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EMAIL TO A FRIEND

Elliott Yamin

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Elliott Yamin is sporting a five o'clock shadow at 10:30 on a Tuesday morning, as he makes his way through the lobby of Los Angeles-based Creative Artists Agency, perhaps the premier talent agency in the world. Just two days earlier, on June 11, Yamin was belting out the national anthem for a crowd of 20,459 at the American Airlines Center in Dallas, and given the warm welcome he received, it's possible that a viewer tuning in at just that moment might have been confused about whether they were watching the second game of the NBA Finals or an Elliott Yamin concert.

This sort of thing can go to a young man's head, but at least for now, the 27-year-old — he'll be 28 on July 20 — still seems grounded.

"First of all, I looked like a fool when I walked out there," he says, joking about his bopping gait on the way to the microphone in Dallas. Yamin discusses his own performance briefly -- "I didn't want to mispronounce anything or get nervous" -- before moving on to what was probably the highlight of the day for him: Watching the game while surrounded by NBA legends Spud Webb, Bill Walton and Dominique Wilkins. "We talked basketball, we talked life," Yamin says, repeatedly laughing with joy as he remembered the experience.

"My brother called me and he's like, 'What are you doing, man? I'm trying to look for you in the crowd.' I said, 'Oh, I'm just over here shooting the s--- with Bill Walton and Spud Webb.' "

Heady stuff for an avowed basketball nut, but an ABC cameraman helped keep things in perspective. During the first timeout, he approached Yamin to explain, "We're going to need you to scoot over for a minute," as they focused on Wilkins, Walton and Webb for a shot coming out of the commercial break. Yamin's NBA seatmates dutifully waved to the crowd, and Yamin just as dutifully got out of the frame.

For today's meeting at CAA, however, the focus is on Yamin. It was just five months ago that he worked his last day at the Westbury Pharmacy, and now he's on his way to the latest in a series of talks to discuss his future in show business with executives at an agency that represents superstars like Stevie Wonder and Mary J. Blige. You have to wonder if one of the tie-clad twentysomethings pushing a mail cart — for many, the first rung on the ladder of success at the agency — doesn't look at Yamin, dressed casually in jeans, an orange ringer tee, dark blue Chuck Taylors and a Baltimore Orioles ballcap, and wonder how in the hell this pharmacy clerk from Richmond leapfrogged him on the road to success.

Yamin would be the first to admit that he's as amazed by his rapid ascent as anyone.

"I didn't understand the magnitude of how big this show was going to be," he says. "Sometimes I have to really tell myself, 'Wow.' And I say it out loud, too."

All of the adulation directed toward Yamin comes as a result of the phenomenon known as *American Idol*— the TV singing competition that's a ratings juggernaut for the Fox network, annihilating any program that's scheduled against it.

Yamin auditioned for the show at the urging of his friends. "They had more faith in me than I did," he says. "I've always been so critical of my own sound. I didn't think it sounded so good."



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Which isn't to say that Yamin was afraid to take the stage. In Richmond, he occasionally sat in with Big Pat & Legion, a jazz/funk band in town, and he fronted a local reggae outfit, the Razor Posse, at the Bob Marley Festival in Chimborazo Park one year, singing "Waiting in Vain." He even laid down some tracks for Terry Thompson of Soul Lovers Entertainment.

A songwriter, producer and artist, Thompson, also known as Big Planz, ran into Yamin when he was hanging around the hallways of Kickem II the Curb recording studios in South Side. "I heard him sing and I turned around and saw this little Jewish kid," Thompson recalls. "I was blown away. I immediately wanted to work with him. He didn't realize the talent he had."

In 2004, Yamin sang background on Big Planz's CD, *Sound Doctrine*. (After fans discovered that their favorite Idol had performed on the album, Thompson's Web site got 7,000 hits in three days. In just 24 hours, *Sound Doctrine's* sales ranking on Amazon.com climbed from 505,000 up to 1,300.) Yamin called up Thompson for advice when he was thinking about auditioning for Idol. "I'm one of the few people he knew who is in the music industry," Thompson says. "When he asked me, I said, 'Go.'"

Yamin saw the show as a shortcut into the music industry. "I had dreamed of tapping into it for years, but I never had the drive to pursue it," he says. "I'd gotten sucked into the reality of the daily grind."

Yamin's girlfriend, Amanda Parker, also wanted to try out — the two began dating about a year ago after meeting at TGI Fridays during karaoke night. The couple rented a Dodge Stratus and hit the road, driving 11 1/2 hours to Boston for the Aug. 31 auditions. Yamin packed a bunch of CDs and brought along a list of potential songs for the tryout, tunes like Donny Hathaway's "Moody's Mood for Love" and Peabo Bryson's "I'm So Into You," some of which would eventually become familiar to Idol viewers. "You should see it now," Yamin says. "I still have it. It's all wrinkled up and old, and it's been folded up like 80 times."

He finally settled on one of his all-time favorites — Hathaway's "A Song for You." The soul legend, who died when Yamin was an infant, has been a major influence on the budding performer. Yamin has been listening to Hathaway's music since he was in the seventh grade at Tuckahoe Middle School. A friend, Mike Smith, was introduced to Hathaway's music by his father, whom Yamin describes as "an old-school R&B head," and he passed on the addiction. "His voice spoke to me," Yamin says. "I had never heard anything like it before. I was so fortunate to be exposed to him at that age. It's ironic that one of his daughters, Kenya, was a backup singer on *American Idol*."

On the ride up to Boston, Yamin and Parker argued about who would audition first. That continued all the way to the white tent where they signed up for the show. "I was begging her to go first because she gets so emotional when I sing," Yamin says. He and Parker stood in the pouring rain for more than two hours while waiting to register — luckily Yamin had purchased two ponchos at a nearby store. After registering along with 10,000 other hopefuls, they were sent to the bleachers at Gillette Stadium, where they did outtakes for the show — the crowd of *Idol* wannabes crooned "Singin' in the Rain" for the cameras. Yamin eventually received a ticket and a number and was told to come back the following morning by 8 a.m.

The next day, Yamin waited for about five hours before his row was called to one of the many audition tents housing the show's production assistants. "The tents were really close together," Yamin recalls. "Luckily my bad ear was next to the person in the next tent who was singing very loud and very bad." Yamin has 90 percent hearing loss in his right ear, the result of a condition that started during his infancy.

Yamin's rendition of "A Song for You" earned him a chance to audition for the show's producers, Nigel Lythgoe and Ken Warwick, two days later. "That ... allowed me to walk through the player's tunnel into the office where I signed my life away," says Yamin. After gamely attempting to read through the impenetrable legal jargon, Yamin gave up and got down to it, inking his signature at least a couple dozen times. "No matter what it said, I was going to sign my name," he says. "I would've signed my name over a hundred times."

He repeated the Hathaway song for Lythgoe and Warwick, along with the first verse of Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City," and was asked to return in October for an audition with the show's judges, Paula Abdul, Randy Jackson and Simon Cowell.

In the intervening months, Yamin, who notes that he's never had a voice lesson, didn't make any special preparations for the upcoming competition. He simply went back to working part time at

the Westbury Pharmacy and tried to keep his excitement to himself, in keeping with the gag order placed on contestants by the *Idol* producers. He was only partly successful on the latter point.

"Anytime you go through something like this, you want to share it with friends and family," Yamin says, grinning slyly before adding with a laugh, "And that's what I did.

"I kinda swore them into secrecy, but especially being a Jewish family with a lot of women, no offense, my Jewish aunts and cousins, they all love to talk. We all have big mouths, including me. Anytime someone's proud of you, they want to tell everybody."

Yamin's mom, Claudette, and his younger brother, Scott, accompanied him on the return trip to Boston in October.

Abdul, Jackson and Cowell were as moved by Yamin's voice as their predecessors, giving him the famous "golden ticket to Hollywood." Yamin was now one of the 175 who would battle it out for a coveted spot in the top 24 during "Hollywood Week" in December.

When it was time to head to California, Yamin was torn about making the trip. His mother had been in the hospital off and on battling an eating disorder -- she had gone through gastric bypass surgery a few years prior and was afraid she would gain back the weight she had lost. Now she was lying in the ICU at St. Mary's Hospital. "She'd given up on eating," Yamin explains, peering down at the ground. "Her body was depleted, and it was shutting down. My main concern was her and her health. She was in the worst state she had ever been in." Yamin's brother, Scott, came home from college to help Claudette. "I was afraid he would have to take the brunt of it," Yamin says. "I almost didn't go but I knew she would want me to go and follow through. I did it for her and the family."

It's a week after the *American Idol* finale, and Elliott Yamin slips into his mother's room at HealthSouth Rehabilitation Center, plopping down in an empty wheelchair next to her bed. Claudette, who is recovering from hip surgery, asks her son if he stopped by her home and picked up the mail. He nods.

In Richmond for a well-deserved break before rehearsals for the American Idols Live tour, Yamin is finding that the machine that made him a household name is difficult to shut down, even when he visits family and friends. The cell phone on his belt is a constant distraction. At this moment, the call is from a salesperson at the Guitar Center in Hollywood. He replaces the phone in its holster and offhandedly comments that he bought a guitar from the store on Memorial Day -- fellow Idol contestants Bucky Covington, Taylor Hicks and Chris Daughtry had been teaching Yamin to play during the competition.

"What do you mean you bought a guitar?" Claudette asks her celebrity son. "You didn't tell your mother you were getting a guitar? I've got to hear it in an interview!" Claudette laughs. "You see, we're just a regular mother and son."

"Regular" is hardly the word for Yamin's current status, especially in his hometown. Earlier in the day he tried popping into the Short Pump Ukrop's to drop by the bank and pick up some Turkey Hill Diet Iced Tea -- he can't get it in Los Angeles -- and he was mobbed by surprised fans. Management had to herd him to a back room to escape the crowds. Once he was safely sequestered, the store employees began asking him for autographs.

The life of a performer may be a new experience for Yamin, but not for Claudette. She moved to Richmond from Philadelphia when her parents opened the Crystal Market -- its original location was 29th and Leigh streets -- and started singing at the age of 13. Her brother, Eugene, took accordion lessons, and she would accompany him during recitals.

During her teen years, Claudette sang blues, jazz and standards with Gordon Smith's band and at various private parties and weddings around town. One night she was called in as a last-minute replacement for Fats Domino, who was caught in a snowstorm and couldn't get to town. She auditioned with the Ray McKinley Orchestra but couldn't travel with the band because of her age. Several years later, she moved to California and again started singing, this time in piano bars. "My singing was an avocation, not a vocation," Claudette says.

Born in Los Angeles, Elliott listened to music constantly. His mom loves to tell the tale of her 5-year-old son strolling down the sidewalk of their home in Pasadena, Calif., carrying a boombox that was pumping out the classical stylings of violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman. "I used to ask him

what he's listening to and he would say, 'Classical music, Momma,' " Claudette remembers with a smile. A few years later, the conversation around the Yamin household went more like this: "Elliott, please! If you want to sing, go in a room and close the door!"

"He never sang a song all the way through," Claudette says. "I honestly didn't know he could really sing till about a year and a half ago."

After the family moved to Richmond in 1988, Yamin's mother and father, Shaul Yamin, divorced. "Even when my dad was around, he wasn't the male figure you expect to have as a kid," Yamin confides. "It was rough. I had a lot of animosity toward both of them. So I rebelled." He missed curfews and skipped school. Yamin was also struggling with attention deficit disorder -- he took the drug Ritalin for a while. "It was hard for me to stay focused," he admits. School was, in his opinion, a big waste of time. He feels differently now. "Kids don't realize, if nothing else, school helps you prepare for life," he says. His mother finally pulled him out of school when he was 15. "The principal at Douglas Freeman invited him to leave school," she says. "I went to court to have him released."

Claudette helped her son get a work permit. To date, Yamin says he's had 43 different jobs, everything from collections and customer service to retail; from landscaping and vinyl-siding installation to a job working part time as a weekend overnight DJ for Power 92. During his time at the radio station, he recorded song parodies that aired on the nationally syndicated Russ Parr Morning Show. He even donned a bear costume to become the Shoney's Bear, waving at traffic outside the restaurant chain's Skipwith and Broad location.

Yamin's longest stint was with Foot Locker -- he worked there for six years. Yamin's manager, Tony Klisiewicz, who now works in the Office of Laboratory Safety for George Mason University, first met his young employee at the Regency Square store, when he would come in after skipping school. Klisiewicz would later become a mentor to Yamin. "I had the impression he was a kid with no direction," he says. "He had a great personality under a tough shell."

When he began working at Foot Locker, Yamin would show up late on many occasions. "Half the time he didn't hear his alarm clock because he slept on the wrong side of the bed," Klisiewicz says, noting that he was sleeping on his good ear. "I talked to him about responsibility. When we started him in the management-training program, he had responsibility for the store. I had to talk to him about image, responsibility and time management."

Klisiewicz bought Yamin a book to study for his GED, and he earned it in 1997 at the Virginia Randolph Education Center.

What sticks in Klisiewicz's mind is the kindness that Yamin showed to others. "One day he was walking the store, and a woman approached him for \$10 so that she could get a cab home. He didn't have the \$10 to give her. He came in and asked if he could borrow \$10 and told me the story. I gave him the money and told him we would split it. He ran out and gave it to her. He wasn't afraid to get involved."

After Yamin made the Top 24 on *American Idol*, but before the results had been announced, Klisiewicz took him shopping at Tysons Corner -- several coworkers had chipped in to buy Yamin some clothes for the show. "He didn't want to spend the money, so we walked around a while," Klisiewicz recalls. "I told him to loosen up, that he would do the same for me."

The night that Yamin made the Top 12, Klisiewicz's grandmother passed away. "Elliott called me and he overheard the news in the background," Klisiewicz recalls. "He asked me what was going on. We started talking about that, but I tried to move back to his big moment. He said to me, 'What just happened to me happened three hours ago, and it's done. I want to talk about you and your family.' That really touched me."

Debra Byrd, *American Idol*'s vocal coach and arranger, describes Yamin as "his own cheerleader." "He would ask me why they had him learn so much music. 'It's a contest,' I would say. 'They want you to break down.' Then he would say, 'I can do it.' And he would repeat himself over and over."

The contestants had little time off, working 12 to 15 hours each Sunday shooting commercials for Ford along with their weekly rehearsal schedule. "That gave me a taste of how to work in front of a camera," Yamin says. "It was another aspect of the business to learn."

His biggest challenge during the competition was the night he went up against Katharine McPhee and eventual winner Taylor Hicks in the semifinals. The three-way sing-off followed a whirlwind trip back to Richmond before the May 16 show. "I've never seen the city in the frenzy the way it was that day," he says, shaking his head. "It was such an emotional day. It pulled at my heartstrings. I felt like I made a lot of people proud." During the semifinals, Yamin had to deal with three wardrobe changes, three new songs and exhaustion. "Those last few days were intense," he says. "There was a lot of pressure. I wasn't keen on 'Open Arms,' and I managed to switch some lines [covering for any flubbed lyrics as best he could]. You have to learn how to make mistakes gracefully on stage. I'm glad I pulled it off."

Sitting in the audience at the finale was a surreal experience for Yamin. "I will admit there were times when I sat there and thought if only there had been a few extra phone calls, extra votes, that I could be fighting for the title, but you know, everything happens for a reason."

Yamin is quickly discovering that along with the perks -- free clothes, cutting to the front of the line at L.A. nightspots, flying first class -- fame also brings the opportunity to make a difference.

Because he has been vocal about his diabetes, the American Diabetes Association and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation have approached Yamin about being a national spokesperson. His left arm now sports a rotating trio of blue, red and green vinyl bracelets supporting various organizations fighting diabetes.

Learning that he had diabetes when he was almost 16 was one of the lowest days in Yamin's life. He had felt dehydrated at a Fourth of July cookout and downed four Pepsis in an hour. His energy level was plummeting. "I came home and told my mom, who has diabetes, how I was feeling and that I was urinating a lot," he recalls. "She checked my blood sugar level, and it was close to 600 milligrams -- the normal is less than 100." Yamin spent several days in the hospital. "I went from a normal 16-year-old kid -- most 16-year-olds are thinking about getting a driver's license -- to having to manage the onset of a disease. I had just gotten used to my parents being split up. I wasn't much of student. I was in a resentful state. I was in denial: 'This can't happen to me.' I didn't understand and I didn't want to understand. So I acted out. I stopped my insulin, and I got sick. I was hard-headed."

For the last five years, Yamin has been wearing a pager-size insulin pump that monitors his blood sugar and dispenses insulin if he needs it. Though he's now a lot more conscientious about monitoring his condition, there is one fear that Yamin secretly harbors still today. "I have the fear of becoming blind," he confides. "I've never shared that with anyone."

Easing back into a chair at CAA, Yamin confesses that along with his excitement about starting rehearsals the next day for the Idol concert tour -- from meeting the touring band to seeing his fellow contestants again after their time off -- there's also one thing he dreads: "The only thing I'm not ready for is our group stuff and the choreography for that," he says, before adding, "I just have a hang-up about singing and dancing at the same time, especially when there are steps that I'm supposed to follow."

Rehearsals will last in L.A. until June 30, followed by five days of work in Manchester, N.H., where they'll iron out any last-minute kinks before performing for the public. Yamin expects to sing three songs solo, as will former Virginian Chris Daughtry.

The tour hits Richmond on July 29. "I'm really looking forward to getting to Richmond and Norfolk," Yamin says. "I'll get to connect with the fans on a personal level. Nerves won't be a part of it."

Until the tour ends, fans probably won't hear any more details about Yamin's future plans. But he is in the process of selecting a management team -- publicist, business manager, attorney, etc. "They will help me focus on the most important thing, the music," he explains.

When asked about the musical direction of his first album, Yamin says, "I want to have a funky, soulful R&B sound -- like Average White Band meets Prince."

And don't look for a lot of covers on his first CD; Yamin wants to go with original material. "As far as covers are concerned, I would love to do some and maybe even someday come out with a whole cover album, because those are really popular these days and a lot of artists are doing them," he says. "But at the same time, that's all we've been doing on the show, and I want to come out of my shell and have my own material and move forward with that."

In the meantime, he's looking forward to seeing his mother in the audience again.

"It's just great to be onstage and look out and see that proud smile she's got on her face," he says. "I think no matter how old we are, at some point or another we all strive to make our parents proud. That's always been important to me, because I've been a screwup," he says with a laugh, remembering some of the trials he's put his mother through over the years.

"It's about time I started doing some good and right things. I'm making a mensch of myself, as she would say." —*Additional reporting by executive editor Chad Anderson.*

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