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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted March 4, 2009 | 01:58 AM (EST)

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American Idol -- Top 36 Round Three: The Winners!



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UPDATE: So America voted three more of the Top 36 contestants into the final 12: Lil Rounds, Scott MacIntyre and Jorge Nunez, giving me a perfect sweep in predictions this week. I hit 7 of the 9 people who made it into the Top 12. (Here's Michael Slezak of Entertainment Weekly's initial reaction.) Lil and Jorge did their thing but Scott's reprise of "Mandolin Wind" was even worse than Tuesdays. I really don't think he'll last long. I liked the way they handled the announcements. They got clear winner Lil Rounds out of the way quickly and neatly (not to mention without

pairing her off with someone who would then know for certain they were doomed). Then batches of people got dismissed. Pairing Nathaniel and Kristen was perfect and you could see his face fell when Ryan didn't begin the announcement by suggesting one of them would go through. And facing off Ju'Not and Jorge was great since that had genuine suspense.

Naming the Wild Card team was suspenseful as well, with each person being named seeming to sprint out of that upstairs holding room towards the stage. I was thrilled to see Von Smith be named first since I think that was a show of support. And surely the only thing unanimous about putting Tatiana through was that the producers would be pleased. The eight in order of being named were: Von Smith, Jasmine Murray, Ricky Braddy, Megan Corkrey, Tatiana Del Toro, Matt Giraud, Jesse Langseth and Anoop Desai. Their performances should sway the judges a tad, but sight unseen I'd expect Anoop and Jesse to get through. Something about Jesse being a last minute substitution bodes well for her. And the third pick really should swivel on how they do, but I'm rooting for Von Smith to have another strong performance. Actually, we already have six guys in the final 12. There's no way they'll choose three girls from the Wild Card but it's equally unlikely the producers will let them have eight guys and four women. That gives Jasmine and Megan a serious leg up (please, not Tatiana unless she suddenly mellows and sings well, of course). Nonetheless, I'll stick with my two guys and one gal.

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The ratings are in and the Wednesday show reached 22.5 million people. [According to the Hollywood Reporter](#), that's down 15% from last week and the lowest Wednesday rating for Idol in 6 years. But keep it in perspective: American Idol is the #1 show in the country. Thursday is not kind to Idol ratings-wise but the live decision of who goes forward from the Wild Card round could help. Naturally, the beginning of the Top 12 will help kick up ratings a notch next week. So who do you think is most likely to jump from the Wild Card round to the Final 12?

ORIGINAL POST: The third round of the [top 36](#) performed on Tuesday and to me the men clearly outshone the women, who were generally dreadful or (even worse) forgettable. Remember, you only need one man and one woman and one wild card. The ratings were strong of course. According to Marc Berman of *Mediaweek* (who bizarrely thinks Nathaniel Marshall will be brought back for the Wild card), [Idol scored a 13.8 rating](#), which means roughly 25 million people were watching. Here's [the AP summary](#) and an early response from *Entertainment Weekly's Michael Slezak*, who thought eight out of 12 had a shot at strong voting. And here is [his full recap](#). And [Ken Levine weighs in](#) with his scathing rundown of the contestants.

1. Von Smith -- The night got off to a great start with Von Smith, who really impressed me with his restrained but fresh performance of Marvin Gaye's "You're All I Need To Get By," one of a series of classic duets Gaye recorded with Tammi Terrell. Von Smith is a theater boy overshadowed a tad by the more *Rent*-ish Adam Lambert, not to mention Smith's own over-singing in Hollywood Week. Despite being given the deadly first slot (when the number of people who haven't tuned in yet ranks in the millions, making it harder to garner votes), he did a great job despite the *Miami Vice*-styled jacket and t-shirt look. He got better and better and really won me over. Simon compared him to Clay Aiken and Von fumbled a tad in responding but finally said the right thing about Clay being hugely successful and that it was a compliment. Duh! And next time, Von seriously needs to cover Rick Astley because that's who he really looks like. If he'd performed towards the end, Von would have a MUCH better shot of getting through. (Check out the ratings breakdown at Mediaweek which I linked to above. The ratings went from 12.2 at 8 p.m. to 13.5 at 8:30 p.m. to 14.8 from 9 to 10 p.m. That's a huge gap in audience and the fewer people that watch you perform, the fewer that are likely to vote.) I felt so bad for him, he's the first person I've voted for this season. (I usually don't bother until the final 12.) All four judges were strongly enthusiastic about his vocals but that seemed forgotten by the end of the show.

2. Taylor Vaifanua -- Singing "If I Ain't Got You" by Alicia Keys, Taylor seemed to lose track of the tempo and never found it again. She was a little better on the chorus but had a really bad last note to end on. Not good. Kara began the first in a series of encomiums to the singers, saying of Taylor, "You've had a voice from the moment we met you. You've got talent." But she wondered what Taylor was really like. "What's it like to go shopping with Taylor?" she said. With Paula having done her homework and relating current performances to Hollywood Week (which were taped months ago, remember), Kara has stepped in to provide loopy comments. But Taylor was almost in tears from the moment she ended the song. She knew.

3. Alex Wagner-Trugman -- The somewhat dorky college student tackled Elton John's "I Guess That's Why They Call It The Blues," one of his gems from a resurgence in the 80s (though talking about a resurgence for an artist who has delivered consistently for four decades is silly). Alex started off great, but soon devolved into an almost ludicrous attempt to sound soulful a la Joe Cocker. He was actually doing it for a bar or two when he wasn't trying and then suddenly it seemed as if he were possessed by the soul of John Belushi as one of the Blues Brothers. When he sang "Rolling like thunder under the covers" I giggled. That can't be good. Too bad because with restraint and practice he could be solid. Simon nailed it as usual by saying he was like "a little hamster trying to be a tiger."

4. Arianna Afsar -- The 17 year old sang ABBA's "The Winner Takes It All" in a train wreck of a misguided performance right down to the very rough last note. A shot of her parents looking miserable said it all. To her credit, despite having to hear friendly but harsh critiques, Arianna remained composed. It's appropriate to sing ABBA since they made their breakthrough on the song contest Eurovision with the unstoppable "Waterloo." This tune, their last Top 10 hit in a whirlwind 9 years of chart dominance, also includes the Idol-appropriate line "The judge will decide." They did.

5. Ju'not Joyner -- Sang the Illinois band Plain White T's memorable "Hey There Delilah" in a slowed-down somewhat soulful version that I thought was ok but which the judges and my friend

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ATLANTA — Traces of a

Aaron all liked more than me. Sporting a cross AND a pair of handcuffs, Joyner also reached out to multiple niches with this r&b take on a tune everyone knows. The judges were all polite but not truly enthusiastic. Kara however said "I know you got ridiculous pipes," and Ju'not later said he was so nervous he got a cortizone shot right in the butt, which can't help voting much.

6. Kristen McNamara -- She and Nathaniel had the nerve to imply that their hysterics during Hollywood Week were all the fault of their group nemesis. Isn't it a bit late to still be throwing darts at someone who didn't make it through? Kristen sang Tracey Chapman's "Give Me One Reason," an easy mid-tempo tune that is the biggest hit of that engaging artist's career. It peaked at #3 for FIVE weeks in 1996, so there must have been some crazy logjam at #1 and #2 that summer. And since the hateful "Macarena" was #1 for fourteen weeks, we know which song to blame for keeping her from going higher. Kristen insisted "my strength is my voice," a curiously obvious claim for someone in a singing competition to make. She left me completely cold, even as I appreciated her vaguely Dusty Springfield attempt to go for some southern soul. I just didn't buy it at all. But the women judges liked her (Kara said, "You are a great singer!") and the men didn't.

7. Nathaniel Marshall -- He good-naturedly admits being "tagged" with the label of drama queen, when it would have been much more fun to have him embrace actually BEING a drama queen. He sang Meat Loaf's hilariously contradictory song "I'd Do Anything For Love (But I Won't Do That)." It was by far the biggest pop hit of Meat Loaf's career, staying at #1 for five weeks. (His big album *Bat Out Of Hell* exploded because of relentless touring and AM rock radio stations more than hit singles.) Nathaniel's performance was unfortunately bad for good (that's a Jim Steinman reference btw). His look was very *Flashdance*, with spikey hair and a blue headband Simon described as very Olivia Newton John -- not winning any points for cleverness since everyone at home already shouted that out. More importantly, his vocals were dreadful; just thin and weak. He did however have the best post-performance banter with the judges, though I think we're far from Sanjaya territory here.

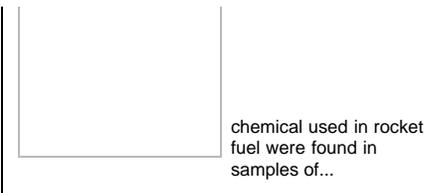
8. Felicia Barton -- A last minute substitute, Felicia sang Alicia Key's "No One," an uninspired song choice that she delivered fairly adroitly until she fell apart on the chorus and began oversinging until she really lost it on one of her big notes. Kara put it far too politely by saying, "You had a few problems with some of those notes." She looked great, though. At this point, I'm thinking Von Smith looks like the star of the evening, but the back end of the show is loaded with people who make an impression.

9. Scott MacIntyre -- Scott's the visually impaired guy the judges insist they LOVE when he sits down and sings at the piano. Personally, he's left me unimpressed most of the time but tons of airtime and a heartwarming story make him perfect *Idol* material for the Top 12. Scott sings Bruce Hornsby's "Mandolin Wind," the nice tune following his breakout hit "The Way It Is." I thought he was very so-so, running out of breath at times and flat. I never relaxed the entire time he was singing. Randy was a tad mixed but Kara declared "You move mountains" and Simon gave him a huge endorsement by insisting Scott should sail through. I don't hear it yet.

10. Kendall Beard -- This pretty gal tackled Martina McBride's "This One's For The Girls," the last of six songs to scrape into the Top 40 (a good claim to fame for a country gal). Kendall did indeed look good (the first thing Paula praised) but she was rough, bad on the chorus and ultimately rather piercing. It was a terrible song choice because it exposed the weakness of her voice. The judges were polite but mixed.

11. Jorge Nunez -- The Puerto Rican tackled a more familiar Elton John chestnut, "Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me" (#2 for two weeks back in 1973, with a couple of Beach Boys and Toni Tennille on backup vocals). And it was pure *Idol* -- he sang the song very closely to the original (which most viewers prefer -- they like you to sing the songs they love the way they're used to hearing them) and had a handful of big notes to wow 'em with. Then he closed the deal with a sweet chat with the judges (Kara said, "You were born to sing!"), tearing up over their praise and then breaking into Spanish towards the end. Audiences will eat it up and obviously he should get the Latino vote. I didn't see this one coming at all.

12. Lil Rounds -- And the show closed on a strong note with Mary J. Blige -- I mean Lil Rounds PERFORMING Blige right down to the flattish moments that seem so "real" from Blige. Rounds was very professional and smooth, though she does need to avoid Blige for a while. Kara sunk to a low by saying "Let me tell you, girl" in an "urban" tone and even doing the head-bobbing thing. But



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I'm probably just jealous because I always wanted to be a judge and I've lost my chance for years to come.

So Lil Rounds is a lock for the women and the other two slots belong to the men. My heart is with Von Smith but the judges' overwhelming support for Scott MacIntyre and Jorge Nunez make them the front-runners I believe. I hope I'm wrong again, just like I was with Kris Allen, but that first slot is a killer. So who did you like and who do you see getting through to the final 12?

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All my faves are guys. Lambert, Gokey, and Nunez. Still don't know what Ricky did in a former life to tick off Simon? He should be top 13, too. But that would be too many white guys for Idol, apparently. *sigh*

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One of the wild cards should have been Jackie Tohn; she's terrific and knows how to put a song over and very well too. Scott is there simply as a sympathy vote; he won't make it. Lil Rounds is magnificent but she sounds like so many of the others, cloned Arethas, whether male or female. Jorge is good but he hasn't got that star power. My bet is it will come down to Lil Rounds and Adam Lambert in the end, that is if Lambert can do away with the cheesy gold chains and Las Vegas kitschy look. The two of them

are the most professional and are really polished, Lambert maybe too much so, but then TATIANA'S BACK! Drama for the sake of drama. Funny though because I like her voice; it's throaty and sexy but everything else about her is such a turnoff. If she can find who she is and stick to bluesy adult types of songs and not try and do everything all at once, she might surprise everyone and come up a winner.

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"Scott is there simply as a sympathy vote"...totally agree

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Hey Michael. As always, loved the post.

I also found Kara's faux "downness" with the "sista" unseemly. I can't stand that nonsense. Patronizing and phony. There's a lot of *un*-phony, slightly veiled racism on the show which seemingly goes unnoticed. There's a recurring pattern throughout the seasons of telling contestants what they should and should not do, not-so-subtly based on race. Like when Randy J tells Jasmine T "I didn't expect you to do that" (meaning, a *white* pop hit). "You should stick to doing things like Rhianna." Why? Because she's black? Ridiculous. Happens the other way too. To white contestants, who do surprisingly well with R&B joints, i.e., Paula's infamous "You're a funky little white boy!" comment to Elliott Y. Why? Because he doesn't look, sing or move like Pat Boone? White performers are, generally speaking, inherently unsoulful? Prejudice is prejudice, even if it's framed in a positive light.

Side note. Not to seem like a hater but, as a journalist, I know you appreciate accuracy. Don't mean to call you out but "Don't Let the Sun Go Down ..." was recorded and released in 1974. Perhaps "1973" was just a typo. Look forward to next week's post. Actually, more than I look forward to the show.

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Lil Rounds is one of the best

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All of the 36 singers have been just fair so far. I can't get excited yet over this year's crop. Maybe when I hear them a few more times. However, I just hate Kara, and when she spoke in what you described as an 'urban' tone, I cringed. She adds nothing. I want crazy Paula back!

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Agreed,

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Ya know Michael, the singers are all starting to run together. As I remembered over the last several seasons I am beginning to see no difference. It's as though they are all coming from the same cookie cutter. The vocals all sound the same, the facial expressions are the same, and on and on.

I'm quickly losing interest. I want to hear something DIFFERENT.

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I hear ya. I think by the time it shakes out to the final 12 that people will start to shine. With so many to sift through, they haven't had a lot of chances to actually perform.

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I agree that Lil was good...but not great, or "brilliant". She way oversang the song...and in some parts was just plain bad. This takes me back to David Archuleta forgetting the words to his songs and the judges not saying one word about it. It's clear that Lil is a producer favorite so they clearly can't say anything negative about her. It's just totally unfair to the other contestants.

As for the others last night, Von was by far my favorite! And that actually shocked me. I hadn't liked him at all before, but I found myself rewinding to watch his performance again. He's the first contestant I picked up the phone to vote for this season. I also really liked Jorge. I hope the judges undeserved glowing review of Scott doesn't prevent Jorge from making the top 12.

My prediction: Lil, Von and Jorge (but probably Scott)

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Thanks for reading. Sounds like we were in sync last night on our favorites.

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Sorry, I beg to disagree. Lil was good but being loud does not make good music ! I did like Mandolin rain by Scott, of course this is the first time I heard him. Rest are either loud or off key.....

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Thx for reading. If you mean you disagree because you liked Scott, well you're certainly not alone. The judges agree with you.

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Not really, of course I have to admit , I love the song. But I am not partial to Scott, I really thought he sang well. We shall see who makes it.....

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