BY PAMELA GWYN KRIPKE

# The Reluctant Idol

## Jason Castro returns to Rockwall and the screaming masses.

HE IS NOT VERY good at the waving part. "Stand here by the edge," the boat man tells him. "They want to see you." Jason Castro leaves the helm of the 40-foot catamaran and strides to the railing, his boots secure on the wobbly craft. On this day in late May, 12,000 people are waiting for him in Rockwall's harbor, screaming and cheering and professing their love for him.

"Wave, Jace," the man suggests.

"Okay," he says, lifting an arm.

Fame feels funny to Castro, the 21-year-old whose distinct acoustic sound and unassuming charm propelled him to fourth place on this past season's *American Idol*. For five months, he kept his auditioning a secret from his buddies at Texas A&M, where he performed occasionally around campus or, more often, in his dorm room. Now he is piloting large boats across lakes to receive people who are wearing t-shirts with his face printed on them.

**HALL OF FAME:** "Celebrity offers a little bit of power. What you do with that is up to you."

"Is this weird?" he is asked, on land, of the frenzy surrounding both the national recognition and his return home. "You're on shirts."

"Yes," he says, seeming relieved, almost, to tell. "I don't like the whole idea. You can lose your person, you can become like a monkey. For me"—he continues, intently, despite the hover of assorted helpers—"it is the music. In order to do the music, you have to do this. Once the music stops, this is no good."

While it is going—and the hope is it will go for a long while—complete consciousness of what accompanies the art is essential for Castro. "You have to know that celebrity is flattering, but you need to know who you are and realize that you've been given a chance to see life in a way that many people haven't," he says.

On the banks of the harbor, an undulating mass of humanity—more than a third of the city's population—begins to form in the mid-afternoon heat, four hours before Castro is due to cruise into shore and sing a few songs. Supporters who share his taste in hairstyle, self-declared Dreadheads, roll into town from

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across the state in two school buses, spilling out of the windows like dolls from a toy chest. A bulldog sports a cap, outfitted with fake locks, and poses for pictures. Several ralliers traveled from as far as Albuquerque, Boston, and Chicago. A congressman presents an American flag that flew over the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., and cheerleaders, so many cheerleaders, from local high schools, middle schools, preschools, maybe, if we could have snooped in the strollers, attach to the moment with gusto and adulation never seen on a Friday night field. "Will you marry me?" a sign reads. "We love you!" a voice squeals.

Just what does one open with the keys to the city?

Castro was born in the United States to Colombian parents, the eldest of three children. His father owns a pool design and construction company. His mom, Betsy, clearly the bearer of the charisma gene, keeps close watch, though you might not realize. "I'm the mother of this child," she introduces herself, a splashy print blouse catching the wind. "I put this top on to cover up my arms," she laughs. "I got it at Wal-Mart."

This lack of pretense, combined with an engaging personal style, would seem to serve the stage, a place that Castro came to know in his teens. He took drum lessons, and through high school, performed in a popular local band, Keeping Lions. During freshman year, he came home from A&M to practice and play gigs on weekends. But the travel became exhausting, and his grades slipped. He had entered college on a full academic scholarship, working toward a BS in petroleum engineering.

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"I was wasting my opportunity at school, and I felt I needed to please my parents," he says. He quit the band. His drums were sent back to North Texas. "I was miserable. I declared myself a music minor, and failed Theory 1. I don't know how it happened, but I started to sing, just three years ago. I taught myself the guitar. I'd go to the park across the street, where no one could hear me, and the sound just came out. After a while, I started to get better, and by summer, I was okay with myself."

Okay enough to be one of 100,000 singers hoping for notice they wouldn't have in a park across the street, or a corner bar or living room. "Jason sang in my house a couple of times," says his friend Philip Venegas, a

civil engineering major and fellow member of the Aggie Men's Club, a Christian campus service organization. "I think he's still thrown by something like this, but he is so grounded. What you see is who he is."

On the show, Castro was not the typical contender, seeming to avoid the game of the thing, the strategy, the ploys to win votes. He was a sort of anti-Idol, playing up nothing, saying he didn't talk much, smiling instead of crying. Just a guy with a guitar, some cool tunes to let loose, and not a chance he'd make that silly telephone pantomime with his hand. Unaffected by the pressure of the race, he didn't seem to need to win; being there was enough. And that is what we, the real live regular people who don't sing on TV shows, liked. A lot.

His voice has been described as smooth and airy, unusual, creative. He takes risks with inflection, and for that, his sound is recognizable. He has an endearing tone, a peaceful quality to his music, much of which he writes. He doesn't belt out applause-snagging high notes, though some critics say he could stretch his vocal range. He doesn't choreograph steps to match his lyrics, or seem too committed to performance, or showmanship. He says he is influenced by the raspy folk singer Ray LaMontagne. The *Los Angeles Times* called him a "genuine find." He calls the attention "strange, but an honor, almost undeserved."

Almost. "I began seeing a vision in my mind, and I grew more and more confident," he says.

In a back hallway at a reception after the concert, Castro is happy to take a walk. The crowds have been imposing, and he is home for just a couple weeks before returning to Los Angeles for summer tour rehearsals. Unlike the carefree and sometimes daffy demeanor caught on television, Castro's live presence is decidedly reflective, and certainly smart. Right now, despite the glitter—and mania—of new fame, he is thinking more heady thoughts about how to reconcile it, manage it, and give it a purpose.

"I have a conflict with a lot of the lifestyle of the music business. But I know that you can do it your own way. Celebrity offers a little bit of power," he says, slowing his step. "And with that power comes responsibility. What you do with that is up to you. I hope I can use that power for good."

We reach a huge empty room at the end of the hall, where photographers and other reporters are set up by a picture window, lenses angled and ready. There is one chair waiting, like a target. Castro hesitates to sit.

"Look at the sun," he says, pointing west. "It's setting."

No one else looks.

"Fame is fake," he said earlier. "It is not what it appears to be. You can be very much alone, so you really have to know that you are okay, wherever you go." D

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