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Bobby Bones Reveals Two Big Changes Coming to *American Idol* This Season

Radio and TV personality and winner of season 27 of [Dancing With the Stars](#) **Bobby Bones**, 40, returns as mentor for the fourth season of ABC's [American Idol](#) (Feb. 14), which will again be hosted by **Ryan Seacrest** with judges **Lionel Richie**, **Katy Perry** and **Luke Bryan**.

What can fans look forward to this season?

Idol acknowledges the real world, meaning it's aware that people are getting [known from] [TikTok](#) and Instagram. We're like, "Great, come be exactly who you are, we're not going to change you—let's see how far your talent and your voice will take you."

What makes you a good mentor?

My advice comes from being a musician and working in alternative, pop, hip-hop and country music. And from being a comedian, touring and not only interviewing folks, but being interviewed. I've never been great at one single thing, but being barely above average at a lot of things has paid off because I've been able to learn a lot in different areas.

Related: [How Bobby Bones Got His Start as a DJ and Became the King of Kindness](#)

What keeps bringing you back to mentor the contestants?

Working with *Idol* is great because this is really the one singing competition show that is about the artist. And so, even from season one on ABC, it was, "Hey, let's see what I can lend to the contestants." Because I didn't really know yet; I hadn't been on the show yet. Then to not only watch them grow and to see that I could help them with a lot of things, like what songs to sing or how to impress the judges, and then once I won *Dancing With the Stars*, I could actually talk to them about competing on a show, because I'd been through that as well.

But the great thing was when I was back and working in Nashville, watching the artists slowly start to grow out of *American Idol*. I don't mean growing up in a bad way, but grow outside of it, like **Gabby Barrett** or **Laine Hardy**, and I'm still working with them today.

So what keeps me going back is the fact that I get to keep developing these guys even after the show is over. I took a couple contestants from the last season on tour with me as well, to open and to play in my band. So it's been pretty great for me so far as the continued mentorship.

Are there any new elements for the coming season?

We have changed the categories a bit where people get to choose their format. So that's a change. In Hollywood Week, the judges went around into the rooms a bit more than ever before and worked with the contestants as well. We had duets last year, but the big twist this year was the judges paired people up.

Maybe that's a COVID thing, because we used to see people running around and they couldn't find a group, and there was a lot of interaction.

I think partially. But, also, the judges really wanted to put people sometimes with extremely different kinds of singers, so it was a strategy thing too, but you're probably right. So much has happened with COVID, and we're doing such a good job at it that it almost becomes annoying, right? I'm so happy that COVID security is there and in place, because if not, when I'm mentoring and trying to help out these kids, I'd probably have an arm around them. But they don't really allow that this year.

What's the best advice you give the contestants?

That it's OK to be nervous. If they're nervous, to not fight that. So many of them haven't performed on a stage at all; they sometimes just sing in their phones. And they come to me and they're like, "I don't know [what to do](#) about these nerves. How do I get them to go away?" And the best advice that I give them is they're not going to go away until you get on that stage another 100 or so times, and then they're just going to change. So if you eliminate that time where you're trying to get rid of the nerves and focus on something else, you're actually at a bit of an advantage over other folks.

Once we get to the top five or six, I can really help on song choice. And there's even a week when they make me pick all of the songs. Then if the contestants do bad, it's my fault. But early on, with these new performers, it's mostly nerves.

How do you think the past contestants are doing? Gabby Barrett won the Breakthrough Video Award at the CMT Awards, but we haven't heard that much from Laine Hardy, Alejandro Aranda or Maddie Poppe. Do you think it's just a different world than when *Idol* started and launched [Kelly Clarkson](#) and Carrie Underwood?

First, let me say on Gabby, Gabby had the absolute biggest song in country this last year with "I Hope." It was bigger than any other song, period, in the format, and to do that only three years out of *Idol*... It does take a long time to develop an artist nowadays. You don't just go viral and become an artist anymore because too many people are going viral. So I'm very proud of what Gabby was able to do.

Even **Caleb Lee Hutchinson** from Maddie's season has a management deal and is working. **Emma Kleinberg**, who was on two seasons ago, who I took on tour with me, she just signed a big publishing deal. So these artists are actually doing pretty well, and that's what I like about *Idol*. They're furthering their careers and it's letting them shine in songwriting, doing originals. Alejandro was set to have a big tour but COVID knocked him down.

Laci Kaye Booth is about to have a massive couple of years. And she's, again, off the same season with **Walker Burroughs**, who is now playing in my band. But Laci is going to have a big season in country music. They've been developing her for the last year.

So I think that some of them are doing wonderfully. It's just not the same stage as it used to be when any show had 20 million people watching it. I'm very proud of the contestants in the first three seasons of the show.

What's happening with your new show *Breaking Bobby Bones* [this spring on National Geographic]?

I wanted to do a show where I talk to people that have stories a bit like mine, that come from backgrounds that some would consider tough or rough and they defy the odds. Also, they have a hobby or a job that is pretty original, sometimes dangerous, and it's my job to compete in what they do. And sometimes I fail miserably.

Why is your new show called *Breaking Bobby Bones*?

It's *Breaking* because some of these things break me. The goal is that I can't complete their challenges. One of them, I go and have to hang 5,000 feet over the Grand Canyon on a rope. There's this guy, who served some time and got out of jail, and is a typical story about getting it right, a second chance. But he's a rope access climber, and what he does is he gets to places that drones or ladders or cranes can't get to. The only way you can get to it is by building a rope rig and swinging on ropes out there.

So I had to hang 5,000 feet over the Grand Canyon and clean the bottom of a sky bridge. Could I do it? Could I do it in the amount of time I needed to do it? I've also played hockey with the Paralympic hockey team, and they beat the crap out of me. So it's stuff like that, competing in a hockey game, hanging on ropes, driving humongous machines. I've broke humongous machines in the process, so it's definitely been interesting.

And then, at the end, we have a big give-back. It's a combination of what I do every morning on the radio show, and then some of my favorite shows like *Anthony Bourdain* or *Jackass* or *Move That Bus! Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

***The Bobby Bones Show* is your day job and it switched from Top 40 to country when you moved from Texas to Nashville. Was that a hard transition?**

It wasn't a hard decision, because I got to make it. I had built my own syndication company in Austin and they were like, "Hey, what do you want to do next?" And, for me, there had never been a national show in country music. I grew up in Arkansas and was always a country music fan, and I just felt like those were my people more so. It felt like an audience and a base that would be more understanding of just generally the life I came from and my lifestyle. So to move to country was a risk, but it was one that I put on myself. And now we're in like 175 cities and three countries. That part of it is going really well.

With all of your achievements, of which are you most proud?

I won *Dancing With the Stars* and, in the end, that is what introduced me to my fiancée. I think that's probably it. We had a chance meeting. She had a friend that was working PR, but I only went to visit them because I'd won *Dancing With the Stars*. So because of that mirror ball, I am now with the person I'm going to marry and be with for the rest of my life.

You recently got [engaged to your girlfriend, Caitlin Parker](#). Are you a romantic?

I am now, with her. I've never told anyone I love them at all until her. I'm like the Grinch. I had a deep, dark heart and no one was able to get to it. And then, like at the end of *The Grinch* where his heart grows in size three times, that's what happened when I met her.

What's been the hardest thing for you this year?

I've had a few friends that have gotten really sick from COVID. We've all tried to be extremely careful, myself included, so it was hard to watch them go through what they've been going through with their health. **Eddie[Garcia]**, my producer and my comedy partner, got really sick with COVID. Tim, my security guy, got really sick with COVID. A lot of people around me got it, and just to watch them fight through it has been difficult.

Then a lot of my band crew haven't been able to work. I've been lucky, I've had jobs that they have figured out ways to make sure we can keep working. Being on the radio, I've been called an essential worker, because if something goes wrong, they need people that are on the airwaves to be able to spread news. But my guitar player, my tour manager, they can't do anything, they have no work. There have been ways that I've been able to help them, but not enough. So to watch my friends not be able to work, feel fulfilled with their career, and pay their bills, that's probably been the toughest thing.