

TV GUIDE

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**KELLY
CLARKSON
ON...
FAME,
FRENCHIE
& HOW TO
WIN ON
AMERICAN IDOL**

**"HELP, I'M ADDICTED
TO REALITY TV!"**

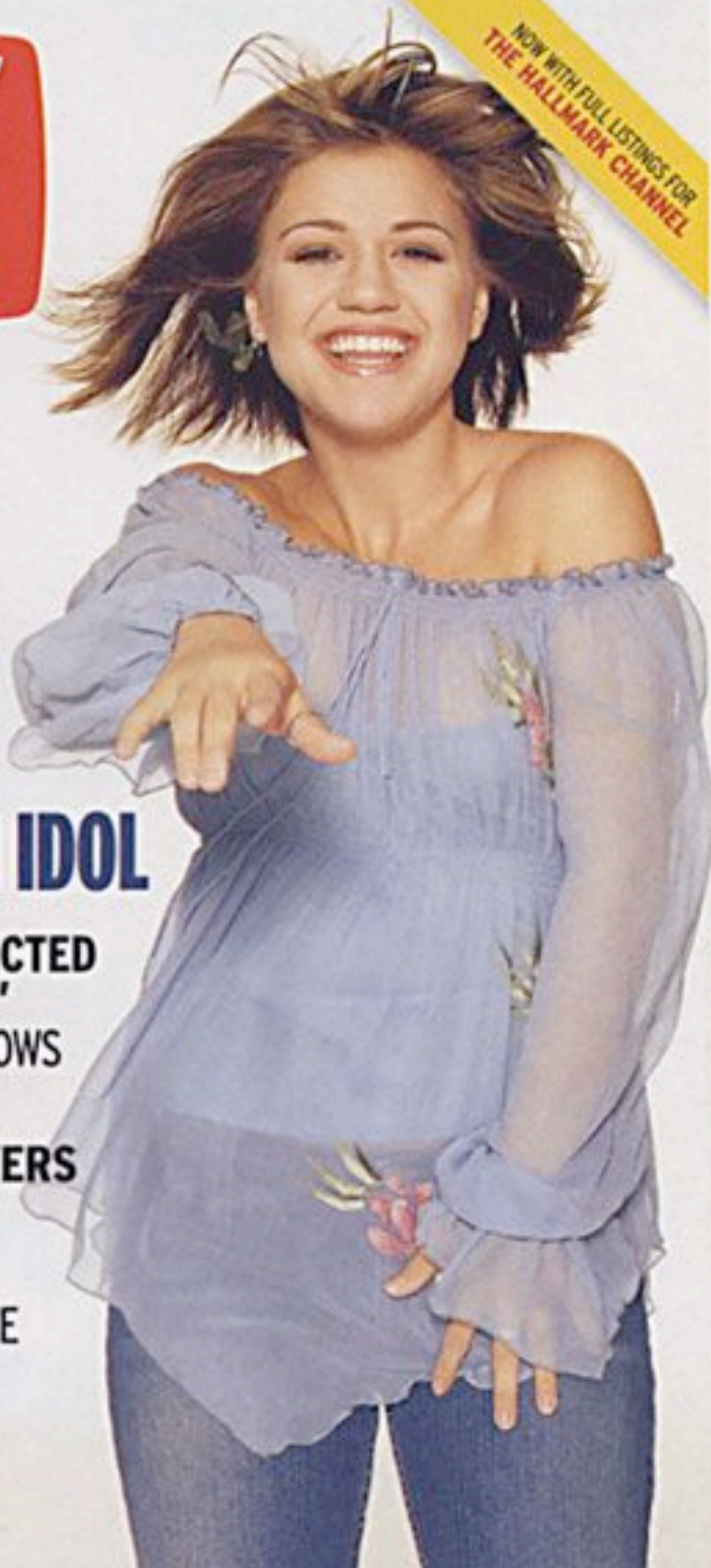
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AMERICAN IDOL airs Tuesdays, 8 P.M./ET, and Wednesdays, 8:30 P.M./ET, on Fox.

FEBRUARY 17

A blizzard has stopped Manhattan in its tracks. Fifty-mile-per-hour winds and relentless snow have buried cabs, shuttered stores, seized sidewalks. But another storm is vying for citywide domination today—and please, *nothing* stops the media maelstrom of *American Idol* 2.

Finalists Ruben Studdard, 24, and Kimberley Locke, 25, plow through countless TV interviews, literally traversing snowbanks along the way (in heels, in Locke's case). With the help of a Yukon SUV, they stay on their jam-packed schedule that begins at 7:20 A.M., weather crises notwithstanding. Often with mere seconds to spare, they make it to *Access Hollywood*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *Extra* and two morning shows. And that's before breakfast.

Even in warm studios, there's a chill in the air: TV hosts pelt them with questions about their weight (neither fits the stereotypically svelte pop-star image). And everyone's fishing for dish on that other plus-size contestant, Frenchie Davis, who got booted for appearing on a racy Web site.

So how do a couple of overnight sensations handle the stress? Quite well, as it turns out. When asked if they're anxious about being grilled on live TV (first up: *Today*), they shake their heads "no." And the pressure of sudden fame? They just shrug.

No wide eyes here. Interviews seem to be a celebrity drudgery they've already gotten tired of, especially as this day wears on. Who cares whether reporters focus on their physiques (which are just fine, if you ask them)? Besides, Studdard figures they've got an *Idol* summer concert tour to think about—even though a reprise of the first season's tour is not yet confirmed by Fox. "Basically, we're all with this *American Idol* thing for about a year," Studdard says. Translation: They're already winners.

Meet the press: Lucky finalists Smith and Olivarez with *Access Hollywood*'s Billy Bush in New York City's Rockefeller Center.

BY JENNIFER GRAHAM

Each week, for four straight weeks, *American Idol* contestants have inched closer to stardom and experienced one of its trappings: press interviews. After advancing to the finals, they've been jetted to New York City for a 30-hour media blitz. TV GUIDE followed four of them as they made the rounds.

SCOTT JAMES FOR TV GUIDE

There's no stopping **Idol** Frenzy!
American Idol finalists as they make their mad dash for the spotlight

And really, who wants to go through an awkward, naive stage anyway? These two are going straight to savvy, nixing a photo shoot in a horse and carriage because, as Locke says, "they're already saying we're dating." Later, Studdard wonders, "Do they give sneaker endorsements to *American Idol* contestants?" Listen, if Shakira's getting free Reeboks, why not him?

FEBRUARY 24

Another day ripped from a superstar's schedule! Today the roles will be played by finalists Rickey Smith, 23, and Vanessa Olivarez, 21. Smith is quiet and amiable—according to tough *American Idol* judge Simon Cowell, he advanced only because of his nice personality. The flamboyant, colorful Olivarez won fans by shaking her ample rear end for the *Idol* cameras.

Luckily for Olivarez, last week's snow has melted. She never would have made it through the drifts in her 5-inch, cherry-red platform sandals. As it is, she trips twice just trying to navigate Fox News's carpeting. "It's OK," she says. "I usually trip six times a day in these." All right, then. Four to go.

Today's interviewers all seem to think they're Oprah. Olivarez is asked endlessly how she felt when Cowell advised her to lose a few pounds. Other sample questions: "Have you gained weight since the first auditions?" "Are you dieting?" "Exercising?"

Each time, she cocks her head to the side and smiles like Betty Boop, only perkier, poised in the face of the firing squads. "I appreciate his constructive criticism," she says. In fact, despite her on-air defiance of Cowell, she's decided to take his advice.

No one has any probing questions for Smith, but his day gets better when they visit Nickelodeon. "This is the only channel I watch!" he cries. "This and ESPN!" On *U-Pick Live*, they are pitted against each other in a "dance-off." An audience of kids votes (by applause) on the guest with the coolest moves. Smith triumphs, and the show's producer, dressed in superhero tights, presents him with his prize: a can of Spam.

Leaving the studio, Olivarez shakes her head and laughs. "I embarrassed myself," she says, "and I didn't even get any mystery meat." Not that she'd eat it. She's got a Simon-inspired goal: 10 pounds to lose.

Ready for their close-ups: Locke and Studdard prepare for *The Caroline Rhea Show*.



LEFT: SCOTT JONES FOR TV GUIDE; RIGHT: MELBA DUNKA FOR TV GUIDE; HAIR: YOGIE TAUBER/PHYL; MAKEUP: ARIEN ANDUS/WILLIAMS IMAGE GROUP; STYLING: JENNIFER CHAMBERS; JACKET: MISS SIXTY