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Michael Giltz

Award-winning freelance writer
Posted January 14, 2009 | 05:09 AM (EST)

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American Idol Returns -- Phoenix



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UPDATE: *American Idol* opened to huge numbers that dropped a modest 10% from the opening night of last season. It was seen by 30.1 million viewers. This show is a massive hit. The last network programming of any kind to top that number? You have to go back to the OLYMPICS in August. That's right. The once-every-four-years Summer Olympics was the last network programming to score bigger numbers. And the season premiere of *American Idol* was bigger than most nights of the Olympics anyway, with only the Opening Ceremony and key nights

pegged to Michael Phelps actually doing bigger numbers. Other than the Olympics, what was the last network program of any kind to do bigger numbers than the season premiere of *American Idol* last night? Yep, the season finale of *American Idol* back in May: **the showdown between the two Davids scored 31.7 million viewers.** This show isn't going anywhere.

American Idol kicks off Season Eight without missing a beat: **new judge Kara DioGuardi** fits in smoothly; the contestants (as usual) run the gamut of the good, the bad and the ugly; and the editing keeps it all entertaining. *Idol* is every show wrapped up into one: a comedy for those who enjoy the bad auditions, a reality show for those who prefer the sob story personal profiles and the backstage drama of the Hollywood section, and a variety show for those who love the judges' banter, the taped bits and of course the singing.

People who insist the show is the ruin of the music industry don't know their history: talent shows have been around forever, from Arthur Godfrey on the radio to the Apollo to *Star Search*. And *American Idol* is above all a talent show, with audiences looking for a contestant they love and rooting for them. Finalists have won Oscars and Grammys, been on Broadway, received critical acclaim and sold millions of records. Eight years isn't enough time to judge a career, but Kelly Clarkson -- to name the first and most obvious *Idol* success story -- has just released her catchy new single. (**Listen to it here.** It's catchy as hell.) They're not going anywhere and neither is the show. With the easy introduction of a new judge (after an earlier failed attempt), they've set

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themselves up for the next eight years. Eventually one of the original judges will step down but they'll be ready. (And I'll finally get my shot at an *Idol* dream: being a judge myself.) Yep, I love it. On with the show.

Phoenix Auditions

The opening montage included Clay Aiken several times, giving him as much (if not more) screen time than any other previous *Idol* contestant -- a nice nod to the latest *Idol* finalist to come out. And the footage of some tweens anxiously watching the Season Seven finale and shrieking in pain when David Archuleta lost was my favorite moment of the night. Naturally, sappiness followed comedy: "The beauty of *Idol* is the journey itself," intoned Ryan Seacrest.

Tuan Nguyen (NO) -- Guy with huge fro and goofy marching band military dance moves. Sang Michael Jackson's "The Way You Make Me Feel." Badly.

Emily Wynne-Hughes (YES) -- Mom always yearned to be a singer and Emily is the rocker chick who sang Heart's "Barracuda" pretty well. Even more interesting was the fact that she's in a band and none of them know she's auditioning. Going to Hollywood means they'll lose out on a tour of Europe, but she never hesitates. The judges have a *lot* of fun with that and Emily never blinks. She tells them hopefully she can pull a Daughtry and bring the band along...eventually. But that's exactly the sort of selfish focus you need to become a pop star. Plus her singing was good and she looked cool. Definitely one to watch.

Randy Madden (NO) -- Would-be rocker who wears the leather pants and has a catch phrase about being a rocker in a box, but is missing one ingredient: talent. Often the show is painted as cruel, but many times the judges try to be nice, and this is one of them. Madden is seen looking very emotional both before and after his audition and it can be fascinating to see people who have never had a singing lesson or formed a band or probably even sung karaoke somehow expect to be "discovered." "If you think you have a great voice, why wouldn't you be singing -- somewhere, anywhere?" "I just want someone to tell me I'm great," he says before getting turned down. "That's all." Paula really isn't helping the guy by saying he should be in a band and get some experience because he can't sing.

J.B. Afhua (YES) -- Good-looking kid who gets through. Hard to get a read on him, but I was most intrigued by his dad and siblings. When J.B. got emotional and teared up after getting a golden ticket, they all turned away and avoided eye contact as if emotions were embarrassing.

Michael Gurr (NO) -- Nervous guy who growls/mumbles his way through a Carrie Underwood song. Followed by a montage of three more contestants who were weak. Seeing the episode as a whole, I'd say they definitely tilted away from making fun of contestants and kept the focus on telling stories, whether the people were good or bad. Like...

Aundre Caraway AKA X-Ray (NO) -- The first of a wave of singers who had dubbed themselves with goofy nicknames. He sang an original tune called "Cactus Baby" and danced around goofily. Way too energetic.

Ariana Afsar (YES) -- Finally a winner, a 16 year old girl who scores points by founding a group to bring teenagers into retirement homes and entertain the elderly. Then she scores cool points by singing "Put Your Records On" by one of my favorite current artists, **Corinne Bailey Rae**. Then she scores the most important points of all by nailing the catchy but tricky song very nicely. Cute as a button indeed. Another one to remember.

Elijah Scarlett (NO) -- Guy with freakily low voice. Again, the judges try to be polite.

Lea Marie Golde (NO) -- Claims she is Kara's biggest fan and since Lea's main focus is songwriting, maybe she is. Dressed up memorably with red hair and a pink cowboy hat and sings dance tune "Everything We Touch" in a very flat, nasally voice. Sweet personality but Paula isn't doing her any favors by telling her to work on her voice. Maybe she's a good songwriter and you might as well encourage the interest she might have a shot at.

Stevie Wright (YES) -- Named after Stevie Nicks, she wears a black and white dress and does a very nice version of the Etta James classic "At Last," notably *not* oversinging a song that causes too many contestants to emote like crazy. Got better as she went along but Simon saw something a little passive about her personality. "I want you to grow teeth," he advises, worried she may not

"Washington Unplugged"

Arianna was on CBS' "Washington..."

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I'm a little embarrassed to love this show as much as...

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Michael Sarver (YES) -- works as a roughneck on an oil rig and to me that was more interesting than his bland personality and OK singing. But the judges loved the odd mix of this big burly guy singing the Boyz II Men song "Thank You." Me, I'm always wary of contestants who claim they're doing it to help their family financially. That's so goofily unrealistic and rarely the driving force of a pop star that I'd rather hear they yearn to be famous. He was followed by a montage of four more bad singers, which makes it easier to understand why the judges voted him through.

Katrina Darrell (YES) -- showed up in a bathing suit, which worked just fine for Simon and Randy. When she walked in Simon, chirped up nicely and said, "Let me tell you; it's smart" about Katrina's outfit selection. Sang her way through Mariah Carey's "Vision Of Love" and wasn't awful for a Paris Hilton wannabe but hardly good. Simon and Randy immediately say yes. (In fact, Simon jokingly said she was great before she'd barely finished two lines). Kara and Paula are annoyed that a so-so singer was getting through but Kara's rather annoying when she insists on belting out the song herself. What does Katrina care? She gets through and Kara rescues herself by delivering the best line of the night: "Next time, come naked." Katrina then walks out and makes good on a promise. "Where's Ryan so I can make out with him?" she says. Their poolside kiss is notably tepid. (Does Ryan want to hear more gay jokes from Simon?) The ladies are right on this one: Katrina belongs on a reality show, not a singing contest.

Eric Thomas AKA Sexual Chocolate (NO) -- Someone who would ink their back with "Sexual Chocolate" definitely has the ego to be a pop singer. Too bad he squinted his way through Stevie Wonder's "Ribbon In The Sky." Oddly, his mom promised him a new car if he *didn't* get through to Hollywood.

Brianna Quijada (NO) -- Best remembered for calling Simon "Simey," she was not great on "Let's Hear It For The Boy" and much worse on "Killing Me Softly," which is a really really hard song to sing and a terrible choice for an audition unless you're actually Roberta Flack.

By the way, this is the first and only time we see Simon breaking a 2 to 2 tie. It would be interesting to find out if the judges ever tied and he actually voted against himself when breaking it. This time, he's right.

Deanna Brown (YES) -- She follows a montage of winners but happily Brown is one more who does a pretty good job with Otis Redding's "(Sittin' On The) Dock Of The Bay." Personally, I thought she had enough vibrato to power a city, but it was indeed a distinctive voice and the judges really liked it.

Cody Sheldon (YES) -- 17-year-old kid from Detroit who loves horror movies. Thanks to the jokey set up by the show and the emphasis on his love of making slasher pic home movies, we were primed to hear a disastrous audition. Instead, he delivered a pretty good rendition of James Morrison's "Wonderful World." Cody had clearly practiced a lot in front of his bathroom mirror but it was a good voice. I fear his lack of experience in performing live will undo him. But he's definitely the *Idol* most likely to benefit from a dramatic makeover. (They'll lose the goth look in about two seconds flat, I predict.)

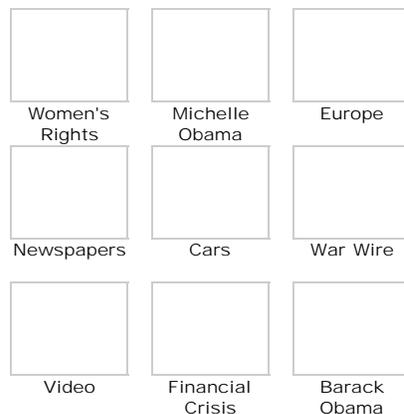
We also get a glimpse of how Simon amused himself: apparently he asked a lot of the contestants what three countries they would be most popular in, eliciting a lot of amusing answers. Geography is apparently not a strong suit of kids these days.

Alex Wagner-Trugman (YES) -- A nice kid who just ignores Simon's joke about him coming out of the closet. (His backstory was that he used to sing in the closet so as not to annoy his family and caught an illness from mold in there.) Then, bizarrely, he insists that Randy sing along on the chorus of the James Ingram/Patti Austin love song "Baby, Come To Me," even though Randy had nothing to do with that tune. In other words, he duetted with a guy on a love song, making Simon's joke actually sort of funny again. It was an oddly high voice, but Randy compared him to Joe Cocker of all people and he got through. Not to be rude, but Alex seemed a bit too introverted to pop out as a personality. He was followed by another montage of bad auditions.

Scott Macintyre (YES) -- the final audition we see is of the visually impaired Scott, who is led into the audition by his darn good looking brother. Basically blind, Scott skies and ballroom dances and graduated from college at 19. I would have bet good money he'd make it through. (If he

love it for a reason like being green!
FastCompany...

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sucked, they never would have put him on the air.) And yep, he goes through. But he shouldn't have. Scott sang the Billy Joel gem "And So It Goes" in a rather weak, undistinguished manner. I think he also faded out on the last word, singing "know" rather than "knows." If he was really bad, I'd be offended for him -- clearly he doesn't need anyone's pity. But he was OK. He was certainly dubbed "courageous" and Simon said Scott was a cool guy. More power to Scott for learning classical piano and doing his thing. Maybe it was just a nervous audition and he'll be better down the road.

In all, 27 people got a golden ticket for Hollywood and we saw 11 winning auditions. *Idol* would be smart to post *all* the winning auditions online and let us get to know the other 16 contestants from Phoenix that are heading to Hollywood. Let us watch them and judge for ourselves. The show can never give airtime to everyone and there's no reason *not* to let us get a peek at the people going to Hollywood. This would also balance out the problem of singers who are barely seen suddenly popping into the Top 20. What do they have to lose? Nothing. What can they gain? More traffic for [their website](#).

Go [HERE](#) to see Ryan Seacrest hi-five the blind contestant Scott.

Go [HERE](#) to see a story on the ratings, which dropped minimally.

Go [HERE](#) to read Ken Levine's diss of the new season.

So what did you think of the first show? Any auditions stand out? And what did you think of new judge Kara?

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He was a bit like Marc Singer in IF YOU COULD SEE WHAT I HEAR. But that's just my opinion! And that's a good thing!

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Hey Michael, good to see you back on the AI beat. I'm glad the show is back, I need the distraction right now!

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Change for the show would definately have been to show ALL auditions of the Yes vote getters...the remainder of time to other clowns.

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You're right. Their changes are mostly cosmetic and don't go to the core of the show, which they would in fact be fools to change. If it ain't broke....

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

I've never understood why "news" organizations constantly report on the progress of reality shows. Especially ones that are well past their prime like A-Idol

I always got why Fox did it, they own the show. So the news value is less important than making money for them.

But the others don't make money off this reality show, I can't understand why they give free advertisements. I suppose some actually consider this news

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Well, it's the number one show in the country and my coverage was for the entertainment section -- the same section that reviews CDs and movies and plays and concerts and dances and art exhibits and so on. It's not "news" in the important sense, just coverage of a hit show. In my view, ignoring Idol would look pretty bizarre down the road -- don't talk about the biggest hit show of the past decade, a show that gets bigger numbers than anything else on TV for the past eight months but the Olympics? Only the Super Bowl and the Oscar can challenge it and those are one time events. The british press does this a lot more -- discussing what actually aired the night before on TV, the same way that people will stand around a water cooler and discuss the latest twist on 24 or the new lead on CSI or whatever. It's by no means important but what's wrong with talking about it?

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 **sro798** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of sro798](#) [permalink](#)

Last night's two-hour premiere was well worth watching to the very end, when 23-year old Scott McIntyre auditioned for the judges. McIntyre has been blind from birth. Sporting a 'Mind the Gap' t-shirt (a nod to London's famous 'tube' system) that he thought Simon Cowell would appreciate, McIntyre won the judges over with his rendition of Billy Joel's And So It Goes. Because I have a profound hearing loss, I rely on my boyfriend to tell me whether each contestant has a good voice. "Is he good? Can she sing?," I ask during each performance. I had my fingers crossed for McIntyre. "He's pretty good," my boyfriend replied, somewhat tentatively. When the song finished, I sat up straight in my seat. I had seen contestants with disabilities compete on Idol before, without success. But I knew the judges saw talent in McIntyre, who is also a pianist and songwriter. The final outcome: Four 'Yes'-es from the judges, and Paula Abdul told him she especially liked his "softer tones." I started to tear up. The judges saw McIntyre's talent, his sheer determination, and the guts it took for him to audition without his 'security blanket,' -- his piano. The media has called McIntyre's voice "like Coldplay." I personally can't decipher musical style nor pitch, but I am delighted for him. I May others with disabilities (and talent)

aspire to go forth as bravely as McIntyre has. <http://www.profoundlyyours.blogspot.com>

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[-] **Haupialani** See Profile I'm a Fan of Haupialani permalink

The judges may see something we don't but in the end it's the public that buys the CDs. McIntyre was not that great and I would not have given him that sympathy vote but since he's through to the next round I wish him the best.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 06:50 PM on 01/14/2009

[-] **Michael Giltz** See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Thx for your perspective. The judges see a lot more of the contestants than we do so hopefully he'll grow in Hollywood and prove why they put him through. Your boyfriend certainly isn't alone in thinking he was good.

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