

Title:

You Just Never Know: From Chicken Soup For The American Idol Soul

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Summary:

Excerpt From Clay Aiken

American Idol Runner-Up, Season 2

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Article Body:

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It was December 2003, and Christmas was just a few weeks away. I was in Atlanta as part of a radio tour around the country when I received a very special and unexpected holiday gift.

Six months had passed since that amazing night when Ruben and I stood on stage at the Kodak Theater for the American Idol Season 2 Finale. In those months, I had loved being on the American Idols Live! tour, making my first video and album, traveling from city to city, singing live at radio stations along the way, and meeting with thousands of fans to chat and sign autographs.

At the beginning, all the adulation had been difficult for me to accept, but I was finally starting to get used to people telling me how hearing my songs or watching my videos had changed their lives. Yet, it was still a challenge for me when a fan would tell me something dramatic like, "I was thinking of ending my life – and then when I put on your CD and heard your song, I realized that I

actually wanted to live, and I cried tears of gratitude to you."

Could I really be having that kind of impact on people's lives? I'd ask myself. Because, if I am, I should be the one crying tears of gratitude to have the fortune to be in this position.

Since my fans mean everything to me, I would do my best to be gracious when they'd tell me these things, even if I was caught off-guard.

This particular December day, a very petite and pretty girl came up to me as I was signing autographs and said, "Your video, Invisible, made such an impact on my life."

I didn't want to argue with her, but I was sure she must have gotten that video confused with some other video I'd made. I thought, It couldn't have been Invisible. That was just a self-congratulatory video of me singing on a stage in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard with a bunch of people cheering. There was no story line. There was nothing inspirational about it. How in the world could that video have impacted her?

"Are you sure you don't mean some other video?" I asked.

"No, I'm sure it was Invisible."

I asked her to explain.

She paused before she said, "Well, I used to weigh about 200 pounds."

"Wow, you look great, but how does that have anything to do with Invisible?"

"When I saw that girl on stage in the video, and you put your arm around her, I could hardly believe it. I mean, she was overweight, and you looked so happy to have her up there with you. Because you accepted her, I was able to accept myself. After that, my whole life changed."

I had to think back to that video for a minute before it dawned on me what she was referring to. While we were making the video, the music director had pulled someone out of the audience and put her on stage with me. She wasn't hugely overweight. She was just a healthy-looking girl, but she didn't exactly fit the image of the kind of women you usually see in music videos. She wasn't stick-thin or model-gorgeous – but I had never thought anything of it until that moment.

"Well, thank you so much for sharing that with me," I said. But a simple thank-

you was hardly adequate for the gift that young lady had given me that day.

Without her even knowing it, her words had rocked my world.

I've always tried to remember that people are looking at what I say and do to find out what's valuable and important to me, and I've always tried to set the right example. But that day I realized that I can't know all the ways my actions may impact someone. I couldn't have imagined that video would have affected anyone in any kind of positive way – but, lo and behold, it had.

Based on that conversation, I decided that in my videos, I would always have normal, everyday, average-looking people. I had to fight with the producers from my record label about this, but I insisted. When we made The Way, I told them I didn't want any stick-thin girls or model-perfect guys in the video. If we were going to include beautiful people, I wanted the gorgeous girl to be with the overweight guy and the average-looking girl to be with the model guy. I want people to know that it doesn't matter what you look like. Everyone is good enough.

This is one of the reasons America loves Idol and the show has the impact that it does on so many people. You rarely see a contestant with a music-video look! It's about real people. Season 2 was so exciting because not only were the Top 3 – Ruben, Kimberley, and me – all from the middle of nowhere, Podunk, USA, but we were also extremely normal, average-looking people. We would never have gotten record contracts if it hadn't been for American Idol. Ruben was such a big guy; Kimberley was gorgeous, but a plus-size woman; and me – I was, and am still, such a dork! And then, the next season there was Fantasia – a struggling single mom that so many people could relate to. We're just normal people from next door or down the street.

That momentous day in Atlanta, I also realized that it's not just people in the public eye who have an impact on others. You don't have to make a music video to make a difference in someone's life. You can be a bagger at a grocery store or a teller at a bank. You just never know when something you say or do is going to impact someone else's life, and maybe even change it forever. . .

The gift I received from my fan in Atlanta is proof of that.

(Reprinted with permission from Chicken Soup for the American Idol Soul: Stories from the Idols and their Fans that Open Your Heart and Make Your Soul Sing.)