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## Visiting with 'Idol Tonight'

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The term “**American Idol**” no longer refers just to one mere television show, but also to a vast industrial complex of shows ("American Idol" performance and results, "Idol Tonight," "Idol Extra," "Idol Wrap" and "Idol Rewind," live acts and tie-ins, all revolving in orbit around the flagship series). Each Wednesday, the mothership releases another aspiring singer into the larger "Idol" community – a world of records and TV appearances, where some 80 former contestants labor to keep their profiles above sea level. When evening comes, one giant off-tan building on the CBS Television City lot becomes the center of the entertainment universe, hosting in side-by-side stages the sets for “American Idol” and “Dancing With the Stars.” But as lunchtime lingers on through the first truly warm day of the season, the grounds feel as sleepy as a half-abandoned strip mall in some Sun Belt edge city. Outside "Idol's" giant doors, crew members take their time over cigarettes. A few others sprawl on beach chairs outside the craft services tent. On most show days, the bustle would be stepped up at least one notch as "Idol" prepared for its pre-show run-through, but today, I learn, the run-through has been scrubbed because the unimaginable has happened to "Idol's" Iron Man of Hosting, Ryan Seacrest – he has fallen victim to the flu – a disease that until now only prayed on puny humans. For the first time in living memory, Seacrest missed his morning radio program, a tragedy that had the up side of proving that there is only one of him and that he is not, as rumor had it, an army of robots. And for perhaps the first time in "Idol" history, the seal has been broken on the envelope marked “To Be Opened in the Event of a Seacrest Outage” and the little-known contingency clause has been brought into play. “So You Think You Can Dance” hostess Cat Deeley has been summoned as a possible stand-in. From one side of the Idoldome, however, I hear a sudden explosion of cheers. While Idol Nation prepares for the night's climactic elimination, one of the largest bodies in the "Idol" planetary system shoots its latest episode. Hosted by "Idol" veterans Justin Guarini and Kimberly Caldwell, "Idol Tonight" is one of the final stops for the newly eliminated on their post-show PR lap, and one of the major platforms where "Idol" alumni can return to to keep up with the larger fan base. As I approach, the victim of this season's first great tragic elimination, Alexis Grace, stands on a small stage with Justin and Kimberly, a crowd of mostly teenage fans wildly cheering every pause in their interview. Off to the side, Season 5 finalist Mandisa prepares for her turn on the stage. “Now you'll get paid to sing, which is the coolest thing ever!” Kimberly gushes to Alexis of her future. During breaks between segments, I chat with Alexis, just back from her publicity tour in New York and a week home in Memphis with her baby. “I still get that feeling every time I look at that stage,” she says when asked how it felt to be back. “It sends a chill of fear down my spine.” Asked what her plans were, Alexis tells of getting started in the music industry now that she is outside the "Idol" tent. She is planning to start writing songs – she wants very much to record her own music – and to move her family to either Nashville or Los Angeles. “First thing, I've got to find a good lawyer. Then hopefully record an album,” she said. When asked if she is overwhelmed by the experience of meeting the public after leaving "Idol," Alexis admits she is. “You know what a big deal it is. Obviously, I've watched the show so I had a sense of that. But when you're on it, you're so busy you forget.” The sudden rush of interviews, public appearances and crowds recognizing her on the street still clearly takes her breath away. And then, interview done, she heads back to her hotel to get ready for her return to the Idoldome for the show a few hours hence. On stage, Brandon Rogers clears up a mystery of the previous night's show. During "Idol's" Tuesday night show, careful viewers noticed an unexpected sight upstairs in the bandstand – Season 6 finalist Brandon Rogers swaying alongside the back-up singers. Rogers

reveals that a few days earlier, he had received a surprise call from "Idol's" music director, Rickey Minor, who was looking for a male voice to add to the chorus and asked Rogers to sit in. "You don't say no to Rickey Minor," Guarini responds. After the taping ends, I chat with Guarini and Caldwell. On air, the pair have an easy, perky chemistry that blends well with the show's breakneck format. Off-camera, their teasing sibling banter continues. Caldwell became the show's first anchor several years back, taking the reins after her Season 2 run on "Idol" and a brief gig as a sportscaster. The following year, Season 1 runner-up Guarini joined the team. Caldwell's sportscasting background is significant – as commenting on "Idol" is much closer to the job of a basketball correspondent than that of your typical entertainment beat host. Looking back on the last week, Guarini and Caldwell dissect the stumbles of early favorite Matt Giraud. Was his confidence shaken by the audience verdict last week? Was he overthinking his song choice as a result? Have the judges turned on him? Is his confidence permanently shattered? Like racetrack handicappers, the pair go over all the angles astutely. I ask them how they saw the two most important voting blocks in Idol Nation – the tweens and the cougars – breaking in this season. Both say the buzz they are hearing from fans shows Adam Lambert, flamboyance or none, garnering a lot of support from those segments. "There are a lot of older women who really, really like Adam," Guarini says. The pair have been there themselves and seen years of Idols pass through their stage heading on to better or worse. I ask them what advice they would give singers departing the mothership. "Take every opportunity that comes to you," advises Caldwell, speaking with great seriousness. "When we were on the show," says Guarini, "things like MySpace and Facebook never existed. And now there's a way even if you don't have the full might of the 'Idol' machine behind you, even if you're off seventh, eighth or ninth, you can stay out there and stay in touch with fans." I ask them if they believe that anyone who has made the finals can make a career performing. Caldwell answers, "Anyone who is in the top 10, who has experienced the 'Idol' tour, you're touring arenas. You can't pay for that experience and that exposure." Asked what the biggest mistake people make after leaving the show, Guarini says, "Not being connected. A lot of people say, I want to take time and rest." "Justin and me started working the day after we got off the show," says Caldwell. "You gotta stay out there and keep in touch with your base." As the afternoon cools off and the "Idol Tonight" crew breaks up the shoot, people begin to wander onto the stage, getting ready for the big elimination show. Out on Beverly Boulevard, fans queue up, with "Go Danny Gokey" signs in hand, waiting to see if they will be granted seats at the dress rehearsal or even the show itself. Within a couple of hours, the family of former Idols carving out their place in the larger business will have a new member.