

TV Tuesday

What you need to know before tonight's big finale

By MICHAEL GILTZ

THINK you know everything there is to know about "American Idol?" Think again. "American Idol" — which comes to a grand finale on Fox tonight and tomorrow at 9 p.m. — and is shaping up as the biggest show of the summer.

Here is what you need to know before watching the final shows.

Do the judges always mean what they say?

Don't you believe it. Case in point: judge Simon Cowell's on-air defense of Justin Guarini the boy wonder was perceived as being arrogant for playing to the crowd.

"I really do feel sorry for Justin when he slipped up and got arrogant with me a few weeks ago, which is

nothing in the grand scheme of things," says Cowell. "He said something, you could see he regretted it afterwards. For him to be criticized for it was completely wrong."

Do the contestants always mean what they say?

Cowell's healthy cynicism extends to the contestants, who he would prefer to behave with a little more self-interest.

Case in point: the dramatic ouster of Christina Christian when she was in the hospital.

When the remaining idols sent messages to Christina, the floodworks opened up and Cowell's eyebrows were raised.

"One of them should have been sitting there thinking: 'Well, there's another one gone that's quite

good; it's all better for me,'" says Simon. "Of course, once one starts crying they all start to cry. I watched it with a wry smile on my face thinking, 'Okay, they're all turning into pop stars.'"

Are the hosts really that bad?

No, they're not. But the writers are: the behind-the-scenes staffers who've been feeding bizarre put-downs to Paula Abdul are the same ones who've been forcing Ryan Seacrest and Brian Dunkleman to trade weak banter.

It doesn't work once a year at the Oscars and it doesn't work on "American Idol."

What are the parents of the finalists like?

Maybe even more competitive than the finalists.

"I call one of the kid's mother Laser Eyes," said Cowell when about five contestants remained. "As

I'm talking I can feel her eyes boring into the back of my head. She has this particular look which is amazing."

How many of the finalists will get a recording contract?

All of them are contractually bound to record for Simon Cowell's label and be represented by 19 Management — the British agency behind the show and a lot of British pop stars.

After a certain grace period, if Cowell and 19 don't exercise their options, the finalists are free to record for other labels.

In the UK, Cowell signed the two finalists Will Young and Gareth Gates and three other contestants got deals elsewhere.

If Cowell likes five of the American finalists, will he

sign them all?

"Bloody right," says Cowell. "If I find 10, I'll sign the whole lot."

Look for Justin and Kelly to be shoe-ins, along with Tamyra.

As for the others, Nikki may get a deal elsewhere.

(And the judges don't always dissemble. When Tamyra was booted off, all three said they would help her in any way. When Nikki got tossed, they all said, basically, "Good luck and good for you for getting this far." Offers to help? None.)

How can I satisfy my "American Idol" needs until the next edition in February?

Don't worry. A tie-in book is available right now. The single from the winner is due in stores



Who do you like? Boyish Justin Guarini or big-voiced Kelly Clarkson (left).



'American Idol': The last dance

Sept. 17. (The runner-up will probably have one out a month later.)

The DVD from the show comes out Oct. 1. The 28-city, six-week tour featuring all 10 winners begins Oct. 8 in San Diego. (It comes to the Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale Oct. 27 and Albany Oct. 29.)

And of course "American Idol 2" launches in February.

Forget the contestants, is Simon Cowell gay?

"I really am straight," laughs Cowell. "But I'm asked the question a lot."

"I remember the very first time I saw 'Pop Idol' back in the UK. I phoned up one of the judges and said, 'I've just seen the show. I am so gay!' He said, 'It's taken you all this time to realize, Simon?'"

Winner: Are 'Idols' for real?

WILL Young, the 23-year-old winner of the original show "Pop Idol" in Britain, wonders whether the "American Idol" finalists are really amateurs.

"The U.S. guys seem more polished than we did," says Young, who will get his first American exposure when he sings on the show tonight.

"To me, when I was watching particularly someone like Tamyra, I was thinking, 'My God, you're Whitney Houston! You could be doing that performance at the MTV Awards.'"

"I was really, really impressed."

Young's been watching some tapes of the American episodes and while judge Simon Cowell and the producers have all said the Americans are a better batch of singers, Young suspects they've already been groomed for stardom.

"They're brilliant," says Young, who's in LA rehearsing for the show.

Since winning "Pop Idol" in February, Young's first single, "Anything Is Possible/Evergreen" debuted at No. 1 and sold more copies in its first week (1.1 million, to be exact)

than any single in UK history.

Young's had a second No. 1 single since then (a cover of The Doors' "Light My Fire"), a third record comes out this month (it's a duet on the Beatles classic "The Long and Winding Road" with his "Idol" runner-up Gareth Gates).

Simon Cowell, for one, sees a direct link between Young and one of the two finalists.

"I see such huge similarities between Kelly [Clarkson] and Will, it's unbelievable," says Cowell.

— Michael Giltz



Brit Will Young, the first "Idol," says American kids are already "polished."