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"American Idol" calls itself a singing competition, but first and foremost it's a television show, which means the producers are always looking for characters and story lines.

Adam Lambert is the "theatrical" one.

The former San Diegan, who performs tomorrow night for a place among this season's final 12 contestants, got tagged with that label by judge Simon Cowell after singing "Bohemian Rhapsody" during an audition in San Francisco.

Lambert's reply: Thanks for the compliment.

"I am theatrical," Lambert said in a phone interview. "In the current pop scene, lots of performers are going in that direction, more theatrical in appearance, in camp value. So I don't consider it derogatory at all."

Lambert, 27, grew up in Rancho Peñasquitos. He moved here from Indiana with his parents when he was 1 and attended Deer Canyon Elementary School, Mesa Verde Middle School in Poway and Mt. Carmel High School, where he was in theater, choir and jazz band. He has one sibling, a younger brother.

He said he's wanted to be an entertainer since he was 10. He took private voice lessons and appeared in musicals – "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," "Grease," "Chess" – at the Starlight, the Lyceum and other local venues.

His voice coach, Lynne Broyles, and Alex Urban, artistic director of the Children's Theatre Network (now MET2) were influential mentors, convincing him he had talent, Lambert said.

After high school, he moved to Orange County for college – and lasted about five weeks. "I just decided that what I really wanted to do was try to work in the real entertainment world," he said. "Life is all about taking risks to get what you want."

He moved to Los Angeles and did the starving artist thing – cruddy apartments, cruddier paychecks – and landed an understudy spot as Fiyero in the cast of "Wicked."

In the last couple of years, he said, "I've been branching out, doing my own music." He was in a rock band, did session work, "and it's just been kind of a natural progression. I know now that I want to make it in the recording industry."

"Idol," of course, is a rocket ride to making it like no other. The show draws millions of TV viewers each week, and by the end of the season the top contestants are household names – no small thing when it comes to selling records and concert tickets.

Lambert said he's been watching the show, now in its eighth season, since it started. "But I never really pictured myself on it." Friends from "Wicked" pushed him to try out.

Under a new "Idol" format this year, the final 36 contestants have been put into three groups of 12. The first group went last week, with the top three voter-getters moving on to the next round.

Lambert sings tomorrow in the second group. He said he's not allowed to reveal his song choice beforehand. Another local contestant, Westview High student Arianna Afsar, is in the third group, which goes next week.

Even though some contestants who get knocked out at this stage will be brought back in two weeks for another chance in a wild-card round, the pressure to nail the song or go home is enormous, Lambert said. But he feels ready.

"One of the reasons why I waited to audition until I was older is because before this, I would have crumbled," he said. "I've got more experience, I'm used to being in front of a crowd, and I've just grown up. Once you get to a certain point in life, you can handle more."

Even being called theatrical.