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Michael Giltz

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American Idol Top 20: The Men

Posted February 27, 2008 | 05:16 AM (EST)

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Got home late so took a while before I could watch the show and several friends already had emailed or called about David Archuleta's performance. When they intro'd the guys, there was very little applause for anyone except for Danny Noriega and then by far the most for Archuleta. The producers will soon be looking to create a little tension to hide the fact that he may be a runaway front-runner a la Carrie Underwood (who apparently had a massive vote lead the entire season).

Michael Johns -- I'm a big tennis fan so glad to hear he plays. But Seventies night got off to a very slow start with the first five guys all being weak or unmemorable. And don't forget: going first is a huge disadvantage because the audience climbs during the show so millions fewer are watching you perform which means millions fewer to draw on in the voting. Johns did no favor for himself with the classic Fleetwood Mac tune "Go Your Own Way." I was surprised the judges didn't point out that it was in too high a key for him. He was really straining on the chorus and weak at the end. It didn't help that the sound was weird (did he keep the mike too far away?) and it sounded for a while like he was in another room. The tepid crowd both when he was introduced at the top of the show and after his song sure doesn't bode well either. Looks good in jeans, though, but that's nothing special this season.

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Jason Castro -- he played the acoustic guitar again, strumming along to Andy Gibbs' "I Just Want To Be Your Everything." As I've said before and the judges pointed out, his performance is engaging but his vocals aren't terribly strong, especially on the chorus.

But he made great use of the backup singers, which

made him sound a lot better. Simon criticized him for picking a schmaltzy song? Sunny and schmaltzy is where he lives. Paula told him to drop the guitar next week? She's crazy. The guitar is what makes him stand out. If he just depends on his vocals, he'll look a lot more vulnerable.

Luke Menard -- talked about his a capella group. Now was that so hard, *Idol*? Especially since we learned what a basically non-commercial sort of venture it was. (A capella singing groups aren't exactly a ticket to pop stardom.) He unwisely tackled Queen's "Killer Queen," an extremely difficult

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song to sing that's half in falsetto, at least. Technically, his vocals were ok, but as Simon said they lacked the spark of originality that Freddie Mercury brought to it. Luke had a weak ending with a weird gyrating body motion. And the excerpt at the end of the show made his performance sound really odd, since the few lines we heard were out of context. Just a bad, bad choice of song.

Robbie Carrico -- a drag racer, which is fun. But he struck the wrong note in his pre-song interview by saying to Simon: "Get used to it" about his being a rocker. It's a lot trickier taking on Simon than people think. If Simon is being mean, they'll naturally sympathize. But usually Simon is just critiquing (and accurately), so you can't win. There's a difference between standing up for yourself and lashing out at Simon and most people just do the latter and seem arrogant by defying Simon when most of the viewers think he's right. That said, Robbie did a fine version of Foreigner's "Hot Blooded" which I thought was a big improvement. Solid vocals, but not individual -- more of a good copy of the original. The only thing worse than being awful is being forgettable.

Danny Noriega -- all the teenage girls want to date David Archuleta but they want Danny for their BFF. The only guy to get some serious noise from the crowd other than David. He did "Superstar" by the Carpenters (perfect for his haircut) and frankly I thought it was very weak, especially on the low notes. To me, he struggled. But the judges were very friendly and Danny was very personable in a snappy way during the chatting section and was funny when Simon asked if Danny now agreed with Simon that he was weak the previous show. "Ish" said Danny. Neither Randy or Paula actually said much of anything about his performance, which shows they didn't think much either. But between their kid gloves and Simon's nod that it was better than the week before, he should be fine. But it ain't because of his vocals this week. I have no idea what Paula is saying when she talks about his wonderful vibrato. By the way, even if Danny isn't gay, I'm sure he's been teased by other kids at school for being "different." It's nice to see he's comfortable being himself and not uptight about who he is, which is all that matters.

David Hernandez -- finally, a good performance! And from a gymnast no less, which is just one more reason to like him. Unlike the judges, I thought his vocals were really strong last week and I thought he was just terrific tonight. He's really coming on strong in my book. Except for being a bit theatrical in his facial expressions when he began, I thought he nailed the Temptations classic "Papa Was A Rollin' Stone" and the judges began to catch up to my opinion of him. Gritty and confident without overdoing the soul brother act. He looked good with the hoodie and worked up a big *Idol* finale that was very smart, even if he did waver a bit on the final note. (His only weak moment.) Clearly he knows what it takes to win. Also managed to look sweetly modest and pleased by the praise. This guy is seriously gunning for runner-up. (Come on, we know who the front runner is.)

Jason Yeager -- a vast improvement over last week's "Moon River," with Jason unbuttoning his shirt, putting on a charm necklace and singing the Doobie Brothers tune "Without You." Not a challenging song vocally, but after his near total disaster last week he was smart to choose something relatively easy. Still very cruise ship-ready with his hand gestures and vocal riffs and a very goofy ending where he struck his arms out to the side and bowed his head in a grand gesture a la George Michael or someone that would have worked really well if he were in a stadium and just delivered a tremendous vocal. The judges all criticized him and the crowd didn't seem too upset by that. However, he did tear up a bit as the criticism mounted, which might counteract some ill-chosen words like "We're all killer singers," which compliments everyone but still has him unblushingly referring to himself as a killer singer with terrific range. The judges really do affect voting and with all three being hard on him, Jason is very vulnerable. If his sensitivity and the grandma vote and the fact that he was much better than last week can rescue him, it'll be a close call.

Chikezie -- another very good performance, with Chikezie nailing Donny Hathaway's "I Believe To My Soul." Actually, I thought he should have been a little more dressed up for such a classy song but given the grief he got for his suit he was probably a little clothes shy this week. Very strong.

David Cook -- came out with an electric guitar and vamped through Free's "All Right Now." Ran out of breath as he tried to prime the crowd, but playing an instrument can really hide a lot of vocal flaws. Also had a strong ending. Randy annointed him the real rocker, thus dissing Robbie by comparison and Paula praised him too. Simon said he was much improved but pointed out he lacked charisma and urged him to hide the fact that he is smart -- ok, to be fair Simon said touting the fact that you love crosswords is not exactly a crowd pleaser. His attempt to talk back to Simon

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also fell flat. Ryan tried to say David meant no disrespect to Simon but of course that's exactly what he meant when he delivered the old standby about having to win over the crowd at this stage, not Simon. But being right doesn't do you any favors.

David Archuleta -- makes a terrible song choice of John Lennon's "Imagine." Why is it a terrible song choice? Because while it SEEMS like a standard, it's actually very sappy and awful in almost anyone's hands other than Lennon himself. Because of who he was, Lennon can sing the lyrics and get away with it. Almost anyone else just sounds stupid or banal doing it. So the last thing I wanted to hear was a 17 year old kid sing it. If it wasn't cringe-inducing, it would be a miracle. Well, cue a miracle. And the producers knew it, giving him the star treatment. Just watch how they worked the camera for his song as compared to everyone else. They gave him a dramatic black backdrop at the beginning and moody lighting and the camera stayed on him (at most going to a medium shot) virtually the entire song. For everyone else, they often went far away or focused on the band for brief moments. For David, they stayed right on him, adding in slow fades from one angle to another and generally giving him the deluze buildup. And why not? He delivered an extremely mature, even soulful rendition that jumped right to the third verse, added in some minimal flourishes (but far from Mariah Carey territory) and was generally faithful without being copycat. He also ended on a smooth, controlled note, rather than trying for a big finish. I even saw a little gospel singer-like fluttering of the hand during a medium shot when he began to dig deep. The obvious comparison is Fantasia with "Summertime," where you felt the competition was over. The best thing David could say was to joke, "Well, I've officially peaked too soon." (That's my line, not his.) In fact, as the judges gushed and basically anointed him the presumptive winner, David managed the very tricky feat of listening to intense praise modestly and politely without seeming either pleased as punch for himself or falsely modest. The kicker was the video intro where we found out he attended the season one finale (hey David, I was there too!) and bumped into a group from the Top 10 in the lobby of the hotel and somehow convinced them to stand around while he belted out "(And I Am Telling You) I'm Not Going" from *Dreamgirls*, wowing them all and compelling Kelly Clarkson to ask him his name. In other words, he was anointed at the age of 11 by the very first *American Idol* and is destined to win it here. Simon pithily said he was the front runner and that there were 19 miserable other contestants. Darn right. But they know a lot more than one person can build a career out of each season, so David Hernandez and Chikezie and the women still have a lot to fight for. Of course, he could stumble or suddenly reveal himself to be a heartless bastard instead of a sweet kid with a great voice and oodles of charm, but I wouldn't hold my breath if I were the others.

Two more guys to go and -- again -- so many of them eventually will have to go that it's easier to say who should be absolutely safe. I imagine David Hernandez, Chikezie, David Cook (maybe) and definitely David Archuleta are safe. All the others are vulnerable. The two weakest performances to me were Michael Johns and Danny Noriega. But Danny had a great post-song chat and the girls squealed for him, so I think he's safe. And you can't overlook the judges piling on Jason Yeager. I'll go for Michael Johns and Robbie Carrico getting the boot. Luke Menard's performance was worse but Robbie Carrico's performance fades a little bit every time I try to think about it. Or rather, out of there. Meanwhile, *Tiger Beat* is preparing its first David Archuleta pull-out poster even as we speak.

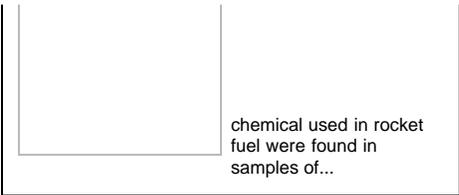
So which two guys do you think will go home on Thursday?

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Two words. David Archuleta. Not only did I tear up along with my friend...but we found ourselves standing and clapping at the end of his performance. The words and song choice were so perfect for this tumultous time in America. Why, I'm going to watch it one more time.

I have not heard such a performance in a loooooong time, and I cannot wait to buy his album when it comes out. His voice is magical.....his delivery equally amazing.

It is almost unimaginable....that a young man of 17, can speak to so many of us through his voice.... and this is what truly makes him an idol.

You're it David. You're it.

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Charity See Profile I'm a Fan of Charity permalink

i'm 60. i was around from the beatles get-go (saw them at the gator bowl on their first america tour). i'm no pushover. but i will say this: while lennon's own rendition of "imagine" will always be the edgier, which was his intent, david archuleta's version (the camera work did help...) brought tears to my eyes. and that was unexpected on my part.

the kid was born to sing. i'm surprised simon hasn't asked him what he asked carrie underwood - why hasn't a recording company snapped you up?

archuleta will now and forever be a successful singer. he doesn't need idol - and really, never overestimate the power of the popular vote; clay aiken didn't win idol when he was obviously the more talented - but at 17, it is arguably the right place for david to be at this time.

what makes it fun is to see how he takes on the different genres and which songs he chooses.

who knows, there might be a genre he can't sing, though i have a phone book here that says different. david, just start with the A's and work your way through to Z while i sit back and enjoy.....

good column, michael.

=====

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oh, forgot to add who I thought should get the boot, definitely Jason Y (I felt really sorry for him after getting hammered by the judges but his performance was painful to watch) and Luke M.

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great recap of the guys. Yeah, this week was much better than last week. Some of the guys killed. My picks:

1. David H- great choice of song, he had command of the song and stage and he was humble in taking the praise from the judges, love that
2. Chikezie- much better this week, real strong, confident performance
3. David C- good choice of song for his rocker sensibilities, should be safe for the week, but no sure about the back talk to Simon.
4. David A- pretty much blew me away with his interpretation of this song, I was shocked how good it was, but I have the feeling he's done this song a thousand times already so it sounded so polished

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Yes, despite a deeply unpopular war and theme shows devoted to the protest heavy Sixties and Seventies, I don't think we saw even a single auditioner tackle even "Blowin' in the Wind." So Archuleta gets points for being "political" even though Lennon's radical song has been denuded of danger by being so widely accepted.

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🗨 spinstahbabe See Profile I'm a Fan of spinstahbabe permalink

I couldn't help wondering if Archuleta is an Obamaniac. The verse he chose is certainly apropos and it's the first "political" song anyone has chosen. Embarrassed to admit that a 17 year old kid's rendition of the classic actually gave me chills. Go David!

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