



## RUNNING THE SHOW AT AMERICAN IDOL **RICKEY MINOR**

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What do you do after you've reached the top of your profession? If you're bassist-turned-music director Rickey Minor, you find the next hill to climb.

Minor toured the world as Whitney Houston's musical director and produced her Superbowl national anthem performance. He's received Emmy nominations for overseeing such shows as 2004's *Genius: A Night For Ray Charles*. He's helped assemble bands for artists like Usher, Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears, and Mary J. Blige. And starting last season, he took on a new challenge: music director for the smash *American Idol* series.

The *American Idol* gig requires a vast range of musical experience, Minor says: “You have to understand big band, jazz, pop, country, rock, show tunes—the list goes on and on.” Fortunately, Minor has experience in all of the above. As a teenager in the late 1970s he played in the Four Tops's big band, then went on to back Gladys Knight and the Pips and Lou Rawls. He's also worked with BB King, Dionne Warwick, Al Jarreau, Smokey Robinson, Dave Grusin, CeCe Winans, Wynonna Judd, N'Sync, and the Spice Girls. “In my 30-plus years of playing music, I've worked with some of the greatest artists around,” says Rickey. “Stevie Wonder. Celine. Sting. These people have so much talent that you rise up to their level. It's like sports—if you're playing with top players, it improves your own skills. These experiences let me bring so much more to the game on *American Idol*.”

Each episode of *Idol* involves a complex, carefully choreographed series of behind-the-scenes tasks. “We have a pretty tight system,” Minor says. “We have two vocal coaches and two rehearsal pianists who work with the kids. I come in at the end of the day to find out which songs they've chosen and how they plan to do them. I make my comments, and then we record it using a Yamaha AW16G recorder.”

The AW16G digital audio workstation lets the *American Idol* staff quickly and easily record a working demo of each contestant's song. “It's great as a standalone device,” Rickey notes. “It's a mixer and an audio playback device, it burns CDs, and it even has built-in reverb.”

Once the basic accompaniments are recorded, the contestants sing their parts over the tracks. Next, the staff burns CDs of the resulting demos on the AW16G for the singers to take home and study. “We also post those versions online for all the musicians, arrangers, and production people,” says Minor. “We have about 15 orchestrators, and about the same number of copyists. They turn out arrangements in basically one day.”

By the end of the week Minor has revisited each song, paying special attention to orchestration. “Maybe I'll change the ending, or decide the strings or horns are too busy. Then on Monday, the band gets the charts and rehearses for three hours. We take an hour break, and then the contestants come in and rehearse with the band. They get to perform it twice that day. And on Tuesday, it's showtime.”

Yamaha keyboards also get a workout on *American Idol*. “Both our keyboard players use the Motif ES8,” Minor says. “The Motifs let us create textures and really give the contestants something to take home and listen to. If it's a country song, we want to have an acoustic guitar sound when we're rehearsing—and the Motif can do that. If we need a split keyboard thing with strings and piano, the Motif does that too.” Rickey finds the Motif invaluable for concocting fresh orchestrations. “I can find a specific sound I like and write that on the chart. I try not to use the same sounds all the time—the same acoustic guitar sound, the same electric piano. I definitely try to use a lot of different sounds. A lot of times I try to find a good sound, then edit it a little bit.”

As a bassist, Rickey brings a distinct perspective to the music director gig. “The bass is the harmonic foundation of the band, and it's also the groove,” he explains. “I find that music directors who are piano players sometimes don't get the groove side of things. They understand how to voice things, but because they can use all ten fingers, they can go overboard and fill up all the space. A bass player tends to be more of a minimalist. The arrangers see me coming and say, ‘Here comes the red Sharpie!’ I cross things out and say, ‘This is way too much!’ You might have a great string part, but if it doesn't have any space, it doesn't breathe. As a bass player, I understand and appreciate space.”