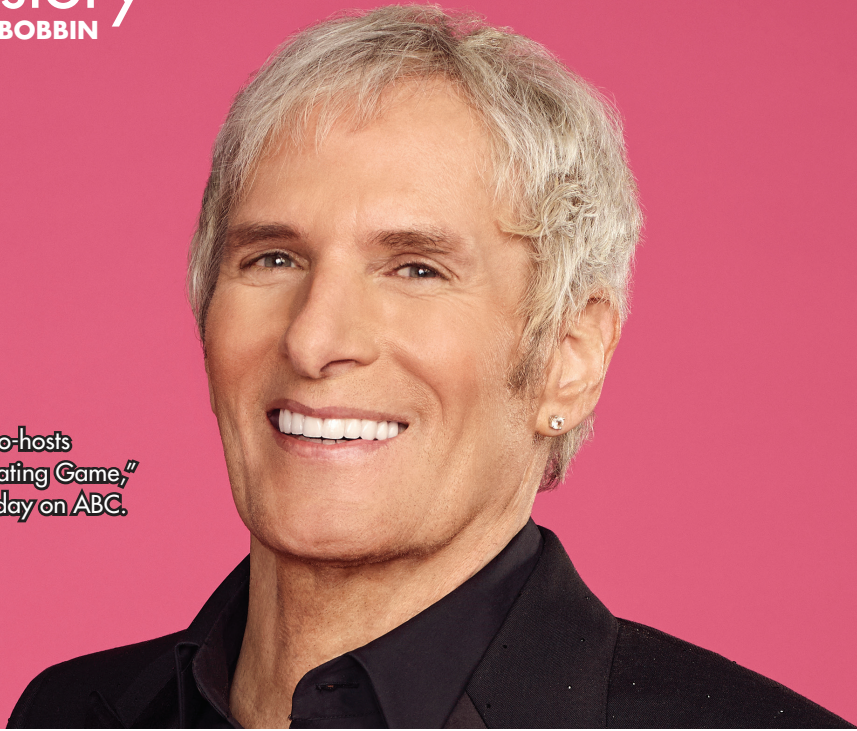


**coverstory**  
BY JAY BOBBIN



Michael Bolton co-hosts "The Celebrity Dating Game," premiering Monday on ABC.

Michael Bolton sings a different tune with 'The Celebrity Dating Game'

If you think Michael Bolton will co-host "The Celebrity Dating Game" without crooning to the contestants, forget it.

The long-popular, Grammy-winning singer-songwriter starts a new chapter by joining "New Girl" alum Zooey Deschanel to host ABC's new take on a classic game show premiering Monday, June 14. The idea is the same, with someone choosing between three contenders ... who won't know the identity of their question-asker unless, or until, they can guess it from musical clues supplied by Bolton. First up to do the picking: former "Bachelorette" Hannah Brown and actress-comedian Nicole Byer.

Also an executive producer of the show, Bolton explains he wants to "connect the dots" between music and other kinds of entertainment now. "That was part of this offer, then the music became front-and-center. And I realized, as I was doing it, that I was accepting an invitation to bring bits and pieces of songs I've loved my whole life – and of a couple that I've written and produced, ones that were hits for me. It was a lot of fun doing it, with a lot of talented people to work with."

Citing Deschanel as one of those people, Bolton is grateful for her participation: "I know she has a beautiful voice and loves music, but in a way, she's doing the heavy lifting here. To stand in front of my own audience is fun and easy, but speaking to an audience that hasn't been holding tickets waiting to see me for six months to a year, it's a matter of keeping them engaged. Zooey is so good and so comfortable with that; She's adorable and she lights up a stage, and it would be so much work for me to introduce the contestants and make it feel like I wasn't reading."

Celebrities have sampled the "Dating Game" premise before, though they weren't necessarily stars at the time. John Ritter, Farrah Fawcett, Ron Howard, Sally Field and (twice) Tom Selleck were on the original 1965-73 ABC version of the show hosted by Jim Lange.

With a catalog of enduring hits ranging from "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You?" to "Love Is a Wonderful Thing," Bolton – who has been working on a new album – is following television-series guest shots ("Two and a Half Men," "Glee") and appearances in commercials with "The Celebrity Dating Game."

"Being backstage for this was one of the first times I've felt comfortable in a year," he attests, having been off the concert circuit because of the coronavirus pandemic. "The most difficult thing about this was forgetting the songs I know (for the show's parody versions). I was unlearning things I've known for 30 or 40 years."

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