

'IDOL' WORSHIP

Pop star hopefuls, to the starting line! BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Will it happen all over again? Will America fall in love one more time with "American Idol" in its sixth season, beginning Tuesday? Will viewers phone or text in more than half a billion votes to support their favorite acts, like they did last year? Will there be controversy and tears? Will there be great performances and unexpected failures? Will someone get booted before his or her time? Will the winner deliver a multi-platinum album and will the runners-up enjoy success as well? Will around 30 million viewers tune in every week?

What do you think?

"American Idol" launches Tuesday (Fox, 8 p.m.) with auditions from Minneapolis; Seattle auditions follow on Wednesday. Every year, people assume the show can't get any bigger. And every year, it does.

But even if this is the year "Idol" ma-

nia finally peaks, it's clearly gone from a phenomenon to an institution that will remain wildly influential for years to come.

"American Idol" didn't invent the talent show. It just perfected it.

The three judges — Paula, Randy and

Simon — have become first-name-only celebrities. Host Ryan Seacrest looks set to become the next Dick Clark (he's already got New Year's Eve sewn up). And "Idol's" method of picking stars and making them famous is spreading from pop music to theater, books and every other facet of entertainment. (Given the show's track record in spotting genuine talent, if "Idol" could pick the next president of the United States, it might be easier than an election.)

The winners — and many of the other finalists — have gone on to multi-platinum careers in pop, country, R&B, gospel and dance. They've won Grammys and hit Broadway. They've made indie films and huge hit musicals. They've signed deals to star in sitcoms and worked as reporters on entertainment news shows. Very soon, they might even produce their first Oscar-winner with "Dreamgirls" star-is-born sensation Jennifer Hudson.

Every season brings changes that tweak and improve the show, and the

new one will be no exception. Producers plan an "Idol"-like songwriting contest to choose the tunes the singers perform at the finals and which the winner will release as their first (and undoubtedly No. 1) single. The "Hollywood" shows — the episodes after the auditions but before finalists start getting winnowed down in live votes — have been shortened as much as possible.

They're also cooking up a "huge" midseason surprise. Along the way, superstars ranging from the likes of Rod Stewart and Barry Manilow to Prince and Mary J. Blige will coach and perform solo and alongside the contestants.

And perhaps the most remarkable fact of all? No one knows who the star of the show will be. Everyone is an unknown, eager hopefuls from small towns and big cities who sing in the shower or on some stage somewhere night after night, dreaming of stardom. For some of them, that dream is about to come true. Here are the five who got there first.



GRUMPY, HAPPY AND RANDY From left, Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson, the judging triumvirate on "Idol"

IN HIGH GEAR



KELLY CLARKSON



RUBEN STUDDARD



FANTASIA BARRINO

SEASON ONE: KELLY CLARKSON

First single: "A Moment Like This"
How'd she do it? America's sweet-heart took the stealth route. While everyone was gushing over the charismatic, camera-friendly Justin Guarini, Kelly just got better and better every week. A quiet makeover that made her more appealing without betraying her down-home appeal helped tremendously. Oh, and there's that voice.

Career highlight: Kelly recovered from a rushed debut to record a multiplatinum follow-up featuring "Since U Been Gone," proving that "Idol" winners weren't going to be one-hit wonders. Winning a Grammy gave her, and the show, a huge dose of credibility.

What's new? Guest-starring on "Reba" tonight (The CW, 7:30 p.m.) and prepping her third album.

SEASON TWO: RUBEN STUDDARD

First single: "Flying Without Wings"
How'd he do it? The Teddy Bear of Season Two proved that slow and steady can win the race. Other contestants may have had better weeks (and many think Clay Aiken outsang him in the finals), but Ruben was the most consistent performer.

Career highlight: Ruben has delivered three albums, including a gospel CD. But perhaps his biggest accomplishment has been tackling his weight problem.

What's new? Touring to promote his critically acclaimed third album, "The Return." He performs at B.B. King's in Manhattan Jan. 30.

SEASON THREE: FANTASIA BARRINO

First single: "I Believe"
How'd she do it? Fantasia had attitude, self-confidence and pride in her talent. But she won it all long before the finals thanks to a chill-inducing cover of the Gershwin classic "Summertime." It wasn't just a great performance for an unknown — it was a great performance for anyone.

Career Highlight: Playing herself in a highly rated TV movie took guts, especially for a woman who bravely admitted she

was illiterate and couldn't even read the script. Her self-titled second album is serious R&B.

What's new? Touring all over the country, Fantasia hits the New Jersey Performing Arts Center on March 1.

SEASON FOUR: CARRIE UNDERWOOD

First single: "Inside Your Heaven"
How'd she do it? A sweet personality will take you far on "Idol," but Carrie's secret weapon was her love of country music. By staying close to what she knew best, she stood out from the crowd.

Career highlight: Her debut album. Every other "Idol" winner has needed an album or two to find their niche. But Carrie's "Some Hearts" has gone five-times platinum and been nominated for numerous Grammys (including Best New Artist).

What's new? Getting ready for the Grammys on Feb. 11, preparing for a new album.



CARRIE UNDERWOOD

SEASON FIVE: TAYLOR HICKS

First single: "Do I Make You Proud"
How'd he do it? Soul Patrol, baby, Soul Patrol! That Phil Donahue-like gray hair was a reminder that it's not just kids who can sing. Years of performing in bars gave Taylor the chops that contestants often lack.

Career highlights: His debut album just hit the charts a month ago.

What's new? Though Taylor could be overshadowed by other contestants from his season (runner-up Katharine McPhee has her debut out Jan. 30, and Kellie Pickler, who got good reviews for her country debut, may shine brightest on a sitcom that's being developed for her), it's often the second album that reveals an "Idol" winner's talents. Taylor will surely keep touring and keep recruiting new members for the Soul Patrol. ♦



TAYLOR HICKS

'IDOL' TV SCHEDULE

■ Jan. 16: Season premiere, Minneapolis auditions
 ■ Jan. 17: Seattle auditions

■ Feb. 14: Top 24 singers revealed
 ■ Feb. 20: Top 12 male singers perform
 ■ Feb. 21: Top 12 female singers perform
 ■ Feb. 22: First live results show
 March 13: Top 12 finalists perform