

Winner's time limited while on fast track to fame

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"I have Fantasia on the phone," the handler says.

Yes, as in Barrino. The "American Idol" winner from High Point, now being claimed by Charlotte.

She's on a cell phone somewhere in Los Angeles, 11:14 a.m., en route to breakfast.

The handler has given you, appropriately enough, 15 minutes of her time. Starting now.

Only you can barely hear her. The call is fading in and out. There are people talking in the background. And a voice that is

usually drenched in the syrupy sweet dialect of the South today sounds weary, raspy and uninspired.

Not exactly what we expected.

But hey, it's Fantasia. The flavor of the moment. Everyone wants a taste.

An outfit called 19 Entertainment doles out samples when, and how, it deems fit.

So you take what you can get. Even if it's on the way to breakfast.

"I'm sounding a little tired because I've been on the go," explains Barrino, who recently turned 20. "I haven't really stopped since the show started."

"American Idol" ended in May — but not Barrino.

There's her single, "I Believe," which debuted at No. 1 in The Billboard Hot 100. It sold a respectable 142,000 units but was far short of the debut weeks of "Idol" contestants Kelly Clarkson, Ruben Studdard and Clay Aiken, in that order.

There's also rehearsal 10 hours a day for the "American Idols" tour, which comes to Winston-Salem's Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum on Aug. 21.

And, oh yeah, there are the interviews. They never end. They can't. There's product to sell.

CNN. AP. CBS. A constant blur of acronyms.

"No Disney World for me. I've been really, really busy. I haven't had time to do a lot," she says.

Fantasia, welcome to the machine. 19 Entertainment pulls the strings. Barrino and fellow "Idols" such as Studdard and Clarkson move on cue. And if you don't sell enough CDs — like first-season runner-up Justin Guarini — your strings get cut.

Barrino says she isn't concerned. Of course, the view from the top always looks good.

"Oh, man. I'm ready. I'm excited. I've always dreamed I'd be

able to share my music with the world, and that's what's happening now."

A pause.

The handler is back on the phone. "That's time," she says.

Click.

We should have had another six minutes. But when you're trying to get a piece of Fantasia, any piece, even if what you get barely qualifies as a sliver, you have no choice but to take it.

Even if it's nine minutes on the way to breakfast.

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