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'American Idol' back with plans for ratings, stars

Merchandising deals part of grand scheme

By LYNN ELBER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES

Last year, Prince. This year, Paul McCartney and Mariah Carey?

As "American Idol" started singing again Tuesday, those connected with the Fox blockbuster acknowledge few limits when it comes to guest stars or ratings or product spinoffs. Or even rampant enthusiasm.

"This is the greatest music talent show ever," judge Randy Jackson said in a TV news conference last week. Fellow jurist Paula Abdul calls

the show a cultural phenomenon.

"I get a kick out of the fact that there's not a day, not an hour, that goes by without someone talking about it," she said.

Cecile Frot-Coutaz, who oversees "American Idol" as chief executive officer of producer Fremantle-Media North America Inc., is more measured but no less upbeat about Season 6 and beyond.

"I don't see anything that tells me that it's about to fall off the air," she said. "We won't be there for quite some time." It's a defensible position regarding the No. 1 TV series.

Against expectations for an estab-

lished series, "American Idol" has gained in the ratings, up 14 percent from 2005 (26.8 million average viewers) to 2006 (30.6 million). The finale with winner Taylor Hicks drew more than 36 million, according to Nielsen Media Research.

That topped the 2005 season-ender, in which Carrie Underwood claimed the title, and made it the third most-watched event of '06 after the Super Bowl and Academy Awards.

The most impressive number has a dollar sign in front of it: "American Idol" reportedly brings in \$500 million a year in TV ad dollars. (Fox, a unit of News Corp., declined comment on the figure.)

Even impartial observers see blue skies directly ahead.

'IDOL' REFRESHER

The good, the bad and the ugly starting with Season 1.

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"American Idol" judges Paula Abdul, left, and Randy Jackson ponder a question at a news conference during auditions for the show in San Francisco in September 2005. The show returned to TV this week for Season 6.

AP PHOTO



AP PHOTO

"Everybody Loves Raymond" alum Brad Garrett is the star of "Til Death."

Garrett on divorce, 'Death'

By PATRICIA SHERIDAN
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

Most viewers recognize Brad Garrett from his supporting role as the brother in "Everybody Loves Raymond." But this Emmy Award-winning actor and comedian is now the star in his own sitcom, "Til Death," Thursday nights on Fox.

It's a comedy about a long-married couple (Joely Fisher plays the wife) and their newlywed neighbors.

Garrett, 46, also can be seen in "Music and Lyrics," which is scheduled to open in theaters on Valentine's Day.

A conversation with the actor:

Q: When was the first time you remember thinking "I'm funny"?

A: Oh, boy. I'm going to say 8. Eight o'clock last night, which is kind of disheartening. I was a very awkward, strange kid. ... I kind of looked a little off; not that I look on today. So that was kind of my niche, kind of my thing to get laughs, because nothing else was working.

Q: What was the adjustment like to being the lead in your own sitcom?

A: Well, it's literally three times the work. It's much more of a

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MUST-SEE MOVIES



AP PHOTOS

Cinderella (voiced by Amy Sedaris), Snow White (Amy Poehler), Fiona (Cameron Diaz), Rapunzel (Maya Rudolph) and Sleeping Beauty (Cheri Oteri), from left,

stand their ground in a scene from "Shrek the Third." The animated movie is one of several films expected to draw lots of movie-goers to theaters this summer.



Daniel Radcliffe fans will get to welcome the star back to the silver screen this summer with the release of "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix." Radcliffe plays the title character.

Blockbusters in waiting

Hotly anticipated films set for summer

By DAVID GERMAIN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES

There are big years for movies, and there are big years. Then there's 2007, which has some Hollywood types thinking a record box-office year may be at hand.

The month of May alone has dollar signs dancing in studio executives' heads as the third installments to three of the all-time biggest movie franchises hit theaters within a three-week span.

First up, "Spider-Man 3," with Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst returning as the young superhero and his dreamgirl.

Next comes "Shrek the Third," with Mike Myers, Cameron Diaz, Eddie Murphy and Antonio Banderas back as mouthpieces of the animated fairy-tale kooks.

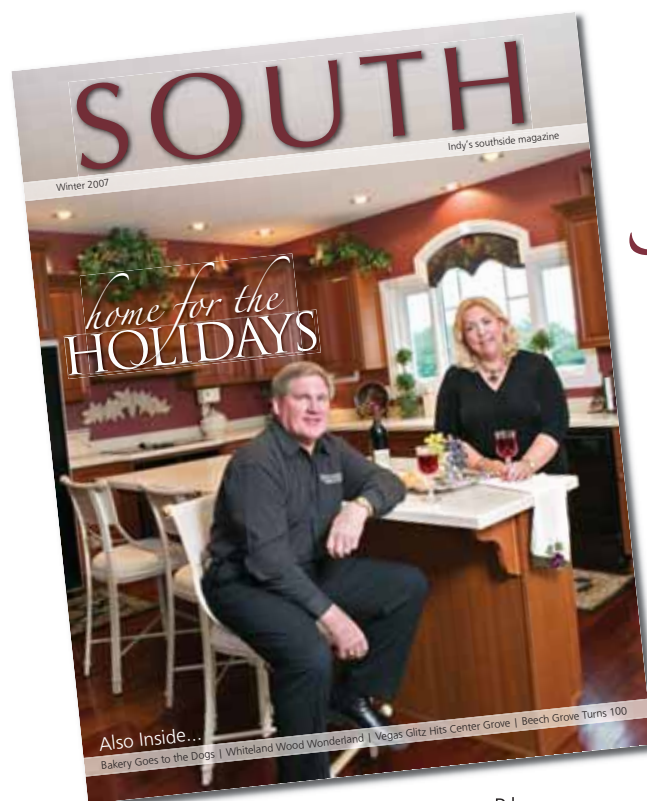
Then there's "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End," with Johnny Depp continuing the cliffhanger left from last summer's blockbuster.

Two other heavyweights follow soon after: the animated "Ratatouille," a comedy about a

gourmet rodent from the Disney-Pixar partnership; and "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix," with Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson and Rupert Grint going back to wizardry school in the fantasy series' fifth chapter.

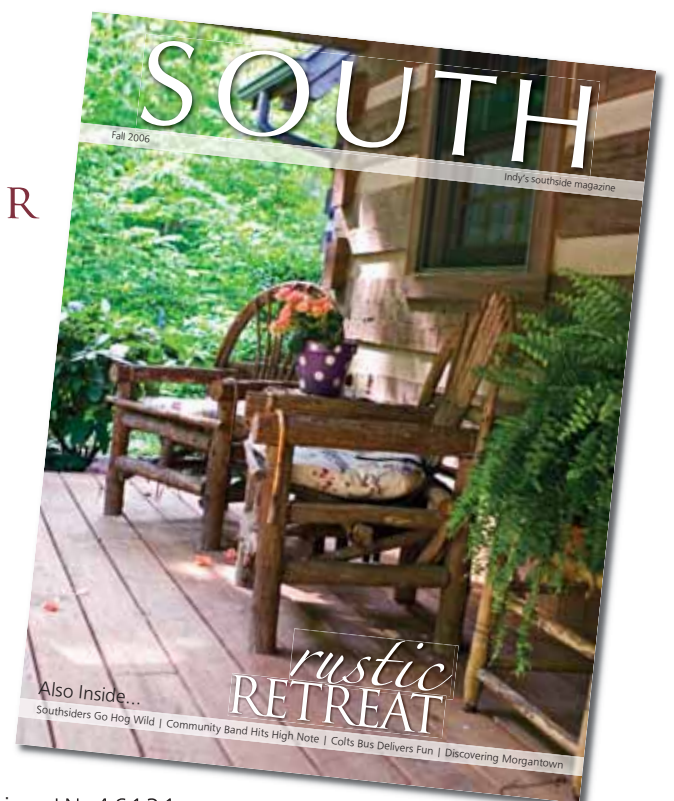
"There is a lot to see," said Maguire, whose boyish Peter Parker — the nerd turned superhero by a mutant arachnid's bite — finds himself wrestling with his dark side just when he thought he'd gotten his act together.

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