

First Time

AN 'IDOL,' UP CLOSE

Clay Aiken is the star of teen's first concert

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This is the ninth in a year-long series offering a look at various "firsts" for people around the region.

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Sarah Hansen's bedroom is like a shrine to her favorite men: Clay Aiken and Batman.

Pegged to a corkboard behind the door, next to assorted buttons and a purple Quiz Bowl ribbon, are some posters and pictures of Clay, a couple of which include Sarah.

See, there's Clay and Sarah sitting on the bronze turtle statues at the zoo. And there's the two of them together for a Christmas-time portrait. A little photo manipulation never hurt anyone, did it?

"It's not so much liking Clay as being a little obsessive," the 15-year-old high school sophomore said.

Tall and thin, her hair in a ponytail curled like she was ready for prom, Sarah gave this tour as she prepared to leave for her very first concert — Clay Aiken's recent Jukebox Tour performance at the Toledo Zoo.

As a member of Clay Nation, she dressed the part. Little Clay faces stared out from buttons along the neckline of her white T-shirt. Another Clay face hung from each of her earrings. Clay crooned on the front of her homemade shirt and grinned on the back in more photos.

Sarah, a student at Notre Dame Academy, has been a fan of Clay since she saw him on the Fox television show *American Idol* in 2003. He actually finished second to Ruben Studdard, but that matters little to Sarah and his legions of fans, who bought more than 2 million copies of his debut disc, "Measure of a Man."

Admittedly, not everyone agrees with Sarah that Clay is a perfect 10 on the "hotness" scale. (But they're wrong: "10. There's no question," she said.)

"Ever since the seventh grade, my friends all laughed," Sarah said. "They liked Clay too over Ruben, but they still didn't think he was handsome, for some reason. I don't know. I don't understand them."

The concert started at 8 p.m., so Sarah wanted to leave a little after 7. Her father, Rick, drove her and a friend from school, Emily Gedert, 14, to the zoo. On the way, dad went over the rules while they sat in the back and fiddled with Emily's iPod and its 374 songs: Call me when you sit down, at intermission, and as you get up from your seat when the concert ends.

As he pulled up to the zoo's Broadway entrance, Rick, whose first concert came years ago during the rockin' jams at the Toledo Speedway, surveyed the crowd.

"They're wild."

Um, yeah. No worries about confusing this with an AC/DC show. In fact, it was probably closer to years ago when Sarah's mom saw Barry Manilow for her first concert: lines of teeny boppers dressed in bubblegum pink, soccer moms holding red and white "Clay" pennants, blue-haired grandmothers. And maybe four guys.

Many wore T-shirts announcing their devotion to the messy-haired singer: "Aiken for Clay," "Claymates," or, for



Sporting a big 'Clay Aiken' bracelet she bought for the concert, Sarah Hansen, 15, takes a photo of the singer. (JETTA FRASER/THE BLADE)

the more straightforward, "I love Clay."

One of the first orders of business was for Sarah to buy a shirt (\$35) and a blue rubber Clay Aiken bracelet (\$5). Emily, who had been to two concerts previously ('N Sync and 3 Doors Down), got some chocolate ice cream and promptly spilled some on her light blue shirt.

"Oh, I got it on myself!" she said. "That is so not cool."

A half hour has passed by the time Sarah remembered something.

"Shoot, I was supposed to call my dad." She picked up her cell phone (ringtone: "Invisible" by you-know-who) and dialed home. Within minutes, the show began with Clay's version of "Twisting the Night Away," and Sarah needed to put up her homemade sign: "Doin' the ZOO with CLAY AIKEN!"

The girls sat perched on the edge of their seats, looking blissfully happy. While Clay donned a black leather jacket on stage and danced with some women in poodle skirts, those in the front part of the audience stood and swayed; those back with Sarah and Emily (section G, row S, seats 1 and 2) were content to sit and smile.

"I guess I'm not really a screaming type of person," Sarah said later. "I'd rather listen to him. That's what I paid my money for." And pay she did; tickets in her section went for \$47.50.

As Clay performed medleys of songs from the '50s to today, Sarah took out her digital camera from time to time, trying to freeze a moment of greatness. When the singer waded into the crowd to pluck someone to dance in the show, she popped up in excitement.

"I was really hoping that he would pick somebody by me so I could get a better picture," she said.

Behind Sarah, an old man sat still, stodgy, arms-crossed. A few people closer to the stage had lighters that they flicked on in salutation, but others just waved their glowing cell phones.

Clay did it all over 2½ hours and countless costume changes: "Bridge Over Troubled Water," a gospel-ly version of Prince's "When Doves Cry," an Elvis medley, and — to the ecstasy of both girls — Ricky Martin's "Livin' La Vida Loca."

Both girls, who picked up snacks at intermission, liked the idea of Clay working his way through the decades and always seemed to know a couple of songs from each time period. Clay sang a few songs from his upcoming CD too, then boomed above all the squealing women to announce that he had one more performance in the state coming up in Cleveland. Somewhere a few rows ahead, a row of girls exploded in screams.

"That's our field trip! We'll be in Cleveland anyway!"

More screams.

Even if they weren't screaming, that's how Sarah and Emily felt when it was finally over — after Clay closed with "Invisible." Both finished the concert by standing and singing along. Sarah took some last pictures of her first concert scene.

Then it was time to go. But Sarah kept looking to the stage, kept smiling.

"Oh, I should call my parents," she said. Flip-flip went the cell phones one more time. Turned out dad was already in the car with the rest of the family wait-ing to pick them up.

"It was so good!" the girls said as they met up with the car.

Later, Emily pronounced the show a complete success. "I really liked the whole thing," she said.

And Sarah, well, she was still in nirvana hours after the show.

"I especially liked when he held his high and long notes, and it reminded me how much I like him," Sarah said. "It was sooo good!"

So good that the adrenaline was still pumping through her body into the wee hours of the morning.

"I stayed up until 3 o'clock last night. I couldn't get to sleep," Sarah said the next day. "I don't know if it was because I was so excited or because of the popcorn I ate."

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