

CULTURE

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Above left: Adam Lambert performs with KISS during the season eight finale of *American Idol* in Los Angeles in May last year. Above right: Taylor Hicks performs at the season five finale of *American Idol* in 2006. PHOTOS: REUTERS

With Simon Cowell's days numbered and Paula Abdul already gone, this season is shaping up to be the end of an era for the US' most-popular show, the Fox Network's *American Idol*.

Really, however, when it comes to living up to its title and creating superstar acts that captured the imagination of millions, the power of *Idol* has been ebbing for years. While it produced multiplatinum sensations in its earlier days, starting with Kelly Clarkson and ending with Carrie Underwood, recent *Idol* winners or runners-up have not had similar chart success.

Kris Allen, last year's champion, has sold about 200,000 copies of his debut album. And while his *Idol* runner-up, Adam Lambert, proved to be more popular and controversial, even his debut has not stayed at the top of the charts for long.

"When you start thinking about *American Idol* as a place that feeds the music business, it's not as much as people think it is," said Howard Benson, who produced the first two CDs for *Idol* finalist Chris Daughtry's multiplatinum band, Daughtry. "It's fallen off."

Of course, "fallen off" is relative when you are talking about a show that has been the undisputed ratings champion since it debuted in 2003. It has produced millions and millions in album sales, Grammy Awards, even an Oscar winner in Jennifer Hudson, who is also a Grammy winner and successful recording artist. Even the also-rans of *Idol* have managed to parlay career success after an *Idol* stint.

"It is by far still the most-watched show on TV — even more watched in some years than the Academy Awards and the Grammys or anything like that" says Ann Donahue, senior editor at *Bill-*

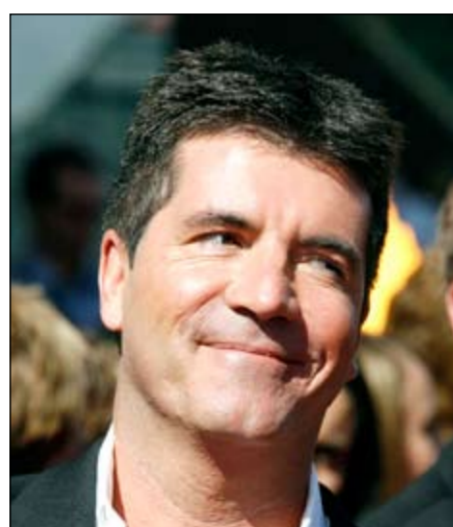
Simon Cowell's departure is another setback for 'American Idol'

board magazine. "But actually translating those people who watch the show into buying albums remains difficult.

Like the rest of the music industry, *Idol* is battling a decline in music sales. But even taking that into account, the drop-off in sales and buzz for *Idol* winners is telling. When Clarkson became the show's first winner in 2003, her album, *Thankful*, debuted at No. 1, sold a healthy 297,000 copies and included hits like *A Moment Like This* and *Miss Independent*. It went on to sell 2.7 million copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

The next year, champ Ruben Studdard sold 1.8 million and had the hit *Sorry 2004*. Clay Aiken, that year's runner-up, did even better, selling 2.7 million copies of his CD, *Measure of a Man*. Studdard's follow-up, *Free Yourself*, also sold 1.8 million and had the R'n'B hit *Free Yourself*. Underwood established herself as the show's most successful winner — her country debut sold nearly 7 million copies with major crossover hits like *Jesus Take the Wheel* and *Before He Cheats*.

The next winner, Taylor Hicks, was a major disappointment, selling 700,000 copies of his self-titled debut. Jordin Sparks followed with a platinum self-titled debut CD and hit songs, while David Cook had a platinum CD, also self-titled but without the hits.



Simon Cowell is leaving *American Idol*. PHOTO: REUTERS

The departure of two judges and a decline in sales and publicity for recent champions could signal the end of an era for America's most popular TV show

BY NEKESA MUMBI MOODY
AP, NEW YORK

This year, *Idol* champ Kris Allen released his self-titled CD to little fanfare. It did not debut at the top of the charts and now sits at No. 91 on *Billboard's* Hot 200 albums chart and has not generated a top hit thus far.

In a recent interview, Underwood said being on *Idol* is not a guarantee of success, even if a performer has a hit debut. "You look at people who came before me too, like some of them you haven't really heard from in a while. And I don't think it's just since me. I think you've got to have a lot of luck on your side, too. Just because people vote for you doesn't mean they'll go out and buy your album, and especially now," she said.

Still, the success of *Britain's Got Talent* finalist Susan Boyle shows if an artist piques the interest of the US, they can still generate huge sales. Boyle's debut CD, *I Dreamed a Dream*, has sold more than 3 million copies since it was released in November (the same month that Allen and Lambert's CDs were released). Boyle's CD was produced by a judge on *Britain's Got Talent*, the judge being Simon Cowell.

In an interview with Fox News, Cowell said he decided to leave the show after this season because "I don't think you should be doing the same thing over and over again."

"I hope and believe it's still the No. 1

show in America, which is a pretty good place to be. I think in a way it's a good thing for the show because it breaks it up; you know it'll be speculation as to who's going to replace me and more shows need that," he said.

"You can't have the same people the whole time, it gets boring."

Idol has already provided the show with some jolts. Last year, it added a fourth judge, Kara DioGuardi, to the original panel of Cowell, Randy Jackson and Abdul, and last year, Abdul announced her departure and is being replaced by sunny talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres.

Donahue says contestants like Allen did well in digital downloads of their show performances, and that may be the best way to gauge their success since the show is more popular with the 18-to-49-year-old demographic, who tend to buy singles more than CDs.

"More and more we can expect *Idols* do pretty well in terms of their digital downloads... but maybe it's not really a fair measurement anymore to see how they do in albums, because the people who watch the show, who buy music, buy singles; they don't buy albums," she said.

Fantasia, who had a gold CD and success on Broadway after her initial success, said in the end, the success or failure of any *Idol* depends on the winner and not the program.

"It's in your hands. We had to fight for [our success] as well."

"You have to make sure you put out great music and sell yourself," she said.

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

JAN. 8 TO JAN. 14



1 Rainie Yang (楊丞琳) and *Rainie & Love...?* (雨愛) with **18.39%** of sales

2 Jeremy Liu (劉子千) and *Mr Why* (愛與想) with **7.51%**

3 F.I.R. (飛兒樂團) and *Let's Smile* (讓我們一起微笑吧) with **6.91%**

4 Alien Huang (黃鴻升) and *Love Hero* (愛英雄) with **5.92%**

5 Magic Power (魔幻力量) and self-titled album with **5.42%**

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

PLANET POP

Haiti's devastating earthquake has moved Hollywood and pop music stars to lead a rally for disaster relief donations and open their own wallets, led by Haitian hip-hop artist Wyclef Jean.

Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie were the first to reach out to Haiti by donating US\$1 million from their foundation to Doctors Without Borders, which has been tending to victims of the quake that demolished buildings in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, on Tuesday. Tens of thousands are feared dead.

Doctors Without Borders said on Friday that actress Sandra Bullock had also donated \$1 million. Madonna donated \$250,000 through Partners in Health and said in a statement she was praying for the Haitian people.

Jean launched a texting campaign, calling on fans in the US to donate US\$5 each to his Yele Haiti Earthquake Fund charged to their cell phone bills by texting "Yele" to 501501.

He raised more than US\$1.9 million by Friday for the disaster relief effort and is in Haiti "giving aid and assessing the situation," according to his Web site, www.yele.org.

Lady Gaga, another pop star who is chipping in to help Haiti, has canceled four of her US concerts, citing exhaustion and dehydration.

The Grammy-nominated singer, one of the top-selling artists of the last two years with hits like *Bad Romance* and *Poker Face*, pulled out of a show in Indiana on Thursday and on Friday postponed or canceled shows on Jan. 16 to Jan. 18 in Connecticut and Atlantic City.

"I've been crying for hours, I feel like I let my fans down 2nite," the 23-year-old singer wrote on social messaging site Twitter on Thursday. "An hour before the [Indiana] show, I was feeling



Wyclef Jean is on the case in Haiti. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

dizzy and having trouble breathing.

"Paramedics came to take care of me, and told me my heart-rate was irregular — a result of exhaustion and dehydration."

"I am so devastated. I have performed with the flu, a cold, strep throat: I would never cancel a show just based on discomfort," she added. Gaga also announced that all the ticket and merchandising proceeds from her Jan. 24 concert in New York would go to relief organizations for the earthquake in Haiti.

"I worry that young people don't know enough about what's going on there," she said of Haiti.

In other news, NBC's late-night woes have become the biggest drama on US television, as comedians and TV executives trade increasingly bitter barbs in public.

With the struggling network still scrambling to sort out its failed prime-time experiment with host Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien and Jimmy Kimmel have played out their talk show wars with Leno all week in what media watchers called a public relations disaster from which NBC could be slow to recover.

Senior NBC sports executive Dick Ebersol entered the fray on Friday,

blaming O'Brien for much of the fiasco and telling the *New York Times* the on-air jokes against Leno were "chicken-hearted and gutless."

Hollywood insider Web site TheWrap reported late Friday that the network had agreed to pay O'Brien US\$30 million to exit *The Tonight Show*. NBC told Reuters the report was "not true."

NBC, which is at the bottom of the big four US TV networks in audience share, has made no official comment on the talks, which also reportedly put Leno back in his old job as host of the flagship *The Tonight Show*.

The vitriol started even before NBC confirmed last week that it would end in February *The Jay Leno Show* in the 10pm prime-time slot because of low ratings and a backlash from its local TV stations.

Earlier hopes that NBC could swiftly move Leno to his old 11:35pm time slot and push *The Tonight Show* with Conan O'Brien back to 12:05am disappeared when O'Brien released a bitter statement refusing to participate in what he called the destruction of *The Tonight Show*.

Since then, O'Brien has placed a sales ad on popular Web site Craigslist for a "barely used late-night talk show,"



Conan O'Brien is on the outs at NBC. PHOTO: EPA

and joked that young people should be inspired to believe they can "do anything you want in life — unless Jay Leno wants to do it, too."

Jimmy Kimmel, late night host of ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* told Leno on his show: "Listen Jay, Conan and I have children, all you have to take care of is cars. I mean, we have lives to lead here, you've got US\$800 million. For God's sake, leave our shows alone."

Meanwhile late-night CBS rival David Letterman took a shot, quipping: "NBC announced it was putting the NBC peacock [the network's symbol] on the endangered species list." —AGENCIES