

Teen Lyrics Contest

Write & win

TEENS: Get the scoop on what Simon Cowell and Fantasia say about writing great song lyrics — they're picking our winner!

BY FRAPPA STOUT

ATENTION, TEENS: You have the chance to root for your favorite *American Idol* wannabe — in person — plus meet the hit show's Simon Cowell by entering the 2005 USA WEEKEND Songwriting Contest for Teens.

This year's theme is "Make A Difference," in honor of our annual day of volunteering, Make A Difference Day, which will take place nationwide Oct. 23. (For details on songwriting contest prizes and how to enter, see box at right.)

Stumped on where to start? We asked for tips from Cowell and Fantasia, last season's *Idol* winner, whose first album is due in November. Read on and take heed; both are USA WEEKEND guest judges and will help to pick the winner.

So, what makes a good lyric?

Simon: Something that makes a song stand out. If you listen to a song like [1975's] *Fernando* by ABBA — "Can you hear the drums, Fernando?" I mean, I don't think anyone would ever write a song like that today. It's sort of odd. But being odd makes it great.

Fantasia: I think encouraging messages. A lot of songs go on about boys and love and stuff like that. I try to tell people that it hasn't been gravy all of my life. I've been heartbroken. I've had a man who said he loved me and then walked out on me. People want to hear how to get through it, without it being sad.



Sitting in judgment: Fantasia and Simon Cowell, key players in our teen lyrics contest.

Who, would you say, are the best at it?

Simon: Elton John's writing partner Bernie Taupin. *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, *Candle in the Wind* — those lyrics are genius. They're so creative and clever and memorable, rather than just "I love you, you love me, let's love each other."

"Tell a story [that's not] mushy and clichéd."

— Simon Cowell

Fantasia: During *American Idol*, I was really affected by [singing] Barbra Streisand's [version of] *What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?* [written by Alan and Marilyn Bergman]. It made me think of my 3-year-old daughter, because I want to be there with her.

Simon: The most-sung artist [in auditions] this year is Stevie Wonder. And these are songs that are 20 to 30 years old now. It's very rare that we get people [in auditions] singing modern songs. You listen to Justin Timberlake a capella ... it doesn't work.

You mean today's songs can't compare?

Simon: No, no. I think Eminem is incredibly clever. All of his songs are well

observed. And another really inventive line that comes to mind is [Diane Warren's] "Un-break my heart" [from the Toni Braxton hit]. It turned a love song almost on its head.

Fantasia: I think Jill Scott does. And Alicia Keys.

Simon: Another very well-written song that we used on the show is [Lee Greenwood's] *God Bless the U.S.A.* I'm not American, but when that song was sung, it was like hairs on the back of your neck stood up. And it wasn't corny.

What's your advice for teens who want to enter our contest?

Fantasia: Write what you feel and what you see. Encourage yourself.

Simon: Avoid saying things in a way you wouldn't normally talk. Tell a story, but try to tell it in a way that people can relate to it, not all mushy and clichéd.

How about for writing to our theme, Make A Difference?

Fantasia: I'd write a song about voting ... that's making a difference.

Simon: My advice is simple: Write a song reflecting on the difference *you* want, rather than guessing what I or other people want. You'll have more luck. **W**