



by Karla Dial

Behind the *Music*

How one Christian couple has been bringing the love of Jesus to the set of "American Idol" this season.

SHINING LIKE STARS: The cast and crew of "American Idol" welcomed Billy and Julie Mauldin with open arms.

t's Wednesday afternoon, and Stage 36 on the CBS lot in West Hollywood, Calif., is a hotbed of activity. It's a performance day for the nine remaining hopefuls on "American Idol"—the nation's biggest talent show—which just awarded the winner a recording contract and life as a pop star.

But on this day in late March, there are still nine singers vying for that spot. Various stage managers and production assistants—most dressed in black, almost universally carrying coffee cups—mill about the set. Host Ryan Seacrest, casually dressed, arrives and things go quiet: It's dress rehearsal, and the entire run-through starts now.

In the stands, just above a section of seats filled with placards bearing each contestant's name and larger-than-life face, 49-year-old Billy Mauldin stretches out his denim-clad 6-foot, 4-inch frame, and explains to his visiting 16-year-old niece who everyone is and what they're doing.

Meanwhile, his wife, Julie, 45, is everywhere else: She bonds with a security guard over her turquoise bracelet. A woman who works for 19 Entertainment—the group that awards the recording contract—gives her a painting she just made, bringing Julie to tears. A few minutes later, she's giving vocal coach Michael Orland a big hug and kiss on the cheek. There she is sitting down, talking with the mother of one of the contestants. A few minutes later, she's getting all the details about a publicity rep's upcoming wedding.

This is the Mauldin family at work. For this, the Fox reality show's 13th season, they have been asked to serve as nondenominational spiritual advisors to the contestants. But halfway through the season, they've made an impact on cast and crew alike.

"I wanted someone with common sense, who would be like a big brother and a big sister to the kids."

David Hill, executive producer

"When (the show) first contacted me, I said, 'I've got to have Julie,'" Billy says. "She knows fashion, she knows makeup, so everything about this falls into her sweet spot. She uses it to connect with people. We're a team.

"I'd say 33 percent of the people here have some kind of committed faith, 33 percent are somewhere in the middle, and 33 percent it's not even on their



radar," he adds. "So you fall back on trust and the relationship. Julie and I are here to love them—really—and to serve them, really. Just to be who we are and to be real with them, and that's what allows them to trust us."

He nods toward Julie, now seated in the row before him and deep in private conversation with her friend from 19 Entertainment.

"This is what it's all about, right here."

Novel Idea

This week has been easier than most for Billy: As president and CEO of Motor Racing Outreach (MRO)—the 25-year-old ministry that serves the NASCAR and World Truck racing communities—he's still responsible for the operations at the track for the racing season, which runs from February to November. But since this weekend's NASCAR race was at Fontana—just 90 minutes from Los Angeles—he was able to skip his usual red-eye flight back to North Carolina and take two of the contestants to the track with him.

It was through his work with MRO that Billy met



David Hill in 2010. At the time, Hill—a fearless Aussie, red of face, blue of eye and white of hair, whose jovial exterior gives little hint of his reputation as one of the toughest negotiators in the entertainment industry—was CEO of the Fox Sports Media Group, and a frequent visitor to NASCAR tracks nationwide. Hall of Fame driver and Fox analyst Darrell Waltrip, who is MRO’s chairman, introduced the two over dinner in Virginia one night, and they hit it off immediately.

“He’s cool,” Hill tells *Citizen of Billy*. “I’m a great believer in muscular Christianity, and I think he fills that category. I’ve always thought there would be no Christian religion if not for St. Paul—I don’t think he could have done what he did to spread the message without being a really tough guy. I’ve always seen that as being part of the church. I really like Billy, and I think his message is really clear and he’s sincere.”

Last June, Fox asked Hill to take on the role of executive producer in an effort to revamp the struggling “American Idol” series, which had suffered a 45-percent ratings dip over the previous two years. After reviewing tapes, amid all the decisions about judges and other changes that needed to be made, it took Hill less than a month to turn to the Mauldins to

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG AUDIENCE: The top nine contestants of Season 13—C.J. Harris (back left), Jessica Meuse, Dexter Roberts, Jena Irene, Caleb Johnson, Malaya Watson, Alex Preston, Majesty Rose and Sam Woolf—join each other for a group number watched by more than 9 million people nationwide. The show has averaged about 10 million viewers per episode this year.

do something unprecedented.

“I have four kids,” Hill explains. “I said, ‘Just imagine how you’d feel if your kid—16, 17, 18—suddenly goes off to Hollywood for three months, to a different world.’ So many of these kids come from church families, and we felt they were going to be away from any spiritual connection that they’d had.

“I know it’s a dumb term—‘spiritual advisor’—but I couldn’t think of anything different. I wanted someone with common sense who would be like a big brother and a big sister to the kids, and if they wanted to talk religion, they could, and if they wanted to do a Bible study, they could. Or if they weren’t Christians, we would find through Billy and Julie whoever was the applicable person to come in and be there for them, too. We wanted to have a cocoon around the kids.

“I don’t want it to sound like altruism, because the show depends on the kids to be at their very best,” he adds. “These kids are in a crucible, more intense

than anything they've done in their lives. Who could fulfill that role of mentor/advisor/big brother in this intense competition? It was Billy with NASCAR. He's going out to minister to guys who might not lose the race—they might lose their lives! Who better to do this than Billy and Julie, who see it every week on the race track?"

When the Mauldins got the call from Beverly Hills last June, they were driving back to their home in Charlotte from a day at the beach with their four children, who range in age from 4 to 13.

"It was a call that I was surprised to get, but it made sense," says Billy.

Though they were sworn to relative secrecy while they considered the offer, the Mauldins did their homework. Billy reached out to a few former contestants with a hypothetical question: If you'd had a spiritual advisor on the show, how would it have helped? And the answer was: It would have helped a lot.

"After we talked it through, we felt it was a door God had opened and we just needed to be obedient and go through it—not really knowing what it all meant, just taking it one day at a time," Billy says. "If you think you know what it's all about, you may miss what you don't see coming. And that's been the best part of it."

So the Mauldins made the decision to become bicoastal parents to their own children for a short while in order to minister to "the kids," as they call the contestants. It's a role in which Billy's background as a one-time assistant youth pastor serves him well. It's also one of the first opportunities he and Julie have had to team up in ministry since their first child came along; ordinarily, Billy is out on the NASCAR circuit

while Julie homeschools their four.

They were welcomed from the beginning by the "Idol" family after Hill introduced them.

"From the very first, everyone said, 'They're so nice!'" he recalls. "I don't know what they expected—someone with a huge beard and robes and a staff? I don't know! But they're just lovely."

Ministering in the Moment

The dress rehearsal continues below: Seacrest introduces the judges, and three stand-ins walk in, waving and smiling as though they are the real deal, and take their place at the judges' table. Shortly before the performances begin, the real Keith Urban arrives and relieves his stand-in of his duties.

Alex Preston, 20, leads off with a No Doubt song. Afterward, he hits his mark and awaits feedback.

"It was so windy outside, the press tent nearly blew over," says "Jennifer Lopez."

"It's going to be in the 70s today in Los Angeles, with a chance of rain," adds "Harry Connick, Jr." The real Keith Urban grins and says nothing.

The rehearsal continues. Billy stands up and catches the eye of 22-year-old contestant Dexter Roberts, seated on the blue couches to the right of the stage, where the performers watch the show. Roberts grins and gives him a thumbs-up: He's feeling confident at the moment.

"We don't often have long blocks of time to talk to people. It just doesn't exist in the workplace," Billy says. "So we grab little moments, a lot of nonverbal communication. We make eye contact, and sometimes that's as much as you get in that moment. Then later, we can text or talk a little more."

"But it changes all the time. One minute you're on a high, and the next you're thinking maybe you did something wrong, so you get down. That's hard on anyone, no matter how young or old you are. But when you're in an environment like this, a competition, it changes a lot more frequently."

Occasionally, though, there are breaks in the momentum long enough for more traditional ministry. Like two weeks earlier, when Billy was able to share about Psalm 23 before the performances began, at 22-year-old contestant Caleb Johnson's request.

"We just sat up there on the couches and went over it for about 20 minutes. I tied it into David being



LIGHT-HEARTED ATMOSPHERE: Executive producer David Hill, center, shares a laugh with "Idol" judges Keith Urban, left, Jennifer Lopez and Harry Connick, Jr., during a commercial break.

Reaching Out at the Racetrack



A QUIET MOMENT: Billy Mauldin, right, takes time to pray with NASCAR drivers Kevin Harvick and Tony Stewart before a race.

Motor Racing Outreach [MRO] may not be a household name where you live—but to NASCAR drivers and fans, it definitely is.

By the late 1980s, “a lot of the families had come to a point where they really wanted a pastor out there with them,” says CEO Billy Mauldin of the racing community. “They wanted to be able to have church—a Bible study, if nothing else.”

So MRO was established in 1988—and has since grown from ministering to drivers to pit crew members to fans. “All the same types of events and opportunities you would have at a local church, we do—but in a mobile fashion,” says Mauldin.

The group also has a longstanding partnership with Focus on the Family: President Jim

Daly is a board member. MRO has often distributed material created by Focus—such as children’s magazines—at the track, and uses the family organization’s national network of Christian counselors in its outreach efforts.

“We’ve worked with Focus on the Wait No More adoption initiative, promoted Plugged In,” notes Mauldin. “We’re currently involved in developing materials for single fathers who are primary caregivers to their children. That’s an emerging issue for our country.”

In the meantime, Mauldin’s book *The Race: Living Life on the Track*—cowritten with Kyle Froman and NASCAR Hall of Fame driver Darrell Waltrip—was released on May 15. [Find it at <http://tinyurl.com/knfrdez>.]

“The purpose of the book is to encourage people that no matter where they are and what they do in life, they can have an impact in ministry,” Mauldin says. “Whether you’re a plumber or a nurse or a firefighter, in your workplace, you can touch lives. It combines philosophical and impactful ideas to encourage the reader to see their opportunity in a new light.”

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a songwriter,” he says. “The time in which David wrote Psalm 23 was a tough time! But he went back to the core of who he was to write that. When things get difficult, you go back into the heart of who you are to re-find your footing and your faith. So we just started with that.”

“We were careful, though,” Julie says. “We didn’t assume they would all love that. So quietly, we went around the room before and said, ‘This is what we’re thinking of doing, and Billy won’t make it weird. Are you OK with that?’ I just want to be mindful that we’re dealing with a lot of grace and integrity, and not assume or ramrod anything. But everyone—everyone—gathered up and listened in.”

What is far more common is what Julie calls “the

ministry of hanging out.” The first week, Billy established trust with the kids by finding their cell phones for them when they were somewhere else in the three-story building that houses the “Idol” set. On Valentine’s Day, they passed out cards to all the cast and crew, handmade by their children back in North Carolina. On elimination days, it’s easy to sense which contestants feel they are on the bubble—and Julie is often there beside them as they get their hair and makeup done, just stroking their arms and chatting.

“Billy has been like a father to me through this whole thing,” says C.J. Harris, 23, one of the top nine. “He’ll walk me to lunch or dinner, talk to me on the phone for an hour—do anything possible to make your day better, pray for you. He’ll send me a text message and

say he's praying for me, hopes everything is going good, he's got me on his heart. I've never met anyone like him."

"They've really helped me a lot," agrees Jessica Meuse, also 23. "I have a relationship, and it's hard to maintain one when you're so far away. I've gone to them several times. There are really no words to describe how genuine and sincere they are. I definitely want to keep them in my life, even post-'Idol.' They're nondenominational, and they don't judge, at all. I feel like I've known them a lot longer than I actually have."

"I think the world needs a lot more people like them."

Going Home

It's Thursday—elimination day—and the tension on set is palpable. Billy and Julie are in the red room upstairs, where the hair and makeup gets done and the contestants try (and sometimes fail) to relax before the precipitous half-hour taping in which they will learn their fates.

Billy is prepared for another short chapel service—this one based on the Rolling Stones' 1968 album *Beggars Banquet*, which begins with the song "Sympathy for the Devil" but later includes "Prodigal Son." He's not sure if there will be time to discuss it as a group, but knows he can hit the main points in individual conversations if need be. Julie is flitting, as usual—getting water for the girls, receiving tweeting lessons, passing out little blank notebooks handmade by her 8-year-old daughter back home.

"I think we need a lot more people like them."

*Jessica Meuse,
contestant*

"When you're not in control, you can trust that if the moment doesn't happen, it's OK," she says. "It's so hard to lay down our agendas sometimes. Especially as women, we always feel like it's all on us. But when we allow our faith to work through love, people just come to you. It's just the Holy Spirit. The rest of the details are between them and the Lord, so we just do our thing and let Him do His."

Majesty Rose, a 22-year-old from the Raleigh area of North Carolina, has been having a hard day. Though the judges gave her good feedback on her overall performance the night before, they also mentioned some pitch problems.

Her instincts turn out to be accurate: She is in the bottom three, and then sings for her life. One of the judges fails to be moved by her rendition of Pharrell Williams' hit song "Happy"—and without unanimity among the three, they cannot use the one judges' save of the season to keep her on the show.

The next few hours are spent in interviews with the press. The Mauldins stick close by, texting other contestants and Rose's friends and family, keeping up the nonverbal communication with her as she makes the rounds. Finally, the cameras are packed away, and the lot around Stage 36 falls quiet.

A staff member gives Rose her itinerary, telling her when a car will be picking her up in the morning and what will be happening the next few days. Julie takes her by the arm and joins the staffers walking her back to the red room to collect her things.

Meanwhile, Billy takes a seat on a bench near the parking lot and reflects on the last few months.

"One of the most precious moments was the first week we were here," during a boot camp experience in Palos Verdes, he says. "There was a production assistant assigned to us, and we picked up that she was not at peace. In 10 or 15 minutes, we found out her brother had recently been killed in a motorcycle accident, and she was just hurting. We talked and prayed, and we've stayed close to her throughout the show. It's been good to see her life get back on track, as well as her family's."

Those 20 minutes spent talking about Psalm 23 a few weeks ago are paying off, too.

"I walked in the room tonight, and one of the contestants came over to me and said, 'I wasn't having the best night last night, so I called my mom and she said, "You need to read Psalm 23," ' " Billy says. " 'Then I called my grandpa, and he said, "You need to read Psalm 23." That was so cool!' And I just said, 'It shows you that God is consistent! He doesn't jerk around with you.' "

The door opens, and Rose arrives with Julie still on her arm. Billy asks her if she would like to pray one last time, and the three huddle up, arms around each other, as he asks a blessing on her journey and her life.

"Three hours," he tells her as they separate. "Three hours from Charlotte to Raleigh. That's how long it takes us to get to you."

Rose gets in the car that is waiting for her, and the hybrid purrs to life. As he does every Thursday night, Billy runs alongside it until it pulls away, waving through the driver's side window—just to let her know she is loved to the end, and beyond. ■