

'Idol' sensation showed promise on local stage

Early teachers stretched Adam Lambert's talents

By **Karla Peterson** Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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When “American Idol” judges Simon Cowell and Randy Jackson announced on “The Tonight Show” that former San Diegan Adam Lambert was likely to be one of this season's top two finalists, they were getting a little ahead of themselves. After all, that was in March and the “Idol” finale wouldn't air until May 20.

But for theater producer Kathie Urban, the judges' predictions of greatness were about 18 years late. Urban has known Adam Lambert would be big news since he was a little boy.

“Adam was one of those kids who just had it,” said Urban, executive producer for the Metropolitan Educational Theatre network, also known as MET2. “He had the vocal ability and the acting ability. He was the whole package.”

With his love of death-defying high notes, vampy theatrics and material that ranges from classy (“Tracks of My Tears”) to trashy (“Play That Funky Music”), Lambert, 27, is still the whole package. And he has arrived on the “Idol” stage just in time to save the most popular show on television from becoming the most predictable show on television.

“I think Adam has definitely kept this season from flat-lining,” said Entertainment Weekly senior writer Michael Slezak, who blogs about the show for EW.com. “It has been a little bit serious this season. Tons of ballads, tons of sad songs. Then Adam will come out and sort of explode onto the stage in this fireball of energy. And the fact that he does it without ever missing a note is what makes it work.”

In a season devoid of controversies – even dizzy judge Paula Abdul has been relatively coherent – and unsuitable train-wreck contestants, Lambert is the weekly wild card.

From his glitter-rock romp through the Rolling Stones' “(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction” to his mournful take on “If I Can't Have You” from the “Saturday Night Fever” soundtrack, Lambert never forgets that Fox TV's singing competition is also a show – a really big show with an influential audience that isn't likely to forget about him.

“He has a reputation for experimentation that most Idols don't have,” said Sean Ross, vice president of music and programming at Edison Research, a New Jersey-based media company that consults with radio stations. “He comes to the table with people



PROFILE: ADAM LAMBERT

Age: 27

Family: Adam Lambert's father, Eber Lambert, is director of program management for San Diego's Novatel Wireless. He lives in South Park and hosts open-mic poetry nights at Rebecca's coffeehouse. Lambert's mother, Leila, is an interior designer who lives outside San Francisco. Younger brother Neil is a graduate of University of California Santa Cruz.

Education: Lambert grew up in Rancho Peñasquitos and attended Deer Canyon Elementary School, Mesa Verde Middle School and Mt. Carmel High School.

Theater education: Productions with the Metropolitan Educational Theatre network and Broadway Bound Youth Theatre groups; theater, choir and jazz band at Mt. Carmel High.

Professional experience: National tour of “Wicked”; Pantages Theatre production of “Wicked”; musical version of “The Ten Commandments” at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles; and “The Zodiac Show,” a cabaret review at the Avalon Hollywood.

“American Idol” performances: “(I Can't Get No”) Satisfaction”; “Black or White”; “Ring of Fire”; “Tracks of My Tears”; “Play That Funky Music”; “Mad World”; “Born to Be Wild”; “If I Can't Have You”; “Feeling Good.”

Judgment call: “(You're) confusing and shocking and sleazy and superb and way over the top. But I don't know, I like you,” judge Kara DioGuardi, after Lambert's April 28 performance of “Feeling Good.”

wanting to see what he does next and wanting it to be something a little bit different.”

Now one of four remaining finalists vying for the “Idol” title and record deal, Lambert got much of his artistic education through local children's theater groups, where the skills he learned playing Peter Pan and Huck Finn helped him turn the “Idol” stage into his own playground.

“Adam was always a mover; he was someone who wanted to make people feel things,” said Lynne Broyles, Lambert's former vocal coach. “The stage is home to him. It's like he's always been there.”

At the age of 9, Lambert began performing with the Children's Theatre Network – now MET2 – the company founded by Urban's late husband, Alex. A few years later, Lambert also started taking voice lessons from Broyles, who later formed the Broadway Bound Youth Theatre Foundation.

Lambert performed with both groups until he graduated from Mt. Carmel High School in 2000 and headed to Los Angeles, where he still lives. In San Diego, he started in the ensemble of “You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown” and ended up playing lead roles in “Big River,” “The Secret Garden” and “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.”

“He was given the opportunity to play so many different parts, and it helped him learn to be a real chameleon,” Urban said of Lambert's time with MET2, where students play multiple roles throughout the run of a play.

While the Urbans were teaching Lambert to be a quick-change artist, Broyles was helping him push the boundaries of his voice, allowing him to follow in the platformed footsteps of Queen's Freddie Mercury and Michael Jackson, childhood favorites he still admires.

Vocal exercises and singing techniques helped Lambert hang on to his boyish falsetto as he got older, and acting classes taught him how to turn raw emotion into stagecraft.

“In our classes, we got into some real intense acting techniques that helped the students focus their emotional energy,” Broyles said. “You have to know enough about yourself to know what you can bring to an audience, and even as a young child, Adam was very in tune with his soul.”

Knowing how to put himself into a song has paid “Idol” dividends for Lambert, whether he was turning Johnny Cash's “Ring of Fire” into a slinky seduction number, or singing a vulnerable rendition of Smokey Robinson's “The Tracks of My Tears,” which earned the singer a standing ovation from Robinson himself.

Lambert's ability to put on a vocally dazzling show has made him a favorite with “Idol” fans, who have cast enough phone and text votes to keep him in the competition through nine elimination rounds. His crowd-pleasing talent also has helped him shrug off baggage that has weighed heavily on previous contestants.

His résumé includes a European tour of “Hair” and a stint in the Los Angeles production of “Wicked,” but he hasn't been criticized for being too theatrical, as Constantine Maroulis was in season four, or too professional, as San Diego's Carly Smithson was last year after it was discovered she had recorded an album as a teenager.

Photos of Lambert in drag and kissing other men surfaced early in the competition, leading to a

rash of news stories speculating that he could be the first gay or bisexual “American Idol” winner. Fox TV keeps “Idol” contestants away from the press, so Lambert hasn't commented on the brouhaha. Racy photos have derailed past contestants, but they haven't been a problem for Lambert or his fans.

“No one really cares what pictures Adam has floating around on the Internet,” Slezak said. “If people enjoy what you're doing as an entertainer, they don't focus on the things that don't matter that much.”

Wednesday, a surprise drop in viewer votes put Lambert in danger of elimination for the first time this season. But early elimination from “American Idol” wasn't a problem for Oscar winner Jennifer Hudson or for Chris Daughtry, who went on to sell more than 4 million copies of his debut album.

“Regardless of where Adam Lambert finishes, everyone (in radio) is going to want to hear his first record,” Ross said.

Lambert will be part of the “American Idol” tour, which comes to San Diego July 18. After that, there is no telling how far he'll go. But the woman who helped Lambert find his voice is pretty sure he won't be losing himself along the way.

“Adam never thought that he had a free ride. He was always wanting to grow and always wanting to find that next great vocal,” Broyles said. “Whenever he did something new or special, he would never say, 'Wasn't I great?' He would say, 'Wasn't that fun?' ”

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