

'American Idol' doing just fine without Simon Cowell

I hope you're all sitting down because I'm about to say something somewhat shocking. So far, "American Idol" is

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better without Simon Cowell. Now I know that I said

before the season started that we would miss Cowell terribly, but I couldn't have been more wrong. In January, I just couldn't see how the show would work without him. But the show is not only working, it's flourishing.



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That's because the show has adopted a much friendlier and fun tone. Gone for the most part have been the ugly confrontations between the judges and contestants. They've been replaced by talented singers



and compassionate, understanding judges.

Jennifer Lopez has completely surprised me. Her critiques are fair and honest, but she gives them with the compassion of someone who has experienced rejection. And Randy

Jackson has been much more on point than what we're used to from him. But it's Steven Tyler who has truly breathed new life into the show. Tyler is extremely entertaining, but he also gives solid criticism and he's incredibly kind to the contestants. Plus, he's not afraid to jump in and sing right along. I'm not ashamed to admit that I've completely fallen for him, although I will also admit I think he could watch his language a little.

The biggest plus of the new

judges, though, is that they actually want to be there. In the last few years of Cowell's tenure on the show, it became increasingly obvious that he didn't want to be there. With all of his obligations to his other projects, "Idol" had become almost a chore to him and it was starting to show. Lopez, Tyler and Jackson have a fresh new excitement about their jobs. And because of that, they've given second chances

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to a lot of people that Cowell would have just dismissed. And we've already seen some of those second chances pay off.

Which leads me to make another bold statement. Every year, the producers and everyone involved with the show say that this season has the best talent ever. But after what we've seen so far, I think that statement could actually be true this year. I saw more outstanding final solo performances last week than I have ever seen on the show. And I'm looking forward to seeing what the remaining 61 contestants will do in Las Vegas with the music of The Beatles.

More cuts will be made after the Vegas performances and then the judges will make

their final cuts when the Top 20 are introduced Thursday. And then, in what could very well be the best change ever, America will begin voting next week and the finalists will be named Thursday, March 3. That's right. No more semifinals dragging on week after week. Season 10, the remix, is kicking it into high gear.

I am not a fan of change. But if every change worked as well as these have for "Idol" so far, I could seriously get on board.

"American Idol" airs Wednesday, Feb. 23 and Thursday, Feb. 24, with two-hour episodes each night. For the latest news, be sure to visit my blog.

Angela Henderson-Bentley writes about "American Idol" on her "Idol Chit Chat" blog at www.herald-dispatch.com.