

Idols by Degrees

Some alumni enjoy hot careers after the Fox reality show — others find a cooler reception

BY RASHOD D. OLLISON [SUN POP MUSIC CRITIC]

As *American Idol* glitters into its seventh season tonight, the cultural craze just gets more complex. With the Hollywood writers' strike wiping out scripted prime-time programming, the reality series may be an even greater ratings juggernaut than in seasons past.

Yet recently, *Idol* winners have been struggling with flagging album sales. Sony-BMG, the recording home for

all but one winner, has parted ways with several of the show's alumni. But some have managed to transcend *Idol*'s overcooked production style and take advantage of the opportunity the show presented. As *Idol* heats up, here's a fever chart tracking the fortunes of its winners and other notable finalists on a scale of 10 (hot) to 1 (cold).

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» ON TV Season 7 of *American Idol* premieres at 8 tonight on WBFF (Channel 45).



KELLY CLARKSON

With soaring vocals and a sweet demeanor, the native Texan, then 20, became the show's inaugural winner and sold more than 3 million copies of her debut album, *Thankful*. Sophomore *Breakaway* topped that, spawning two Grammys and selling more than 11 million copies. But the indie-rock direction of last year's *My December* prompted a feud with label boss Clive Davis, a delayed tour and no hits; the album did, however, reach platinum sales.

JENNIFER HUDSON

The buxom Chicago belter became the sixth of the 12 finalists voted off during Season 3. But turning in a different direction, she quickly rebounded with the coveted role of Effie White in the hit 2006 film adaptation of the *Dreamgirls* musical. Upstaging co-stars Eddie Murphy and Beyonce, Hudson earned an Oscar. Now 26, the actress has roles in *Sex and the City* and other coming films.



CARRIE UNDERWOOD

This Oklahoma beauty stuck to her country-pop leanings throughout her winning stint on *Idol* and has become the genre's brightest new star. Her 2005 CD, *Some Hearts*, spurred 6 million fans to CD shops and netted two Grammys — including Best New Artist. In barely two months, last year's radiant *Carnival Ride* has sold 2 million copies. Starting this month, the singer, 24, hits the road on a tour with country heartthrob Keith Urban.



CHRIS DAUGHTRY

Daughtry, the fourth finalist on Season 5, has all but rendered winner Hicks irrelevant. Since getting booted from the show, he formed the band Daughtry and released a self-titled debut in 2006. Since then, the critically acclaimed album has sold nearly 4 million copies.



CLAY AIKEN

The jug-eared North Carolina native charmed viewers with his "geek-to-chic" metamorphosis but still came in as runner-up on Season 2. He has since eclipsed Studdard in popularity — particularly with his "Claymate" fan base. His first two albums sold more than 4 million copies combined. His third release, 2006's *A Thousand Different Ways*, went gold. This year, the 29-year-old will move to Broadway in Monty Python's *Spamalot*.



FANTASIA BARRINO

Her back story — a barely literate teen mother who overcame the odds to sing — became mythology. But Barrino's mighty stage presence and churchy, soul-venting vocals won her Season 3. Her debut, *Free Yourself*, included the controversial R&B hit "Baby Mama" and sold more than 2 million copies. But the edgier follow-up, 2006's *Fantasia*, only went gold. In the meantime, the North Carolina-born 23-year-old garnered rave reviews in Broadway's *The Color Purple*.

TAYLOR HICKS

At 29 and with prematurely gray hair, Hicks became the oldest *Idol* winner, powered by his affable, quirky personality and blue-eyed soul. But his self-titled debut produced no major hits and sold mostly to Hicks' "Soul Patrol" fan base. He supported the album with a club tour, and sales eventually reached platinum. But last week, it was confirmed that Hicks is no longer signed to Arista, the Sony-BMG company that put out his uneven debut.

JORDIN SPARKS

Sparks, a doe-eyed singer from Arizona, was *Idol*'s youngest winner at age 17. On the show, she somehow impressed judges with her technically proficient but hollow take of Ben E. King's "I (Who Have Nothing)." Sparks signed a deal with Jive/Zomba Label Group, making her the first *Idol* winner not to join RCA Label Group, which falls under the Sony-BMG umbrella. But she may not be with the company for long, as her self-titled debut, issued in November, has spawned no huge hits. The album's first-week sales of 119,000 is the lowest of any former *Idol* winner.



RUBEN STUDDARD

Alabama's "Velvet Teddy Bear" won Season 2 with his shy persona and gospel-bred vocals. He updated Luther Vandross-style balladry on his debut, *Souful*, which went platinum in no time, then did an about-face on *I Need an Angel*, a gospel effort that sold gold in 2004. But when he tried to tip-toe back into R&B with 2006's *The Return*, music buyers mostly ignored him. Last month, Sony-BMG's J Records dropped the 29-year-old crooner.

