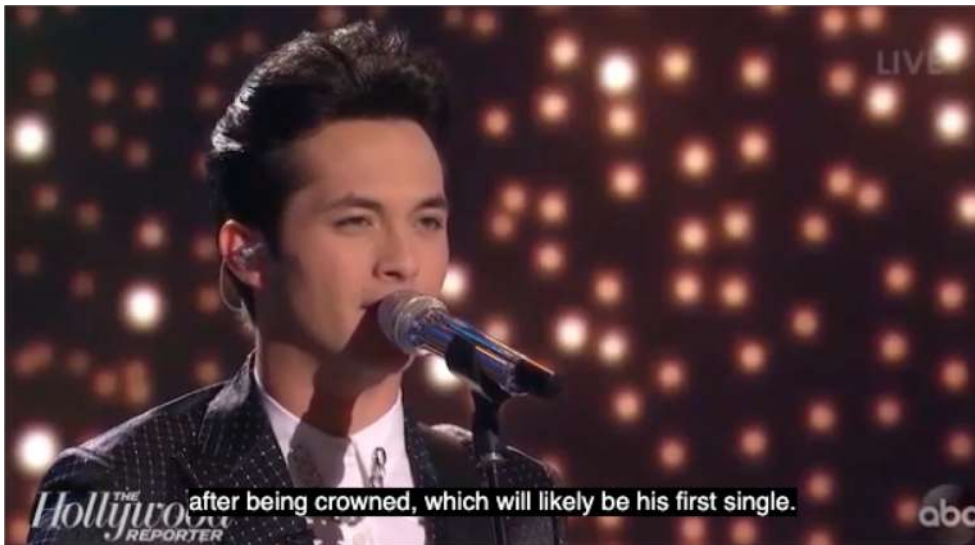


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Laine Hardy Talks 'American Idol' Season 17 Win: 'I'm Overwhelmed by All This Emotion'



Admitting it was the most surreal moment of his life, newly-crowned *American Idol* winner **Laine Hardy** looked like he was having an out-of-body experience when he spoke to *Billboard* minutes after Ryan Seacrest announced that the Louisiana teen had taken the crown for the series 17th season. "To be honest, it feels so unreal. I feel God put me here for a reason. I know I was created for a purpose. I'm so grateful for all my fans who voted for me and I'm overwhelmed by all this emotion."

It was a redeeming victory for the 18-year-old born in Baton Rouge and raised in nearby Livingston, population 1,769. He competed last year on season 16 and was cut by the judges after making it to the top 50. As they told him again on this year's season finale, he wasn't ready -- then. Thinking back to the moment he was eliminated last year, Hardy told *Billboard* he could not have imagined being the winner one year later. "I did not want to try out again. I did not want to go through all this again, but I thought, 'I'm going to do it. I can do that.'"

Hardy, who ended the three-hour live show with a performance of his new single, "Flame," says he knows what his first priority is. "I'm going to put music out as soon as I can, get it out to my fans because I've been itching to do it."

Alejandro Aranda, who was proclaimed to be a frontrunner during the auditions when [Katy Perry](#) told him he could win the whole thing, was smiling broadly right after the broadcast ended. Whose name did the 24-year-old musician from Pomona, Calif. expect to hear when Seacrest looked at the card with the winner's name? "I didn't really have any expectation. I think we both did the best we could. Laine killed it tonight. Everybody killed it tonight. There was absolutely an amazing amount of music, so I can't complain. It was awesome. Being on the show where they allowed me to play my own songs, that's absolutely crazy and I feel loved and supported. So if it's first, second, third, fourth or 40th or 50th, it would've been the same mindset for me, just knowing that I'm still pursuing music and I have a love for it. It feels amazing to have support."

Hardy is now signed to Hollywood Records. Has anyone offered Aranda a record deal? "Yeah," he revealed. "Some people have approached me."