



# The unlikely impresario

The music manager behind *American Idol* is a master trend-spotter, writes **Matthew Garrahan**

## Man in the News

SIMON FULLER

The seventh series of the most successful programme on US television came to an end on Wednesday night when David Cook, a spiky-haired barman from Missouri, was crowned winner of *American Idol*.

In a two-hour finale packed with glitz, surprises and special guest stars – George Michael and Seal were among the performers – an emotional Mr Cook emerged victorious, to the delight of the 7,000 people at the Nokia Theatre in downtown Los Angeles. While Mr Cook basked in the adulation, the man who has masterminded the *American Idol* phenomenon sat quietly a few rows from the front of the stage, careful to avoid the limelight.

Simon Fuller, a softly spoken English music manager who shuns publicity, created *Pop Idol* in the UK before taking the show to the US where it became a television and music juggernaut. The programme has discovered the likes of Carrie Underwood, Chris Daughtry and Kelly Clarkson, turning them into chart-topping pop stars. It dominates US ratings and in its six years on air has helped News Corporation's Fox network trounce its rivals. Wednesday's finale was watched by more than 31m, with only the Super Bowl and the Oscars attracting more viewers.

In an era in which hundreds of new channels have fragmented audiences, *Idol* is a rare commodity: must-see "water-cooler" television that families watch together. At the start of Wednesday's show Ryan Seacrest, the host, said final performances had attracted 97.5m telephone votes in 24 hours – a record for

the programme and more than the combined populations of Canada, Ireland, Spain and Australia.

The show has catapulted Mr Fuller to the top of the entertainment industry, helping him gain a net worth of more than £450m (\$891m, €565m). However, he was a significant force in the music industry well before *Idol*. A renowned music manager, he has a knack for spotting talent and scored his first number one hit in the UK in 1985 with Paul Hardcastle's "19", eventually naming his company after the song. He represented Annie Lennox when she decided to pursue a solo career. But his biggest moment came in 1995, when he launched the Spice Girls, propelling its five members to global stardom. It was an unusual time to launch an all-female pop act. "At the time music in the US was all about the grunge scene," says Jeff Frasco, a talent agent with Creative Artists Agency, who has represented Mr Fuller for 20 years. "He told me pop was going to come back and he was right."

Friends say he has an uncanny ability to spot trends. Peter Chernin, News Corp's president and chief operating officer, says he is "an unstoppable one-man show... who is always one innovation ahead of the curve".

His success led *Billboard*, the US music magazine, to name him the most successful British music manager in history, ahead of the Beatles' Brian Epstein. His artists have scored 500 number one singles globally, released more than 240 number one albums and sold 116m records in the US.

He is also a growing presence in sport, having masterminded David Beckham's move from Real Madrid to the Los Angeles Galaxy, hoping to use his appeal to trigger the growth of US soc-

cer. He knows Beckham through his pop-star wife, Victoria – better known as Posh Spice. He spent Wednesday afternoon with the couple at his 12-bedroom villa in Hollywood, where they watched Manchester United beat Chelsea in the final of the Champions League. Like Beckham, he is a fan of Manchester United.

Luxurious hotels in Hollywood are a far cry from Mr Fuller's childhood. He was born in 1960 in the seaside town of Hastings, southern England. The family travelled because of his father's job as a teacher, so he spent part of his childhood in Ghana and Germany. When he returned to England he had hopes of forming a band, but realised his skills lay elsewhere. Rather than go to university, in the late 1970s he got a job promoting concerts in Hastings, booking acts such as The Clash. Later he worked as a talent scout for the Chrysalis label.

Reflective and quiet, he makes an unlikely impresario. He displays little of the classic, pushy music promoter and has made few enemies. His face gives him a boyish look, enhanced by his dark, spiky hair. He has a loyal staff, dominated by women, who he once said were "harder-working and more loyal". In spite of his success, he continues to work long hours and says he is driven more by finding the right songs for his singers than by money.

While he may display little of a pop-star persona, he loves the pop-star lifestyle. He has a fondness for luxury cars, such as a hand-built, \$500,000 Mercedes Maybach sedan, and owns several corporate jets. Last year he paid \$19.4m for two ninth-floor condominiums in Manhattan. He gives visitors to his French house bottles of 19, his own brand of olive oil, made on the estate.

Yet he has not just been swept

up in industry glamour. Last year he helped set up *Idol Gives Back*, a two-night special event to raise money for charities in Africa and the US, something that was uncommon in the US. The event raised more than \$70m. A follow-up this year raised a similar amount.

Mr Fuller's career has hit some obstacles. At the peak of the Spice Girls' success in 1997, Mr Fuller was fired as their manager. The group never hit the same heights. When they reformed recently, he was brought back into the fold, helping to plan a sell-out tour.

He has also had an uneasy relationship with Simon Cowell, the charismatic and acid-tongued judge on *American Idol*, who is arguably its biggest draw. When Mr Cowell launched *The X Factor* on British television, a singing contest with a slightly different format to *Idol*, Mr Fuller claimed the idea was copied. The dispute ended in the courts but at the eleventh hour a settlement was agreed. The two men have patched things up: at a recent party at Rupert Murdoch's house in Beverly Hills, they were seen huddled in conversation.

There have been other challenges. After selling his company, 19 Entertainment, to CKX, a US entertainment group, for £100m in 2005, Mr Fuller last year launched a \$1.3bn bid to buy it back with some of CKX's other assets. Yet the agreement was forged just before the credit crunch. It is still pending as financing options are explored.

In the meantime, Mr Fuller is, at 47, finally getting married this month to his long-term girlfriend, Natalie Swanston, an interior designer, in a three-day ceremony. Plotting Mr Cook's pop career, then, will need to wait until after the honeymoon.