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‘American Idol’ Mentor Bobby Bones: ‘I’m the Dork That Looks Like Weezer and Talks a Little Country’

ABC may have bigger plans than just an "Idol" mentor gig for Bones, the most widely heard country radio personality in the nation.



National country radio personality Bobby Bones is getting into the “American Idol” business, as a mentor to this year’s top 24 contestants. And ABC may be interested in getting into the Bobby Bones business, which could make him a key winner this season, however the actual competition turns out.

“Country music is a huge part of ABC’s DNA,” says Rob Mills, ABC’s SVP Alternative Series, Specials & Late, due largely to “our fantastic relationship with the CMA. Through that, Bobby is someone who has been on our radar for quite some time. He’s someone who people feel comfortable with whether you’re an everyday person or Luke Bryan. He is someone we’ve been looking for the perfect vehicle for.” Though he only filmed on the series for a few weeks, “we are not having Bobby on and then sending him back to Nashville,” Mills says. “We are so excited that he will get introduced to a broader audience, and by no means will this be his last appearance on ABC.”

Last fall Bones became, then at 37, the youngest person ever to be inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame, a reflection of the dominance of his syndicated Premiere morning show across the nation. He actually rose up as a popular Top 40 DJ in Austin and Nashville before switching to country — and that, along with his decidedly un-rural look and demeanor, makes him an easy bet to cross back over someday, should he choose to. Some have even seen him as following in the footsteps of a Ryan Seacrest, though the Arkansas native has

developed an intimate enough rapport with country artists and fans that it's clear the genre is no stepping stone.

Bones has also had a New York Times bestselling book, released a music/comedy album and toured behind it with a band, and hit the road as a standup comic. He spoke with Variety before his first taped appearance on "Idol" this past Sunday.

Do you have any thoughts about how to deal with the fact that, to a large part of the audience, you'll be a star or a friend, but an even larger part of the audience isn't familiar with you at all?

Yeah, they're going to be, "Who the crap is this dude?" But that's been the story of my career. And for me it wasn't about just doing something where new people could see me. I believe now we're in such a niche-land in media that you have to super-serve your niche rather than try to be everything to everyone, because if you do that, instead of making your group care, nobody cares. I'm still gonna super-serve my people. I feel the same way, though, when I hop on a stage in a theater and do stand-up: There's probably a fifth of the crowd that has no idea who I am. I feel like every day for me is just a reintroduction, anyway. So I'm just the dork that kind of looks like Weezer and talks a little country.

What do you think the show had in mind by having you come in as mentor?

The reason that they asked me to do it is because of the national radio show — I'd been in many formats, from pop to hip-hop to alternative to sports, and now I have the biggest country show — but I'm also a stand-up comedian and play in a band too, so I think they wanted me to bring a little bit of all of that. Between Katy, Luke, Lionel and the vocal coaches, they didn't need another singer to come in and teach them how to sing. My take is that they were bringing me in to teach the top 24 how to do the other parts of performance — and "performance" even includes social media nowadays.

When and how did you get brought in?

I was presenting at the CMAs last November, and Robert Deaton, who produces the CMAs, was there with Rob Mills from ABC, and I met with them. All I knew about the "Idol" recreation was that my buddy Luke Bryan was doing it. I was having dinner with Luke before Christmas, and I asked him how it was going, because Luke is not one to mince words, and he talked about how it took a second, like it would with any relationship. But he said, "Man, it's really going so great that I'm even surprised by it." And it's been great. I mean, the hours were long, but it's really been awesome.

You were under a veil of secrecy where you weren't supposed to tell your listeners you were doing the show, which must have been tough. You were still doing your radio show from the west coast?

I spent 13 hours a day, working with four or five contestants at a time, or hanging around waiting to work with them. So I would work from 8 a.m. to 8 or 9 p.m., and then try to get back to the room, eat, and then get up again at 1 a.m. for my show. That was a bit of a cycle but you make it work. They locked me down (from revealing the job) for about two months. So for me to keep a secret for two months like that, I had to get off social media, because I was in L.A. the whole time.

Who are some of the artists you feel you had a role in having something big happen as a result of the radio show?

It's kind of full circle that Cam is doing the duets (episode) of "Idol," and we were there the same night. In 2015 Cam came onto my show with a whole different song, and she hadn't had a hit yet, and I said, "No, we should do this other song instead." So she played it on my show, and I continued to play it that morning, and they switched the single to that song that day because of my audience. And it went on to be No. 1: "Burning House." And Kelsea Ballerini, and LoCash... I worked on (breaking) Maren Morris really early, before she had songs ready for radio (promotion). So it's not unlike me to try new music, and I think that was part of the reason that they put me on the show.

ABC has expressed to us how high they are on you. It's safe to say you're thinking about how you can develop this into more television work, right?

If I didn't want that, I'd be lying. I'm not pursuing that. I think that what I do is I go out and I just try to create all this content. I have 50 rejected TV show ideas. I think when I hit 100, then I'll feel like I really started to make it. Listen, I loved the people I worked with, and there are some projects that have popped up that are pretty enticing to me. I just don't want to get involved in something that I don't feel is kind of rooted for success.

On your radio show, your first role obviously is an entertainer, but it seems like you also endeavor to take on social issues, at least on certain flashpoint issues like women in country, or the Las Vegas massacre. Do you see that as part of your mission, to be funny but also be a change advocate and a social conscience for country?

Yeah, I do. My most important job as the host of that show is to entertain, and find stories to tell to my audience. But I do think that inside of country music now there's a very silent majority, and I represent that silent majority. Because the majority is the one streaming the songs and buying the records, so with the Sam Hunts and the Maren Morrises and the Chris Stapletons, the new age of country music, (some) people are going "Well, that's not country," but that's a very minority group that says things like that. And I represent the majority of people who enjoy it. You know, I grew up in Mountain Pine, Arkansas. You get no more country than where I grew up. But I also grew up in the Napster / iTunes / Spotify / iHeart Radio era, and so I see that everything is influenced by everything else, and that's what country music is now.