into the real show once. A big group of people who showed up for *Idol Tonight!* leave. I think they are making a mistake.

When we first sit down on the bench and begin speculating about whether or not we will get in, it is four o'clock. An hour and a half later, we are told that we definitely have a chance. The show will begin at six so that it can be shown live on the East Coast and then delayed elsewhere. They let all the people with tickets in. We are given "standby" wristbands and are put

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<sup>12</sup> Mandisa's unique name almost instantaneously gave her the "one name" status that few celebrities have. Her last name is Hundley.

at the front of the standby line. I am the fifth person back. My wife is going to be jealous when she finds out about this.

It is roughly ten minutes prior to the beginning of the live results show that they let me in and show me to a seat. The energy level in the studio is dramatically different than the dress rehearsal we attended. The crowd is louder. A comedian is stalking the stage warming up the audience. The band is tuning their instruments and checking levels in the background.

The warm-up guy stops to make an announcement. He asks that we stay after the show because they are going to be pre-recording a segment for a future show. It will feature Pink, who will be, live, on stage, tonight.

I am stoked, and I know my wife is going to be a lot more than jealous.

The warm-up man introduces the judges. We all stand and applaud, trying to get a glimpse around all the bobbing heads to see the judges as they enter. The stage manager seems impatient, and she does a countdown to the live show as the judges find their seats.

A spotlight hits Ryan Seacrest at the end of the stage. He begins his slow and dramatic intro to the show, with no trace of the casual dismissiveness he employs during the dress rehearsals. With the words, “This is *American Idol!*” we burst into applause. No one has to cue us.

The first segment features the group song. The *American Idol* group songs are frequently criticized as being cheesy, which is probably a fair accusation, but I find that I always enjoy them. At the end of the first segment, the judges are up from their chairs immediately, walking around talking to people. Even during the show, they don’t seem all that interested in what is going on. Simon gazes around distantly as if he doesn’t even care that there’s a show taking place.

The warm-up guy is back to his routine, mingling with the audience and asking people questions, but at this point, he has become nothing more than an annoyance. The stage manager interrupts him to explain something to the audience. One of the musical guests on the show tonight is Akon, but his performance is pre-recorded and he won't be on stage. "I don't want our audience here to be confused," the stage manager says.

Tonight's show is the first of the season in which the results will be dragged out over the space of an hour instead of a half-hour. When watching on TV, I prefer the half-hour format, but being there in person, I'm glad that it's an hour. That means more show to see.

The first bit of filler used is a video package of Ryan interviewing people at the Los Angeles Farmer's Market, which is just south of the studio. While the clip is running, Ryan moves down into the audience near where I'm sitting. The camera zooms in on Ryan and he announces Akon. To the audience at home, it looks like a live performance, but we are watching a video that was recorded after a previous show like the video of Pink's that we will see filmed tonight.

During the break that follows, Paula, flanked by a security guard, heads back into the audience to hug and talk to some people who are obviously friends of hers. When the break nears an end, the stage manager begins the countdown and the security guard almost has to drag Paula back to her chair. They barely make it.

About a half-hour into the show, Ryan announces the bottom three. The first two are Phil Stacey and Haley Scarnato. In the process of having the contestants stand up and hear the results, Ryan has Sanjaya stand up, then sit down, then stand up again. When it comes down to the remaining two possibilities for the bottom three (either Chris Richardson or Sanjaya) Ryan has

Sanjaya sit down for the final time. Chris is in the bottom three. There are boos as the audience learns that Sanjaya is not in the bottom three. It's hard not to feel bad for him personally.

During the commercial break, the contestants mill around on stage and talk to each other. Sanjaya walks over to Ryan and pretends to slap him in retaliation for being toyed with. Simultaneously, we are assaulted by the warm-up guy's banter. For a moment I wish that I could be watching commercials instead.

As the countdown back to airtime starts, the contestants retake their positions on stage and the judges return to their seats. Live again, Ryan announces that Chris Richardson can return to his seat with the other "safe" contestants, leaving Phil and Haley as the two possibilities of who might go home.

The highlight of the live show is Jennifer Lopez's song. It is a full-on stage performance with fog machines, pyrotechnics, lights, dancers, and an excellent vocal. She rocks the house, and the audience is on its feet. Ryan does a short interview with her afterwards before the commercials.

During the commercial break, the stage manager is quick to come out and have the stage doors opened to clear all the smoke. To the audience's right (and to the left of the stage) curtains are pulled back and two giant doors open up, revealing a five-story-high corridor to the outside. Once again I am reminded that we are in Hollywood, where walls can be stripped away at a moments notice and much is illusion. Some of the smoke drifts away, although not enough to clear the air entirely.

With the final countdown to show time, the gigantic doors, like the doors closing behind a 747 leaving an airport hanger, move back into place. The air is still filled with haze, and it is

against this smoky backdrop that Haley Scarnato learns her time on *American Idol* is over. She sings “Turn the Beat Around” as, somewhere in the editing room, the final credits roll.

As soon as the show is off the air, Haley gathers together with the other contestants and they move offstage. Audience members start to leave, but the stage manager reminds us that Pink is going to be performing and we should stick around.

It takes a long time for the crew to set up the stage for Pink. They have to shuffle parts of the audience around as they physically reposition some of the seats near the front of the stage. Pink’s band, minus Pink, takes the stage and begins testing their drums, guitars, and keyboards. Only when everything is in place, does Pink take the stage. Her blond hair juts upwards from her forehead. She is wearing a tight black dress that looks more revealing than it actually is. It looks like somebody has wrapped lengths of black tape around her body. She tugs at the dress uncomfortably and doesn’t look at all at home in high heels.

When she starts to sing, all awkwardness disappears, at least for a moment. Shortly into the song, she stops it because what she hears on her earpiece sounds muffled. They work with the sound and try again. It’s a great song, the second one I’ve heard from her latest album.

Around the second take, people begin to filter out of the audience. The stage manager begs them to stay. The pages and OCA staff shift into a state of mild panic. They gesture at each other and begin shuffling people forward so that when the camera scans the audience, there will be no empty spots. When the third take begins, more people leave. The audience seaters look at each other and shrug. What can they do?

I’m not going anywhere. Why would I? I’m in Hollywood. I’m on the set of *American Idol* and Pink is performing for free! What’s the hurry? Why not take all this in?

But, eventually, it does end, and there's nowhere to go but home. When I get there two hours later, my wife is in bed watching the results show, and Jennifer Lopez is strutting across the stage with fireworks blasting behind her. It looks so small and sounds so tinny on the TV. I brush my teeth, change, and prop myself up with a pillow behind my back as Haley sings her final song.

Seen through the flickering window into another world that sits not far from the foot of our bed, the stage she stands on seems like such a far and distant reality.

## Chapter 33 – Internal Gauges

On Chris Sligh's last day on *America Idol*, before he had even heard the results, he had a strong feeling that he was going home. He went around and thanked everyone he had worked with, from the makeup people to the vocal coach. He made a bet with Phil Stacey that he would be leaving that night and packed his bags.

On the interviews after the results show, Chris seemed perfectly content with the idea that his time as a contestant on *American Idol* had come to an end. He had gone farther than he thought he would, while achieving his goal of making it to the Top Ten, which enables him to be a part the summer *American Idol* tour.

Chris had a different gauge of success than some people do. Others would have been miserable or even angry at getting "kicked off" when they did, especially when Sanjaya remained. Mr. Sligh had different expectations.

It is easy to think that other people have the same sets of expectations or sensibilities that we do, but it is a common mistake. The more people you get to know, the more apparent it becomes that people have incredibly different standards for a wide variety of things, including the following:

- How long you should be in a relationship before you say, "I love you."
- How long you should stay single between relationships.
- What is considered obscene.

- What is considered grotesque.
- What is considered an acceptable amount of violence in movies and television.
- What consists of “talking too much” and what consists of “not talking enough.”
- What is an appropriate public display of affection and what isn’t.
- How much of your feelings you should reveal to other people.
- What is considered wealthy and what isn’t.
- What is an acceptable amount of pay.
- What is a desired level of accomplishment in life.
- What is an acceptable amount of recognition.
- What is considered “loud” in terms of conversational voice and what isn’t.
- What is considered “loud” when listening to music.
- How much abuse you should tolerate from your fellow human beings.
- What is too skinny. What is too fat.
- What is too corny and what isn’t.
- What is too spicy and what is too bland.
- How much mayonnaise is too much?

With any thing in life where quantity, volume, distance, time, or expectations can be measured, human beings all have their own sense of what is ideal and what isn’t. We all have our own sense of etiquette. It often doesn’t even occur to us that other people might have such different standards until we are confronted with them.

There were at least two times on *American Idol*, where Simon commented about Haley Scarnato’s attire or lack of it. It seemed to me, like pretty much every time I saw her on camera,

she was showing skin. At first, I thought this trait of hers was pretty great. But it reached a point where it began to work against her. I, as well as some of the people I work with, and — obviously — Simon Cowell, began to see it as either manipulative or in poor taste. She had crossed a line that didn't agree with other people's internal gauges. I'm not sure that she was aware of it.

People often differ from each other in unexpected ways. Sometimes being aware of these differences is of little importance, but in some situations, such as new relationships, new social settings, politics, and even being on *American Idol*, being aware of these differences and adapting to them can make all the difference in the world.

## Chapter 34 – Seven to Six

On Tuesday, April 17, the nation is recovering from the vicious attacks that occurred on the Virginia Tech campus the previous day, in which thirty-three people lost their lives. It almost seems inappropriate to do anything fun at all. As a result, the introduction to *American Idol* is subdued. Ryan Seacrest wears a black suit and acknowledges the losses that people across the country have endured. The introduction music plays, but even that doesn't seem peppy as usual.

The guest host is country star Martina McBride, and after the introduction we hear her deliver a message to the contestants that they have heard a couple times before. She tells them that in order to do a song justice, you have to be in touch with the lyrics and you have to tell the story of the song.

Phil Stacey is the first on stage. He takes on a Keith Urban song and conquers it. In fact, it is his best performance of the season so far. When I saw him sing live on "Tony Bennett" night, Phil proved to me that he had a voice, but tonight he proved to America that he has personality and that he can deliver a sensational performance. The judges are blown away.

Jordin Sparks follows Phil and doesn't let anyone down. She maintains the intensity and manages to keep "the spark" alive with a soaring vocal as she sings "Broken Wing." Simon's says to her that this is "the first time I actually believe you could win *American Idol*."

I'm hoping this might be one of those nights when all of the contestants shine. It might make up for a couple of the nights that have gone before, but it's not to be. Sanjaya is next. Martina McBride gives him some much-needed advice, which is that he needs to sing more

forcefully rather than softly as he has in the past. When Sanjaya comes up on stage, his hair is forced back by a big red bandanna, producing a big poof of curls behind his head. He looks like he might have just climbed off a boxcar and stumbled into some Midwestern town in search of a handout. His chosen song is “Something to Talk About.” His comments beforehand reveal that at least he is aware of the double meaning.

Afterwards, Simon rips him apart, and when Ryan jumps in to defend Sanjaya, the tension becomes palpable. Simon tells Ryan to shut up, and then moments later, when Ryan says that Simon has never complimented Sanjaya, Simon responds, “I liked him last week, big mouth!” You can feel the love.

When LaKisha’s turn comes, she chooses a song that doesn’t seem to fit her style — Carrie Underwood’s “Jesus Take the Wheel.” Chris Richardson’s song that follows is equally lackluster. I write down the word “nasally” while he is singing, and the judges repeat the word on television almost as soon as Chris is done. But Simon doesn’t stop there. He describes Chris’s performance as “completely and utterly insignificant.”

When Ryan interviews Chris, Chris says that “nasal” is a vocal style, which baffles Simon. Chris also takes a moment to mention the victims of the Virginia Tech tragedy and their families. When the camera cuts back to Simon, he is rolling his eyes, but it’s not quite clear why. *That might present I problem*, I think, but the show moves on.

Melinda, bless her heart, gets everything back on track with a rocking rendition of the Julie Reeve’s song, “Trouble is a Woman.” The nature of the song gives Melinda a chance to show some spunk in her attitude, something she is desperately in need of, and it suits her well. She is already a professional. When Simon compliments her afterwards — he has little choice —

he asks her to do him one favor before he does, which is not to act surprised. You can see her reminding herself to accept the compliments as if she deserves them. She manages to pull it off.

Blake performs after Melinda. His take on “When the Stars Go Blue” is nothing more than boring, and the close-ups on him draw my attention to the fact that his mouth looks kind of funny when he sings. I look to the left while I’m watching and notice the aquarium screensaver that my wife has on her laptop. The fish have the same expression as Blake! It’s definitely not his best night, and the show limps into the finish gate.

At the end of the show, Simon — speaking for all three of the judges — also acknowledges the families of those who are affected by the incidents at Virginia Tech. While probably not calculated, this is probably a wise thing to do, given that the second biggest *American Idol* controversy this week, next to Sanjaya’s longevity, will be the look that Simon made after Chris Richardson’s mention of the Virginia Tech incident.

During the results show, the first thing that Simon does is to explain it. While Chris was talking to Simon, Simon was talking to Paula about the idea that “nasal is a vocal style,” and he says he rolled his eyes at what Paula said rather than at what Chris said. I am reminded of how much Simon failed to pay attention to what is happening on stage when I saw the show live, so what he says is consistent with my experience.

Usually the results shows are not as interesting as the actual performance shows, but this one feels like an exception. Fergie sings, although I suspect the performance is pre-recorded, because, during the wide shots, you don’t see the mini-bleachers for the contestants anywhere on the stage.

What is brilliant about tonight’s show, however, is how the producers line up the contestants and do the elimination. Sure, it’s cruel to the contestants; they are shuffled around

like pawns in some conceptual game of chess, but the way it keeps you guessing is downright strategic.

Chris Richardson is sent to one side of the stage, and I think, *Okay, well, that's the losing side*. Chris's performances have been poor, and he's been in the bottom three before.

Then Sanjaya is sent to the other side of the stage. That makes sense. I could see him sticking around for another week. I have been predicting that he might just do that. It's my way of hoping for the best but expecting the worse.

But then Jordan is sent to join Chris and everything flips. There's no way that Jordin should go home, so maybe I was wrong before. When LaKisha is asked to stand with Sanjaya, it becomes equally as vague. Has LaKisha so fallen in favor with the American public that she is now in the bottom three?

Phil joins Chris and Jordan. Blake joins LaKisha and Sanjaya. I have no idea which group is the bottom three.

Next, Melinda is asked to stand between the two groups. Everyone knows that she is in a class by herself. Whatever group she is a part of is the one that will be staying. Singling her out like this, however, has got to make things difficult for her. How much resentment is that going to cause with the other contestants backstage and throughout the following weeks?

Ryan asks Melinda to join the group she thinks will be "safe." It isn't a fair request, but I can't help but suspect it's a setup. They did the same thing with Bo Bice two years ago, and he chose to stand between the two groups. Melinda, whether it is scripted or not, takes a seat on the floor. While she's there, Ryan tells her to scoot to her left, meaning that she, Chris, Jordin, and Phil are safe.

That leaves Sanjaya, LaKisha, and Blake in the final three. Simon Cowell's face breaks out into a great big smile, and Ryan comments on it.

"I see a trend here," Simon says. It would be a shocker if either Blake or LaKisha went home.

But who knows? More surprising things have happened on the show. It is here that we are left hanging while Martina McBride sings, during several commercial breaks, and during a video segment in which the contestants go to see a special screening of *Shrek 3*.

You probably know the results already, but in true *American Idol* style, I'll keep you hanging, because what I want to talk about at this moment is the positioning of the contestants in terms of voter results. Two weeks ago, no one would have thought that LaKisha and Blake would be in the bottom three. One week ago, I would not have predicted that Phil or Chris would be in the Top Three. Their current status dramatically demonstrates that what America votes on is not a contestant's prior record or reputation, but on the last song they sang. Simon Cowell made this point in season one of *American Idol* when the talented Tamyra Gray was voted off the show before Nikki McKibben. He said, "You've learned, unfortunately, a very very important lesson, that you are judged on your last song."

This is one reason why fame is so fleeting and fickle. The public has a short memory. What sticks in their mind most vividly is what you've done recently. The downside to this is that the impressive things you do are quickly forgotten. The upside is that the stupid things you do may also be forgotten, (although who knows what journalist is going to bring them up again when you thought you had finally put them behind you). The forgetfulness factor can hurt you, but you can also take advantage of it.

This “impression over time” also occurs in interpersonal relationships. Sometimes the attitude is, “What have you done for me lately?” But it can also allow people to smooth over a multitude of past mistakes.

I know of a couple instances where I haven’t seen someone for a while, and I think, “I should go see them.” When I do, I remember why I haven’t taken the effort to see them for a long time. But the reverse also happens. I have met up with people after a long break and have been reminded of how delightful they are and how fun it is to be around them. I often experience this with movies, forgetting just how good they were or how terrible they were. Our minds take the edge off things over time.

Not only are we forgetful creatures, but we forget surprisingly quickly. It’s not a profound revelation, but it’s interesting to observe in action. It accounts for why we can watch a television show repeatedly and not be bored. It supplies us with a partial explanation of why we can read an account of something, even though we already know how it ends, and still be interested in it.

So what we were talking about before? Ah, yes, It’s coming to me now. It’s not Blake, because Ryan Seacrest has just told him that he is safe, and he is not going home. That leaves Sanjaya and LaKisha, both of whom took a beating from the judges the night before.

Ryan announces that it is Sanjaya whose journey is over.

As we watch the video package recapping Sanjaya’s days, I think about how much we have watched these contestants go through, and how much of it we have already forgotten.

My wife is surprised to find herself crying. “I didn’t think I would ever cry for Sanjaya,” she says.

Jointly, we cannot help feel that he has been through a lot. “It’s not his fault that people keep voting for him,” is a phrase that I have begun to repeat.

But it’s a good time for him to go. He’s probably run out of different hairstyles as it is. About the only two options he has left are to shave his head bald like Phil Stacey or to go for the Princess Leia earmuff look.

It feels like the end of an era, the end of a chapter. Now we can get on with the serious competition. That’s especially convenient as next week’s “Idol Gives Back” is being promoted as one of the “biggest Idol events yet.”

## Chapter 35 – Working Together

I've always loved the fact that artists in the music business so often work together and cooperate on projects. I know of no other industry where there is the same level of overlap. Musicians often appear on each other's albums, collaborate on songs, and produce each other's work. And, of course, Randy Jackson has worked with everybody.

Also impressive about the music business is the number of causes it has backed and the amount of money it has raised for charities. Every since “We are the World,” musicians have been well known for “giving back.” Why is this? Billy Joel answers the question this way:

“I have been asked many times, ‘Why do musicians give so much time to charitable causes?’ I know a few musicians who are motivated by pure guilt—the result of a dissolute and misspent youth combined with the onset of remorse and middle age... Some are motivated to activism by a sincere idealism, which musicians and artists in general must have in spades to be able to deal with the disappointments and cynicism we all encounter in what seems an often endlessly futile labor of love.”<sup>13</sup>

Bono is a perfect example of the artist who is associated with social and political causes. If there's a charity event, he'll probably be there. “Idol Gives Back,” is no exception. Bono is the mentor for the contestants on the performance night of the two-day “Idol Give Back” event. Oddly enough, he is not seen on camera during the show, unlike all the other mentors in the past who have been shown in video clips.

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<sup>13</sup> As quoted in *Take This Advice: The Most Nakedly Honest Graduation Speeches Ever Given*, edited by Sandra Bark (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2005), pp. 54-55.

Perhaps this is in order to give more time to the video packages about the “Idol Gives Back” program, which take up a good portion of the show. The most striking of these is the footage of Ryan and Simon in Africa. In a recent TV Guide Interview, Simon said, “I’m always very uncomfortable about multimillionaires preaching to people.” Luckily for him, he doesn’t need to. The video showing conditions in Africa does it for him. In the poverty stricken areas that Ryan and Simon visit, Simon’s adjectives of “intolerable,” “terrible,” and “unbelievable” are fitting terms.

Later in the show, the cameras visit areas in Louisiana, Kentucky, and Arizona where people are in need of help as well. Simon visits a warehouse in downtown Los Angeles that is staffed with volunteers whose job is to make sure that homeless and starving people get food. Simon comments that he didn’t even know places like it existed.

While a large portion of the show is dedicated to the “Idol Gives Back” program, this is interspersed with the performances of the remaining six contestants. Half of them — Melinda Doolittle, Jordin Sparks, and Chris Richardson — do remarkably well. The other three do not.

On the night between the two “Idol Gives Back” shows, Sanjaya Malakar provides a humorous break. He appears on *Late Night With David Letterman* reciting the appropriately titled Top Ten List of “Things I Learned On *American Idol*.” The one that makes me laugh the most is item number two, which is simply, “Nothing.”

The Wednesday night Idol results show picks up where the Tuesday show left off with more footage from Africa as well as locations throughout the United States where poverty and hunger remain a problem. Because of this ongoing theme, the show seems more like a continuation of the previous night than most of the results shows do. The elimination of a contestant takes a back seat to the charity drive. Throughout the show, Ryan announces that the

results are going to be “more shocking than ever,” and I recall that he said something similar before the end of the show the night before. He said that the show would contain “one of the biggest shocks that we have ever had on *American Idol*.” Was he talking about the results then? If so, how could he know what the results were before America voted? I have a feeling they’re toying with us.

The main thrust of the show, though, is raising money for “Idol Gives Back.” In learning about the program through a variety of video packages, where we are presented with pictures of despair and the possibility of hope.

I’m impressed with some of the things that are being done through “Idol Gives Back.”

Every penny that is spent towards education both here at home and in Africa is worth it. Education is vital. I am encouraged by the video of a family in Kentucky where the children in a family are learning skills their mother never had. Echoing in my head is the proverb that says, “Give a man a fish and he will have a meal. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.”

It’s excellent that, with a few dollars, we can provide drugs that will cure malaria and mosquito nets that will prevent it. If only all such problems were so easily solved.

Whenever I look at these issues in any depth, the thing that strikes me is how complex they are. It ties back to what I talked about several chapters ago; things are usually harder than they look. I don’t say this to be discouraging, and certainly not to suggest that we don’t try, but we should avoid the trap of saying, “How hard can it be?” In order to solve a difficult problem, sometimes you first have to understand it, and this involves coming to terms with how complex it is.

People talk about feeding the starving in other countries as if it should be the easiest thing to do, as if all it requires is “dollars a day.” But they completely forget that, as I mentioned

earlier, when food is delivered to some places in Africa, it may be confiscated by tribal warlords and then sold on the open market. The people who need it may never get it, and will never know it was sent to them.

In order to get it to these locations, you need a way to get it there. If there is no infrastructure, no roads, no means of transport, and many of the other things we take for granted, then it becomes all that more difficult.

When we realize that there are homeless and starving people in our own country, which was made clear very quickly by the videos shown on *American Idol* and was even evident as I stood in line outside CBS Television City, then we see that there has to be another level of complexity to these problems. In our country, we don't face obstacles like tribal warlords, and yet we still have these issues to deal with. Some homeless people are mentally ill, so the problem of taking care of them is indicative of a much larger one that involves the health care and social welfare systems of the entire country.

One of the greatest obstacles we face in making the world a better place is that we don't all agree on what that means.

Surprisingly, the songs sung by the contestants the night before give us a little insight into this. Melinda sang, "There Will Come a Day," by Faith Hill. The song has strong religious overtones talking about how "Every knee shall bow." It's a song that allowed Melinda to, as she has been known to say, "get her Jesus on." The song conveys one vision for an idealized future.

But wait! Blake sings, John Lennon's "Imagine," a song which contains the words, "Imagine there's no Heaven," and later the words, "And no religion too." The lyrics to this song express atheistic, as well as communistic sentiments, which are opposed to the ideological content of the song that Melinda sang.

I find comfort in the fact that two opposing ideologies can be expressed on the same stage and are part of a celebration in which people are joined together doing good for the rest of humanity. At the same time, I am not sure that many people are aware of the disparity that is presented here.

Differing viewpoints of what is ideal and what isn't present their own problems. War and death have come about due to these disagreements. Much of the conflict in the Middle East is over parcels of land that people claim they have a divine right to. Every day, American sons and daughters are killed in Iraq because Muslim extremists are strapping bombs to their bodies and walking into crowded places. It is paradoxical that most people are united in the idea that we want to do the right thing for humankind, but there are those who will kill each other over what they think that is.

Meanwhile religious extremists in our own country such as Pat Robertson could be helping those who are victims of Katrina, (the very victims that "Idol Gives Back" is trying to help) but instead, such people wage a verbal war against these victims by saying that Katrina was God's response to the sinful nature of New Orleans. Mr. Robertson has committed Jennifer Hudson's mistake of ascribing thoughts and motives to God. He has also shown a complete lack of compassion and simultaneously relieved himself of any obligation to help those in need. Conflicting ideologies have become part of the problem.

I was watching an episode of the show "B.S.!" from the stage magicians Penn & Teller, and they tell the story of Norman Borlaug.<sup>14</sup> Norman developed a variety of foods — strains of wheat, rice, and corn — that could survive much longer and feed millions of people better than the crops that already exist in impoverished countries. When he was allowed to introduce these foods into new areas, he saved millions of lives. Sometimes, however, import of these foods into

countries like Zambia is stopped because the food is “genetically engineered.” Leaders don’t want the people in their country to have the food because it is “unnatural.”

Ideology, which is supposed to help us, can kill. And how do you fight that? How do you work with that? How do you change it or get people to compromise? You must deal with complicated psychology, politics, and economics. It gets ugly all too fast.

The current conditions in Iraq also demonstrate the depth of these problems. We have gone in to that country trying to force a democracy on people who have demonstrated that they may not have the education or skills to run one. Some have speculated that Iraq was better off under a vicious dictator.

But just when I begin to get depressed about this and fear that maybe there is no hope, I am reminded of the better side of human nature and how it can overcome such obstacles.

In a graduation speech given in 2004 by Njabulo Ndebele, a poet and activist from Cape Town, South Africa, I found reassurance in the words he had to say about what the leaders in his country did to bring an end to Apartheid:

“Ten years ago my country achieved its freedom from tyranny and oppression. But we did not attain our freedom in the usual way. Our road towards liberty could be described as counterintuitive. This means that in a world that had become conditioned to think of conflict, particularly between black people and white people, as something that ends in victors and the vanquished, of the winner taking it all, it was strange, first, not to have had a racial war. And secondly it was strange that the contending races negotiated themselves out of conflict in favor of an outcome with two victors and no losers. Very strange! What kind of people give up power? And what kind of people give up the possibility of attaining it?

“What most of us recognized in South Africa, at the very last moment, was just how much we needed one another. We realized that violent confrontation promised only destruction and a long life of shared misery. It was a choice we made. It was a choice against habit, the habit to seek to march into final battle.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See B.S.!, the first season, episode 11: Eat This! (Diets & Food).

Njabulo goes on to talk about how the leaders of his country, including Nelson Mandella and others, had to give up long-held ideologies and habits in order to do the right thing and improve conditions in their country. He talks about the amazing insight and strength it takes to do this. Perhaps there is a lesson here for our own administration who, with the war in Iraq, has confused stubbornness with strength and continues to “stay the course,” when a change in plans would be wiser.

What happened in South Africa gives me hope.

I wonder for a moment why the improved conditions in South Africa can't spread upwards into the rest of the continent, but some of the reasons become immediately apparent. There are borders between South Africa and the rest of the continent, just as there are borders between the United States and Mexico. In our case, we want to help Mexico, but we can't just go in and take it over. Mexico doesn't want us to, and I'm not sure that our government would want to. Economically, Mexico might be more of a burden than an asset. These are just a few concerns among hundreds.

I quickly slide from hope to frustration and then back again. The fact that people support a cause like “Idol Gives Back” is encouraging. The website that Bono and others promote during the show, [www.one.org](http://www.one.org), speaks to the fact that humanity is one. I think that as a planet we need to learn the lesson that the leaders in South Africa exemplified. We are in this together. If we want to survive, there are going to be more times when we will need to cooperate instead of fight. We are also going to have to give up old habits and change mindsets, which may possibly be one of the toughest things there is to do.

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<sup>15</sup> As quoted in *Take This Advice: The Most Nakedly Honest Graduation Speeches Ever Given*, edited by Sandra Bark (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2005), pp. 122-123.

## Chapter 36 – Bon Jovi Night

Two weeks before “Idol Gives Back,” I received an e-mail offer from On Camera Audiences to go see Celine Dion on the *American Idol* stage. They were pre-recording her performance for the show. I didn’t go because that would have meant driving an hour and a half to L.A., watching Celine sing one song over several takes, and then driving all the way back home again. After watching the second night of “Idol Gives Back” on which they used the recording, I was glad that I didn’t. A video of Elvis singing was superimposed over her song so that it appeared that Celine and Elvis were doing a duet. To me, it seemed completely incongruous in the midst of the seriousness of “Idol Gives Back.” The show was going along fine and then it suddenly plummeted into bizarro land. “Celine and Elvis?” I said, “What the...?”

When I commented on this at work, I was surprised that a couple of people did not realize the performance must have been pre-recorded, and they were a lot more impressed with it than I was. They thought that the audience in the studio saw what we saw on TV. In actuality, all the audience saw the night of the broadcast was a video that had already been edited together. At least no one said, “I told you Elvis was still alive!” Ken Warwick, one of Idol’s executive producers, explained that creating the illusion of Elvis on stage required the use of rotoscope technology, and it was both expensive and time-consuming.

In other recent *American Idol* events, an unflattering mug shot of 2005 Top Ten Finalist, Jessica Sierra was all over the news this past weekend. The details of the story are sketchy. We are only told that she hit some guy in a bar, apparently hitting him with a heavy glass, and was

charged with assault. She immediately posted bail. It's obvious that the only reason we're hearing about it is because Jessica was once on *American Idol*.

I can't help but think that it must be frustrating and disappointing for her to find herself in this situation after having once been someone that had a nation of fans cheering for her. The line between famous and infamous is far too easy to cross.

The *American Idol* contest returns in earnest this week, with some serious competition. On Wednesday night, the contestants pull out all the stops and show that they are truly interested in winning this competition. It's good to see and makes for an exciting show, especially after Simon Cowell has said that many contestants are suffering from "Daughtryitis." What he means is that they aren't trying as hard as they could because they know that, just like Chris Daughtry, they can have a career and succeed without reaching the number one spot.

When I hear that the mentor for the night is Jon Bon Jovi and the theme is Bon Jovi's music, I wonder if there will be enough songs for the contestants to choose from. Limiting them to Bon Jovi is a lot more restrictive than, say, "the 80's" or even "classic rock."

There's no need for concern, though, with the exception of Jordin Sparks, all of the contestants find songs that fit them well. LaKisha does so well with her take on "This Ain't a Love Song" that Simon says he wants to kiss her. Ryan leads LaKisha down to Simon and makes it happen. Phil Stacey once again shows a surprising versatility with "Blaze of Glory." Melinda Doolittle pulls out the stops with "Have a Nice Day," and shows that she can rock. She adopts the perfect attitude for the song and proves that she is, by no means, "coasting." She is going to give it her all until her final moment on stage, no matter when that will be.

The judges (both on TV and at home) are split on how well they think Chris Richardson does with "Wanted." My wife thinks it's great. Me, not so much. But the standout performance

of the night comes from Blake Lewis, who, making a huge gamble, reworks “You Give Love a Bad Name.” He turns it into a beatbox tune, but does it so well that even Jon Bon Jovi seems impressed. Randy calls it the most original version of a song ever on *American Idol*. I think that if Melinda or Jordin won, I might or might not buy their albums. I kind of know what they would sound like already. But if Blake won, I would definitely buy his CD, because I know it would be fresh and original. He has made a definitive statement this time around. I’ve also gained a greater appreciation for Blake’s sense of humor over the past weeks.

*Who’s going to get thrown off?* I wonder. They’re all good and all six have earned their current positions. From here on out, it’s going to be especially tough to watch the contestants be eliminated. I don’t want to see any of them go, yet, we have to lose two people on Thursday night. My plan is to drive into L.A. and find out in person who we are going to lose. I already have the day off and tickets to go see *Idol Tonight!* and *American Idol Extra*. Okay, maybe I’ve become a little more involved in this whole thing than I originally planned.

## Chapter 37 – A Weird Day at CBS

I'm back outside of Studio 36 in CBS Television City. It's funny, I think, how things change from visit to visit. The guy from On Camera Audiences (OCA) is leading us around the side of the studio to the security station and the metal benches where we will wait to be part of *Idol Tonight!*, but instead of leading us around the trailers beside the studio, he leads us through them. For the first time, I get a chance to see what the trailers are actually for instead of having to guess. It's very clear from the signs on the doors. One says "Hair." A second says, "Makeup."

We take our places on the benches just outside the studio. On the other side of the wall, there is a rehearsal taking place for *Idol Tonight!* When I walk over to one of the porta-potties, I take my time and look over to see what they're doing. There are two people standing in for the hosts of the show, running through the lines while the technicians play the video segments for the show.

It doesn't seem like very long before they let us on to the set, and I am lucky enough to get a spot close to where I stood the last time. I am positioned right behind where the hosts stand when they interview members of the audience — guaranteed camera time.

For some reason, the energy level seems higher today. I don't why. Is it because we are drawing closer to the season finale?

The stage director asks to see the signs that everyone in the audience has with them. The people who will be staying to see the live results show have signs for Blake and for Jordin. There are also signs for Bon Jovi and Simon. The director says that they cannot use the signs for Blake

and Jordin in this show because there aren't signs for any of the other contestants. TV Guide cannot run the risk of showing favoritism towards any of the contestants.

Gina Glocksen is walking around backstage. Kimberly Caldwell is also there, which is cool because she wasn't at the last taping I attended. She takes the stage along with Justin and Rosanna. They face away from the audience as makeup artists dab their foreheads and adjust their hair. Both Kimberly and Rosanna are wearing heels and have short skirts today, causing them to occasionally reach back and make adjustments.

The stage director counts us down, and the show begins.

From this point on, it's business as usual. They do a recap of *American Idol* from the night before and then bring Gina Glocksen up on stage to discuss how it feels to be thrown off the show. She says, "It sucks." I love her frankness about this. You go girl.

For me, the most interesting part of the show is what happens between the takes. When Rosanna Tavaréz is down in the audience standing directly in front of me, Justin Guarini and Kimberly Caldwell are up on stage getting their makeup touched up, but this doesn't stop them from interacting. Music booms from speakers overhead. When "I Want it that Way," by the Backstreet Boys begins to play, Justin makes fun of the chorus. He sings the words "Tell me why" in a very forced voice, stretching out the last syllable so that it sounds like "Tell me why-eee." For some reason, it's hilarious. I can't help but bust up watching him. Rosanna Tavaréz is laughing just as hard, seemingly oblivious to the makeup man who is poking at her brows.

It is obvious watching them, that Rosanna and Justin have fun together and that they have chemistry. More so, I dare say, than Justin and Kelly.<sup>16</sup>

When Kimberly Caldwell is in the audience, a lady asks about her high heels. Kimberly jokes that she needs to wear them because of her lousy pedicure. She pulls off her shoe and

shows us her feet. “See,” she says. “One nail is all cracked. It’s awful.” She slides her shoe back on before the cameras start up again.

The guest after Gina is Kimberly Locke, third place finalist from season two. She is out promoting her latest CD, which was released yesterday.

There seem to be a lot of technical difficulties on this week’s show and the taping goes longer than usual. A couple segments require several takes before they are good to go, causing the hosts to have to recap their lines and their conversations.

Wrapping the show up is Shawna Malcom from TV Guide. She has a regular TV Guide column about *American Idol* and is, of course, a regular “guest” on *Idol Tonight!*.

When *Idol Tonight!* is over, I’m eager to see what the rep from OCA has to say about our chances of getting into the results show. There are several groups in front of me. He asks how many people are in each group and then huddles together with them, whispering some kind of offer. Try as I might, I cannot make out what he is saying. A couple of the people turn him down, so he comes to me.

“How many people in your party?” he asks.

“One,” I say.

He explains what is going on. “We don’t have room in the results show today, but if you’ll go be a part of the audience for *The Late Late Show With Craig Ferguson*, then we’ll send you a free priority ticket for the results show next week. Do you want to do that?”

I only have a second to make my decision. If I didn’t get to see the results show today, then I really wanted to see *American Idol Extra* and the close-up interview of the two eliminated contestants. Then, again, if I do go to the Craig Ferguson show, I can get into the live results

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<sup>16</sup> Kelly Clarkson, that is.

show next week. *If*, that is, I'm willing to take a day off and drive out to Los Angeles one more time.

"Okay," I say.

Suddenly, the group of us is off to another part of the studio, pulled away from the world of *American Idol*. We follow the OCA rep across the length of the CBS lot to a separate set of buildings. We round a corner and are presented to Jason, another OCA rep, and asked to take a seat.

I have already decided to take a part in this whole process passively. Tell me where to go. Lead me where you will. I just love being in the studio and seeing what goes on there. It's fascinating.

But the group of women in line before me is not so passive: "My feet hurt! Why do we have to go clear over here? I'm hungry. I need something to drink. Where's the bathrooms? How are we are going to get our tickets for *American Idol*?"

Even though we have been asked to take a seat, some of the women immediately rush off to vending machines in the distance. One of the women who has stayed behind quizzes Jason about the tickets to the *American Idol* show next week and about the length of the show we are going to see right now. He brushes her off abruptly, causing her to become indignant.

She turns away from him, "Maybe you don't realize what a mother of five has to worry about!" she exclaims.

*Okay, already.* I look at the group of women who have disappeared over by the vending machines. They are standing near the main entrance of the CBS studios, and it provokes a flashback.

In 1984, fresh out of college with a bachelor's degree in radio and television communications, I interviewed for a job as an intern here at CBS. Down the hallway from the main entrance, in a room I recall as being nearly all white in décor, I was quizzed about what I wanted to do in the television industry and why I thought CBS should hire me as an intern.

I made several mistakes. Mistake number one was that I waited to try and get the internship after college. I should have done it while I was still enrolled, but I didn't because I was concerned about my grades. Mistake number two was that I never narrowed down my interests. I never chose one thing — like cameraman, sound tech, or editor — that I wanted to do. Instead, I just said I wanted to do “something creative.” That really is all I wanted, but saying that won't get you a job, and, from my experience, it just frustrates the interviewer.

My reverie is interrupted by Jason from OCA who has looked up from his paperwork and is now yelling, “Where did everybody go? I need you all over here!” The gaggle of women bustle back, and I join them in a circle around Jason. He writes down our names for the *American Idol* tickets and then tells us that they will call us. I'm skeptical, but I'm along for ride anyway.

Jason takes us into the building and leads us up four flights of steps. These dump us out into a hall filled with people. There is a long line that we are supposed to join. It ends in a room that is obviously under construction. Metal beams and wires lay everywhere. It's a lawsuit waiting to happen. Before I can think to trip and injure myself, the line moves down the hall and into the small studio where *The Late Late Show With Craig Ferguson* is shot.

Many of the people in the audience have come here with the sole purpose of seeing this one show recorded, but for those of us who have left the set of *Idol Tonight!*, it is a bizarre transition.

Overhead, flat screen TVs play video of previous musical guests, and the music fills the studio. The set looks like what you would expect from a talk show. A Hollywood cityscape is painted on the walls around us and on the backdrop. Lights are placed strategically for artistic effect. Tech people are setting up a drum kit and instruments for a band. A warm-up man roams the audience flicking small pieces of candy — Snickers and Milky Ways — at members of the audience. I catch a couple and wolf them down.

The studio is small. The audience section holds about one hundred people.

Someone taps me on the shoulder. He obviously works on the production crew. He asks me and the guy sitting beside me to move and directs us to different seats. My new seat is closer to the stage, but it is off to the side.

When my wife and I went to go see them film “Thank God You’re Here,” we saw them shuffle audience members like this, and now it’s happening to me. I assume it’s so the audience seen on camera represents a certain demographic range. After I’m seated, the man who asked me to move goes up on stage and eyes the crowd, looking to see if it needs to be further rearranged.

As I’m watching him, the music overhead cuts out, and the warm-up man tells us that they are going to record the musical guest for the show first, which is the band, Fountains of Wayne. Their song will be edited into the middle of the show later on. After the band sings, we see why they have to be filmed before the rest of the show, because their equipment takes up all of the stage.

Union workers clear the set of the equipment, while the warm-up man gets into his routine. It is only natural that I compare the atmosphere of this studio with the *American Idol* sets I have recently visited, and I am struck by some of the differences.

Much of what the warm-up man has to say is about how we should contribute to the show. He calls us “show enhancers” and drives home the point that we should laugh at everything even if it is not funny. He illustrates this by telling unfunny jokes and then walking around the audience with his fingers held up in the shape of two “L’s,” indicating that we should laugh, laugh, laugh. We are told that when Craig Ferguson comes out, we should keep standing and applauding even when he tells us to sit down. These instructions are given in a funny way, but the repeated insistence makes me uncomfortable. I feel dirty, seedy, as if I am being forced to participate in the cynical dirty lie they sometimes call Hollywood.

When the stage director comes out and asks us if we have seen the show before, some of us, like me, do not raise our hands.

“Wrong answer,” he says. “You’ve all seen the show before, and you love it.”

Compare this to *Idol Tonight!* When the stage director asked the audience if they had seen the show before, he seemed genuinely surprised at the number of raised hands. “Wow,” he said. And sure, we were asked to applaud and “show energy,” but all the stage director had to do during the show was tell us when we were coming in and out of a commercial break and raise and lower his hands. Our enthusiasm was real. We wanted to see the guests on the show. We probably would have applauded without prompting. The same goes for the real *American Idol* show. You really don’t have to tell the audience of over 300 people to act excited. They already are.

I wonder at the necessity of the forced enthusiasm requested of the audience for Craig’s show. Is it really all that essential?

When the show starts, I ask myself the question again. Craig Ferguson really is funny. You don’t have to prompt me to laugh at his material. I would anyway. As the show gets

underway, I truly enjoy it. The monologue is terrific. Right at the start, we discover that we have not escaped *American Idol* entirely. Craig jokes about President Bush appearing on *American Idol* and says that after he was on the show, America tried to vote him off. Naturally, there are a couple Sanjaya jokes as well.

The beginning monologue is followed by another, because, it turns out, they are recording elements of three different shows tonight. They are recording the monologues for both Wednesday and Friday nights. We will also see a variety of guests including Molly Shannon, Julia Sweeney, and Alice Cooper.

The show goes on, and it is not until seven that evening that I am back on the road home. There's no chance that I'll get to be a part of the live audience for *American Idol Extra*, which, in my experience, has proved to be a surprisingly difficult show to get on. CBS studios is too desperate for audience members to let you stand around on their lot for that long. I drive back through the streets of L.A., experiencing a weird bit of synchronicity as I do. On the corner south of CBS studios there are groups of people standing on the corners waving signs protesting the war in Iraq. It is set to the tune of John Cougar Mellencamp's "Ain't that America," which is blasting on my radio. This blends into the song, "Walking in L.A." which becomes the soundtrack for pedestrians who cross my path as I make my way down Fairfax Blvd.

I get home in time to see the last half-hour of the *Thank God You're Here* episode that my wife and I saw filmed months before so that we could get tickets to the *American Idol* dress rehearsal. Simultaneously, playing on the TV Guide channel is the *Idol Tonight!* episode where I am easy to spot during the show. Later that night will be the *Late Late Show With Craig Ferguson* that I also saw filmed earlier. If my wife were to ask me if I was famous today, I would have to say, "Yes."

I had hoped that during the day's events, I would learn who was booted off *American Idol*, but instead I learn about it at the same time as just about everyone else on the West Coast.

The hour-long results show is almost all filler. The only interesting thing is the actual results, and those you can get without watching the show. Phil Stacey is the first to be sent home. At the end of the show, Blake Lewis and Chris Richardson are the last two to remain standing in the center of the stage. One of them will be leaving the show along with Phil. Chris and Blake's interaction as they await the results gives us a hint as to what kind of friends they have become over the past months. Chris says that he would be willing to go home in order for his friend to stay. In the end, that is what happens.

On the *American Idol Extra* interview after the show, Chris is asked if he is unhappy about no longer being on the show, and he responds that he isn't, but when pressed, he admits that maybe there is a part of him that is disappointed.

## Chapter 38 – Disappointment and Regrets

It is interesting how people deal with disappointment, and from the *American Idol* auditions to the final results shows we witness a variety of ways to do so — some healthy, some not so healthy. Anger, denial, resentment, and bitterness are all ways of dealing with disappointment that we saw repeatedly during the auditions. It is not surprising that those who might be considered “losers” are those who most often deal with disappointment in negative ways. How a person deals with failure shows more about their character than how they deal with success. Would those people who went farther in the show have handled disappointment gracefully if they had been ejected from the show earlier on? It’s hard to say for sure, and it varies from individual to individual, but I’d be willing to bet there are many of them who would have been just as graceful as they are now. The traits that make them winners are also the traits that would make them good “losers.”

You’ll also see this in how people react to the *American Idol* results shows on blogs, message boards, and in the office. When their favorite gets kicked off, it is easy to find people who whine, complain, blame, accuse, and get angry about the results, even more so than the contestants themselves! There is a reason that such attitudes are reminiscent of the ones exhibited by contestants during the early rounds. These are not the attitudes that will help to make you successful.

Just about everyone who has been eliminated from the Top Ten so far have dealt with leaving the show by talking about how far they have gotten, the friends they've made, and by citing the many opportunities that being on *American Idol* has opened up for them. Most have found a bright side to look at.

But I also liked the response that Gina Glocksen gave on *Idol Tonight!*, when she said, with a smile on her face, "It sucks." At that moment, her attitude was "It is what it is, so deal with it."

Both of these attitudes (finding the silver lining and accepting things for what they are) work, although I personally prefer the later. I prefer this because I think we have gotten to the point in America where we over-rationalize. We feel compelled to justify everything. It's as if we have this desperate need to make every thing seem wonderful. I've got no problem with finding the good in bad situations. It is generally better than the option of being miserable and depressed, but I would also like to see this "positive" outlook balanced with a sense of realism. Life is sometimes painful, bad, and terrible, and we should acknowledge that. We don't have to drown in our own misery, but we do need to learn to accept the bad *along with* the good. The psychologically healthy individual experiences moments of sadness and depression. If you're happy all the time, then there is something wrong with you.

The reason I feel it is necessary to mention this is because, while finding the silver lining is generally a good thing, for some people it becomes a form of denial. These individuals hide from the unpleasant facts of life by turning everything into a hyper-positive fantasy. In fact, if you try to tell such people about something bad that has happened, their eyes will become glassy, and they will mutter some platitude, designed, not to make you feel better, but to make them feel less vulnerable. They're not truly listening to what you say. Their attitude has gone from being

positive to being dismissive and patronizing. The guiding motive behind their words is nothing more than the desire to avoid pain and to get you to be quiet about yours. They don't want to deal with negativity, which is understandable, but now a positive strategy has, instead, become a retreat from reality.

When an initially positive attitude goes awry like this, those who are guilty of it often treat their own problems the same way. They can't fix the problems in their lives, because they can't even acknowledge that the problems exist.

This whole psychology in which individuals fail to even acknowledge the painful facts of life is sometimes related to the attitude of adults who say that they have no regrets about their lives.

It seems to me to be a silly claim, as if the people who make it are afraid to admit that that they have done things along the way that they are sorry for, or that if given the chance to do it all over again, they wouldn't change something. There exists the hidden implication that having regrets is somehow a bad thing. It isn't. Having regrets means that you tried things without knowing what the results would be and those things didn't go the way you would have wanted. Having regrets means that you have made mistakes and learned from them. Having regrets means that you have lived and the experience of living has taught you better ways to do things.

My answer to the question, Do you have any regrets? is "Hell yeah, I do!" If given a "do-over," there are a number of things about my life I would change. I would certainly change how I handled that interview I had at CBS all those years ago, and who knows? Maybe I'd be working as the cameraman on *American Idol* set right now.

Chris Richardson, Gina Glocksen, and all the other Idol contestants are experiencing some amazing highs and some unanticipated lows. As they leave the “*American Idol* bubble,” as it is called, and they deal with the world at large, I hope they are able to keep it all in perspective – not too sad, not too happy. There are plenty of positives to recognize in their situation, but I hope they are also able to realistically come to terms with those parts that aren’t and accept them for what they are.

As Randy Jackson would say, “Just keepin’ it real, Dawg. Just keepin’ it real.”

## Chapter 39 – The Other Side of the Glass

There was a time when I would ache with jealousy whenever I watched a musician I admired performing on stage. As the crowd cheered and applauded, I wanted to exchange places with the person who was receiving all that admiration. Watching the Academy Awards and seeing people achieve their dreams would fill me with the same kind of envy and accompanying melancholy. But each year I would turn the Awards on again and subject myself to that painful longing.

I so badly wanted what those people had. It was a tremendous pressing desire that pushed me forward, but often left me feeling empty and depressed for my failure not to achieve. The sensation has often been described as “standing outside the shop window, looking in.”

It was not until my first book was published that I was able to stand on the other side of the glass and see how it felt to be that person with all eyes momentarily turned upon me, to receive so many compliments that it went from being pleasurable to downright embarrassing, and then to become numb to it.

I was glad to achieve what I set out to do, but I also learned that the satisfaction gained from admiration and accolades is short-lived. If the appreciation of others was the only reason I had for accomplishing my goals, it would not have been worth it. Fortunately, I had also learned along the way that there was joy to be found in doing the work itself. Doing and enjoying the work brought far more satisfaction than the accolades that one might receive at the end. There is also a certain inner satisfaction that comes with accomplishing what you set out to do that has nothing to do with what other people think.

Whenever you do get some measure of satisfaction and recognition for your accomplishments, you also learn, very quickly, that no matter what you do, there are a lot of people who simply don't care. When you see someone receiving praise for what they've done, it may seem as if everybody loves them, but you can rest assured that this is never the case. There are always those who are more envious than appreciative, and there are inevitably those who aren't appreciative at all. This, too, makes you realize that the best reasons for doing things lie within the joy of doing them rather than the accolades for doing them.

As I have visited the *American Idol* stage over the past month, I have gotten used to seeing the same faces when I go there — the cameramen, the guys from OCA, and the other people behind the scenes. When I first saw them, it seemed as if they were part of the glamour. But now I'm able to see that, for them, it's a job. In a similar fashion, I used to be jealous of the people who worked at Disneyland. I used to think that their job was the coolest in the world. After going to the park dozens of times and listening to the employees talk, I came to see that, for them, it was a job that sometimes bordered on drudgery. I picked up a copy of the book, *Mouse Tales: A Behind-the-ears Look at Disneyland* and read accounts of what it was like working at the Magic Kingdom. These accounts reinforced the idea that what was important was not how cool the job looked, but what it was actually like doing the job.

I have long revered the work of Neil Peart,<sup>17</sup> who I mentioned previously. I continue to admire his work, but when I read his book, *Ghost Rider*, which talks about the death of his wife<sup>18</sup> and his daughter and how Neil dealt with it, I was reminded that of all the things that matter, fame is the least important.

In the end, we see that there is nothing like success to put success in perspective.

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<sup>17</sup> Drummer and lyricist for the rock band, Rush

<sup>18</sup> Actually, she was his longtime significant other, but the difference, as far as I'm concerned, is technical.

The situation that *American Idol* contestants are in is unique because of the sheer suddenness of their fame. The road to fame for the average musician involves years of traveling, touring, and appearing on small stages in remote locations. It involves having one or two people who cheer you on and many others who think you are an artistic fool who is wasting his or her time. If you do gain success this way, the fame builds slowly, and the compliments and appreciation you receive also come gradually, giving you time to get used to them and put them in perspective.

Not so for somebody in the *American Idol* Top Ten. They are thrust suddenly into the limelight. During interviews, the contestants often refer to the sudden fame as “surreal,” which, I think, is the perfect description. It brings home the sheer absurdity of fame. The contestants are people who are little different than they were months before, except for the fact that they have appeared on a television show, yet suddenly everyone is treating them differently. In a way, it is completely ridiculous. Yet, we feed the phenomenon of celebrity, and we willingly participate in it. I think that many of us know, deep down inside, that fame is a game of sorts — that it really doesn’t mean anything of substance, other than the fact that human psychology is fundamentally quirky.

Now that Phil Stacey is off of the show, he is at the mercy of the United States Navy because he is still on active duty. There has been speculation that they could send him to Iraq, which I don’t think will happen, but if they did, I cannot imagine a more dramatic transition, to go from the *American Idol* stage to an environment where you are in fear for your life, afraid that you may be killed by a roadside bomb. What an incredible contrast that would be.

It seems more likely that the Navy will allow Phil to go on the *American Idol* tour this summer, or they may send him to places as part of entertainment for the troops. They now have

their own entertainer that they can deploy anywhere they want. But if Elvis can survive the army, Phil Stacey can survive the Navy.

What Phil's situation brings us back to, though, is the relative unimportance of fame. Those who have never tasted it will probably long for it, but they might find comfort in the fact that those who have experienced fame can tell you it means very little. No matter your celebrity status, life goes on, and there is always work to do.

## Chapter 40 – Four to Three

When the guy from OCA told us that they would call us about our tickets for the live results show on Wednesday the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, I had good reason to be skeptical. They never called, so I called them. And then I had to follow-up. But I finally ended up getting a ticket for the show that will take place the following week, when the Top Three will become the Final Two. It's a good thing, too, because the shows featuring the Top Four this week are boring and predictable.

Barry Gibb is the mentor for Wednesday night's show. He talks through clenched teeth like a bad ventriloquist. Each performer — Melinda, Jordin, LaKisha, and Blake — sings two songs, but the songs are hard to work with. The contestants find it difficult to take the high falsetto vocals that characterize the Bee Gees and turn them into “normal” vocals for themselves.<sup>19</sup>

The only person who is able to pull it off is Jordin Sparks, who seems to be Barry Gibb's favorite as well. She receives two extraordinary compliments from him. Before she sings “To Love Somebody,” Barry says, “I know a couple a' hundred people who have sung this song, but I haven't heard a greater version than Jordin's.” After hearing her rehearse “Woman in Love,” Barry says, “This is going to be, I think, one of our greatest female recording artists.”

The judges must love it when the contestants sing two songs, because it instantly gives them something new to say. It gives them an out. If the first song isn't good, they can always

say, “I hope your second song is better,” or they can turn around and compare the second song with the first, which is exactly what they do.

On the results show the following night, Paula diplomatically refers to the night before as “a difficult” night. It was difficult all right. It was all I could do to stay seated on the couch. I kept finding myself wandering into the kitchen looking for something to eat.

The results show is an hour long. We see more “man on the street” interviews with Ryan accosting people in the Los Angeles Farmer’s Market. Afterwards he says, “You can tell we have an hour to fill tonight.” He also announces that in just a few minutes that Pink will be “right here on this stage!”

When the time comes, they play the video that was recorded when I saw the results show taped three weeks before. Pink’s voice seems muffled, and I can immediately see why she complained to the sound technicians when it was being recorded. When I saw the performance live, it made me want to rush out and buy her album. When I see it now on TV, it seems dull. Still, it’s one of the better parts of the show.

If I were to have edited the whole show down to what was worth watching, it would have been five minutes total: Pink’s song, followed by the not-so-surprising result of LaKisha going home. Once a frontrunner, LaKisha’s status changed over the weeks when she was never quite able to top her blockbuster performance of “I Am Telling You.” Arriving in fourth place, especially when you consider the remaining contestants, is quite an accomplishment.

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<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Robin Gibb was one of the celebrity judges on season two. He also appeared on the night of the Top Four. The four finalists at that time were Kimberly Locke, Clay Aiken, Ruben Studdard, and Josh Gracin, and they all performed Bee Gees songs. This was not too long after Maurice Gibb had passed away.

## Chapter 41 – Miscellany

In recent Idol events:

- Over the past few weeks, McDonald's has been serving *American Idol* Happy Meals. One of the first toys is a plastic microphone. The label on the bag calls it a "judgmental microphone," which made me think that it might insult me the second I unwrapped it. In reality, the judgmental microphone has a small orange button. When you press it, it displays a series of different messages in a small window on the handle. It may say, "That's the Bomb, Dawg!," "Off Da Hook!," or "You're Going to Hollywood."
- Michael Bublé appears on KOST radio promoting his latest album and talks about his appearance on *American Idol*. He tells the hosts, Mark and Kim, that he only had a few hours notice before he appeared on the show as a replacement for Tony Bennett, and he had never sang the song on stage before. He also relates how he likes to keep things loose and goofy, which is a fitting description of his few minutes on the show.
- On *Idol Tonight!* and other media hot spots where *American Idol* trivia pops up, I keep seeing the statement that "Blake makes his own pants." It makes me laugh every time. *Well how about that*, I think. I really don't know what to do with this information. Good for you, Blake. Keep makin' them pants.

- I go on to the [americanidol.com](http://americanidol.com) website to vote for the song writing competition and discover that the voting is already over. That went fast! Apparently, they only post the top twenty nominated songs for a very short time. It makes sense, in retrospect. I'm sure they have to tweak the song and make all the preparations for the final show.
- Sherman Pore, the man who appeared on the *American Idol* auditions in Los Angeles after his wife died (see Chapter Ten), is going to release a CD called *My Lady Love*. It is scheduled for release on the day before the *American Idol* final results show. Part of the money from sales of the CD is going towards the City of Hope's cancer programs.
- The last of the six McDonald's *American Idol* Happy Meal toys is the "Applause O-matic." It's a little gun-shaped toy with a giant hand at the end. When you pull the trigger, the hand separates and claps against itself. Maybe I should take it with me when I go to the next live results show. I wonder if it is the kind of thing that security would confiscate.

## Chapter 42 – In the Front Rows

A cold wind blows down the length of Beverly Blvd, rustling the leaves of the hedges that line the exterior of CBS studios. Back in 1979, when I first visited the studios, there were no fences, no hedges, no security gates. You could walk right across the parking lot to the front door, or you could walk straight to a small ticket window at the side of the building and get tickets for just about anything that was taping that day, like the classic *Match Game* with Gene Rayburn.

It's just past noon, and there are many hours of standing to go before we get into the *American Idol* studio, but no one seems especially bothered by this. The man in line behind me, has been a part of a number of audiences, including the audience for the Grammy Awards. He's bald, wearing a black shirt, and he tells me how I can sign up to be a seat filler. He is also a member of the Kelly Clarkson Fan Club.

Behind him is a family. The two daughters are holding Blake signs. Signs for Blake have become a source of amusement for me. So many of them rhyme, like "Blake, You Make Me Ache," "You Take the Cake Blake," and "Shake it Blake." My personal favorite, though, is "You're Blaken Me Crazy." You'll also see the occasional "Blaker Girls" sign. The Blaker Girls are Blake's "official" fan club from his hometown. They sell gear on their website, but, per Blake's request, fifty percent of the proceeds go to cancer research at the Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle.

There's a Paula Abdul tie-in there too. Paula used to be a Laker girl, and then she graduated to doing choreography for them. It was this choreography that got her into show business.

In the line in front of me is a couple who has flown to California from Houston, Texas for the sole purpose of seeing the *American Idol* results. They left Houston early in the morning and took a bus from Los Angeles International Airport to CBS where they immediately got in line. The woman has glued photos of Jordin Sparks and Melinda Doolittle to round circles of cardboard, attached them to sticks, and highlighted them with decorative jewels. Her husband stands by passively. Tonight, after the show, they are going to take a bus back to the airport. Their flight back to Houston leaves at 12:30 at night.

Conversation flows fairly easily today and the time passes quickly. Soon Mike from OCA is numbering our tickets and we are directed forward to a CBS page. The page escorts a group of us to Studio 36. Along the way he tells us how Jordin Sparks is going to win the competition and gives us all the reasons why he thinks this is true. "She has it in the bag," he says with complete and total confidence.

I showed up at the studio early so that I could be a part of the *Idol Tonight!* audience. It worked, but I will be far back in the crowd. It is almost a relief not having to worry about how I look and whether or not I'm on camera. Standing in front of me is a tall boy in his teens. He's with his mom. The boy is several inches taller than I am and blocks me from the camera's view, although I can see the stage just fine. His mother constantly admonishes him to push his shoulders back and stand up straight. She whispers things in his ear. I overhear her talking about one of the women the producers has lined up along the side of the set where the camera spends a good deal of its time. It appears that the woman "mom" is referring to has purchased a nice new

set of breasts and she consistently positions herself where she, in her halter top, can show them off.

The more the mother talks, the deeper the frown on the boy's face gets. I suspect he wishes his mom were in the audience for *The Price is Right*, or maybe somewhere even farther away.

Justin, Rosanna, and Kimberly (with hair that is much longer than the last time I saw her) begin the show with the usual hype. They recap the previous night's events in which the Top Three competed. Each one sang three songs: a song selected by one of the judges, a song selected by the producers, and a song they chose themselves. For their third song, Jordin and Melinda sang a song they had already performed this season. Jordin sang "I Who Have Nothing" and Melinda sang "I'm a Woman." Blake was the only one to choose a song he hadn't sang on the show before. For this, Simon praised him for, again, taking chances and being original.

The first guest on *Idol Tonight!* is Brandon Rogers. He is asked to comment on the performances of the contestants the night before and he (what else is he going to do?) has good things to say about all of them. It's not tough to do, though, because all of the performances *were* good.

The other big guest on *Idol Tonight!* is Josh Gracin from *Idol*'s season two. He talks about being in the military and having to coordinate that with being on *American Idol*. He faced a similar dilemma to Phil Stacey's.

As per usual, TV Guide's Shanna Malcolm is one of the final guests on the show, and she has some interesting facts to relate about the Top Three. Melinda and Jordin, she reports, get along like best buddies. There are no catfights there, which causes Kimberly to comment, "They should have been on my season!"

Shanna also relates that, prior to being on *American Idol*, Blake took out a 25,000-dollar loan and built a recording studio in his parent's barn. You wouldn't have guessed it from an earlier video clip in which he describes going to the auditions as a last minute thing he did at the prompting of a friend, but Blake has been serious about his music all along.

After *Idol Tonight!*, it's a relief not to have to worry about whether or not I can make it into the results show. I know for sure. Not only, am I going in, but I'm first in line. The ticket that OCA has given me is a priority ticket, and I am put at the very front.

Just behind me are a girl and her mother who flew in for the week from just outside Philadelphia, PA. The main purpose of the trip is to see *American Idol*, but it is also the daughter's Mother's Day present to her mom.

I sit on the edge of the bench, flipping my attention from the book I have with me, to the conversations around me, and then to the guys across the way who are tearing down the set for *Idol Tonight!* They busily disassemble it. Pieces of it will be taken to the Kodak Theater for the Red Carpet walk on the days of the Finale.

It is already 4:30, and the sitting area is filling up rapidly. Pages have to stop and yell at the crowd to scoot down on the benches so that there is room for everyone. When the benches fill up, they have people form a secondary line near the back.

A man I have seen before comes around and exchanges the paper tickets that many of us have for an "actual" *American Idol* ticket. It is bright red, lined in silver, and has the *American Idol* logo stamped on the top. It's suitable for framing.

An elderly couple walks up the steps through security. Seeing them, the girl from Philadelphia and her mother offer them their seats. The couple is accompanied by a younger

couple, obviously related, and all four of them thank the girl and mother from Philly for their consideration.

One of the pages jokes with the younger of the two couples that just arrived, saying, “So who did you vote for?” which evokes laughter. *Who are these people?* I wonder. *Are they related to one of the contestants?* On the other side of me, a lady has begun talking to the elderly woman, and it’s confirmed. The people on the bench next to me are Melinda Doolittle’s grandparents, and they are with Melinda’s parents.

Seconds after I figure this out, Melinda’s grandfather turns to me and asks, “So who are you voting for?”

“Melinda,” I say, telling, perhaps, one of the most justifiable white lies I have ever told.

“She’s my granddaughter, you know.”

“Congratulations! You must very proud.”

Melinda’s grandfather seems like a great guy. He tells me how Melinda used to live in Oklahoma, but then moved to Tennessee to become a music major in college.

I ask him if it is his first time here at CBS, and he tells me that they saw the show live for the first time this week. “We just don’t get out as much as we used to,” he adds.

Our conversation is interrupted by the announcement that they are about to let us into the studio. It is almost five o’clock and the show begins at six. As soon as the doors open, I follow a string of people inside. Inside, I make my way around the black curtains that line the stage and past the ropes that stretch upward five stories to the ceiling.

Instead of being guided to a seat, as I have been in the past, I find my own using the row and seat numbers on my ticket: Section A, Row 7, Seat 10.

I bump past the knees of a woman and her sixteen-year-old daughter and settle down in the seat beside them. The woman immediately begins talking to me about the great seats we have. She's right. The seats are closer to the *American Idol* stage than I have ever been. They are to the judges' right and back a little.

Directly behind the judges' chairs is a row of seats that are quickly filling up with women, many with low cut tops. There is not one single male in that row. There rarely is.

Behind the row of women is the row in which Melinda Doolittle's parents and grandparents sit. Blake Edward's easily recognizable father takes a seat at the other end of the row. The woman with the boob job who was so obvious during *Idol Tonight!* reappears and tries to blend in with all the other females in the row behind the judges. The man in charge of seating quickly identifies her and directs her back to her assigned seat in the third row. "You're fine right there," he says, holding his fingers up in the "okay" sign.

A woman and her daughter take their seats in the row in front of me about the same time as another couple sits down at the left end of our row. The woman next to me immediately engages the newcomers in conversation. Her chattiness proves to be helpful because we instantly learn that the newcomers are the winners of the *American Idol* Challenge from [americanidol.com](http://americanidol.com). The woman and her daughter in the front row were flown in from Florida. The couple to the left is from San Diego. They drove up to Los Angeles, but *American Idol* put them up in a nice hotel for several days. All four of them went to see the taping of the Ford music video on Sunday.

One of the tricks to winning the American Idol Challenge is you have to be home during the day when they call, otherwise they will bypass you and keep on calling other people. It's the daughter of the mother/daughter combo in front of us that won the tickets. When *American Idol*

called her to tell her she had won, she first thought it was a prank. It wasn't until they offered to send her an e-mail confirmation proving they were legitimate that she believed them.

Seats are filling up everywhere, and the lady sitting next to me identifies a woman sitting several rows in front of us as Jackie Collins. Brandon Rogers also appears, as does Josh Gracin, having both made their way over from the *Idol Tonight!* stage. They both take seats in the very front.

The parents of the three remaining Idol contestants are wandering the room, greeting each other, shaking hands, and hugging. They seem to get along as well as the contestants do. There is no nastiness or competition, and it is nice to see. One of the mothers also greets Brandon Rogers and gives him a hug.

The page comes around collecting gum from everyone and I tuck my gum into my cheek as he approaches. He has the girl in the front row spit her gum into a cup, while I nonchalantly look away.

"Sir," the page says to me, a sly smile on his face, "I assume you swallowed your gum?"

Suddenly I feel as if I'm in third grade again. I nod my head and then wait until he leaves before I actually gulp my gum down.

At a little past 5:30, the warm-up guy takes the stage to the sound of loud music. He has us get on our feet and clap along. He calls a man out from the audience and brings him up on stage. The man looks to be in his sixties. I had noticed him sitting next to his wife on the benches outside. He looked like the kind of guy who might be fun if you sat down and talked to him. When he gets up on stage, the warm-up guy has him dance, and my impression turns out to be correct. He dances uninhibitedly, shaking his butt for the audience at the warm-up guy's request.

The mom from Philadelphia, who gave up her seat for Melinda Doolittle's grandparents earlier, is called up on stage next, and she also manages to have fun with the whole thing.

The studio continues to fill up. "LaKisha is in the house!" shouts the warm-up guy, as she walks across in front of the stage. Haley Scarnato also comes in.

Less than five minutes before the show starts, the judges arrive. The warm-up guy announces each one individually, and each one makes their way to their seat via a different route. All three are escorted by security, which hovers around the front of the stage when the judges are seated.

The stage manager warns us that the introduction to the show will be a little unusual and we need to wait until we hear the words, "*This is American Idol!*" before we start to cheer. When the show starts, the introduction is given by Homer Simpson. We see the animated video on the screen at center stage, but we miss our cue, so when Homer Simpson says, "*This is American Idol!*" the applause is a little late and less enthusiastic than it should be. Oh well. Ryan Seacrest makes up for it when he comes on stage.

Ryan announces that both Elliot Yamin and Maroon 5 will be performing live, which means that I have one more thing to apologize to the wife for. She was jealous when I saw Pink perform. This is going to be even worse.

The Top Three are already seated on the "results" couch to the right, ready for a night of drawn-out tension. Ryan walks over and asks Jordin about how crazy the schedule is for the contestants, which serves as the perfect intro to the video package detailing her trip home to Glendale, Arizona and the welcome reception she got there. When it's over, Ryan reviews what the judges had to say about her performance the previous night. He's says, "America voted..." and then leaves her hanging for the results later on.

At the commercial break there is a quick scramble by the stage manager. Brandon and LaKisha are sitting on opposite sides of the stage, but she wants a quick cutaway shot of them sitting together. She has Brandon cross the stage to sit with LaKisha and tells him that afterwards he can return to his seat.

Ryan comes down off the stage and checks in with the two American Idol Challenge winners who are sitting in front of me and to my left. He makes sure he has their names right and after the commercials, he introduces them to the television audience. Next up is the video sequence of Blake returning to his hometown in Washington. As I watch these sequences, I am myself quickly drawn into them, temporarily forgetting that I'm on the *American Idol* set, just absorbed in the story. The change in the lives of the contestants is dramatic, and to see them come face-to-face with the screaming fans and crowds in their hometowns is completely engrossing.

Following this is Ryan's recap of the judges' comments from the night before, and then Blake is sent back to the sofa to await the results along with Jordin and Melinda. When Ryan announces Elliot Yamin, the two girls to my right go crazy. Under subdued lighting, the center screen parts, and Elliot walks out singing.

His voice is so crisp and the music is so clear that it causes the woman next to me to say, "That's not him." She thinks he's lip-synching, but they never lip-synch on *American Idol*, and soon it becomes clear to her that he's just that good. The woman mumbles something about how she was mistaken, but I can barely hear her.

The two girls to my right are singing and swaying along with the music, unselfconsciously bumping into me and nudging me leftward on my seat. What can I do but join in?

Right before the next break, Ryan announces that Maroon 5 is coming up, “plus, your results, and Melinda goes home.”

As soon as we’re off the air, the stage manager is quick to point out that Ryan meant Melinda is going to her hometown, not that she’s being booted off the show.

While we’re waiting for the count out of the commercial break, I notice a woman approaching the right hand side of the stage. She is gazing intently at Melinda, Blake, and Jordin. It looks like she is going to try to get an autograph from them. From my vantage point, it looks like she might succeed, but then a security guard pops out of nowhere, and after a short discussion she is sent, pouting, back to her seat.

When we return to the live show, Melinda does indeed return home to Nashville, Tennessee, where they have even named a street after her — Melinda Doolittle Way.<sup>20</sup> Ryan reads the judges’ comments for Melinda as he did for the other two contestants, and we cut to another commercial break. They come faster and more frequently as the show draws to a close.

The warm-up guy is still wandering the audience talking to people and it is hard to tell where he is because his voice is directed through the sound system. Every time a break starts, I have to look around and locate him. I don’t want to get caught off guard by him sneaking up and shoving a microphone in my face.

In minutes the show is live again. Maroon 5 performs. I learn something from their performance — I’m going to have to buy my wife another CD. There’s one more pause for commercials, and then it’s time for the results.

We learn first that Jordin is going to be one of the two finalists, leaving Blake and Melinda as the remaining two possibilities. They stand beside each other on stage holding hands.

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<sup>20</sup> Now people can really say she has a “Way” about her. Sorry, that’s why I included it as a footnote.

Ryan says, “Who joins Jordin? Will it be girl, girl? Guy, girl?” In the pause that follows, Blake inserts, “Girl versus machine? Machine versus...?” Blake stops and shrugs at Melinda as if to say, “I know I’m a goofball.”

Melinda is asked to step forward, and Ryan solemnly announces that this is the end of the road for her. A cameraman crosses directly in front of me, aiming the lens at Melinda’s parents and grandparents for their response. The crowd cheers, hoots, and boos simultaneously. Eventually, our attention centers on Melinda, who is smiling. She doesn’t seem too surprised that she is going home.

After the package detailing Melinda’s journey, the judges are asked how they feel, and their comments sum up the situation nicely. Melinda *does* have the best voice in the competition. No one has any doubt that she’ll be fine and that this is just the start of her career. Ryan hands her the microphone, and she transforms, as she always does with a microphone in hand, to the consummate professional. She belts out “I am a Woman” for the final time on the *American Idol* stage.

When she finishes, the crowd stands and applauds. We continue to clap and cheer for Melinda long after the show has gone off the air.

That’s it then. *American Idol* has its final two contestants.

Rather than rush out of the studio with most of the crowd, I mosey my way out, turning around to take in the view of the stage one last time for myself. Over the following week, the stage I am staring at will be torn down, moved across town to the Kodak Theater, and reassembled for the finale. Some people are huddled around trying to get autographs from contestants and former contestants. The judges are already gone.

Pages have cleared the upper rows of the audience and are moving my way, so I exit into the California evening sun.

I follow others around the corner of Studio 36 down the sidewalk between the trailers and the studio. Two women in front of me are talking on their cell phones when Ryan Seacrest, accompanied by a security guard, comes out of the side doors of the studio.

Instantly, the two women are calling out to him and asking him questions. They've stopped right in front of me, creating an instant traffic jam. Ryan exchanges brief comments with them, crosses the sidewalk, and heads out across the parking lot.

The women immediately lift their cellphones back to their ears and continue their conversations, "Oh my God. That was Ryan Seacrest! Did you hear that?"

The whole encounter makes me smile.

Exiting CBS Television City, I see a car drive by with writing on the windows. The writing is smeared in white like you might see on the car of a newlywed, but instead of saying "Just Married," it says, "I saw *The Price is Right* with Bob Barker before he retired!"

I hop in my car, and as I turn the corner from Beverly Boulevard to Fairfax, I see the couple from Houston standing on the corner. The man is pushing the crosswalk button. They are headed to the bus stop, so they can get back to the airport where they will wait until midnight, and catch their flight back home.

## Chapter 43 – Stories

In an interview with Rosanna Tavares, *American Idol*'s executive producer Nigel Lythgoe said that they made a couple mistakes during this season. One mistake that they made, he said, was focusing more on the celebrities than the contestants. During the results show for the Top Three he thought, *They've got great stories.*

He's absolutely right. The stories of the top three contestants are part of what made this last results show so great, and I wished I could have had more of that with the other contestants.

Over the weekend, on *American Idol Rewind*, they recapped the final results show where Kelly Clarkson comes in first place over Justin Guarini. *Well, that's it*, I thought. *It's a wrap. We're done.* But at the end of the show, they announced another episode giving the history of Justin and Kelly prior to, and including, their appearance on *American Idol*. It also showed their homecoming trips, like the ones that were just aired for Blake, Melinda, and Jordin.

Getting the history of Justin and Kelly really added to my appreciation of both of them.

Justin's parents, a biracial couple, were divorced when he was five. Justin's mother was an anchorwoman on CNN. His father was the chief of police in Atlanta. Justin has a picture of himself standing with Nelson Mandela because his father was once head of Nelson's security detail.

Like Kelly Clarkson, Justin began performing music when he was very young. He also, for the record, went to school with Alecia Moore, who we know today as Pink.

During the *American Idol* competition he struggled with the pressure of being the front runner. The constant sense that he might very well take the show worked against him, as it quite possibly did for Melinda Doolittle. There was another pressure on him that few people watching the show knew about. A couple weeks before he was voted into the Top Ten, he found out his mom had cancer. She went into surgery only weeks before the finale. Fortunately, she came out of it fine.

As they showed some of Justin's performances on TV, my wife asked, "Why didn't he put out an album?" It turns out he did. It was released on the same day that Clay Aiken and Ruben Studdard's debut singles were released. Because of contractual obligations, he wasn't allowed to release his album until Kelly's was released. When he did, it didn't sell well. Since then he released another CD titled, "Stranger Things Have Happened" that highlights his love for jazz, and he's working on a third.

For now, though, Justin is hosting shows about *American Idol*, and I hope they are paying him well. In person, he seems like an awesome guy. He's friendly, nice, and, given all the fame he has experienced, he is in no way arrogant. I think it's very telling that when Kelly won the title of *American Idol*, Justin reports that during the long pause after Ryan said, "The winner of *American Idol* 2002 is..." Justin truly and sincerely hoped it would be Kelly.

Simon Cowell had something to say about this in his autobiography:

"When Ryan announced that Kelly had won, I wanted only one thing to happen. I wanted Justin to show some disappointment or competitive spirit. He didn't. Instead, he jumped for bloody joy. That made no sense to me. This was a winner's competition, and it stood to reason that the person who lost would be, at least for a moment, unhappy."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Simon Cowell, *I Don't Mean to Be Rude, But...* (London: Ebury Press, 2003), p. 205.

I am not sure if this reveals more about Justin or more about Simon, but it does reflect favorably on Justin's character.

Even then, Justin has not been untouched by his experience in show business. He acknowledges that it is a "business," and it involves a lot of work. He also admits to having developed some cynicism over the years. I think this would be unavoidable for any intelligent person who has seen as much of Hollywood as he has. It would become even more difficult when one constantly witnesses the success of others who are far less deserving of it.

Kelly's story is also interesting. She came from humble roots in Texas and during her younger years, she starred in many high school musicals. As she grew up, she held a number of jobs, working for awhile as a cocktail waitress.

Long before Kelly had even heard of *American Idol*, she moved to West Hollywood and made the rounds trying to get her demo listened to. But then tragedy struck, and the one bedroom apartment she was living in caught on fire. She lost everything she owned.

After the fire, Kelly moved back to Texas, where she was living when she heard about *American Idol*. Even during the auditions for the show (during which she freely used the phrases, "Cool Beans," and, "Score!") her down-to-earth charm appealed to America. (In my opinion, it is this same kind of outgoing and exuberant personality that put Jordin in the final two spots of this year's competition rather than Melinda.) But, back in season one, getting all of the judges, particularly Simon, to appreciate Kelly was not an easy task.

During Hollywood Week, Simon said to Paula, "I just don't like this girl," and put Kelly in the "maybe" group. It wasn't until the Top Twelve, when she overcame laryngitis to deliver a performance that blew the judges away, that Kelly earned Simon's respect. Now, of course, we see how deserved it was.

It is the personal stories that give some meat to *American Idol*. The personal stories are what we can relate to or, perhaps, aspire too. We can imagine ourselves in the winner's position, but we can also see ourselves in the shoes of those who do not win. Life is like *American Idol* in that it is the extreme minority who gain fame and fortune, while the rest of us have to struggle and strive, sometimes just to get by. This doesn't necessarily reflect badly on those who do succeed, nor does it reflect poorly on those who don't make a lot of money or receive any significant recognition.

One of my current favorite pop songs is Natasha Beddingfield's "Unwritten," which talks about how she has her life before her, and it is like an unwritten book. We all have our own stories, and to each one of us, our own story is the most important. We can never live anyone's story but our own. One of the interesting facets of *American Idol* is that it allows access to the stories of other people's lives and gives us a sense of what they might be like. It does this against a backdrop filled with drama and glamour.

I hope that some of the topics I have discussed in this book that run parallel to the journey of the *American Idol* contestants are relevant to your own personal story and that they may even prove to be useful. We have hit up upon several themes along the way, and I'll take a moment here, before the finale, to recap.

The auditions do not always bring out the best in people, and there we saw the importance of a realistic self-image. We also examined how people view each other differently. Humans have a natural tendency to see themselves as better than others, which also tells us that there is always someone who thinks they are better than you. We saw the problems that excuse making and being in denial can cause a person, both before and after we have done something

wrong. We also saw how we can complicate our lives by adding unnecessary competition and drama.

Human nature was revealed in other ways. Sometimes it is perversely rebellious. All of us have different sensibilities about an unlimited number of things, and being aware of these can help us to understand each other better. Our memories are short and unreliable, which can impact the way that people treat us, and the way we perceive others.

So many of the observations in this book have been about finding balance and maintaining perspective.

We need to find balances between confidence and bravado, between supporting others and giving them false hopes, as well as between having ambitions and having unrealistic dreams. There is an acceptable balance between seeing the positive side of things versus being in denial, as there is between being persistent and being stubbornly foolish. We also learned that persistence is no guarantee of success, but sometimes it is necessary for success.

Perspective is useful when dealing with complex social, economic, and political issues. The example of Sherman Pore and the images we were presented with during the “Idol Gives Back” program gave us immediate perspective and served as a reminder that there are things we should never forget.

We’ve had the chance to examine some important distinctions, such as the difference between rudeness and honesty and between fact and opinion.

*American Idol* provided many opportunities to discuss the nature of fame. Fame, in and of itself, is of little value, nor are pride and ego as important as we usually think they are. A person’s “visibility” has nothing to do with how important they are. We should recognize and reward many of those who do not normally receive attention. Being famous means less privacy.

The one advantage to having your secrets known is that you may find that the important people in your life love you for who you are rather than some glamorized image. For the famous, it is sometimes advantageous to pay less attention to what people think of you. And just because someone is famous, doesn't mean they are, or should be, a role model. For that matter, the behaviors of celebrities should not be used as a copout for bad parenting.

Other observations made along the way include:

- It is usually those closest to us who inspire us the most.
- How we deal with short-term disappointments and failures may make the difference of whether we are successful in the long run.
- Humor is a great tool to have at your disposal, but sometimes you need to be careful with it.
- Appreciating the people around us takes work. Most of us are surrounded by people on a daily basis, so if we can find things to appreciate about them, it can enrich our lives.
- The majority of things that people do and go through are harder and more difficult than they look, which gives us one more reason to appreciate the people around us.
- Rather than trying to rush through the unpleasant times in our lives, it might be better to take stock of them and appreciate them for what they are.

We've covered a lot. Perhaps there are tidbits there that you can benefit from. At the very least, I hope there were thoughts that you found interesting.

As the *American Idol* finale unfolds we will see how this particular story ends, and we will witness a significant chapter in the lives of our two remaining contestants. But it is just that — a chapter. The *American Idol Rewind* episode, “Where Are They Now?” airs the weekend after the finale and attests to the fact that the story of the winning contestant will go on, as will mine, and yours.

## Chapter 44 – Duking It Out

When one is sitting in Studio 36 at CBS Television City, the *American Idol* towers that stand on either side of the stage rise high above you. The television screens and neon lights that hang from them display an ongoing sequence of images and color. But on the stage of the Kodak Theater, the height of the towers seems somewhat diminished. The roof of the theater arches high above the towers, and the multi-rowed balconies look down upon them from a distance. Tonight, the seats are filled with over 3,000 screaming and applauding fans who have been granted admission to what has become one of television's biggest annual events.

The judges are lined up and dressed up. Randy Jackson is wearing an outfit with chains on it that makes him look like something out of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, while Paula Abdul's face looks a little smeared due to the efforts of the makeup crew to cover up her broken nose. It seems that, over the weekend, she tripped over her pet Chihuahua, Tulip, and had to make a run to the hospital. Tulip, she assures everyone, is fine. Of the three judges, Simon looks the least different than he normally does. He appears smug as usual.

The spotlight, however, is on Blake Edwards and Jordin Sparks. Both have three songs to sing in the space of the hour. This is their final attempt to win America's votes and claim the title of *American Idol*.

Blake comes into this three round bout delivering a recap of the performance that many, including myself, felt was his best performance of the year. He sings his remixed beatbox version of Bon Jovi's "You Give Love a Bad Name," and it remains as impressive, if not more

so, than the first time he sang it. Jordin counters with an unexpected left hook. She sings Christine Aguilera's "Fighter," a song she has never performed on the *American Idol* stage, demonstrating a hard-edged rocker side that we have not seen much of during the season. Round one goes to Blake.

Blake's second song is a Maroon 5 tune, "She Will Be Loved." The song fits his voice, and he delivers it well, but there is little strength behind the punch. Jordin defends with her song choice from the season, Martina McBride's "Broken Wing," re-establishing her own. The score for the two combatants is one to one.

They return to their corners while Ryan Seacrest introduces the winners of the American Idol songwriter competition, two gentlemen by the names of Scott Krippayne and Jeff Peabody, who wrote the song, "This is My Now." Blake and Jordin will both be singing the song, and whoever becomes the American Idol will release the song as their first single.

Blake is the first to take a shot at it, and it is obvious right away that the song doesn't fit him. Halfway through the song he seems fidgety, as if he is in a hurry to get it over with. Knowing that Jordin has to sing the same song, which is another ballad, makes one appreciate the choice she made for her first number. It was a wise strategy enabling her to show some diversity. "This is My Now" is a much better fit for Jordin than it is for Blake. Jordin begins slowly and works up to a crescendo, delivering what may very well be a knockout punch.

Is it the blow that lands Blake in second place and wins Jordin the title? We have to wait for America's vote to know the answer. It's not a sure thing, either. If the contest is decided on the virtue of performance and originality, then Blake might win. If it is based purely on vocals, then Jordin should win. But then there is the nature of the voters to consider. If the demographic watching *American Idol* is mostly female, this may give Blake the advantage.

I think it might even be ideal for both of the contestants if Jordin won and Blake came in second place. Blake is so creative that the stranglehold the *American Idol* contract places on the winner might limit him, robbing him of the creative control to do original work, while Jordin, as young as she is, might benefit from some musical guidance.

The Wednesday night show will put both Blake and Jordin through two hours of painful suspense before they'll know for sure.

## Chapter 45 – Finale

There is no rest for an *American Idol* contestant. Even on the final night of the show, after all the voting is done, they still have to get up on stage and sing. The opening number of the May 23 finale features Blake and Jordin singing a duet of “I Saw Her Standing There.” It is, in a word, cute.

This is followed by a broadcast from Gwen Stefani who is out on tour. The most remarkable thing about this is the dress she’s wearing, which is puffed out in the back, making it look as if a giant red cabbage has taken root.

After the first commercial break, Kelly Clarkson sings the new single, “Never Again,” from her upcoming album *My December*. Ryan says that this is Kelly’s first appearance on the *Idol* stage since the first season, which, technically, is true, although she performed right here in the Kodak Theater for “*Idol Gives Back*” only weeks before. Kelly is wearing knee-high black leather boots and a short leather skirt. “Never Again” is a breakup song, and Kelly expresses rage worthy of young Alanis Morissette. I think it’s awesome.

Rumors are circulating that Clive Davis thought Kelly’s new album didn’t have a hit single on it, and so he told Kelly to go back into the studio. She declined. Los Angeles DJs Mark and Brian said this was a bad move because Clive has “the best pair of ears in the business,” but I’m not so sure. When it comes to the battles between an artist and the corporate business world that manages them, I most often will side with the artists. Only they know their vision, and only

they can express it. We'll see how it works out. I doubt that Kelly has little to worry about at this stage in her career.

Following this, Ryan announces the "Second Annual Golden Idol Awards," which are basically highlights (or low points, if you will) of the auditions. If the producer's intent is to find a way to recap the season, then it works in that regard, but I could do without it. Going back to the auditions, and the putdown humor that prevails there, seems like a regression compared to the accomplishments of the rest of the season.

Thankfully, the show quickly returns to the music. The top six guys begin a medley of Smokey Robinson songs, and part of the way into it, they are joined by Smokey Robinson himself. The medley concludes with "Tears of a Clown."

I want to cry afterwards when Ryan Seacrest walks us through another round of "Idol Awards." I want to cry like Ashley Ferl.

Gladys Knight then joins the top six girls for a set based on her music, including "Heard it Through the Grapevine," and "Midnight Train to Georgia."

Earlier in the season, Tony Bennett was sick on the night he was supposed to sing, but he finally gets his chance in the finale. When he does, the audience gets to see why he is considered one of the greats. Singing "Once in My Life," he brings the house down.

There's time for one last round of Golden Idol Awards, the "nominees" being, Jonathan and Kenneth from the Seattle auditions. Kenneth is the one that Simon compared to a bush baby, and Jonathan is his friend who, according to the newspapers, was once a Special Olympics contestant. Nominee couple number two is Antonella Barba and her friend Amanda. Nominee couple three is Simon Cowell and Ryan Seacrest. We are shown clips of them exchanging tasteless banter.

Called to the stage as the “winners” of the award are Jonathan and Kenneth, and I wonder why the show persists in its sly mockery of the two, when much of the media thought it was in poor taste in the first place. Up on stage, Kenneth tells Simon he forgives him for what he said (the bush baby remark), and I am reminded of when Mandisa said that she forgave Simon in season five. To me, it sounded condescending when Mandisa said it, and now it seems condescending when Jonathan says it. An eye for an eye, I guess; Simon insults them, and they get to play holier-than-thou back.

Ryan tells Jonathan and Kenneth that they are “good sports,” a phrase that, when translated, means that you are willing to let people make fun of you. I’m not so sure that this is as good a trait as it’s made out to be.

Thankfully, the rest of the show features musical performances. We hear Carrie Underwood sing “Stand by You.” Green Day covers John Lennon’s “Working Class Hero.” Taylor Hicks promotes his new single “Heaven Knows.” Jordin Sparks and Ruben Studdard do a delightful duet to the tune of “All I Need to Get By.” We even hear from Bette Midler, who will be taking Celine Dion’s place in Las Vegas. She sings “The Wind Beneath My Wings.” By the time this is through, we have heard from the winners of every previous *American Idol* season with the exception of Fantasia, who is currently on Broadway in *The Color Purple*.

Also in the mix is Sanjaya, singing “You Really Got Me,” accompanied by Joe Perry from Aerosmith on guitar. Considering the intro that Ryan reads, Sanjaya, too, is a “good sport.”

The last big number of the night before the results is a medley of Beatles tunes, featuring the Top Twelve and the *American Idol* winners, Kelly Clarkson, Taylor Hicks, Carrie Underwood, and Ruben Studdard. Seeing the Top Twelve on stage makes me realize how much

I've missed the earlier contestants, how far we've come, and how much we've seen the contestants grow over the past four months.

But right now, the show is running behind, and at ten o'clock, when the show is supposed to end, Ryan Seacrest is just getting ready to announce this year's winner. All across the western coast, TIVO systems have stopped recording, cutting off the most important part of the show.

The announcement of the results is eerily similar in some ways to the first season of *American Idol*. The finalists are one boy and one girl. Two of the judges, Randy and Simon, predict that the girl will win. Paula will not commit to a prediction, but tells both of the contestants that they are winners. When it is announced, the girl is the official winner, and Jordin Sparks has become the next *American Idol*.

Jordin is overcome with emotion. When she is handed the microphone so that she can sing "This is My Now," she, quite understandably, falters. There are tears in her parent's eyes. Jordin courageously pushes forward. When it comes to the final high note of the song, Jordin belts it out full force. She has proven herself, and we will be seeing a lot more of her in the future. A snowstorm of confetti falls upon the audience, and Jordin is embraced in the hugs and love of her fellow contestants.

As the news kicks in on the TV, I gather my notes and push the recliner back into the upright position like someone ending a long transcontinental flight. I carry my stuff into the computer room where there is a stack of *American Idol* Happy Meal toys, magazines, and press clippings that I fondly refer to my *American Idol* reference library.

As I climb the stairs to the bedroom, I search my head for an ending. How am I going to finish this? We've taken the journey together, Jordin has won, and I've been able to extract some lessons and observations from it all. But this season is no different from the past few seasons

because I feel a void when the show has ended. What am I going to do with my Tuesday and Wednesday nights? I want a new season to begin right away. But that's how I should feel, isn't it? You want to leave your audience wanting more.

The TV is on in our bedroom, and the voices of newscasters buzz in the background. There's a whole wide world of things to keep us busy and engaged, and much more serious things to concern ourselves with. But there's no need to worry that we won't be hearing anything more about *American Idol*.

Once the top headlines have been covered, the Fox Eleven News returns to the backstage of the Kodak Theater. LaKisha is talking about what a thrill it was to sing with Gladys Knight, Chris Sligh is laughing about how Sanjaya forgot the choreography during one of the group numbers, and Blake Edwards is being asked how he feels. His answer is terrific because, not only is it true, it also gives me the ending I was looking for. "It's bittersweet," he says, "because it's over."

## **About the Author**

Bruce A. Smith is the author of *The Path of Reason: A Philosophy of Nonbelief*, as well as the syndicated humor column “Fun With Stuff.” He lives in Southern California with his wife. To find about more about the author and his work visit [www.bruceAsmith.com](http://www.bruceAsmith.com).