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Idol Season 9: Auditions -- Boston

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UPDATE: The ratings are in and according to the Hollywood Reporter *Idol* is still incredibly strong. *Idol* reached 30 million viewers and even went up a bit in the 18-49 year old demo that advertisers love and which had been slipping a bit. *NCIS* held well at 20.7 million, but *Idol* will clearly be the #1 show of the week. With an audience almost 50% bigger than *NCIS*, *Idol* looks set to be the #1 show in the country for a record-setting 6 years in a row, the longest streak in TV history. Sitcoms *All in the Family* and *The Cosby Show* were #1 for five years in a row, and

newsmagazine stalwart *60 Minutes* was #1 for five non-consecutive years in a row. Just below them, western *Gunsmoke* was #1 for four years in a row and sitcom pioneer *I Love Lucy* was #1 for four non-consecutive years in a row.

SHOW COVERAGE:

The backstage drama is probably more exciting than ever at *American Idol*. (Ellen coming, Simon going - eventually -- blah blah blah.) But the top-rated show in America returned Tuesday night without missing a beat.

From the pure Americana of the opener where we got a glimpse of young people from all walks of life who dream of singing or inspiring or just escaping their dead-end jobs to the finale of one last golden ticket, *American Idol* remains a very well-crafted, well-edited, entertaining show. The tone for the first night was notably more optimistic, with a welcome downplaying of the oddballs and losers and an element of empathy even during the rejection montages.

Maybe the *Idol* producers understand a country in recession doesn't want to watch people being kicked when they're down. But they also presented the inspirational tales (my least favorite element of the show) with a certain restraint. Yes, we saw people with siblings who have Down's syndrome, people with grandmothers who have Alzheimer's and people who have fought off cancer, but it never felt too

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manipulative. *Idol* told their stories and then moved on, led smoothly by Ryan Seacrest.

As for the judges, Kara seemed more relaxed, Randy remained mellow and Simon was Simon, though not as acerbic (or at least not edited to appear as acerbic) as he normally is shown. The guest judge was Victoria Beckham aka Posh Spice and while I generally avoid commenting negatively on people's appearances, she is clearly one more victim of the Hollywood mania for plastic surgery. Her face was so pinched and smoothed out and incapable of registering any emotion, I actually found it difficult to watch her. Her demeanor was generally of the nice, positive variety though.

So the tone the show set was pitch perfect: entertaining, generally upbeat and positive. So why bother with the oddballs? Here are my impressions of most of the people we saw make it through.

MADDY CURTIS -- the teen from a giant family with brothers who have Down's Syndrome, Maddy sang Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah." She was fine and it's certainly a challenging song to sing and anyone singing it knows that Cohen and Jeff Buckley and Rufus Wainwright have sung the heck out of it. Maddy was fine and has a nice voice, though it's hard to tell how much vocal character she has. Kara annoyingly said Maddy has an old soul, when that's the song, not her. Simon amusingly heard everyone else say yes and then said "Now the one that counts...four yeses." Maddy paused before walking out and said, "I really enjoyed singing for you" so at least we know she's been raised right. And Simon's compliment du jour quickly became "You're not annoying."

JENNIFER -- Sang a jazzy version of "Ding, Dong, The Witch Is Dead." Brief, but really caught my ear. Fun! And an offbeat choice that paid off. (And obviously, I didn't catch her last name.)

AMADEO DIRICCO -- Boisterous Italian guy who LOVES his family. Sang the Muddy Waters tune "Hoochie Coochie Man." Very limited voice, just a guy who can belt it out in a bar, though maybe just karaoke and not a bar band. Seemed quite limited but the judges liked his personality and gave him four yeses.

LUKE SHAFFER and **BENJAMIN BRIGHT** -- two guys seen harmonizing in the waiting room (with a third guy who obviously didn't make it). Luke is handsome and had a lovely sounding voice, great tone. A studio voice, as they might have said in seasons past. Benjamin sang "All My Loving," and was pleasant though he seemed to keep running out of breath. Both were so brief it's hard to tell. Still, thank goodness *Idol* broke down the Beatles' resistance and we can hear people audition from their catalog.

ASHLEY RODRIGUEZ -- The producers are probably bummed she doesn't have some heart-tugging back story because Ashley has everything else. She was attractive, charming, at ease and while she showed a lack of imagination by choosing Alicia Keys' "If I Ain't Got You," she sang it very very well. Easily the ringier of the day and one to watch.

TYLER GRADY -- Drummer who broke both arms when falling out of a tree. Cool jeans and mellow, early Seventies vibe without looking like he was playing dress up. Charming and sort of sexy though not traditionally handsome, mostly because he had self-confidence. Sang "Let's Get It On" decently, but he seemed more of a showman than a singer to me. But definitely a winning personality.

MIKE DAVIS -- Nice guy who thinks working on a speedboat that takes tourists out for a spin in the harbor is "the best job in the world." Other than being an American Idol, I assume. Sang "Yesterday," in a dutiful, slow and deliberate manner that was even off-key at the start. Simon, seemingly bored, threw out a yes while he walked away for a break. Randy said no and the gals fell for Mike. Didn't they already put through their token nice guy with the Italian? Very hard to justify.

KATIE STEVENS -- A 16 year old girl whose grandmother has Alzheimer's. Sang a fine version of "At Last," though the trills she threw in seemed more Mariah Carey than jazzy. But appealing and sweet.

JOSHUA BLAYLOCK -- This is the cute guy with mannered hair (too much gel) who was deemed too nice by Simon and the rest, so they encouraged him to get a little more defiant and confident and strident. Typically for this first night, they were joking *with* the contestant rather than making a joke *of* a contestant. Joshua was funny and indeed very nice and had a decent voice. Plus, in a later shot his hair seemed devoid of the gel and he looked much better already. Could be a comer.

JUSTIN WILLIAMS -- This is the guy who fought off cancer. Good-looking in a basic way, he sang "Feeling Good" in a style that was pretty mannered to me and rough when he transitioned from his normal range to the falsetto and back again. It's not that clear to me that he can sing particularly well, but he looked like another Michael Buble and they put him through.

BOSA MORA -- Fine looking young guy with parents from Nigeria who are living the American dream. (More inspiration from *Idol*!) I thought he was solid, though Simon's "boring" did strike a chord with

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me. Nonetheless the other three put him through. Besides, the voice was good.

LEAH LAURENTI -- A young woman who apparently did almost nothing growing up but go to church. Feels guilty about singing secular music and it wasn't even clear to me at first if her family approved of her auditioning. She sang "Blue Skies" in tune (a weak compliment, of course) and got better as she went along but seemed basically a Broadway belter more than a pop singer. But not bad and she went through. Later we heard her calling her dad, saying she got through and asking, "Are you proud of me?" He said, "Of course I'm proud of you!" But what a shame she had to ask.

So a very upbeat *Idol* with 32 people heading to Hollywood. A tag at the end of the show urged people to go to [the American Idol website](#) to see all 32 people who got through. I thought, finally! They're finally going to post all the complete auditions of everyone who got a golden ticket. But as of Tuesday night, I can't even find photos of all 32 Boston winners, much less audition video. They're fools if they don't post them, but they haven't yet so why should anything change now?

So who did you like from Boston? And was Kara just trying to get on TV by saying one of the male contestants needed to be spanked? And doesn't she know that she's already on TV?

--30--

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You hit the nail on the head, Michael, with your review. It's tough to get a real sense of these voices based on one song. So often these audition songs are the best performances the Hollywood choices are able to muster and we're let down on the Hollywood shows. But there was enough there to spark interest in following their journey.

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