

## Encore

**IDOL CHATTER** Former *American Idol* star Diana DeGarmo has a new sound—and a new look to go with it. **By Chandra R. Thomas**

"DON'T I KNOW YOU FROM somewhere?" the server asks as she leads us to our table at a posh Buckhead eatery. "You look so familiar," she presses, staring at my svelte redheaded companion.

Diana DeGarmo gets that a lot—especially since shedding excess pounds, cutting and coloring her hair, and . . . well, growing up. Even wearing youthful fuchsia pumps, a flowy turquoise skirt, and a sparkly tank top, the Snellville sweetheart, now 20, doesn't look much like the 16-year-old America fell in love with during Season 3 of *American Idol*.

"I dropped three sizes and got muscular," says DeGarmo, who revamped her diet (less dairy and sugar, more fruits, veggies, lean protein, and smoothies), worked out with a trainer three times a week, and picked up healthy hobbies such as Bikram hot yoga. "Now I'm proud to wear a bikini. It's been a total revision of my image."

Although she has fond memories of her days on *Idol*—where she finished a close second to a certain competitor named after a Disney film—she admits that just watching the show elicits a Pavlovian response. "Even when I TiVo it, I have to fast-forward through the music they play at the top of the show," she says. "Just hearing



it makes my stomach turn. It makes me feel like I'm on the show all over again."

DeGarmo keeps in touch with many of her fellow contestants but acknowledges, with a mixture of indifference and disappointment, that she and Fantasia "don't really talk." "We ran into each

other at a party last year and I said hello," she says, "but I wouldn't say we've kept up with each other much."

Since wrapping up the *Idol* concert tour with the other top 10 finalists and finishing her classes at Shiloh High, DeGarmo has continued to pursue her passion for performing. She moved to New York to take on the role of Penny Pingleton in the Broadway musical *Hairspray* and somehow managed, at the same time, to churn out her debut album, *Blue Skies*, and pick up the title role in the national tour of urban fairy-tale musical *BKLYN*.

Heading to the Big Apple at such a young age caused plenty of culture shock for the Georgia peach, but performing before a live audience eight times a week made the adjustment worthwhile. "I was kind of afraid of my own shadow for a while," she says. "It was really cold, and I walked everywhere—my rain boots were my best investment—but it was so exciting. I loved being up on that stage!"

She spent most of last summer in Atlanta, making public appearances, looking for an intown home of her own, and recording her sophomore effort, due out this month. "I call it rop," she says. "It's R&B with a little pop on top." ★

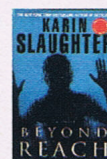
### CRITIC'S CHOICE

## THIS MONTH'S PICKS...



*The Political Brain*  
(PublicAffairs Books)

Drew Westen, professor of psychology and psychiatry at Emory, explains emotion's role in deciding the fate of the nation. With examples from political debates, speeches, and ads, he reveals what Republican strategists know that Democrats don't, and what happens when reason and emotion collide.



*Beyond Reach*  
(Bantam Dell)

With more than 12 million copies in print, bestselling Atlanta author Karin Slaughter has been praised for being "one of the best crime novelists in America." Her latest novel, available August 14, continues the series set in Grant County, where police chief Jeffery Tolliver's partner has been arrested for murder.



*Not in My Family: AIDS in the African American Community*  
(Agate)

In this anthology, edited by Gil L. Robertson IV, African Americans reveal how AIDS has touched their lives. Contributors include Jesse Jackson Jr., Patti LaBelle, Al Sharpton, and many others.