

Can't stop the music: 'The Voice' returns for yet another encore

By Andrew Warren
TV Media

Can't stop the music: A long-running musical feud is heating up yet again. This isn't some back-and-forth between hip-hop artists or pop divas, although there's probably a few of those brewing (aren't there always?) but a feud between the two titans of musical television.

New seasons of both "The Voice" and "American Idol" are set to launch in the coming days, and NBC's "Voice" is first out of the gate this year with a Monday, Feb. 25, premiere. A new batch of talented singers hopes to impress the coaches and earn a spot on one of their teams. Unlike in "Idol" or other similar shows, in "The Voice," the coaches don't actually see the melodious hopefuls before deciding whether to invite them onto their team — it really is all about the voice.

This season's group of coaches should look pretty familiar to anyone who watched last season, with only one change: former "American Idol" finalist and Academy Award winner Jennifer Hudson has bowed out of the job to work on other projects, and her chair has been taken over by fellow Oscar-winner John Legend. Last season's other three coaches — music superstars Adam Levine, Blake Shelton and Kelly Clarkson — haven't gone anywhere, and neither has Carson Daly ("Today"), who's served as the show's host since the very beginning.

Unlike other similar shows, "The Voice" isn't just a competition between the hopeful contestants — it's also one between the coaches. Over the first few weeks of the season, the four giants of the music industry assemble their teams of singers based only on their voices, but once the teams are all sorted out a few weeks in, the Battle Rounds begin.

It's up to the coaches and their advisers to mentor their team and only keep the strongest performers in the competition, because in the end there can only be two winners — a winning singer, who gets an



Adam Levine, John Legend, Kelly Clarkson and Blake Shelton star in "The Voice"

impressive lump sum of money and a lucrative recording contract, and a winning coach who earns bragging rights over the other three. The 16th season of "The Voice" premieres Monday, Feb. 25, on NBC.

Staying in 'Place': There's good news about "The Good Place," the NBC sitcom that somehow manages to be ludicrously funny while also teaching some thoughtful philosophical and ethical concepts: it's been renewed for another season.

It's a combination that probably shouldn't work, but for three seasons it most definitely

has, drawing critical acclaim and a devoted fan base that's eager to puzzle out what the show's next big plot twist will be. The most recent season wrapped up in January, with the next one expected as part of NBC's fall lineup.

It's because of the twists (there are some big ones!) that anyone discussing the show needs to tiptoe around any specifics, but here are the basics: Kristen Bell ("Veronica Mars") stars as Eleanor Shellstrop, an incredibly selfish woman who dies and finds herself in "The Good Place" instead of "The Bad Place," which is where she really belongs.

Sitcom Legend Ted Danson ("Cheers") stars as Michael, the eternal being in charge of The Good Place, while Jameela Jamil ("Animals."), William Jackson Harper ("True Story," 2015) and Manny Jacinto ("Bad Times at the El Royale," 2018) play Eleanor's fellow recently deceased Good Place inhabitants. D'Arcy Carden ("Barry") rounds out the main cast as Janet, an artificial intelligence charged with keeping The Good Place running smoothly.

"The Good Place" may be the smartest comedy on broadcast television, and both audiences and critics love it. Watch for the fourth season next fall on NBC.

Penn's pilot: Plenty of actors dabble in other lines of work, but there aren't very many who can say that they've been part of a president's administration. "Designated Survivor" star Kal Penn has that impressive line on his resume, having served in the Obama administration, but for the past few years he's been busy acting, and his latest project was recently picked up for a pilot by NBC.

The as-yet-unnamed pilot will both star and be co-written by Penn. He'll play a former New York City councilor who discovers a new lease on life when he helps six recent immi-

grants who are striving for the American Dream.

It's heavy-sounding stuff, but should it get picked up to series, the new show will mark Penn's return to comedy after his stint in "Designated Survivor." His first major TV role was as Dr. Lawrence Kutner in "House," but it was his starring roles in the Harold and Kumar movies that first cemented his reputation as a comedic actor, starting with 2004's "Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle."

Of course, many pilots never see the light of day as full series, but Kal Penn has a history of success. Keep an ear to the ground for this one as pilot season continues.