

Lambert at Smashbox Studios in Culver City, California, three days after *American Idol*'s finale

The psychedelic transformation and sexual liberation of Adam Lambert
By Vanessa Grigoriadis

WILD IDOL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW ROLSTON

SOMETIMES, IN THE DESERT, YOU CAN figure things out. That's what Adam Lambert discovered a couple of years ago at Burning Man, the annual utopian festival in Nevada. At the time, he had been hanging out in the nightclub scene in Los Angeles, at Hyde and other celebrity hot spots – “It was negative, and really dark, all about cocaine and synthetic-ego bullshit,” he says – and he felt a little bit lost, not sure of what he wanted to do with his life. “I was getting bitter,” he says. “I was looking for something, and I wasn't sure what it was.” At Burning Man, he drove around in a bus with a flamethrower welded on top, performed in an impromptu musical revue called the “Big Black Man Show” and experimented with “certain funguses.” Then it happened: “I had a psychedelic experience where I looked up at the clouds and went, ‘Oh!’” he says. “I realized that we all have our own power, and that whatever I wanted to do, I had to

make happen.” And what he wanted to do was to try out for *American Idol*.

These are not the kind of stories that one expects to hear from the average *American Idol* contestant. And there are many other aspects to Lambert that people don't know, even after 30 million viewers spent four months thinking they were getting close to him. For example, he's Jewish, though he was never bar mitzvahed and hated Hebrew school, mostly because he got a bloody nose in front of class the first day. His parents split up when he was 19, while he was in Europe performing in a cheesy six-person musical revue on a cruise ship. He admits to having spent a lot of his life partying, obsessively chasing love, though at his core he is the hardest thing to come by in pop culture: a genuinely free-spirited, easygoing flower child who prizes love over money, peace over power. And there's one more thing, something you probably knew already, but he hasn't been explicit about until now: “I don't think it should be a surprise for anyone to hear that I'm gay,” he says.

This information – again, not a surprise – is passed along at 11 p.m. two nights after the *Idol* finale, when Lambert bounds into the waiting area of 19 Entertainment's chic offices on Sunset Boulevard, with a view of

the Los Angeles lights sparkling in the distance (“Is it smog that makes everything look that way?” Lambert muses, gazing into the distance. “Or is it glitter?”). In two weeks, he'll begin rehearsing for the *Idol* national tour, which starts July 5th, but tonight he met with Simon Fuller, the creator of the *Idol* franchise, about his new recording contract. “He's so confident and self-assured,” says Fuller. “He's like Marc Bolan meets Bowie, with a touch of Freddie Mercury and the sexiness of Prince.” This may all be the case, but right now Lambert is running on fumes: After the finale, he celebrated the show's wrap until 3 a.m., then woke up for a batch of Fox-affiliate TV interviews an hour later. “The first thing I did in the morning was crack a Red Bull,” he says, laughing. “For a little while, I felt I was at a rave. Then I went from ‘Oh, my God, who has glow sticks?’ to ‘Stick a pacifier in me, I'm done.’” Nevertheless, he pops open a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, a present from Fuller, pouring glasses for his new retinue: a publicist, a day-to-day manager and a bodyguard. “Ain't going to say no to booze,” he says. “You've got me in rare form: no filter.”

It certainly seems that way during our late-night dinner next door at the Sunset Marquis hotel, where – in the face of a grotesque media circus with such paragons of virtue as Bill O'Reilly and Perez Hilton trying to beat his homosexuality into public consciousness on a daily basis – Lam-

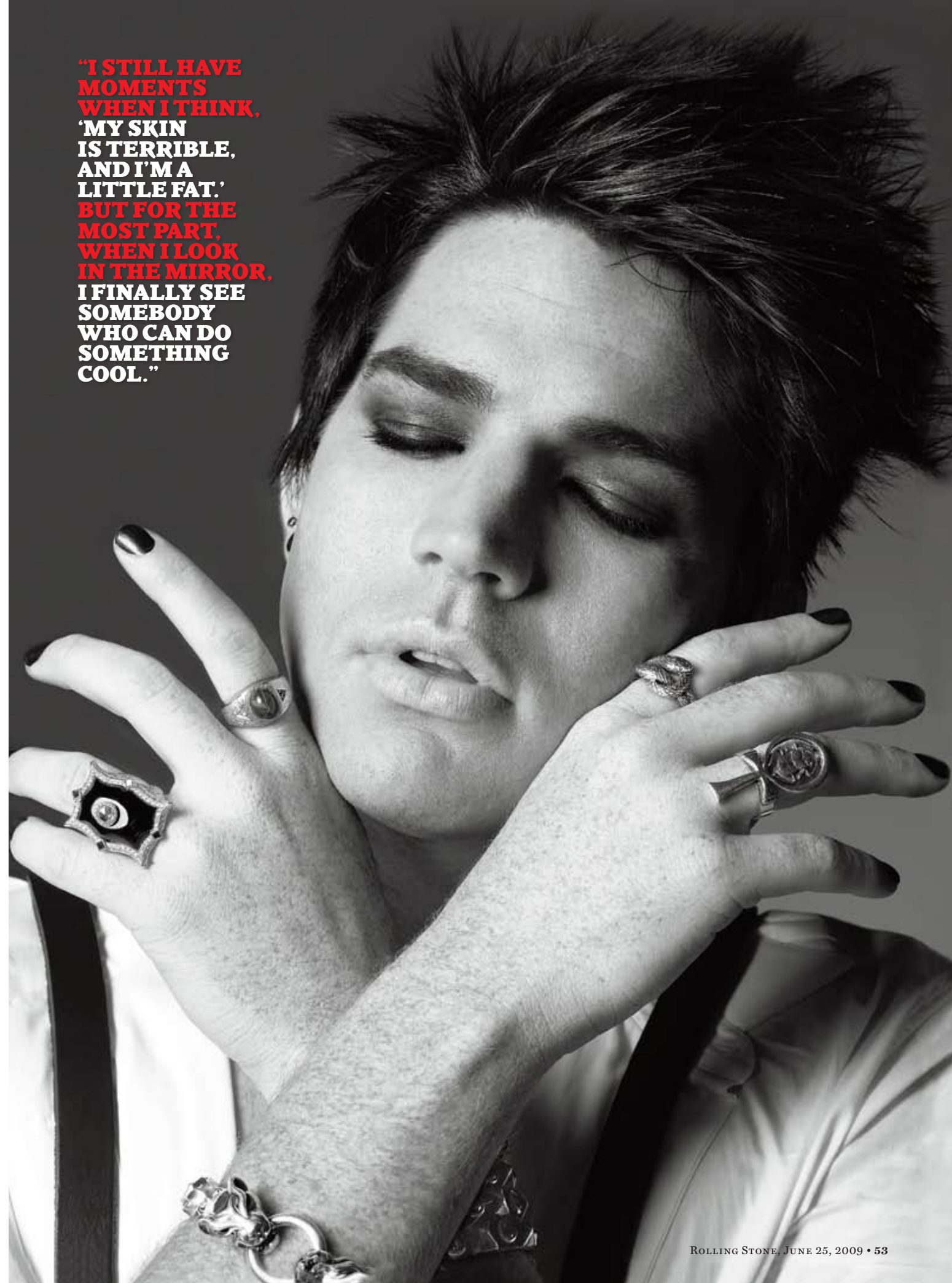
bert eagerly shares details about his private life and his rationale for having kept many of them to himself. “Right after the finale, I almost started talking about it to the reporters, but I thought, ‘I'm going to wait for *ROLLING STONE*, that will be cooler,” he says. “I didn't want the Clay Aiken thing and the celebrity-magazine bullshit. I need to be able to explain myself in context.” Later, he adds, “I find it very important to be in control of this situation. I feel like everyone has an opinion of me, and I want a chance to say, ‘Well, do you want to hear how I really feel about all this?’”

This is a question easier posed than answered, because Lambert has a lot of thoughts on his newfound role as America's new gay runner-up *Idol*, and many of them are somewhat contradictory. But there's one point on which he is completely sure: “I'm proud of my sexuality,” he says. “I embrace it. It's just another part of me.”

LET'S RETURN, FOR A MOMENT, to the other parts of Lambert, the 27-year-old from San Diego who captured many hearts in this season of *American Idol* for reasons that have little to do with his sexual preference and everything to do with his show-pony voice, silky presence and explosive performances. After all, this is the guy who upstaged Kiss on the finale. “I was so excited,” he says of the segment. “I was like, ‘I'm going to glue rhinestones on my eyelids, bitch! That's right, *American Idol* in platform boots. You ain't voting anymore.’” The same electricity that he projected onstage is abundantly available in person, coupled with this triple-snap sense of humor, relentlessly sunny disposition and a knack for quickly assessing the best way to work everybody he comes across. Lambert is handsome – six feet one and 185 pounds, with patrician features and sky-blue eyes – and he's unrepentant about flirting with both sexes. Even when you know that he's gay, it's hard not to find him physically attractive. And that's the way he likes it. “I loved it this season when girls went crazy for me,” he says. “As far as I'm concerned, it's all hot. Just because I'm not sticking it in there doesn't mean that I don't find it beautiful.”

These are the kind of lines that Lambert loves to throw off, a glint in his eye as he savors the shock value. Some of it is gratuitous, meant to provoke; most of it seems genuine, stemming from a sense of confidence that comes from having staked his claim in Hollywood for almost a decade. Before the show, Lambert was a working singer, making \$1,800 a week as an Actors' Equity chorus member in the Los Angeles production of the musical *Wicked*. But he wasn't happy. “I'd finally gotten a part in a Broadway show, and suddenly it wasn't what I wanted,” he says. “Musical theater

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PREVIOUS SPREAD: SHIRT BY VERSACE; NECKLACE BY LOREE RODKIN. OPPOSITE PAGE: SHIRT BY DIOR HOMME. SUSPENDERS BY G-STAR RAW. ONYX RING BY LOREE RODKIN.

Contributing editor VANESSA GRIGORIADIS profiled porn star Sasha Grey in RS 1078.

was too static, in a way, and too thankful. I was so over being a chorus boy." Backstage, in *Wicked's* dressing room, the guys liked to chatter about *American Idol*. "Everyone had an opinion, like, 'Oh, Jason Castro is so cute, but can he really sing?' or 'Carly Smithson, she's so fierce,'" he says. When he shared his Burning Man epiphany with them, they cheered him on: "They were like, 'You have to go, bitch!' I knew that it was my only shot to be taken seriously in the recording industry, because it's fast and broad."

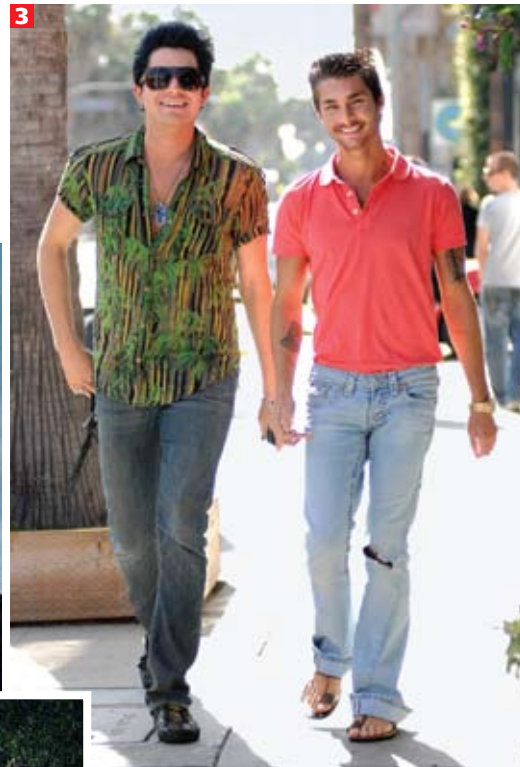
So, in July, he drove up to the *Idol* auditions in San Francisco – and soon catapulted into the Top 36, whereupon he got his first tattoo, of the Eye of Horus, an Egyptian god, to keep him safe. He tried to keep calm, dug into his own pocket for stage costumes and agonized over every song choice. "I saw what David Cook did last year, and it was cool," he says. "He thought, 'I have to sing something everybody knows, but I'm going to make it work for me, and I'm not going to give a fuck about what the theme is that week – and, most of all, I'm going to just ignore the pageantry of the whole thing.'" He snorts a little. "It is so pageant," he says. "That's why it's hard for people like Allison [Iraheta], who won't stand there and smile, say what they want her to say. I was on my best behavior, but it wasn't fake: That really was my best self."

When Lambert hit the Top 13, he sublet his studio apartment in a 1920s Hollywood building and moved into the show's Bel-Air mansion with a new roommate: eventual winner Kris Allen. "I was like, 'Oh, shit, they put me with the cute guy,'" he says. "Distracting! He's the one guy that I found attractive in the whole group on the show: nice, nonchalant, pretty and totally my type – except that he has a wife. I mean, he's open-minded and liberal, but he's definitely 100 percent straight." Danny Gokey, a worship director from Milwaukee, was not quite as progressive as Allen, and Lambert says they discussed religion a few times. "Danny is by the book, and the book is the Word," he says diplomatically. "And I respect that. Just don't try to push it on me, and we're cool."

Gokey wasn't in Lambert's clique on the show, which was made up primarily of Allen and 17-year-old Iraheta – "Two bros and a sis!" says Iraheta, giggling. They encouraged Iraheta to pick up a guitar, express herself. "One of the vocal coaches

once said to me, 'Stop giving everybody such good advice. No one else is doing it for them,'" says Lambert. "But it was good karma, you know?" Allen didn't need any of his help, and Lambert isn't upset about losing the competition to him: "I wasn't after the title," he says. "I was after staying on the platform as long as I could, and I did that." Allen has been unceasingly gracious about grabbing the crown. "Adam was consistent through the competition, and I was really shocked to win," he says.

Backstage at *Idol*, Lambert was out to everybody, but America wasn't completely clued in. Then, one day in March, pic-



Life Before 'Idol'

As a kid, Lambert preferred playing dress-up to sports. (1) With his parents, Leila and Eber, and brother Neil, in 1994. (2) As a high school senior in 2000. (3) With Drake LaBry, whom he's dating. (4) Appearing in front of 6,000 people at his San Diego high school's homecoming parade on May 8th.

tures of him dressed in drag and tonguing his ex-boyfriend hit the Internet. It was his fault: Before *Idol*, he took down his MySpace and Facebook pages but forgot to remove photos from his profile on Tribe.net, a social-networking community of Burning Man attendees. "I thought, 'Fuck, I'm screwed, possibly,'" he says. "Going into *Idol*, I assumed, 'OK, people are going to talk.' I mean, I've been living in Los Angeles for eight years as a gay man, I've been at clubs drunk making out with somebody in the corner. But photographic evidence?" He shakes his head ruefully. "Didn't count

on that. Wasn't ready for that." He was particularly nervous about the drag photos, worried that people might think it was his true nature. "I've only dressed in drag three or four times – and of course I took pictures, because I looked amazing – but I don't tuck and wear breasts, that's not me," he says. "Sucking my boy's face? Yes, that I will own."

WAY BACK, BEFORE HE went on *Idol*, and definitely before the revelation at Burning Man, Lambert wasn't sure that he liked being different. When he was little, he enjoyed spending afternoons in a cape, singing or lip-syncing songs in front of the mirror: "The box with the Halloween costumes stayed out all year," says his mom, Leila, who worked as a children's dental hygienist. "He was so precocious and thirsty for everything." His parents, a liberal couple who met at the University of Vermont in the late Seventies, didn't mind that he didn't like sports; instead, they joined a children's theater group to cultivate Adam's talent. His dad, Eber, who

want to be naked and vulnerable," he says. "I was so scared of my sexuality." He found solace onstage, double-booking himself as the lead actor in school plays and semiprofessional plays in San Diego, and inserting himself into a tight-knit circle of theater kids, many of whom were Mormons. "We were such goody-goodies," he says. "When I was young, I never got in trouble at all." His parents asked a gay friend whether they should talk to Adam about his sexuality, but he advised them to wait for their son to come to them with the news. When Adam was 13, Eber caught him looking at gay porn on the family computer. "I went to my ex-wife and said, 'It's official,'" he says. "She said, 'He's just curious.' I said, 'Let me tell you about heterosexual men and homosexual pornography – this isn't curiosity.'"

In high school, Lambert made out with a few girls, and even had oral sex with one during spring break, but for the most part, they were quick to realize that he wasn't on their team. "During plays, Adam would hang out in the girls' dressing room while we were changing, and every once in a while a mom would walk by and ask him, 'What are you doing in there?'" says Danielle Stori, a singer-songwriter. "And we'd be like, 'C'mon, it's only Adam!'"

After high school, he enrolled in college in Orange County but dropped out after five weeks to star in a play in San Diego. One night, he accompanied his mother to a high school speech-and-debate evening of fictional monologues. "One kid did a dramatic speech about his parents turning their back on him because he was gay, and the kid almost got killed because of it," says Lambert. "I could tell my mom was getting upset. On the way home, she asked, 'Do you have a girlfriend?' I said, 'No.' She said, 'Do you have a boyfriend?' I said, 'No.' She was like, 'Well, do you want one?' I said, 'Yes, that would be nice.'" He laughs. "Suddenly, it was like a wall dropped, and we started gabbing like crazy." But he still had maturing to do. "I didn't feel comfortable in my skin, didn't feel sexy," he says.

After spending a year on the cruise ship, he moved to Hollywood, where he lost his virginity on his 21st birthday. "I was drunk, and it was awkward," he says. "I was like, 'Wow, that was bad.'" Intimidated by the notion of moving to New York to pursue a job on Broadway, he took roles in small productions in California, including a musical version of *Debbie Does Dallas* in Lake Tahoe. "In high school, I got everything I wanted as far as performing was concerned, but in the real world, it was really hard," he says.

When he couldn't pay the rent, his parents usually bailed him out, but sometimes his cellphone would get cut off, and he wouldn't have money for gas. At 21, he was cast in a European tour of *Hair* for six months. In Germany, he started smoking pot and tried Ecstasy for the first time; he



Lambert's Greatest 'Idol' Moments

From Jacko to Johnny Cash, Lambert on his favorite performances

"Black or White"

"I performed this around the time that the pictures of my ex-boyfriend and I kissing came out, and I thought that the lyrics fit the situation. They also related to the change the country was going through with Obama. I wanted to sing something I could believe in, at that moment."

"Ring of Fire"

"Country doesn't make any sense for me – not my vibe, not my look. But South African singer Dilana Robichaux's version allowed me to twist the song, so it worked for me. I love dub music with Middle Eastern flavors: I wanted to do at least one song that had that sound."

"Mad World"

"My brother learned 'Mad World' on the piano, and a few years ago, I started singing to it while he was playing. I think this song is one of my best performances: It has a dark, indie vibe that's different for *Idol*."

"Whole Lotta Love"

"At first, the producers thought they couldn't get the band to release the song, but it was Rock Week, so I was like, 'I have to sing Zeppelin,' and they got it. The groove is so sick on this song. It's pure sex, so hot."

Kiss medley

"When the producers told me they booked Kiss, I was baffled. I'm not a Kiss fan, and I thought maybe it was too campy. But I listened to the songs, and I said, 'These rock in a major way.' Later, I realized that anything I do after this will seem tame. It created a whole range for me – I can go from the guy in the suit to the guy in the glitter shoulder pads."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SETH POPPEL/YEARBOOK LIBRARY; BANKS/SPLASH NEWS; COURTESY OF ADAM LAMBERT

FROM LEFT: SPLASH NEWS; MICHAEL BECKER/PICTUREGROUP

dyed his hair black and went to his first sex club. "I was always obsessed with the Sixties, and this experience was like living through it for me," he says. "I wanted so badly to be the hippie in the show."

That's the lifestyle he sought out upon his return to America, immersing himself in the West Coast neohippie underground around the Burning Man festival – a mix of psychedelics, astrology, left-leaning politics, dub-step DJs and free expression (some might call it "oversharing"). An after-hours musical revue based on the zodiac? Sign him up. A Monday-night bacchanalia in grimy downtown L.A.? He's there. In this crowd, being different wasn't only OK – it was to be revered. "Having so much extra is a difficult journey," says one of his best friends, Scarlett (she goes by one name). "Sometimes if you're too fabulous, people react in a weird way, and I think that was part of Adam's path."

Friends like Allan Louis, an actor on the CW's *Privileged*, encouraged him to expand as an artist, and he took up songwriting on GarageBand with Monte Pittman, a guitarist for Madonna and Prong, even fronting a metal band for Pittman briefly. He also fell in love for the first time, with another Burner. "I expanded a lot spiritually with him," Lambert says. "We treated our relationship like a workshop, talking to each other about the ways we wanted to grow." ("I'm trying to get Zac Efron to come to Burning Man," he says later. "He says he really wants to go!")

Now he feels creatively awakened and personally fulfilled. "Everything that I always thought was a fantasy is actually happening, and it's a testament to imagination and doing whatever the fuck comes to my mind," he says. He even met his own idol, Madonna: Pittman invited Lambert over to her apartment after he gave her a guitar lesson. "She had her guard up a little at first, like anyone would in that situation, but after she realized I had good intentions she was so playful," gushes Lambert. "I told her that I loved her and was intimidated by her, and she was like, 'Oh, so love equals intimidation for you?'" Madonna hadn't watched *American Idol*, but the two of them talked astrology, and they discussed his moon sign, Aries. "She said, 'You don't like anyone telling you what to do, do you?'" he says. "It's so cool, because she gets it, you know?"

He smiles. "I'm finally checked in to my self-worth for the first time in my life, and the fact that it has coincided with *Idol* is so sweet," he says. "I mean, I still have moments where I think, 'Oh, my skin is terrible, and I'm a little fat, I should really go to the gym more.' But for the most part, when I look in the mirror now, I finally see somebody who can do something cool." Then he laughs a little. "Don't they say that you dream more when there are things you aren't attaining, that you are repressing?"

Queen of the Night

While on a European tour of *Hair* at age 21, Lambert started smoking pot and went to his first sex club. Upon returning to L.A., he immersed himself in the nightclub scene (1), starring in the campy *Zodiac Show* (2) and other acts (3). In 2007, Lambert, with pal Scarlett, attended the Burning Man festival (4). He decided to try out for *Idol* following a psychedelic experience. "I thought, 'Whatever you want to do, make it happen,'" he recalls.



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Well, I haven't been having any dreams lately. Now I'm in a waking dream."

THE DAY AFTER THE DINNER at the Marquis, Lambert arrives at his hotel in Beverly Hills around 10:30 p.m. after a long photo shoot, taking a seat in the second-floor lounge. We talk about his likes and dislikes: On the side of likes, we have the *Twilight* book series, Bret Easton Ellis, Thievery Corporation, Goldfrapp and President Obama. "I voted for the first time, for Obama," he says. "Traveling in Europe was so depressing when Bush was in office: People were always asking, 'Why'd you elect him?' And I guess I let it happen, in a way." The dislikes list is topped by Nickelback, Creed, cameras ("Why can't you have the experience without taking a picture of it?") and cocaine. "That drug is such a reflection of the lack of self-esteem and control people have over themselves and their lives," he says. "I'd much rather smoke a bowl, chill out and listen to music." We start talking about his fears, and the only one on this list is worry about his parents dying and, later, growing old alone himself. "I believe that whatever happens after death is

really great," he says. "I don't believe in hell: Maybe you're rewarded for being a good person, but I don't think you're punished."

This is the usual kicked-back attitude one expects from Lambert, but when the conversation turns to his newfound role as a gay icon, he begins to pick the polish off his nails, which is what he does when he feels anxious – it's clearly an argument he's spent a lot of time having with himself, in his own head. On one hand, he wants to support gay rights at a moment when same-sex marriage is in legal limbo in many states. He enjoyed performing Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" on the show for a reason: "This civil rights movement is near to my heart, and it felt really good to sing that," he says. "I'm not asking to get married in your church, but you don't have any right to tell me I can't do it."

Discrimination, though it's usually minor, is a fact of his life: Just the other day, an *American Idol* chauffeur told him that he had no problem with him, "because at least you're not girly." Lambert shudders. "Man, it's so ignorant," he says. "Why can't some men have strong feminine sides? Does that make them less of a man? I don't know why our society has such an emphasis on masculinity and femininity

"BEING A ROCK STAR ISN'T THAT DEEP. IT'S HALLOWEEN, MAKE-BELIEVE. I CAN'T BELIEVE I GET TO PLAY DRESS-UP FOR A LIVING."

– it's really gross. I don't think you're truly sexy until you don't care about that."

On the other hand, Lambert doesn't want to be the poster child for gay rights. "I'm trying to be a singer, not a civil rights leader," he says. Also, he's uncomfortable with some of the ways that gay culture has evolved. "Middle America may think that what I am is gay, but here in Hollywood, gay guys are all about trying to fit in – they're obsessed with looking and acting hetero," he says. "Clay Aiken's gay, and I'm gay, and we couldn't be more different. The only thing that's the same about everyone in the gay community is that we're gay. Do we have anything in common besides the fact that we like dick? Why can't we just talk about a human community?"

He's right: Identity politics suck, and his situation is tricky. Plus, if he didn't want to come out publicly, wouldn't that be his prerogative? "I think I reserve the right to talk about my own sexuality," he says. He's faced a firing squad of entertainment reporters every day, desperate to know when he's going to answer the "question dangling over his head," as one of them put it. He shrugs. "I can either get irritated and let this drive me nuts, or laugh at it," he says, then smirks a little. "I kind of like

things dangling over my head anyway." He leans in. "Lately, you know, there's part of me that's almost bi-curious the other way around. I've made out a few times with girls at nightclubs when I had way too many drinks. I don't know if it would ever happen, but I'm kind of interested. I don't think I would want to do it with a groupie, though." He cocks his head. "Then again, maybe I'd rather it was with a stranger than someone I knew."

After an hour of talking in the hotel lounge, Lambert's bodyguard appears to escort him to his hotel room so he can pack for his trip to New York tomorrow, for a new round of TV interviews. At 9 a.m. the next day, he jumps into the back seat of an SUV, Karl Lagerfeld shades clapped on tight, gabbing about the new condo that he wants to buy. "I want a crash room, or a kind of hookah den with pillows on the floor, a sound system and lots of color therapy, sensual purples and reds," he says, then fiddles with his BlackBerry. "My brother Neil called me last night so drunk, with his friends," he says, giggling. "He said, 'We think you should do an album of covers called *Doin' Hella Dudes*: You'll cover some badass dudes, but it'll be like you're doin' dudes, you know?'" He lets out

a loud guffaw from deep in his belly. "Then he said, 'It's cool if you can't thank us now, but when the album comes out, give us credit, because we love you.'"

IN NEW YORK, LAMBERT DINES AT five-star restaurants, gets into a fight with a cab driver and bawls through *Hair* on Broadway. He meets with Barry Weiss, the head of RCA, the company distributing his album with 19 Recordings – "He asked if I was a Jew, and I said I'd wear a yarmulke if he wanted, as long as it had rhinestones," he jokes. He's hopeful about his new album, which he classifies vaguely as pop-rock electro. "Everyone's so hung up on 'Are you pop?' or 'Are you rock?'" he says. "It's like, 'Um, does this song make you want to dance, or have sex, or remind you of something?' It's not that deep. Being a rock star is just playing. It's Halloween, make-believe." He laughs. "I can't believe I get to play dress-up for a living now!"

On the morning of his return to L.A., he decides to drive up the coast with a guy he's dating to a resort in Santa Barbara (the dude, whom Lambert met while passing out fliers at a club, is "Cajun, voodoo-down, dreamy," but he doesn't want to talk about him too much for fear of jinxing the relationship). "I'm so excited to be almost on vacation," he says. "I ain't going to lie, I put Kahlúa in my coffee this morning."

Before he leaves, he stops at a nail salon, where a dozen Korean attendants whip their heads around in unison at his appearance. After selecting a gun-metal-black nail polish, he sinks into a massage chair, one attendant buffing his feet and another at his hands. He murmurs a little, then directs his attention to a flatscreen TV, set to a replay of the 2008 American Music Awards, with performances by the Pussycat Dolls ("my guilty pleasure"), the Jonas Brothers ("I like those laser lights more than them") and Justin Timberlake ("Yum").

Within minutes, a pair of bedraggled paparazzi appear at the salon's door, totting cameras. A manager lowers a gauzy white curtain for privacy, but they linger on the sidewalk, rising on their toes to peer through windows.

"Should I flip them off?" asks Lambert, a smile playing on his lips. "Is that too racy?"

He goes back and forth on this decision – "Don't you think I want to make a storm?" he says. "Isn't it fun to be cheeky?" – before settling on showing off his pedicure for the cameras when the polish dries, but he gets impatient. He bounds out in bare feet, wiggling his foot like the hokeypokey, then slips into a waiting car.

It would've been fun to flip them off, though. "I would have done it with a big smile on my face, to show them I'm not actually mad," he says. "I'm only playing." ☺

FROM LEFT: AMELIA G/ZUMA PRESS; ARON D. SETTIPANE/WEIN

COURTESY OF ADAM LAMBERT. 2