

# SPOTLIGHT: American Idols and Saints

➔ With *American Idol*'s record for most seasons at the top of the Nielsen charts (a record it shares with *All in the Family* and *The Cosby Show*), it was inevitable that the show would spawn a Christian imitator. But TBN's *Gifted* shut down as *AI* began spotlighting its contestants' faith commitments (however vaguely stated). These days, *Newsweek*, Fox News, and others debate whether the "Christian viewer vote" has become too powerful.



**"There was a time when a worship leader performing on a show like *American Idol* would have caused Christians to question his faith. But with the culture of celebrity becoming more common in the Christian community, the idea of a Christian making it big in the mainstream isn't so distasteful anymore."**

Joanne Brokaw, who blogs on *American Idol* for Beliefnet's *Gospel Soundcheck*.

## GOD IN THE KARAOKE MACHINE



**2002** 9.9 million people watch premiere episode on June 11, 2002.



Mandisa Hundley sings Mary Mary's "Shackles," the show's first gospel song. Her statement "God is bigger" than "lifestyle" prompts a gay boycott.

**2005** Carrie Underwood's Grammy-winning "Jesus Take the Wheel" becomes one of the best-selling post-*Idol* singles.

**2006**



Melinda Doolittle tells Jon Bon Jovi, "I like church!"



Contestants sing "Shout to the Lord," dropping "Jesus" for "Shepherd." After complaints, a second airing restores the original lyric.



Six of the eight top contestants have ties to Christian music. Four lead worship at their churches, including season winner Kris Allen.

**2008** When viewers eliminate Carly Smithson after she sings from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The New York Times* alleges a witch-hunt.

**2009**

**2010**

## INSTANT CELEBRITIES



**R. J. HELTON** Season one's fifth-place contestant became the first to release a post-*Idol* album for Christian markets. 2004's *Real Life* sold about 20,000 copies, but Helton's career stalled when he came out as gay. Season two's Clay Aiken would walk a similar path (with greater success).



**BO BICE** The former New Hope Cumberland Presbyterian worship leader came in second to Carrie Underwood in season four. But season six's Phil Stacey credits Bice with the show's pro-Christian vibe. Bice "laid a lot of groundwork with the producers just in the fact that he was a good Christian," he said.



**JORDIN SPARKS** Season six's winner had already won the Gospel Music Association's Academy Spotlight Award and had sung backup on two Michael W. Smith tours, but qualified as an amateur for *Idol*. After becoming the show's youngest winner (17), she made headlines defending promise rings on the MTV Video Music Awards.



**DANNY GOKEY** *Idol* producers placed much attention on the death of Gokey's wife four weeks before his audition. Also noteworthy: He was one of two members on season eight from the worship team at Faith Builders International Ministries, a multisite church in Milwaukee. (The other, Jamar Rogers, was eliminated early on.)



**JERMAINE SELLERS** "I want you all to come to church with me one good Sunday," the self-described "church singer" told judges. Infamously grumpy Simon Cowell immediately agreed to go, to the surprise of his fellow judges—and Sellers. But the promise was short-lived, assurances that God wanted him to stay notwithstanding.