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'AMERICAN IDOL' MENTOR BOBBY BONES TALKS FILLING IN FOR RYAN SEACREST & RUNNING FOR GOVERNOR OF ARKANSAS



After making a few appearances as a guest mentor on *American Idol* last season, popular iHeart nationally syndicated country radio DJ Bobby Bones was asked to join the series in a full-time capacity this year, working with the current group of contestants. Bones sat down with Billboard this week at a recording studio in Hollywood to talk about his radio career, his victory on *Dancing With the Stars*, a possible run for political office and his work on ABC's reboot of *Idol*.

When did you first know that you were interested in working in radio?

When I was in kindergarten, they made you fill out those sheets, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And I wanted to be a comedian and a radio host and a musician and I wrote all three of those down. I've always known what I wanted to do and I'm doing all three of them now. That's a rare thing.

How did you become interested in radio and comedy?

When I was five, I called in to a radio station and the DJ said my name on the air and I thought I'd like to do that too. I was also watching David Letterman at an early age. He looked awkward like me and he was funny and successful. At 13, I volunteered at the radio station. My first job was cleaning up when I was 17 and before I really started, they fired people for stealing station equipment and I was on the air.

What was it about radio that caught your interest?

We're all searching for love and I felt I could get other people to love me. I come from a pretty rough background, and so for me, doing standup or being on the radio was always about how can I get this love fix and actually feel like someone is there. That's probably the therapy reason why I do it what I do. On the surface, I enjoy the music side of things and I enjoy breaking new artists. I worked in every format – pop, hip-hop and alternative. I did a national sports show. When I finally got to decide what I wanted to do, country to me is the most authentic. I grew up on country music my whole life.

At that first job, you were given the choice of two on-air names, Bobby Z or Bobby Bones.

Yes and they're both terrible. I was 17 years old and I thought, "You can call me anything you want as long as you put me on the radio." My real name is Bobby Estell. Bobby Bones sounds like a pirate. But at least a pirate was a human. Bobby Z sounds like a pill. When I run for political office, I'm going to have to change my real middle name to Bones, so people will remember who I am.

Political office? Is that something you are really considering?

I never grew up thinking, "I want to be a politician." As a matter of fact, I don't want to be a politician right now. I didn't have a lot as a kid. My mom was a drug addict. She died in her forties. I never knew my real dad. My grandmother adopted me for a while and I was bouncing around a bit. I was always helped by the PTA and church groups with food and Christmas presents. It's a hard cycle to break, because when you don't have the resources, it's almost impossible. There is a wider and wider separation between the lower class and upper class and there's almost no middle class. Education is a big deal to me. I never had a great one, but without the proper education, how are you supposed to arm yourself with the tools to do better and break the cycles that you're in? My high school is a very poor school. I've been lucky enough to fund a lot of the athletic uniforms and shoes, because I couldn't afford shoes when I was playing ball. And if it wasn't for the church jumping in to buy me tennis shoes, I would not have been able to play. So for me, those things are important. That's why I want to get into politics. I do think I'll be the governor of Arkansas because I represent the people in that state.

And here you are on *American Idol*. When did you start watching the show?

Season one with Kelly [Clarkson] and Justin [Guarini]. *The Simpsons* and *American Idol* are the biggest shows of my lifetime. *The Simpsons* has been on longer but *American Idol* has been more of a cultural phenomenon. I was really hardcore *Idol* for eight seasons. As I got older I faded off of it. And then when Keith Urban, who's a friend, was on, I hopped back in again. When *Idol* went away, it was the end of an era, because it had been prevalent for so long.

How did you get connected to *Idol* when ABC brought it back?

I did a pilot for ABC. It was a daytime talk show with Deion Sanders and myself. The pilot failed, but I made some decent connections. They called me back in because they wanted to talk about me mentoring on an episode of *American Idol*. I was in a waiting room and there was a woman next to me. She was super friendly. We were just talking about life and I was really interested in her background and she had a funny accent. She gets called into her meeting. I walk into my meeting and the woman that I had been talking to, unbeknownst to me, was Trish [Kinane], who is the executive producer of *American Idol*. We started talking about my skill sets as a comedian, a musician and radio and TV and she said, "You should come on the show." I firmly believe that it was because we had such a great random conversation out in the lobby that I even got a real look. I

walked into that meeting and we were already old friends, and who doesn't want to work with an old friend?

You were on two episodes and the season 16 finale.

I was proud to be part of an institution like *American Idol*. They said, "We would really love for you to come on full time next year," and then ABC gave me a network deal which included [being a judge on] Miss America. And they asked me, "Do you dance?" And I said, "I do not. No part of me has ever danced. Maybe in a bar, if you played 'The Humpty Dance.' That's it." And they said, "Do *Dancing with the Stars*. You'll last like four weeks, and you'll walk right into *American Idol*. You'll get a little notoriety. No one ever wins that show who can't dance. You'll get voted off." I freakin' won the show. I had to miss the very first episodes of *American Idol* where they went to audition in the cities because I was still dancing.

Why do you think you won *Dancing With The Stars*?

Because people saw me in them and I saw them in me. I trained harder than anybody on that show because I was coming from so far back. No dance experience whatsoever, and I was doing eight to 11 hours a day training while working full time doing my radio show and still traveling doing standup on the weekends, and I didn't hide that. Also, I didn't know the rules of *Dancing With the Stars* and I firmly believe if you don't know the rules, you don't play by the rules and you can actually make new rules. I was never the best. I'm the second lowest winner of all-time score-wise, only behind season one when they didn't know what they were doing. I won because I was the people's favorite dancer, and that's what I work with these Idols on. There have been 1,000 singers before you that are as good or better than you, but you're not trying to be the best singer ever. You're trying to be the people's favorite singer. If you're just going to line people up and have them sing their brains out, you're going to get schooled by some opera singers that no one's ever heard of. That's not the game. The game is human relations.

Can you give me some examples of how you've mentored this seasons' contestants?

Wade Cota told me, "I've never been trained. I'm up against people [who have]." I said, "There's a beauty to that, because you're not doing what everyone does and the greats don't. The greats set their own." Laci Kaye Booth has no idea how good she is, because she's never been around people that actually tell her how good she is. She's completely uncomfortable against what she sees as far greater talent. I don't know how many times I've had to tell her that not only does she deserve to be here but she deserves to be there at the very end. I talk to them about their vulnerability. Alejandro [Aranda] struggled with the concept of Disney Week. He said, "Disney songs? I don't know what I'm supposed to do if I have to sing a Disney song." I told him, "You don't have to win every week. If you're running in the forest from a lion, you just have to outrun the slowest guy. The lion's only going to get one of them, so as long as you survive these weeks you're super uncomfortable with, you're good. By the time the semis or the finals come around, you get to dictate what you're doing and how you're doing it." Alejandro did a song from *Coco*. He struggled until the last minute, and then he went out there and pulled it off.

Who were your mentors and why are you such a good mentor yourself?

I've learned a lot through failure and I think that's really where we get the bulk of our knowledge and experience. I've screwed up a lot to figure out who I am. We've all taken many, many wrong turns. I don't know that I'm the best mentor, but I do know that if I don't know something, I have no ego about calling someone to ask, "I don't know this. Can you help me with this?" As far as my mentors, I don't

know if they know I exist. I took so much from David Letterman. I thought it was funny that he threw watermelons off a building, but I didn't quite understand what was happening at the time. And Howard Stern was the first person I ever saw who said, "Let me just talk how I talk and let you see not what's wrong with me, but what we all have in common."

You're still on the radio every morning. How do you do that with your *Idol* schedule?

It's hard. My schedule is tough. When I'm in California, which is right now half the week, I wake up at 1 a.m. to go on the air at 3 a.m. pacific which is 6 a.m. on the east coast, and I work on east coast time. It's brutal. I do my show live in my studio. My co-hosts all sit around the same table in Nashville. Technology allows us to do anything.

You filled in for Ryan Seacrest one night as host of *Idol* when he wasn't feeling well. How much notice did you have?

I was working with the contestants on their duet week. And one of the producers said, "Trish needs to see you." I asked him to hold on a second and he said, "No. Trish needs to see you now." The show was starting in seven minutes. I'm thinking I'm about to get fired. And Trish said, "Take your mic off. Walk out in the alley." Then she tells me, "Ryan is sick for the first time ever in the history of the show, and we have to start the show in less than 10 minutes. Can you do it?" I said I could. There was no rehearsal. I said, "All I need is stage directions. Just tell me to walk right or left so I don't walk into a camera." It was a benefit to me that there wasn't time for me to freak out. I didn't do it as well as Ryan does it. Ryan's the greatest I've ever seen, but I went out and the building was still there when it was over. I thought I did pretty good. I watched it back. I cringed a little bit at me, but that's normal. But it's opened a lot of doors. It would've never happened if there had been five hours. They would have gotten a big star to host it. I was at the right place at the right time and Ryan had a bad circumstance happen.

Lionel Richie pulled me aside and I'm thinking this is nutty – I'm a kid from Mountain Pine, Arkansas and I'm getting mentored by Lionel Richie. So he's giving me advice and he told me about the time Dick Clark called the Commodores and said, "We need an act." "We weren't ready, but they called us and we did it and it turns out we were, and so are you." And then he pushed me in the back and said, "Go get 'em." I walked up and boom, it was *American Idol* time. And then before I knew it, the show was over and I didn't get fired and now I'm here with you.