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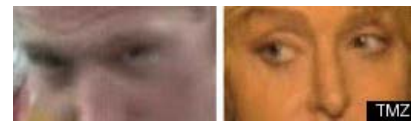
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Michael Giltz
Posted February 20, 2008 | 01:02 AM (EST)

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American Idol Top 24: The Men



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A strong start for the Top 24. And by strong I mean finding three or four men that look rock solid. Three or four really good guys and three or four really good girls will mean a strong Top 12. And even though we've winnowed it down from more than 100,000 auditions, it's still amazing how some really weak singers can make it past this stage.

The judges had an off night -- too much bantering amongst them makes it feel like the show is about them instead of the singers. And to

a person, they all spoke nonsense about how singers needed to make the songs -- it was Sixties night -- sound "current." Do they mean adding beat box elements a la Blake Lewis or a hip-hop arrangement. Paula even cautioned them from singing ballads and insisting you should always speed up a ballad at some point so you don't sound stodgy. Ballads are passe? They're all wrong. You don't have to radically re-arrange a song or start slow and speed up a ballad. You just have to sing it well.

David Hernandez -- He sang "Midnight Hour" and in time-honored tradition, he started it slow and then speeded it up a bit to its standard mid-tempo arrangement. Hernandez did the same thing to great effect with the Stephen Stills classic "Love The One You're With." I thought his vocals were terrific, despite a weak final flourish. Plus he came across as modest but not mousy. And he's got a LOT of room for improvement. David was rooted to the spot on stage and he wore a dreadful silk shirt with some sort of descended epaulettes feature. Best of all, he doesn't seem desperate. And again, his voice sounded great. A little better styling and hopefully a little more comfort on stage and he'll step it up. He's definitely got huge potential.

Chikezie -- yes, it's the beginning of the great makeover. At Hollywood and the Top 24 and Top 12, we always see people do some dramatic makeovers, including the slaughtering or wholesale changing of their name. Chikezie has gone with just one word and why not? It's a fun one. Chikezie had a fun red suit (though it didn't help when a Geiko ad at the commercial break showed backup

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singers in similar suits for comic effect). And he sang the Spiral Starecase song "More Today Than Yesterday" at a far too draggy tempo. He wasn't awful but I felt like I couldn't relax and enjoy his performance because I was so worried about how he'd do. Saved a bit by a big Idol flourish at the end. (You know, a big note held for a while.)

David Cook -- another big makeover, with Cook happily ditching the dreadful red streak in his hair and that rooster-like appearance on top. Good job! he sang "Happy Together" by the Turtles and again, they started it slow and then...speeded it up to the song's standard tempo. he was pretty good and moved around well and had a solid finale that overcame a weak high note. Cook's big problem for me was that when he tried to be sexy he just looked smug. Here's where the judges made no sense. Randy talked about how Cook really rocked the song out -- in fact, it except for the slightly slower intro, he performed it just like the Turtles. Why? Cause THEY rocked it out. This isn't some sweet pop song he roughed up; "Happy Together" is explosive at the chorus. Doesn't Randy know the song? Simon said it was a "weird" song to choose? Huh? It's a seriously rocking song and not a stretch at all for a would-be rocker. Again, don't they know what this song originally sounded like? OK, but he'll have to watch the smug thing.

Jason Yeager -- good to know Jason loves his son and dedicates this song to his late grandmother. I don't think there were any other sympathy cards to play but he could have used them since his version of "Moon River" was deadly dull. Doing some sort of Bobby Darin or Frank Sinatra revamp might have helped -- not because this would have made the song more contemporary or "new" or relevant, but simply because it might have made it easier to sing. Nothing exposes vocal weakness like a strong, simple melody with long lines like this one. Andy Williams can sing, dude. Jason Yeager, at least here, could not. After Paula said she did her first dance recital to this, Simon's line that he bought his first puppy to this song was for me the repartee highlight of the night.

Bobby Carrico -- the rocker who sang "One," made famous by Three Dog Night and written by the great Harry Nilsson. I thought it was a little uncomfortable though not disastrously so. Robbie couldn't really rock out on it because it's more of a pop song and the falsetto was tricky. Having the backup singers trilling away didn't help toughen it up. He seemed to be fighting the mellowness of it but had a good ending and a big note at the end can cover a lot of shaky work. And Simon's right: he does seem more like a Hollywood casting agent's idea of a rocker than an actual rocker. Overall, decent.

David Archuleta -- "I'm getting shaky just thinking about it," says Archuleta in taped intro. So is everyone else, kid. Already a serious front runner for the finale, Archuleta looked smooth and confident and YET also boyish and wholesome and excited to be there and all those other puppy dog, *Tiger Beat* qualities viewers will love. He sang "Shop Around" by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. (And by the way, is it too much to ask them to flash the name and original artist of these songs at least briefly?). And he did great. A little rough on the low notes though I don't think raising the key would have been a good idea. It's always dangerous when the show plays favorites and they did it here, spending oodles of time with Archuleta. One of the trickiest parts of the show is learning how to make the most of your camera time without saying the wrong thing or coming across wrong, which can happen in a million different ways. Archuleta just smiled and gee-whized his way through every moment, including Ryan's cringe-inducing joke that people could only vote for Archuleta, not adopt him. Terrific.

Danny Noriega -- the diva of the show and he loves it, Noriega has the opposite problem of letting his forceful personality overshadow his talent. He will definitely appeal to teen girls who see him as their best friend etc and the gay vote (two of the big three voting blocks, with the third being middleaged housewives), which will like his snappy attitude. But too much attitude can be a turn off to Middle America and the judges spent so much time bickering about him Noriega had too many opportunities to make faces, squint and offer up retorts. As for his performance, I thought "Jailhouse Rock" was a left field choice that didn't give him any chance to shine vocally. But it DID toughen up his image a bit. He might have looked foolish singing it but in fact looked convincing, I thought. And the white shirt and tie was a good look.

Luke Menard -- the second trainwreck of the evening. Menard insisted after the judges trashed him that "people are going to remember this tomorrow." Yes, but unfortunately they'll remember it as being very weak. Paula's comparison to Kenny Loggins was spot-on and maybe Menard is good-looking to get a pass this week and get another shot. But his tepid take on "Everybody's Talking"

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(made famous by Harry Nilsson, but not written by him) was too high-pitched and too bland and wispy to do anything but make you cringe.

Colton Berry -- another very young kid (we've got lots of Latinos and lots of high schoolers this season) and this one is proud of his theater background. I thought Colton's look was good and that he carried himself well during the judges' comments. (The self-deprecating claim that he looks like Ellen Degeneres was a nice attempt too.) Even better was his habit of singing the theme song from *Teletubbies* when nervous. He sang "Suspicious Minds" -- made famous by Elvis and covered by Fine Young Cannibals in a similar style which makes the judges' claim that Colton needed to make the song "fresh" and "current" seem especially silly. I thought Colton's vocals were quite strong, especially on the by now obligatory slow opener before the song is speeded up passage. There are lots of slow breaks in this song and he navigated them very well. Plus he had the all-important big Idol finale featuring a big note held for a while. I think he made the most of his strengths here since the song is very dramatic and theatrical to begin with. Smart choice. Plus he looked cute. That never hurts.

Garrett Haley -- another *Tiger Beat* contestant, this one with serious Leif Garrett hair. Haley looks dreamy on the closeups but didn't handle the banter well. He was off-key with Ryan at the beginning (don't say 'yeah, lots of chicks scream for me') and passive at the end with the judges. The Neil Sedaka tune "Breaking Up Is Hard To Do" was savvy as far as appealing to his core contingent of teenage girls. The vocals were not terrible and his pin-up-ability will probably get him a pass.

Jason Castro -- He made a great choice of the Lovin Spoonful gem "Daydream," a tune that can't help but put a smile on your face. As the only guy who played an instrument (in this case, an acoustic guitar), Castro stood out even more. He had loads of personality and charm, a real entertainer. One word of warning: as I've said before, playing an instrument and being an entertainer can cover lots of flaws and if you turned your back to the TV and just listened to his vocals, they were actually quite rough at numerous points of the song. I enjoyed it a great deal and hopefully he'll gain in confidence and be stronger vocally down the road. Again, the judges sounded goofy when they insisted Castro had made this song sound current and relevant. How? By playing it on an acoustic guitar? He didn't rearrange the tune or shake it up in any way. He sang it in a perfectly straightforward manner. He just did it with a great deal of charm.

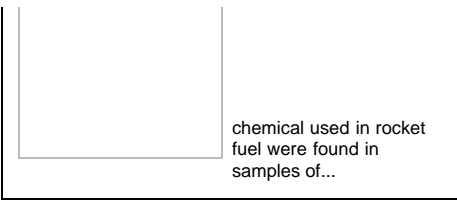
Michael Johns -- having been in a band signed to Madonna's Maverick label, Johns definitely seems like the male who had the biggest previous break (Archuleta was the winner of Star Search at 12 but never did anything afterwards). He covered "Light My Fire" by the Doors, a tune he KNEW was featured heavily in Hollywood week and which he did at an audition. Couldn't he at least have sung a different song by the Doors? Frankly, I thought he looked the part and covered the stage well. But his two big moments in the song to sound rough and dangerous? Didn't do it for me. Certainly good enough to get through but he should be knocking it out of the park and I'd rate three or four guys higher.

Finally, how sad it is to have 100,000 auditions, Hollywood week and now the Top 24 focusing on the Sixties and yet if we've heard a single protest song, I missed it. Didn't anyone even sing something as universal as "Blowin' in the Wind" or god forbid a real protest song? We are at war, a war most of the country is well and sick of by now. You think someone would want to tap that emotion.

It's too early in the competition to say which men should really go home since a good half dozen of them are sure to go and too many are weak to get it right. The ones to go through should definitely include David Archuleta, Jason Castro, David Hernandez and Michael Johns. Everyone else is vulnerable but if I were going to pick two people to go home, it would be Jason Yeager and Luke Menard. Who did you vote for?

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mch755 See Profile I'm a Fan of mch755 permalink

Love the commentary. I'm not normally a watcher of AI, but people kept telling me that this crop of singers would be great this year. Umm..not too impressed at this time, well at least with the guys. Though the little guy, David A, he's real good, very charming and will really appeal to a broad spectrum of watchers. I also like Jason Castro, mellow and smooth, and I like David H, though he did look terrified to be the first up.

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Dianne See Profile I'm a Fan of Dianne permalink

I hope David H. makes it through. Being the first performer on the first "real" episode of the season must be terrifying, and I thought he did well.

I love little David A. The kid has serious talent and he's the only one that I really look forward to seeing again.

Luke is hunky. Chikezie is cheesy and I want him to go home. Jason and his guitar were interesting, but I'm not sure if the guy really has any chops. I actually thought Garrett did a good job with his song, and handled the judges' comments well. Jason has a very nice voice, and I enjoyed listening to him, but anyone who chooses "Moon River" out of all the fantastic 60's songs is doomed, in general.

As for Danny -- pouts on four year old girls annoy me. On a flaming teenage boy, it's the kiss of death. Hopefully, I'll never have to see him again.

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Thanks for your comments. If david A is your favorite, you're far from alone. I don't think Danny is going away yet, but we'll find out tonight.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 03:59 PM on 02/21/2008

67bug See Profile I'm a Fan of 67bug permalink

I didn't know "Jail House Rock" was a 60s song. Sure it didn't come out in the 50s?

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Great question, 67bug! I wish I'd thought of it myself. As you so correctly pointed out, "Jailhouse Rock" was a hit in 1957/1958. It entered the charts in October, with the movie hitting theaters on November 8, 1957, per the IMDB. The song stayed on the Hot 100 for 27 weeks and was #1 for 7 weeks in a row. As far as I can tell, the song did NOT re-enter the charts in the Sixties (as some songs often do). Why indeed was that song allowed on "sixties" night? They could have sung "Return To Sender" or "Viva Las Vegas" or

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alexina [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of alexina](#) [permalink](#)

I am backing Michael Johns based not on his performance of Fire last night, but on his Bohemian Rhapsody. I agree that he did not let the anger and emotion of Fire show through where in Bohemian Rhapsody, I did hear raw emotion. I am the Woodstock generation and prefer the raw, rough Acid Rock to what we termed "bubblegum". Unfortunately my taste is not usually represented so I am hoping to hear more of the type of music Joplin, Hendrix, Doors and Cream rocked with tonight instead of "Leader of the Pack" type music that does not define what my peers listened too. It would be kind of nice since we again have an unpopular war if someone did chose a Woodstock song such as "If I had a Hammer"

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Johns' Bohemian Rhapsody was very good. I'm sure he'll do it again at some point in the competition. And at least we know one of the women will go for a Hendrix, CCR, Cream vibe. "If I Had A Hammer" -- I think my head would explode is someone did something that political on Idol. At least Blowing in the Wind can seem sort of passive (when done poorly). Sadly, the biggest hit of the 60s by a woman was To Sir With Love -- a tune we don't need to hear but thanks to Lulu's appearance last season we probably will again.

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gavintiegirl [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of gavintiegirl](#) [permalink](#)

I called and voted for 3 contestants in this order:

1. Danny Noriega
2. Michael Johns
3. Jason Castro

I agree that Luke Menard was bad. In my opinion it was the most painful performance of the night by a mile. His voice was mouse like. He has a following for his 90210 looks, but oh boy, they are all home crying in their pea soup today. Luke was a DUD big time! It might have helped if he had dressed the part. He looked like a slob.

I could go on forever, but I will spare you.

I hope the girls are more exciting tonight!

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What did you like about these three, especially Danny? And why not the producers' favorite Archuleta? Do you not like him or do you assume others are voting for him already? Thanks for reading.

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gavintiegirl [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of gavintiegirl](#) [permalink](#)

To answer your questions; I like Danny because he has personality. He adds spice to the show, spice the no one else has if you know what I mean. I think he is cute and I heard his voice during Hollywood week and it sounded powerful. I am just waiting for him to burst out and show it off.

Michael Johns is just a smokin hottie and a good singer.

Jason Castro is cute and just a different kind of performer. He may not be the best singer but his style is his own.

With regards to David Archuleta; he is cute and a good singer, I just don't regard him like everyone else does. I think the show's producers like to build hype around one contestant that they feel is most marketable. And you know how easily the sheep can be herded.

His voice is not as strong as everyone seems to think. I am just not sold on him. I think his version of "Imagine" was eh! Don't believe the hype is what I say.

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