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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: March 1, 2010 05:57 PM

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Idol Needs Me, Says Producer Steve Lillywhite

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If rock producer [Steve Lillywhite](#) gets his way, *American Idol* has already found the perfect replacement for Simon Cowell: Himself! A Grammy-winning producer, Lillywhite is a legendarily successful British producer who has been instrumental in the launch of numerous bands, including Ultravox and of course U2. (Lillywhite produced their first three albums, including *War* and songs on everything from their world-beating classic *The Joshua Tree* to *How To Dismantle An Atomic Bomb*.) He's also worked on music by Peter Gabriel, Dave Matthews Band, The Smiths, The Pogues, Talking Heads and is in the studio now with

Evanescence and working soon with Phish.

What began as an off-handed comment by a fan on Facebook has blossomed into a full-blown campaign, with Lillywhite making his pitch via YouTube, not to mention hiring a TV agent to approach the people behind *Idol* and make clear he's very serious indeed.

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BECK IN TROUBLE?
Dropped From New York Radio Station, TV Ratings

So Lillywhite has the credentials, including a music show on the online site [East Village Radio](#). But does he have the lip? Just ask him about the [current crop of talent](#) on the show.

"The girls are definitely better than the guys," says the 54-year-old producer. "Though Casey James had a very good first week."

Along with Crystal Bowersox, right?

"Oh God, I *hate* Crystal Bowersox," laughs Lillywhite. "She's a *subway* singer! If they think they're breaking the mold by having Crystal Bowersox on the show, then... there are so many girls better than Crystal.

"I love Siobhan Magnus. To me it's all about, do you want to be in this person's world? You want to be in her world. You're interested in her. You buy into her. You want to know more about her, the way she looks at you through the camera. She's got good potential. I like Didi; she's not bad. And I'm interested in Lilly Scott. "Fixing A Hole" is such a difficult song to make your own and she did a great job with it."

Lillywhite is clearly paying attention this season, though he says he hasn't always been able to watch in seasons past since he's sometimes working overseas. And one thing is blindingly clear to him: the show is a terrific institution but it needs a kick in the pants. Even Simon looks a bit bored.

"His body language says he's not into it," says Lillywhite. "He looks done. He doesn't look interested.

"I would put my absolute everything into making sure this show [works]. I'm a slightly obsessive person so when I decide to go for something, well, if I got the job on *Idol*, I would give my everything for those five months. I would scour the country and really look for some great people to present to the American public."

Lillywhite doesn't have any specific on-air changes to suggest (original song night anyone?), even though the show makes tweaks in the format every year. But he seems especially focused on the auditions and is convinced there must be a better way to ferret out the absolute best talent. He's proven to have that gift for decades and even worked on a record label as well as a blink-and-you-missed-it role on the UK reality show *Fame Academy*, one of the wave of shows that followed the success of *Pop Idol*, the UK original. Mind you, he makes clear *American Idol* has delivered in the past.

"[Katharine McPhee](#) has a spectacular voice and I don't think her album does her justice," says Lillywhite about one of his favorites from the past. "And for pure pop sensibility, you can't beat Kelly Clarkson. She's fantastic. I like Lambert from last year, obviously. They've had some great people. But it feels tired at the moment. It's a great brand and I would want to help expand it.

So we know he can judge talent. (As can his son: Jamie Lillywhite just hit the Top 5 singles chart in the UK as the producer of [Ellie Goulding](#), a hot new talent spotlighted in the very influential [annual BBC Poll](#) about the top new artists to watch for in the coming year.)

But can Lillywhite judge the other potential judges? What does he think of Perez Hilton and Howard Stern, two other names bandied about as possibilities? That's when Lillywhite -- who has been smartly politic when talking about the show -- gets especially pointed.

"Perez Hilton I don't quite understand," says Lillywhite. "He has a record label but I don't think he has very good taste in music. Because there's nothing I've seen on his record label that is really very good. But he's a celebrity and people know who he is. I think they'd be foolish to dumb down the show. America invented pop music and you take it seriously and I would take it seriously as well and help raise the standards of the show.

"Howard Stern? He's a bit of a nasty person as well. I can't see him being particularly empathetic."

People think Simon is nasty, don't they?

Fall

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"Simon is completely empathetic," insists Lillywhite. "I agree with Simon most of the time. I can see greatness in slightly more [artists] than he. I would be my own person. And I don't suffer fools; to be honest I wouldn't be a soft touch. I believe 99% of music is rubbish. I've been successful for 30 years because I know the one percent."

When Lillywhite says he can see greatness in more artists than Simon, he means the central difference between them is their idea of what can make a star.

"The two sorts of singers I don't like are people who scream and rappers and I don't think either of those are *American Idol* types anyway," says Lillywhite, who insists he is bubbly and funny and certainly has [the Twitter name to prove it: "Sillywhite."](#)

"I would argue that my definition of a star is a slightly wider one than Simon Cowell's. His definition is... not cookie-cutter, but he would define it as a certain style of girl or boy singer who sings maybe poppy songs. I could argue a star in different genres. For me, my mantra is art and commerce can live together. I've always based my career on art and the commerce has followed from the art. I love developing artists."

So if *Idol* is tired, why isn't Lillywhite pitching himself to be on Simon Cowell's *The X Factor*, which launches here in the fall of 2011? For the first time, he seems a bit thrown off by that one.

"Can I be on the same show as Simon? Do you want two Brits?" Lillywhite says finally before focusing on the smart response. "I hadn't even thought about that. All I've been thinking about is *American Idol*."

So yes, Lillywhite made his bones with rock bands like U2 and Simple Minds but he has also worked with Jason Mraz (whose music is so omnipresent this season on the show he seems like the in-house composer) and Crowded House. He's a pop guy as much as a rock guy.

"I love that New York Alicia Keys song, 'Empire State Of Mind,'" says Lillywhite. "To write a song about such a big thing as New York.... U2 tried to do it [on the album *All That You Can't Leave Behind*] and they completely failed. But I prefer the Jay-Z version. I think the chorus works better with a rap verse. Also, I've got little kids and I've got a soft spot for Taylor Swift. She's a great songwriter and a great artist."

Would she have succeeded on *Idol*? He pauses for a moment.

"She's not the strongest singer live, is she?" he says bluntly.

They may have found their new Simon after all.

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RobinSeattle 05:20 PM on 3/02/2010



190 Fans

Steve Lillywhite would be a brilliant choice, but it will never happen and here's why:

Both Simon Cowell and Paul Abdul come from the mindset of producers calling all the shots in the selection of material as well as shaping the sonics of a record. The singer is just another tool. and not a real artist in this context. Abdul herself can't sing and if it weren't for the Eventide harmonizer and other production tools she never would have had a career. She wasn't quite Milli Vanilli, but she also wasn't that far away from it. And American Idol is predicated on the singer just being a cypher who does what they are told to by their labels. Thsu, American Idol will never give you truly great singers, but the vocal equivalent of utility infielders who are adequate, if mediocre, vessels for whatever a producer wants to dish out.

Lillywhite, on the other hand, produced bands who had their own material and helped them take their organic sound to its natural conclusion. There is no "Steve Lillywhite sound" per se in the same way that Todd Rundgren, Phil Spector, Shadow Morton, Brian Eno, Billy Sherrill, Motown or Philly International usually put the people they were working with into their peculiar sonic profiles.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 02:54 AM on 3/03/2010

59 Fans



That's all true. But with the modest exception of Cowell -- who has sometimes been mildly involved with the first album of Idol winners (and very involved in the career of Leona Lewis, an X Factor winner) -- they have nothing to do with actually developing the careers of the winners. So I don't think the fact that Lillywhite actually develops careers and works with artists long-term would hinder him on Idol. What matters is how he does on TV and the pointed, on-target critiques he can offer. Kudos for the Shadow Morton reference!

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MiraMcB 02:30 PM on 3/03/2010

163 Fans



The fact is, if Paula Abdul hadn't been on the panel when AI began, it would have been very tough sledding because no one, at that time, had Clue 1 who Randy Jackson and Simon Cowell were. Paula was the audience draw. She has also been the glue that held the panel together and many, many fans LOVED the chemistry and banter between her and Simon. There are a squillion Saulas out there who are very, very unhappy right now. If Simon does take Paula to his new show, there will be a stampede of millions of Saulas like wildebeests migrating the Serengeti.

This season of Idol without Paula is proving what Paula fans have known all along and the rest of us are just getting. She was CRUCIAL to the show. I never thought I would say it, but I miss her and miss her more every week. The current panel is dissonant. Uncomfortable to watch. You can see it on Simon's face and in his body language. He can't wait til it's over and who can blame him. I'M having a tough time watching this season myself.

It was a classic blunder by the producers. They needed Paula, but they were too thick to see it.

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RobinSeattle 10:19 PM on 3/04/2010



190 Fans

Oh puhleeease!

They would have just brought in somebody such as Susanna Hoffs, Debbie Gibson, Shanice Wilson, one of the girls from Bananarama or some other "legend" that lasted a lunchtime. Heck, they could probably have gotten Stevie Nicks if they were willing to fork out enough money.

And certainly, I don't think they would have been any more vapid than Abdul. And at least they can sing while Abdul could not.

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MiraMcB 02:30 PM on 3/03/2010



163 Fans

Coming on a board and trouncing Paula Abdul seems to be the "in" thing to do. While I am not, nor have ever been, a HUGE Paula fan, I do like the woman and feel she got a very bad rap for a lot of producer set-ups which sometimes portrayed her in a bad light on AI.

I'm going to differ with your assessment of Paula's talents and accomplishments. Saying she would never have had a career if it weren't for recording studio sleight of hand is a cheap throw-away - untrue, unfair and doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Regardless what is probably your personal dislike, this is a woman who is an Emmy winner, a Grammy winner, tied for 5th place on Billboard for top selling female solo artists, has had 6 number one singles and has sold over 50 million albums. She is also a very, very talented dancer and choreographer.

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RobinSeattle 10:24 PM on 3/04/2010



190 Fans

"Saying she would never have had a career if it weren't for recording studio sleight of hand is a cheap throw-away - untrue, unfair and doesn't stand up to scrutiny. "

Listen, what I said about Abdul I have not only heard from people in the business, but it has even been reiterated in print. Your fanboy bias is showing.

And I would personally be ashamed to have a Grammy or an Emmy as a doorstep, much less as something on display in my trophy case. Unless, of course, you think that the Starland Vocal Band and Christopher Cross were better than Bob Dylan, who didn't get a Grammy until one of his Christian albums. Both the Emmys and the Grammys are yet more proof of my adage that the mediocre shall inherit the earth.

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SacSpartacus 05:05 PM on 3/02/2010

0 Fans

Simon Cowell was not known outside of the music industry before the Idol phenomenon and he now has a huge influence on pop music in the US and UK. Since Ellen fills the celebrity role, American Idol should seek out a credible acerbic judge that isn't well-known. Still, Lillywhite's pandering for the job and aping Simon's manner isn't attractive - and he doesn't like Crystal Bowersox!?

I'm a 40something upper middle-class father and I like to say American Idol has become my one real vice. I've only been following Idol for the last couple of seasons and it is a really interesting show, if you Tivo through the drivel and ads. I've read comments from fans that the show is in decline and they don't like this or that about the judges/contestants/format... But this thing is a ratings juggernaut and it will be around for years to come. It is unfortunate that the producers seem

to be coasting and not really making it the best it could be - particularly by expanding the web content on contestants during auditions and creating even more buzz outside of the broadcasts.

(I also like reading this blog and finding that Michael Glitz actually responds to readers comments with thoughtful responses.)

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Glitz 02:30 AM on 3/03/2010
59 Fans



I like that you like my commenting! Thanks for reading.

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SacSpartacus 04:47 PM on 3/02/2010

0 Fans

Well the reality is that Simon Cowell was not known outside of the music industry before American Idol and now has a huge impact on popular music in the US and UK. I think that Ellen fills in the celebrity role on the panel and a knowledgeable acerbic commentator will definitely need to fill Simon's shoes. Lillywhite's pandering for the job by aping Simon is a bit difficult to read. And he doesn't like Crystal Bowersox?!

I was never an American Idol watcher until a couple of seasons ago and it really is an interesting show. (Thank you to Tivo and skipping commercials.) The producers/directors really do a disservice to the viewers during the early sessions by not showing more singing by the hopefuls. The backstories give some manipulative depth, but I'd sure rather hear more singing. At least we get to hear performances now that Hollywood week is past.

And I like this blog where Michael Glitz actually responds with thoughtful responses to reader comments!

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Michael Glitz 02:37 AM on 3/03/2010
59 Fans



I think Lillywhite is crazy about Bowersox, too. She has a lot more confidence and performs a lot more satisfyingly right now than the others. Perhaps his perspective is thinking about what he'd do in the studio with her rather than how she performs right now today. But I wouldn't judge her on that until hearing her original tunes. Anyway, you can never agree with any judge 100% of the time. Or even most of the time. Since I doubt they'll hire me, he's a better choice than Stern or Hilton at least on paper.

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PlanetKansas 01:28 PM on 3/02/2010

32 Fans

Steve Lillywhite, Brian Eno and Rick Rubin would make a dream team that would actually know what to do with talent.

Unfortunately, it would be too cerebral for the general public and lacking in mini-skirts and cleavage.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Glitz 02:41 AM on 3/03/2010
59 Fans



Brian Eno is easily one of the most important figures in rock and roll history -- Roxy Music, Talking Heads, U2, David Bowie, so many others AND he created at least one entire genre of music, ambient. No idea what he'd be like on TV of course. All three of them are great producers of course but judging on the show isn't really about molding someone's career (since only Simon might even remotely be involved with their career once the show is over) but about engaging critiques, championing talent and then sending them on their way, all while providing good tv. Lillywhite could offer that, I think.

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RobinSeattle 10:26 PM on 3/04/2010



190 Fans

Brian is too cerebral for an American tv audience. Can't have people being encouraged to think as those alpha waves wash over them.

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hip dibler 10:45 AM on 3/02/2010

76 Fans

the only thing AI needs is to "go away".

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hip dibler 10:42 AM on 3/02/2010

76 Fans

american idol is the black plague of music.

a disease.

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RobinSeattle 10:27 PM on 3/04/2010



190 Fans

Actually, that plague has a better chance of winning on American Idol if it's white.

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LLNYRN 08:58 AM on 3/02/2010

11 Fans

I was a major fan of Lillywhite's throughout the 80s. He was one of that decade's best producers. Always loved his "big sound" production. It would be interesting to see the man beyond the production studio.

But since I rarely watch "AI", it would just be a passing curiosity for me. And I doubt anyone beyond music tech-heads would get it. Then again, Simon Cowell was pretty much unknown here before "AI" too.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 02:43 AM on 3/03/2010



59 Fans

Exactly, The show is the star and they would be mistaken in thinking they need to get a name to draw in people. It's like Air America getting comics to host a radio show. They needed radio talent. And Idol needs talent that can perform on camera with credibility in the music industry.

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ShebeenCrawler 08:48 AM on 3/02/2010

1 Fans

Good luck to him. Hope he gets it.

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Sunflo 06:54 AM on 3/02/2010

143 Fans

OMG! I greatly admire a lot of his work with U2, Morrissey and Siouxsie. This is quite appalling, why oh why anyone with his cred would want to link himself to this dumb, unpalatable show is beyond me.
Don't. Do. It. Steve. Please.

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MiraMcB 08:20 PM on 3/01/2010



163 Fans

Sorry, I have NO idea who you are. Probably nobody else does, outside of a recording studio. I'm sure you're a nice person, but...

On second thought, knock yourself out. Once Simon leaves, I'm not watching Idol again anyway. They can bring in the Man in the Moon!

It's X Factor for me as soon as it hits the airwaves (or cable, as the case may be).

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 02:46 AM on 3/03/2010



59 Fans

You're not alone. X factor is Idol completely refreshed and with some very changes to get people engaged. And Simon is indeed the draw on Idol of anyone other than the format. I'll definitely watch it just as I do the UK version and it'll be a very dangerous time for Idol indeed when it has to get people excited just weeks after X Factor has hit its finale.

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MiraMcB 02:06 PM on 3/03/2010



163 Fans

A quick read of the AI Boards makes clear the fan base is eroding and there is a tremendous amount of unrest for a variety of reasons.

X Factor is a far superior program to American Idol, jmho. I've watched it since its inception and have enjoyed every season. It has a much richer, more interesting format, the production values blow AI's away, the editing is MUCH better, Simon is able to attract excellent, current talent for guest performances, the judges' panel is cohesive, great host, great after-show (Xtra Factor), etc.

American Idol has been spirally downward the last couple seasons. The producers have seriously irritated/alienated a LOT of fans with some really poor format/talent decisions. Forcing Paula Abdul out the door - a mistake. She was pivotal to the chemistry. Adding Kara D. - another mistake. Probably a nice person, but NO likeability factor on camera. Ellen D. is fine, but really not a fit. It looked desperate. Now losing Simon. No Simon and No Paula = Very Bad News for AI.

Fans will watch next season in the same way people slow down for a traffic accident. After that, I think Idol is going to see a rapid drop in viewership. When XF hits the screens, as you say, trying to capture that same attention right on the heels of XF - very tough. I would prefer it if Fox scrapped AI altogether and put XF in its slot. Failing that, move AI to the off season somewhere.

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