

By MICHAEL GILTZ

HINK you know everything there is to know about "American Idol?" Think again.
"American Idol"

which comes to a grand finale on Fox tonight and tomorrow at 9 p.m. - and is shaping up as the biggest show of the summer.

Here is what you need to know before watching the final shows.

Do the judges always mean what they say? Don't you believe it. Case in point judge

Case in point: judge Simon Cowell's on-air de-fense of Justin Guarini the boy wonder was perceived as being arrogant for play-ing to the crowd.

I really do feel sorry for

Justin when he slipped up and got arrogant with me a weeks ago, which is

nothing in the grand scheme of things," says Cowell. "He said some-thing, you could see he re-gretted it afterwards. For him to be criticized for it was completely wrong." Do the contestants al-

ways mean what they say?

Cowell's healthy cyni-cism extends to the contestants, who he would prefer to behave with a ittle more self-interest.

Case in point: the dra-matic ouster of Christina Christian when she was in the hospital.

When the remaining idols sent messages to Christina, the floodworks opened up and Cowell's eyebrows were raised.

One of them should have been sitting there thinking Well, there's another one gone that's quite

good; it's all better for me. Simon.

"Of course,

once one starts crying they all start to cry. I watched it with a wry smile on my face thinking. Okay, they're all turning into pop stars.

Are the hosts really that bad?

No, they're not. But the writers are: the behindthe-scenes staffers who've been feeding bizarre put-downs to Paula Abdul are the same ones who've been forcing Ryan Sea-crest and Brian Dunkleman to trade weak banter.

It doesn't work once a year at the Oscars and it doesn't work on "Ameri-can Idol."

What are the parents of the finalists like?

Maybe even more competitive than the finalists. "I call one of the kid's mother Laser Eyes," said Cowell when about five I'm talking I can feel her eyes boring into the back of my head. She has this particular look which is amazing."

How many of the final-ists will get a recording contract?

All of them are contrac-tually bound to record for Simon Cowell's label and be represented by 19 Man-agement — the British agency behind the show and a lot of British pop

After a certain grace period, if Cowell and 19 don't exercise their options, the finalists are free to record for other labels.

In the UK, Cowell signed the two finalists Will Young and Gareth Gates and three other contestants got deals elsewhere.

If Cowell likes five of the

sign them all?

'American Idol':

The last dance

"Bloody right," says Cowell. "If I find 10, I'll sign the whole lot."

Who do you like? Boyish Justin Guarini

Look for Justin and Kelly to be shoo-ins, along with

As for the others, Nikki

may get a deal elsewhere. (And the judges don't al-ways dissemble. When Tamyra was booted off, all three said they would help her in any way. When Nikki got tossed, they all said, basically, "Good luck and good for you for get-ting this far." Offers to help? None.)

How can I satisfy my "American Idol" needs until the next edition in

February?
Don't worry. A tie-in book is available right now. The single from the

Sept. 17. (The runner-up will probably have one out a month later.)

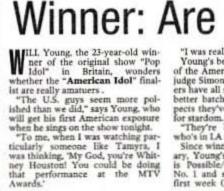
The DVD from the show comes out Oct. 1. The 28-city, six-week tour fea-turing all 10 winners be-gins Oct. 8 in San Diego. comes to the Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale Oct. 27 and Albany Oct.

And of course "Ameri-can Idol 2" launches in February.

Forget the contestants, Is Simon Cowell gay?

"I really am straight," laughs Cowell. "But I'm asked the question a lot.

"I remember the very first time I saw 'Pop Idol' back in the UK. I phoned up one of the judges and said. Twe just seen the show. I am so gay? He said, 'It's taken you all this



Winner: Are 'Idols' for real?

'I was really, really impressed." Young's been watching some tapes of the American episodes and while judge Simon Cowell and the producers have all said the Americans are a better batch of singers, Young suspects they've already been groomed

"They're brilliant," says Young, who's in LA rehearsing for the show.

Since winning "Pop Idol" in Febru-ary, Young's first single, "Anything is Possible/Evergreen" debuted at No. 1 and sold more copies in its first week (1.1 million, to be exact) than any single in UK history

Young's had a second No. 1 single since then (a cover of The Doors' "Light My Fire"), a third record comes out this month (it's a duet on the Beatles classic "The Long and Winding Road" with his "Idol" run-ner-up Gareth Gates).

Simon Cowell, for one, sees a direct link between Young and one of the two finalists.

"I see such huge similarities be-tween Kelly [Clarkson] and Will, it's unbelievable," says Cowell.

- Michael Giltz

