

The Associated Press

April 24, 2007 Tuesday

'Idol' star-studded special to raise funds for charities serving needy in Africa and U.S.

By LYNN ELBER, AP Television Writer
LOS ANGELES

"American Idol" viewers are getting the chance to weigh in on a cause bigger than their favorite singer those in need in America and Africa.

The hit Fox TV show is combining its usual talent competition this week with "Idol Gives Back," a star-filled fundraising effort. Bono, Celine Dion, Hugh Grant and Rascal Flatts are among those scheduled to take part Wednesday.

Those in charge of the show recognize they are walking a fine line, said an executive producer.

"We have to be really careful, because people watch 'American Idol' for entertainment and to see their favorite contestant," said Cecile Frot-Coutaz, who oversees "Idol" as chief executive officer of producer FremantleMedia North America Inc.

"Maybe some people don't want to spend two hours watching poverty and people suffering," she said. "But we're going to try to do it in a way that gives them great entertainment but raises awareness for people who are very poor, and children in particular, in the United States and Africa."

Filmmaker Richard Curtis ("Love Actually," "Notting Hill"), co-founder of Britain's Red Nose Day charity, and "Idol" creator Simon Fuller have discussed making use of the top-rated show's reach, Fox said. Curtis worked on "Idol Gives Back."

On Tuesday's show, the six finalists will perform what Fox is calling "life anthem" songs of compassion and hope. Viewers will vote as usual for the contestants, with donations coming in from corporations.

The audience will get to make its contribution on Wednesday during a two-hour show from the "American Idol" stage and Walt Disney Concert Hall. Viewer donations can be made by telephone via toll-free pledge lines or on the Internet.

Others set to take part include Ellen DeGeneres, Gwen Stefani, Earth, Wind & Fire, Il Divo, Keira Knightley, Josh Groban with the African Children's Choir, Jack Black, Helen Mirren, Quincy Jones, Annie Lennox and past "Idol" winners Kelly Clarkson and Carrie Underwood.

"Idol Gives Back" is intended to raise awareness and money for the newly formed Charity Projects Entertainment Fund and other organizations that fund relief programs for children and young people in extreme poverty in America and Africa, Fox said.

The U.S. organizations benefiting are Save the Children; America's Second Harvest: The Nation's Food Bank Network; Boys & Girls Clubs of America and **Children's Health Fund**. In Africa, funds are earmarked for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; Malaria No More; Nothing But Nets; Save the Children and the U.S. Fund for UNICEF.

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