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Michael Giltz

Award-winning freelance writer

Posted February 13, 2008 | 11:12 AM (EST)

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American Idol Hollywood: Day One



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A very tight and engaging episode of *Idol*, with their usual economy in telling stories, setting up audition dramas and those *A Chorus Line*-like moments when a group of hopefuls is on stage and some are told to step forward and we find out which ones are going home and which ones are still alive. So many people are seen in glimpses that it's impossible to cover them all. So here's a look at some of the contestants who popped out and look really strong for the final 12, as well as a few puzzles. Everyone who made it through will be culled tonight down to a final 24.

Brooke White -- The first person up, Brooke sat at a keyboard and belted out a Carole King song, "Beautiful." Frankly, she was terrific and went through to the final day but I think the music covered up a few rough patches vocally. She still seems too tentative to go far but should at least make it to next week.

David Hernandez -- began the Stephen Stills tune "Love The One You're With" in a nicely slowed down manner before picking up speed. Sounded very impressive but -- darn you, Mariah Carey -- he seems incapable of singing an entire line of the song without throwing in some "run" or variation on the melody. That could be a problem down the road.

Amanda Overmyer -- the rock chick with the white streaks. The first of many contestants to have major drama to offer up for viewers, in her case a serious car accident. Broken ribs? Bah. Amanda -- looking as confident as ever -- belted out "Light My Fire" by The Doors. Very, very strong (final 12 for sure) but Simon was right when he said Amanda doesn't show a lot of variety. That's fine as a performer, of course. You don't go to see Janis Joplin in concert and expect to hear a Celine Dion ballad. But on the show, when contestants have to tackle different genres every week, versatility is crucial. But Amanda has more tricks up her rock chick sleeve.

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Galeb Emachah -- the Latin lover. Galeb should never have been put through to Hollywood -- he can't sing at all. At all. This just proved it as he warbled the Bryan Adams song "Everything I Do (I Do It For You."

"**Light My Fire**"/"**Everything I Do (I Do It For You)**"/"**Sway**" -- 164 contestants. 200 songs to choose from at this stage. And yet 40% of them seemed to choose the Bryan Adams song, 25% the Doors and the rest the standard "Sway." Urgh. Think how happy the judges will be to not hear the same song again and again. Be smart.

Josiah Leming -- the 18 year old kid living in his car. Has his family contacted him yet? Or are we saving that footage for the next round. Josiah is very appealing (if weepy). If he gets to the final 12, he'll get through a number of rounds just because people won't want to see him cry. He's also talented despite that hilarious British accent he affects. I had my doubts but his first performance of Mika's "Grace Kelly" was very good. I thought it was a bad choice because of all the falsetto. But he was great, which made his later meltdown on "Stand By Me" so confusing. He hardly seems capable of being "difficult" and was always hyper-polite but Josiah for some reason couldn't work with the band to get an arrangement of the song. The vocal coach told him what he refused to do but I didn't quite follow anything other than the idea that he didn't know how to work with the band or was just too freaked out and tired to do it properly. They clearly gave him every chance but he then smartly thanked the band and asked them to leave the stage. hey, if you don't like the arrangement, why keep the band? A pity he did such a terrible job on the song. BUt since personality matters more than the judges would like to admit when it comes to picking the final 12, they all said he was terrible but would make it through to the final 24 anyway. Huh? Other contestants must have been thinking, damn, I should have lived in my car.

Danny Noriega -- one of many contestants we met before but barely got a glimpse of in Hollywood. It's always hard to tell if the producers decided these people won't make it or just go through smoothly and therefore don't offer any drama. Presumably a drama major himself, Danny sounded good in the brief moment we saw him.

Blue lollipops -- was someone handing out treats backstage? There was an outbreak of blue tongues during some of the auditions, so clearly something was being passed around.

Kyle Ensley -- the geeky guy playing the Clay Aiken card. No idea why he got to Hollywood (though he seems like an amiable guy). He's dreadful the first time and then sings Josh Groban the second time and to me sounded like the male equivalent of a beauty contestant (gets through the song and hits some notes). But the judges were impressed? I don't get it. If he makes it through the final 12, it will have nothing to do with his singing. Sorry, Kyle.

Angela Martin -- the single mom with the ill daughter, we find out her father hasn't just died but been killed. In season one, wasn't it Justin Guarini whose mom went into the hospital and they kept it a secret because he didn't want it to influence voters? Oh, how the producers have changed their tune.

David Archuleta -- the 16-year-old *Tiger Beat* cover boy of the future (and by future I mean three months from now). Totally adorable in an aw shucks way. How can you not like someone who talks about "that tingly feeling" he gets when an audition goes well.. All the judges want to adopt him and so will all of America. He sang "Heaven" by Bryan Adams, which I thought would be too old and slow for him but he sang it confidently. Desperately looking for something to critique, I would point out his awkwardness not on stage but with his hands, which he kept using in a goofy theatrical manner. Still, at the moment he looks a lock for the finale. (Silly to say that at this stage, of course, but boy he looks good. Only possible weakness: the different genres and new songs he will presumably have never heard.)

Syesha Mercado -- very cute contestant who struggled all week with a hoarse voice. She nailed Aretha's "Chain Of Fools" to say the least and also looks like a lock for the final 12. A very, very strong contestant.

Michael Johns -- the raspy voiced dude who sang "Bohemian Rhapsody," which was another terrible idea (I thought) until he delivered a really confident rendition. That's three contestants in a row that are not just locks for the final 12 but look like serious contenders for the final prize.

Every year, Ryan Seacrest breathlessly tells us that "the talent is stronger than ever." (I'd like to see the season where he says, "the talent is a little weak this year." But those three are set up for a

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Carly Smithson -- she's the girl with the visa problems who couldn't go to Hollywood the last time she got through. It's annoying that viewers haven't been told the whole story, that Carly actually got a record deal with a major label that poured millions into recording her debut CD and making videos only to see it flop. I'm all for backup singers and people like Taylor Hicks who self-released CDs and even giving someone like this a second shot. Certainly no label would jump at an act that already had their big break and failed to capitalize. But we should know what the deal is. Having said that, I also thought her song by Heart was a bit sharp all the way through. It was the sort of performance where you can never relax and enjoy it because you're worried they won't make it. But the judges loved her.

Asia'h Eperson -- she of the annoying name and even more annoying hairstyle with some sort of bun on top. Please get a makeover. But she sounds pretty good.

Brooke Helvie -- the show ended with Josiah in tears again saying he wasn't over-confident. But I'll end with fellow University of Florida student Brooke, the beauty contestant who wanted to prove to Simon that not all pageant performers were bad. She had a very weak performance and seemed set to go home. But Randy said no and Simon jumped in and said yes. Clearly he wanted to force Paula to say no since Brooke didn't cut it at all and Simon had grown tired of Paula hemming and hawing (to the point of walking out during the last contestant on an earlier day). Paula was on the fence and then Brooke annoyingly kept talking. Could she sing a little passage she messed up? No, they said. She sang it anyway. And then she kept on talking and talking til finally even Paula said "no," and go home. If Brooke had kept her mouth shut, she might at least have made it to the final 24, though the final 12 was out of the question.

More culling tomorrow night. Have you placed your bets on a favorite yet?

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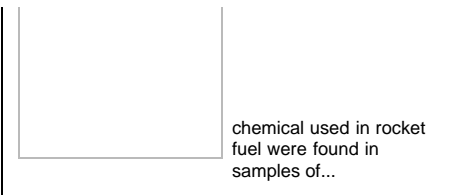


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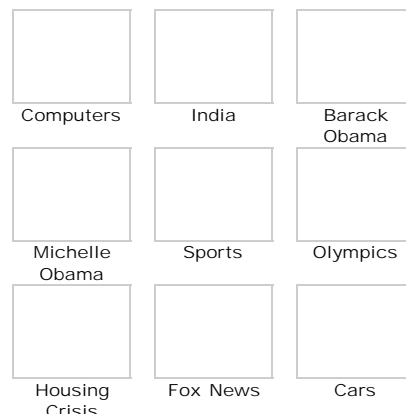
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David Archuleta will win!

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If I was gonna place a bet today, I'd put my money on him too. The UK version of Idol (The X Factor) has had a number of teens who fit the image we sort of expected Idol to celebrate all along - wholesome teeny boppers that girls swoon over -- and they've done really well. Top 5? I'd bet major money on that. But a few possible weak points include his awkward hand gestures and the fact that he's 16. That doesn't keep him from being poised (he sure is) but simply not knowing most of the songs he'll have to choose from can be a huge hurdle. Songs that even people in their 20s know well because they've had some years to hear a lot of pop music are just mysterious titles to him and learning a new song in a day or two is really really hard. Maybe he has a gift for that, but it is a potential weak point. Hey he seems like a winner the way Carrie Underwood always did so we have to come up with some hurdles for him to overcome.

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