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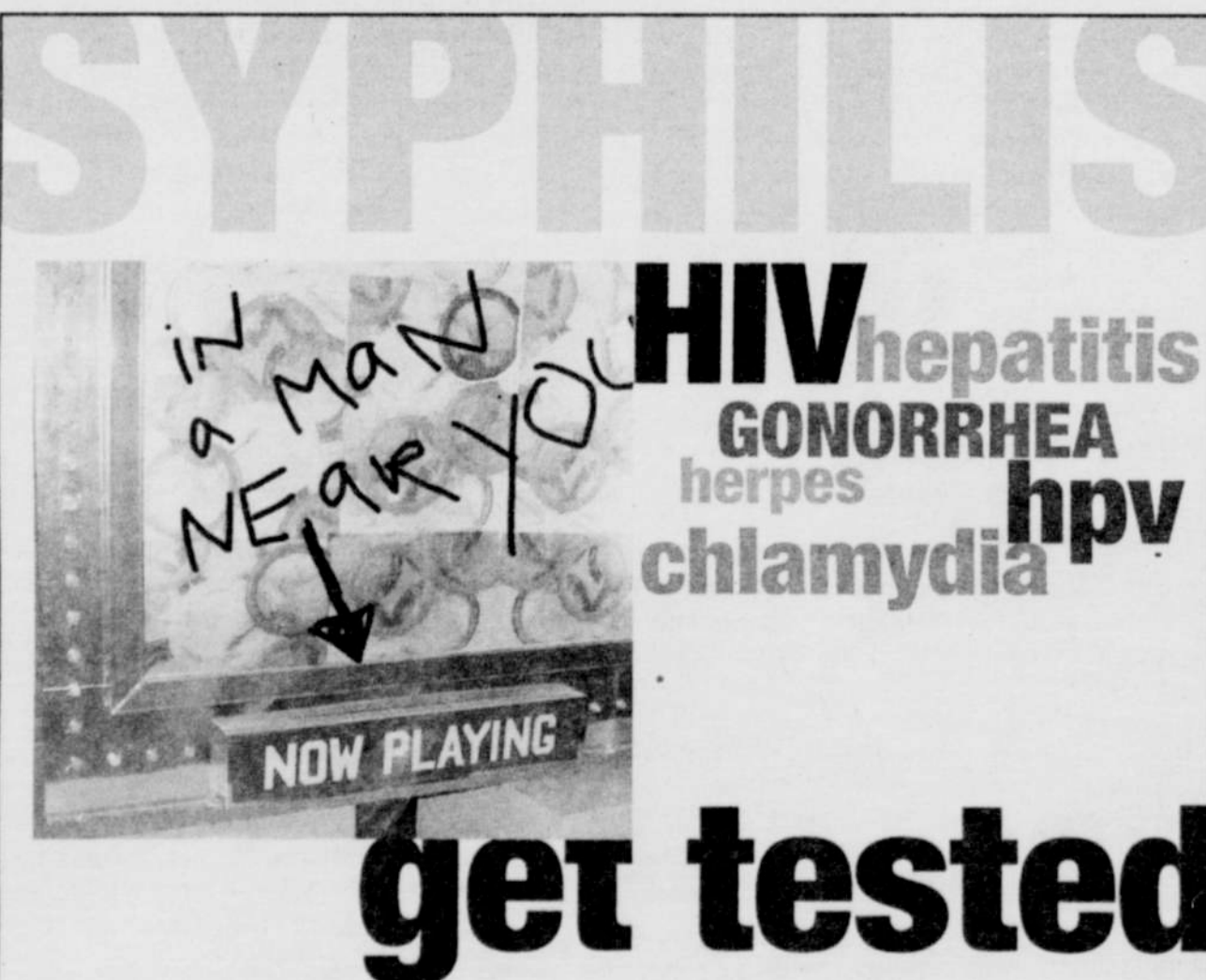
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MUSIC

Idol chatter

Former contestants try to make it big

BY KAREN KUDEJ

For a show that is decidedly mainstream, Fox's *American Idol* hints at queer appeal.

This year's fourth season generated gossip when Mario Vazquez, undoubtedly a favorite, became the first contestant to withdraw from the competition. He stated "personal reasons" for leaving the show, leading many who were already speculating to label him as gay. Vazquez has not confirmed nor denied the rumor, but—sorry boys—chances are good that he left not because of his sexuality but because he was offered a record deal that topped what *Idol* had to offer.

Other contestants have been potential "family," but so far no one has been a sure thing, at least while on the show. Instead, *Idol* has an innocent quality, the Paula Abdul scandal notwithstanding.

Those who loathe the show's wholesome-ness should check out AmericanPornStar.tv. The spoof site aims to select the most promising male porn star and earned complaints from *American Idol* host Ryan Seacrest, who protested the similarities between the two shows, including the host, Jason Sechrest. Both men have unnaturally blond gelled hair, though Seacrest, whose style looks like it was lifted from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, would not be caught dead in Sechrest's sloppy apparel. (At the end of each episode of *American Idol*, Seacrest says his signature line, "Seacrest, out!" Could that be a tease?)

Here's a look at two albums by former *Idol* contestants. One is predictable; the other leans toward the unexpected.

Free Yourself

Fantasia • J-Records

After winning *Idol* last season, Fantasia topped the singles chart with "I Believe." Her first full album, *Free Yourself*, hints at her diva potential.

The 13 songs on this mostly R & B album offer a blend of easy listening and upbeat tunes. While her cover of "You Were Always on My Mind" and the album's title track reminded me of music played in my dentist's office, other tracks showcase Fantasia's unique voice and energetic personality.

The most interesting tracks are "Selfish (I Want U 2 Myself)," with a hip-hop beat and backup vocals by Jazmine Sullivan and Missy Elliott, who wrote this song and two others on the CD; "Don't Act Right," featuring Jazze Pha; and "It's All Good," with a deep bass beat. Fantasia honors single mothers with the catchy song "Baby Mama," and she reminds listeners how she made it to the final round with a competent performance of "Summertime."

The rest of the songs are, as *American Idol* judge Simon Cowell might say, "Just OK." Fantasia received a lot of direction on this album, and it's not a bad first effort overall. Fantasia's voice is her own, even if her career is not.

Rollercoaster

Jim Verraros • Koch Records

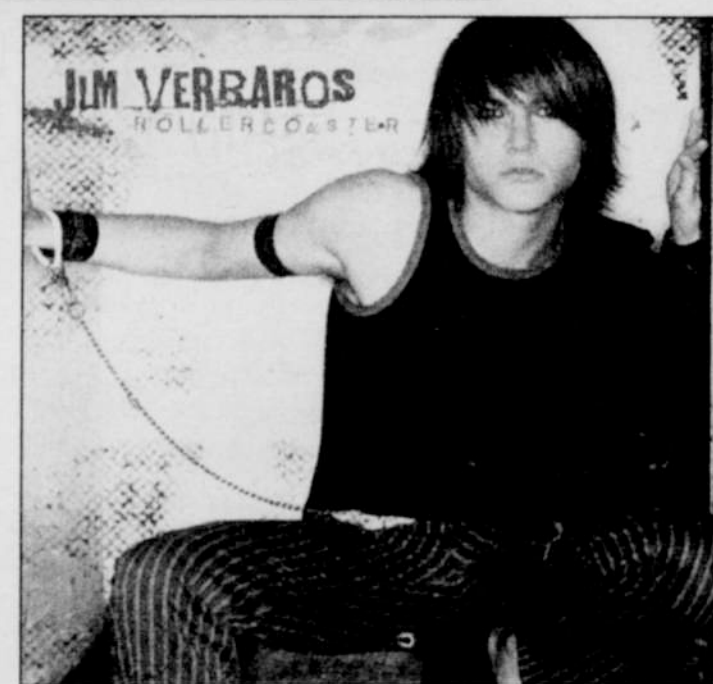
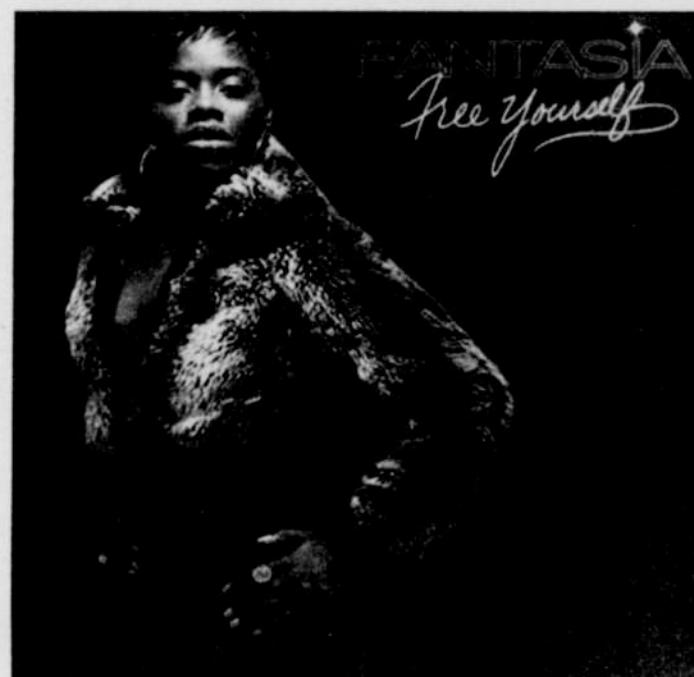
While Fantasia is now inextricably tied to the *American Idol* machine, another former finalist has broken free and is blazing his own trail.

Jim Verraros was a 19-year-old, rosy-cheeked kind of guy with nerdy glasses and spiky hair when he became one of the first finalists to be cut during the show's inaugural season. General consensus was that he was way out of his league.

Verraros has reinvented himself from those early days, literally letting his hair down on his new album. With songs that are at times sexy,

raunchy and highly danceable, *Rollercoaster* is unique among the *Idol* albums that have come before.

All the songs are original, and many are co-written by Verraros, who came out in *The Advocate* two years ago. The album starts strong with "Move," a solid, sexy dance track. Tracks such as



"You Turn It On," "Hold On" and "One More Time," where his voice resembles George Michael, have a vaguely '80s pop vibe.

In fact, many of the songs seem vaguely familiar. "Outside" sounds like it could be a theme song for a teen drama on the WB channel. "Alive" hearkens back to the era of boy bands. "I Want You" has a hint of disco funk that makes it a great song for roller-skating. Verraros' vocals are solid throughout, and one has to admire him for putting himself out there and taking a risk. **J**

The fourth season finale of *AMERICAN IDOL* airs 8 p.m. May 24 and 25 on Fox. First season champ Kelly Clarkson performs 7:30 p.m. May 28 at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway. Tickets are \$37.50 from Ticketmaster.

Portland free-lance writer KAREN KUDEJ watches *Idol* weekly but swears she could quit anytime.