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Michael Giltz

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American Idol Week Three: Omaha

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After last week's barrage of "no's," the latest audition round is bursting with video of contestants who are actually going to Hollywood. We saw 12 full or partial auditions and 9 of them got the thumbs up. It's easy to criticize the show -- crafting an entertaining one-hour episode with drama and comedy and enjoyable singing out of countless hours of footage isn't easy. But this is the way to do it. Don't get caught up in the stories. Give us a look at people who might actually make it to the final 12 and let us start picking our favorites. They should always make certain we see the auditions every week of the contestants the judges think were the best. I'm not always certain they do.

So here's a suggestion: why not post EVERY winning audition in full at the [American Idol website](#)? Group them by city and/or alphabetically. Nineteen people went through in Omaha and I for one would gladly watch them all. (As far as I can tell, they don't do this currently.) Only so many acts can get airtime, so this is the best way to give everyone a chance to find a favorite AND second-guess the judges. Plus, it would only build interest in the Hollywood round. Imagine online communities urging their friends to check out a particular audition and how that would give people a rooting interest in what are now just faces glimpsed briefly in a montage. Thank me later, *Idol*. On to the auditions.

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Chris Bernheisel -- this is where *Idol* walks a really tricky tightrope between toying with people's dreams and celebrating them. Chris is super-enthusiastic about the show, brings gifts, is totally exuberant and can't sing worth a lick. Smartly, *Idol* knows it would be like kicking a puppy if they made fun of him, so

they don't. The judges instinctively know the same and treat him sweetly and insist that he should work the red carpet for his local FOX affiliate for the finale. (An easy enough promise that costs them nothing.) Chris is over the moon and the show is off to a nice start.

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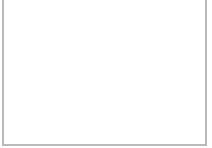
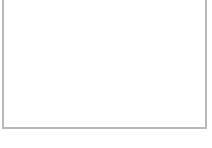


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Jason Rich -- a heartland heartthrob, Rich tackles "When You Say Nothing At All" and repeatedly forgets the lyrics. Again, while people lambaste the show for being cruel, in any other professional setting, Rich would be whisked off the stage in a heartbeat. But the judges give Rich numerous chances to regroup and he finally belts out the song in a solid voice. If he overcomes his nerves, Rich could go far: sweetness, vulnerability and good looks are always a winning combination.

Rachael Wicker -- an arm wrestler, Rachael sings "Don't Tell Me To Stop Loving You" and it's a little surprising she gets through. Not bad, but hardly notable. Then again, the judges can find themselves saying "yes" when they've sat through three hours of auditions and found nothing good. Context is everything and maybe in Hollywood Rachael will step forth.

Sarah Whitaker -- a pro wrestler (as Lady Morgue, I think), Sarah is an amiable time-waster, a kooky "character" of the sort that *Idol* thinks we enjoy hearing from. We don't, but that's what auditions are all about: you never know if the goofball can actually perform until they start to sing. She can't. Good cackle, though.

Then Paula and Ryan swap jobs for a moment and forgive me for indulging myself but it felt like a moment of triumph. I covered the first seasons of *Idol* extensively for the New York Post and when they split up the duo hosting the show (bye, Brian Dunkelman!) and kept Ryan, I suggested to Simon in an interview that Ryan should be a judge and Paula should be the host. In that first season, she was very uncomfortable saying anything negative about the contestants. It was so clear she wanted to be a cheerleader for them all, I thought she would work better as the host, with Ryan in a judge's chair. Simon paused and then said it was a very interesting idea and he would bring it up with the producers (i.e. Simon Fuller). For a moment I thought I'd changed *Idol* history! In fact, I was wrong. You shouldn't mess with a winning formula too much, Paula became more comfortable criticizing the singers (thousands of awful auditions will do that) and the hosting job is very technically demanding and one that Ryan prepared for his entire career. Still, it was a good idea and for a moment I got to see it come true.

Samantha Sidley -- she sings the Norah Jones standard "Don't Know Why" (penned by Jesse Harris) and she's okay but so tentative and breathy it's hard to believe she could sing in any other tempo or deliver a pop song. Ryan is mocked for criticizing her presentation (Samantha keeps rotating her body while singing) but in fact Paula and the others say her "showmanship" needs work. Uh, what's the difference between that and her presentation? Another "yes," but it seems highly unlikely she'll go far unless Hollywood boosts her esteem like steroids. Simon pricks my bubble by joking, "It actually would be horrible doing this with Ryan."

Then we get three shortened auditions, hearing 30 seconds or less of three different singers who get a golden ticket, including Elizabeth Eckert (seemed pretty good), Denise Jackson (solid pipes and confidence to spare) and Michael Sanfilippo (whose shaggy hair and decent looks guarantee some modest pinup appeal). The funniest moment is watching a girl with a golden ticket headed down the escalators and insisting proudly to the camera that she is "America's next top model!" before dissolving into laughter over her reality show mistake.

Angelica Puent -- this is the girl who has been fighting with her father and actually lives with her grandmother. *Idol* mends broken families! Simon mangles her last name -- I know he doesn't like Bob Dylan but doesn't he at least recognize the surname of Tito Puente? I don't have an ounce of rhythm in me but even I can pronounce that one. She belts out Celine Dion's "The Power Of Love" with an emphasis on "belts." She gets a "yes" but seems so overwhelmed she'll need lots of confidence-building to get ahead in Hollywood.

David Cook -- a rocker of sorts, though rather shy about it. He sings "Living On A Prayer" in a raspy, very sloooow version but is pretty good. His worst attribute is an awful, rooster-like haircut with some dyed red streaks. Would he be willing to cut it off for Hollywood? If so, he could go far.

Johnny Escamilla -- he sings "Shout" in a glittery, foolish shirt. Sometimes you know someone won't get through before they've sung a note. He doesn't.

Then there's a montage of people singing "Stuck In The Middle With You." (Appropriate since it was used brilliantly in *Reservoir Dogs* and I'm sure at times the judges would love to cut their own ears off). I often wonder how these bits are done. Do they ask the people to sing this song after they've done their official auditions and been rejected? Do they provide the lyrics?

Leo Marlowe -- finally it comes down to the last audition of the day. It's usually a good sign if

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you're last; your chances of getting through are greatly improved, though not a given. Leo is a sweetie who was either joking about how popular he is or happily outing himself when he told the judges, "My mom always says she raised the perfect homecoming queen -- too bad it wasn't one of her daughters." I hope he was outing himself since he seems gay and *Idol* is overdue for an out contestant. (It would be a huge advantage if you were gay and open, Leo. Just saying.) He did a solid job on "A Song For You," though he pushed it a bit. If he took the time before Hollywood to lose a little weight and tone up (Hey, I need to lose a LOT of weight Leo, so I'm not throwing stones) then we'll know he's serious about this and not just having fun.

So who were the stand-outs for you? And if they were available, would you go to the *American Idol* website and look at the auditions of winners that didn't air?

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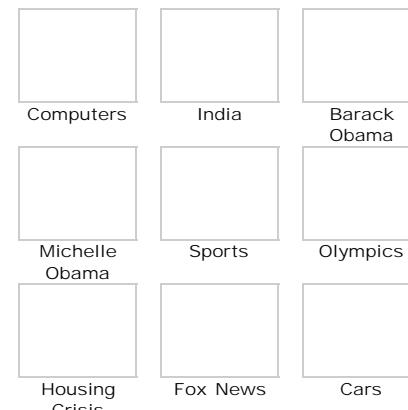
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