

September 30, 2019



Laine Hardy can trace the exact moment that led him to stardom.

He's 5 years old, riding in the car with his mom, when "Heartbreak Hotel" comes on the radio. Elvis' smooth, sultry voice echoes through the speakers, creeping from a whisper to a howl.

By the time the guitar solo hits, Laine is asking his mom who it is and learning about The King for the first time. The song, then 50 years old, is all of two minutes and eight seconds long. But Laine has never heard anything like it. Those electric 128 seconds will change his life forever. Suddenly, all he can think about is wanting to play guitar.

He is not the first musician to be so deeply affected by "Heartbreak Hotel." John Lennon, George Harrison, Keith Richards and Robert Plant are among those who say their worlds were shaken by the track.

For Laine, it marks the dawn of his music career. By 7, he's playing guitar, strumming the chords with his tiny fingers. For Halloween that fall, his mom and grandma glue sequins on an Elvis costume. Every person who sees him in the outfit runs to get their camera or asks him for his autograph. There he is, a few feet tall, dressed in a white suit and sunglasses, dark hair combed back, scribbling his name on paper for his fans.

It's almost prophetic for what's to come.

At 14, Laine starts singing, growing into his signature growling, raspy voice. At 18, he is a fan favorite among *American Idol*'s nearly 8 million viewers, often drawing comparisons to Elvis himself. And then, Ryan Seacrest is calling his name, and he's the last contestant standing, confetti exploding behind him, and the audience is erupting with applause.

In a lot of ways, he has Elvis to thank for this very moment.



Laine has changed outfits four times today. At least.

It's late August, three months since he won *American Idol*. He's back for a short visit at his childhood home in Bayou Barbary, a small, rural community in Livingston Parish.

His house is about 35 minutes from Baton Rouge, but it might as well be a world away.

Summers on his family's expansive, woodsy property were spent knee boarding across ponds, swinging from ropes and jumping on trampolines. As he got older, his hobbies shifted to racking up 6,000-plus miles per year on his four wheeler or taking his brother's boat out on the river.

It's a few weeks before his 19th birthday, and Laine is in his old bedroom. He's getting dressed in the first look of the day: a metallic patterned blue jacket over a crisp navy button-down and pressed pants. His gleaming black hair is slicked back. It's the same outfit he wore for a performance on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, and it's his own selection for today's 225 photo shoot. It's the kind of striking look that fueled all those Elvis comparisons on *Idol*.

Outside, as the camera starts clicking, a dragonfly weaves lazily through the yard. Birds chirp merrily from the trees above the yellow swingset. A stray dog roams. A lawn mower buzzes in the distance.

The air is a thick 94 degrees. Within minutes, Laine is wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead with a napkin.

He's not a complainer. But when the shoot ends, he doesn't hesitate to race back into the house to change into a T-shirt and shorts.

Less than an hour later, though, he's in jeans and boots for his next photo opp, a road sign dedication down the street from his parents' house. Later that night, he'll change back into a button-down for his Louisiana Music Hall of Fame induction ceremony.

Even in Louisiana—away from the songwriters, producers and agents in Nashville, where he's been living since this summer—Laine has places to go. People to see. Suits to wear.

And by 18, Laine owns more suits than some men might in their lifetime. He has 22 in his closet, in shades of blue, black and red in loud, wild patterns.

"I actually tried to get him to not wear a suit on the show," his mother, Cindy, says. "I said, 'Son, why won't you just not wear your suit one time and wear your hat and your boots? And he was like, 'No, Mama. I want to wear my suit.' He was adamant."

Laine's parents' theory: The suit is his armor. Maybe it was what separated the old, shy Laine—the kid who couldn't even look his mom in the eye when he was singing—from the new Laine who was capable of crooning a Beatles song on national television.

Maybe it was what separated the Laine who lost *American Idol* on his first try and the Laine who went on to win it all.



He can remember sitting on the couch with his parents and watching the earlier seasons of *American Idol*. He can picture Carrie Underwood, who won the season four title when he was 4. He remembers Adam Lambert, Scotty McCreery and Phillip Phillips.

But he was more of a casual viewer, and he never imagined himself on the show. Until last year.

The first time, *American Idol* found Laine. Cindy uploaded a video of her son singing to YouTube. Eight weeks later, she received a message from producers.

Laine said he was too shy to audition, but Cindy pushed him to try.

So Laine went to Hollywood, a little bit younger than he is today, and with a little less swagger. During his 2018 run on the show, he dressed in V-neck tees and jeans, his side-swept bangs hanging just above his eyes. He sang songs that reminded him of home, of driving on dirt roads in his 2006 Chevy Z71 truck.

But he struggled. He battled his shyness, both onstage and off.

Because he was still a minor, his mom was always within 50 feet of him. She couldn't protect him from everything, though.

"I'll tell you a little story," Cindy says today, sitting on a picnic bench in her front yard, her long black hair shining in the sunlight just like her son's.

She recalls a group challenge when Laine had to pair up with other contestants. He was in agony about asking others to sing with him. "Mama," he told Cindy, "I don't know what to do."

"And my heart just broke for him, because I had to watch him go up to all these people and listen to everybody telling him no," she says now. "I wanted to go and say, 'Hey. Can Laine be on your team?' I wanted to take care of that for him. But that wasn't something I could do."



Judges Lionel Richie, Katy Perry and Luke Bryan were fond of Laine but ultimately eliminated him during the top 50 round. The second time, Laine ended up on *American Idol* by a fluke. His best friend's sister asked him to come to Idaho and play guitar during her audition. He never planned to try out himself. But the judges recognized Laine—and, in fact, they also said he seemed unrecognizable. A year spent back home, singing in local venues every weekend, had built up Laine's confidence.

"And then," Laine says, "that *thing* happened."

He calls it that "thing" because it was one of the most surreal, unexpected moments of his life. The judges asked him to do an impromptu audition—and they loved his performance so much they practically begged him to return to the show.

The two and a half months the show aired were a whirlwind. Laine was an early fan favorite, known for his suits and country-rock style. The judges pushed him to tap deeper into his emotions and to turn every critique into a learning moment.

His stage presence and energy evolved with each episode. But by the finale, he was still considered the underdog to his friend, frontrunner Alejandro Aranda. So when Laine pulled off the win, it was the most redemptive ending to a 77-day story of growth and resilience.

Sitting on his couch today, Laine is still having trouble processing how quickly his life has changed. The last few months feel like an out-of-focus dream. But if he could give his younger self advice?

"I'd tell him he did everything right," he says. "And sometimes he didn't do things right. But I definitely learned from them."

There are a few moments from his winning season that stand out in his blurry memories—like singing "Hey Jude" during the show's hero tributes week. He dedicated the song to his older brother, Kyle.

"I looked over in the crowd, and my mom started crying," he recalls. "I was like 'Oh, don't do it. Don't do it! I gotta remember the lyrics.'"

He remembers soaking up the judges' advice like a sponge, especially from Richie, who he says he learned so much from.

"Anything he said, I probably should believe it," Laine says. "He knows what he's talking about."

But Richie's most important wisdom for Laine may have come early on, during the top 14 round. Laine performed Elvis' "That's All Right Mama," a rocking performance the judges adored.

Richie's advice was simply: "Just do it some more."

Before I sit down with Laine, his mom warns me: He's not going to talk. Good luck with that interview, she says, almost sarcastically.

"He's very, very, very shy. He literally hardly ever talked," Cindy explains. "I didn't even know he could sing until he was in the 10th grade."

"Well, now you can't get him to shut up," his brother, Kyle, chimes in.

"Once he knows somebody, anyway," Cindy agrees.

Laine's shyness might be eroding. But he is still hyper aware of himself. He's always checking with his mom if it's OK to have certain logos on his clothes. He watches his words during our interview—"I can't really say on paper" is his answer to more than one of my questions. And he politely reminds us that if we capture a mailbox near his house, we have to edit the street number out of the photo so people don't figure out where his family lives.

It feels like a lot for anyone to worry about, let alone someone Laine's age. And there are other risks to stardom.

"I do worry about drugs, drinking," Cindy admits. "Because you hear about how many people get into those things in the music industry. But I think if we put the right team around him, he'll be OK. And until I feel like he's mature enough to make his own decisions, I will be in his Kool-Aid."

But the trade-off for all this stress? Laine owns 16 guitars. He's spent his summer hanging out in the country music capital with some of the industry's biggest songwriters. He's had his performances critiqued by the likes of Lionel Richie and Katy Perry. He just bought a brand-new truck with his own money.

"I GOTTA WORK ON MY
CAREER FIRST, AND THEN
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COMING BACK HERE."

[LAINE, ON RETURNING TO LOUISIANA]



Laine's sitting on his family couch today, in the same living room he once watched *American Idol* as a kid. Now, the room is crowded with his guitars and autographed posters almost as tall as he is.

He apologizes because he can't stop yawning. It's been months of go-go-go. This trip is the first chance he's had to recuperate all summer. But he's upbeat about what's to come. He's been recording with A-list writers—people behind songs like Miranda Lambert's "The House That Built Me" and Lonestar's "Amazed."

He can't reveal much—this is going on paper, after all. But he will say the music feels decidedly like Laine.

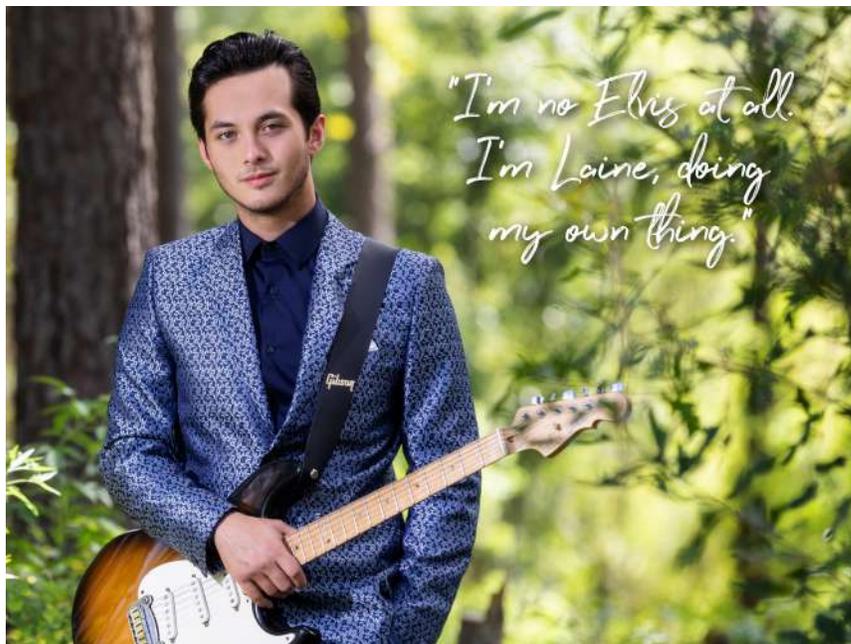
He's pulling from what he grew up on: a soundtrack of The Rolling Stones, Chuck Berry, Jimi Hendrix and Lynyrd Skynrd mixed with a little Louisiana swamp pop.

"I'm aiming for my music to sound the same as what got me here," he says. "It's gonna be like a country-Southern rock-blues-funky kind of thing."

Last summer, he visited Graceland, Elvis' mansion in Memphis. Wandering the singer's wildly decorated rooms and his jet planes comprised an experience Laine says he'll never forget, as long as he lives. But as much as he idolizes the late singer, he's not really sure what to make of all the Laine-Elvis comparisons.

"When people say that, it's cool. But I'm not trying to copy anybody. I probably do some of the things he'd do because I used to watch him all the time, and I guess it kind of became a habit," he says. "I'm no Elvis at all. I'm Laine, doing my own thing."

And like any young adult, Laine is probably still figuring that "own thing" out. But by the end of our interview, as we wind up talking about our shared love for *The Vampire Diaries*, Laine's brother's words are proving right. Laine can't stop talking, can't stop thinking of all the things he has to say.



When considering Laine before *American Idol* and Laine after the show, everybody sticks to the same story: He hasn't changed.

"He's still the same exact Laine," Cindy insists. "He is the type of person that likes people to just be down to earth with him. He doesn't like somebody that's going to talk so sophisticated. He's more like: Just talk normal—talk country to me."

He's still the same baby-faced, humble kid, who hasn't let the shock of stardom go to his head. He's still the son she has to beg to wear shoes, who she has to correct when he's being your average adolescent smart aleck.

"I am the same person as I was before," Laine echoes. "I did learn how to face my fears and push my limits. But I'm still just a normal boy from southeast Louisiana who loves to do everything everybody else around here loves to do. ... I'm always going to be the bayou boy."

When some 18-year-olds leave home and spread their wings, it's difficult to get them to come home. Laine can't come back enough. He misses the river. He misses it so much, he has a hard time explaining it.

"When you're on the river ... you're nothing," he says, searching for the words. "I mean you have your buddies with you; you're not alone. But it's freedom. I mean, I have freedom, but just being on the river ..."

His mom gets it.

"I feel like as long as he gets to come home at least once a month, go on the river, do his thing, he'll be fine," Cindy says.

And after all the hard work is done, Laine only sees himself ultimately ending up one place: south Louisiana.

"It's always gonna be home. I'm never gonna buy a house in a different state or anything. I gotta work on my career first, and then after that, down the line, I'm definitely coming back here."

Part of the draw to Louisiana is undeniably Laine's parents. Cindy and Barry Hardy—these are the people who Laine says have supported him 2,000% his entire life. These are the people who flew out to California every single weekend for his *Idol* shows, no questions asked. They'd buy one-way tickets, eating the extra cost in case Laine didn't make it and they'd need to stay longer. These are the people whose mere presence in the audience made Laine feel better.

His mom is so proud, her ringtone is Laine's performance of "Hurricane."

"He's my angel," Cindy says. "I know he's not an angel, but he's my angel."

The roadside signs increase in frequency the closer you get to the Hardy house: “Elect Barry Hardy: Council District 8.”

Running for councilman is never something Laine’s father envisioned himself doing. He’s shy, just like his son.

“My husband made the comment to me the other day, whenever they approached him to run for parish council. He was like, ‘Cindy, do you know what helped me get past my fear? I said to myself: If Laine could do it, I can do it.’”

If Laine can do it, I can do it—that’s a feeling that’s inspired fans across the country. It’s hard not to resonate with that comeback-kid tale. But there’s nowhere it means more than here, in Livingston Parish. No one it means more to than Laine’s neighbors and friends. To his family.

“To have your kid accomplish what he’s accomplished? I don’t even know what word I would even use for that. The chances of winning *American Idol*? He just beat the odds,” Cindy says.

“We all look up to him, really. And yeah, I’m proud of him being on *American Idol*. But if I had to say what I was really proud of? It’s the fact that he’s still him. And he is determined to stay him. He’s not going to let money, fame, none of that change him.”



This afternoon, the town is placing a new sign on the side of the road. It reads “Welcome to Bayou Barbary. Hometown to Laine Hardy, 2019 American Idol.”

As the sign is planted in the dirt, a small crowd of Laine’s closest supporters gathers: his extended family, neighbors, city officials. His older sister, Brittany, is proudly sporting a Laine Hardy T-shirt. Cell phone cameras click rapid-fire. Everyone wants a turn taking their own beaming photo standing next to the *Idol* star.

Maybe Laine’s right. He’s no Elvis. But he doesn’t need to be.

Because here in Livingston Parish, with his little nieces grinning ear to ear as they pose for a picture with him, he’s still just Uncle Laine.

And that’s more than enough.



Laine through the years, from left to right: Ages 7, 8, 17.