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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: January 21, 2010 03:08 AM

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Idol Season 9: Auditions -- Orlando

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RATINGS UPDATE: I thought Tuesday might have been a fluke, so I held off on trumpeting it. But it happened again Wednesday. *Idol* scored 26.1 million viewers on Tuesday and 26.7 million viewers on Wednesday. That's a massive increase of 33% and 21% respectively over the same nights last year. As Marc Berman of Mediaweek points out, this is remarkable for a veteran series. And *Idol* is the #1 show in the country. To spike in the ratings so dramatically nine years into its run is jaw-dropping. It's only one week, but amazing nonetheless. If it keeps up, it'll be simply

astonishing. The last time a veteran series well into its run increased its total so much was probably *Law & Order*. But that show enjoyed a slow and steady rise to the top, debuting in 1990, becoming a Top 30 in 1994, a Top 20 show in 1997, a Top 10 show in 2000 and peaking at #5 in 2001 followed by a slow decline. The other, better comparison is *60 Minutes*, which debuted in 1968, hit the Top 20 in 1976, the Top 5 in 1977, hit #1 in 1979 and 1982 and then again for three years from 1991 to 1993 roughly a decade later.

A brisk episode of *American Idol*, though talent seemed thin on the ground again. Kristen Chenoweth was a fun guest judge for part of the Orlando auditions -- she and Kara bonded and they managed to have fun while annoying Simon no end. On her own, Kara is still struggling a bit, at least for me. I looked forward to Paula's sometimes wacky comments but I cringe over Kara's. More importantly, she hasn't championed anyone on her own that I was excited about or given me any insight. Mind you, neither has Randy. More than ever, it's all about Simon and every contestant knows it. If he says yes, their eyes light up with shock or joy or triumph.

I always get a little depressed when the show begins with a goofball, in this case a guy named Theo covered in glitter who tells Simon that if he wins *Idol*, in ten years he pictures himself...running a high end salon. (There've been an awful lot of people working in hair dressing or living with parents who do. Know why? Hair salons/beauty parlors are a cheap business to open that you can operate out of your own home -- perfect for this awful economy.) On to the golden tickets.

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SETH ROLLINS -- Sang "Someone To Watch Over Me," which he pegged as a Frank Sinatra song, rather than a Gershwin song. Not a big deal, but can't contestants who plan to stand in line for ten hours to audition google their song and figure out the proper title or in this case whose it is? Seth is a nice guy with two kids, one of whom lives with autism. Seth is fine with the song, like a million other people in a million other cabarets. But he throws in too many trills and runs, loses his breath and has a weird break in the middle and sounds rough on the low notes. Plus he has no vocal character or way with the lyrics. Maybe the judges are beaten down by the lack of talent we've seen on air so far. They say yes but urge him to develop more personality. Huh? How exactly does one develop innate talent?

JERMAINE PURIFOY -- Sang "Smile" by Tony Bennett. (Actually, by Charlie Chaplin.) This is another repeat auditioner, which once seemed unusual but now seems par for the course. If you got to Hollywood in years past, wouldn't you take another stab? In Jermaine's case, he didn't get that far but here he is again. He just SAILS through the tune with ease and personality. It's a lovely tune though it can drag a bit. Not here. The contrast between him and Seth is especially dramatic. Assuming Jermaine came later, Seth got lucky. Both sang standards and if the judges had heard Jermaine first, I think they wouldn't have been so easy on Seth. Jermaine is definitely one to watch.

SHELBY DRESSEL -- Sang "Turn Me On" by Norah Jones. This is the young woman whose mouth is a bit upturned due to a medical condition of some sort. It's rather distracting but you think, who cares if she can sing? But she's not terribly convincing, running out of breath in the middle of a sentence and basically having no feel for the story she's supposed to be telling. You can always spot a "shower singer" -- someone, like me, who can hold a note but doesn't really know how to get the lyrics across. You might hear a pretty or engaging melody, but you can't really follow the words or the emotion that should be conveyed. However nice the sound, it's just sound. That's Shelby. Plus, of course, she forgot the lyrics. Cute curse word or not, forgetting the lyrics should generally be a death knell. Simon gave a yes with a small "y," at least acknowledging her weakness though the others said yes. It's clear they sometimes know the backstory in advance because they often refer to it. I'm sure she'd be the last to want them to grade her on a curve, but I can't help feeling they did. Yet one more golden ticket I object to pretty strongly.

JAY STONE -- Sang/beatboxed "Come Together" by the Beatles and then sang "Ain't No Sunshine" by Bill Withers. Claimed he was really original. No one's ever done this before. Uh, Blake Lewis? Oh, but he didn't beat and sing at the same time, says Jay. His singing moment isn't special in the least. Simon says no, but Kara champions him (why?) and cajoles Randy into saying yes. They also let through a guy with no talent whose pants split during his audition. Again, why?

Then we get a quick montage of three women who all get through but their clips are so short I don't think it's fair to judge any of them too much. But **JANET WHEELER** seemed to impress Simon mostly with her looks (not an unreasonable standard), **BRITNEY STARR JAMES** really flew by and **KASI BEDFORD** had a raspy distinctive voice (to a modest degree) and seemed perky. Boy, with so few golden tickets, why rush through these women? If their auditions were so boring, why did they get through? This seems a case of no juicy backstory, no airtime.

CORNELIUS EDWARDS -- Sang "Rolling" by Tina Turner. Uh, it's called "Proud Mary" and you're singing the Tina Turner version but it's by Creedence Clearwater Revival. This is the guy who didn't sing well but his pants split so Kara urged him through because it was "hilarious." Why?

BERNADETTE AND AMANDA DESIMONE -- Two sisters, Bernadette sang "Hit The Road, Jack" and Amanda sang Whitney, not a good idea. Two lovable and loving sisters with loads of personality but not much vocal talent. They got through easily and will get airtime as they joke around. Maybe Bernadette is decent; we'll find out.

Suddenly we get an episode of *COPS* as a contestant who can't sing at all is bum-rushed away by security, all with ominous music playing in the background. If I were the judges, I wouldn't want creepy people who refuse to leave getting any airtime whatsoever.

MATT LAWRENCE - Sang "Trouble" by Ray LaMontagne. This guy robbed a bank with a BB gun at the age of 15 and spent about four years in jail. Now he wants to make his family proud. Happily, he did and scored a golden ticket. Now, "Trouble" is hardly an obscure song, but it's not Top 40 fodder either. It fits his back story and his vocal range and he nails it. People who audition and sing "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" or "Ain't No Sunshine" or "Falling" by Alicia Keys or any of the other dozen or so songs that get overdone? Try picking something NOT done to death on the show. Yeah, "Summertime" is a great song and you can even get through singing it. But you'll be that much closer to a golden ticket if you DON'T pick something the poor judges have had to sit through a thousand times. Matt did just that and he has a really good, distinctive voice. He did have one odd break in the middle of a line, waiting a moment before delivering the last word. But that was probably nerves. He sang great and he told the

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story of the song. If you actually hear the lyrics (rather than just the melody) you've got a good singer on your hands. As he walked out, Kara said, he's going Top 12. For a change, I agree with her. As a nice bonus, he seemed genuinely shocked and thrilled to hear their compliments.

So did anyone stand out for you and did you have any big disagreements with the judges -- someone who did or didn't deserve a golden ticket? Talk to me.

--30--

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jesselee26 10:04 AM on 1/24/2010

85 Fans

hate the back story. show us the full audition of the people who got golden tickets. show us a couple of hideous ones to laugh at. i agree that it seems the judges would not allow the lunatics to get attention so as not to attract just more lunatics. i think back story would be appropriate either after they've reached the top twelve... or MAYBE now and then as they're weeding them out when they first get to hollywood.

i don't mind randy, but i doubt i'm going to be able to watch next year without simon. he's the only one who seems a bit honest. kara gets up on my last nerve and bounces.

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Tallulah Morehead 08:03 PM on 1/23/2010
373 Fans



I am glad to learn I'm not the only person who gets horribly annoyed at people who announce a song is "by" someone who merely sang it, as though song writers are unimportant. When Jermaine said "Smile" was by Tony Bennett, I was throwing stuff at the TV, wanting to slap him. He had to be twice as good to overcome that. Same with back-sob-story guy who told us "Someone to Watch Over Me" was "by" Frank Sinatra, who hasn't even the best recording, or close to the best recording of it. It may be the best ballad ever written, and if you're using it for an audition and haven't even bothered to learn who wrote it, the exit doors are over there.

Frankly, I hate all the "touching" backstories. I tune in to hear singers, not to learn that so-and-so overcame leprosy, or being raised by wolves (and then the wolves got leprosy and died). I watch the auditions shows to see the freaks get insulted, and go off to open hairdressing salons for wolves. Guys getting hustled off by security or arrested, convinced that their hideous singing is great, is gold. When a "touching backstory" begins, I hit "mute."

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Also, it RUINS the suspense. They NEVER show us a touching backstory, only to have Simon tell them that the wolves who raised them should have taught them to sing better, before sending them home. "Touching" backstory means automatic pass to Hollywood. BOR-ING!!!

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jesselee26 10:07 AM on 1/24/2010

85 Fans

i agree, but i think it goes with the territory, as so many of these people are clearly not professionals.

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SILVANUS 06:45 PM on 1/25/2010

124 Fans



Clearly. Including SOME of the judges.

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Burnsey 02:50 PM on 1/22/2010

14 Fans

I agree with you on the guy with the split pants, I was surprised they sent him through.

But really, why the slams on folks who mention they are doing the cover version of a song, by a particular artist?

David Cook said that he was doing Chris Cornell's version of Billie Jean, but we all know MJ wrote it and it's his. There are differences between most versions, and pointing out that it was this persons or that persons version is sorta silly. And I would point out that it WAS Frank Sinatra in 1946 that made it a hit. Also, Smile (1936), was only a Chaplin song by virtue of the composition itself. The lyrics of the song were added in 1954, by John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons. It wasn't a big hit until it was sung by Tony Bennett.

Most people would give the most famous artist to record the song credit for it, or the artist they are covering, just like most people think "I Will Always Love You" is a Whitney Houston song, although we all know it is a Dolly Parton song. And we all know that the huge Celine Dion Song "Taking Chances" is in fact a Kara Dioguardi song, right? Isn't there enough to criticize on the abilities of these contestants to start trying to parse every little word?

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Tallulah Morehead 08:06 PM on 1/23/2010

373 Fans



It is an insult to the people who actually DID wrtie the songs.

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Burnsey 11:26 AM on 1/24/2010

14 Fans

True enough, but even the author gets Smile wrong. Only the music was written by Chaplin. The lyrics of the song were not written for almost another 20 years. All I'm saying is that if one is going to rail against the mistakes made by the contestants, then one ought to get all the information correct. And I think that the contestants are referring to the COVER they are using, not just the song. There is a LOT of difference in the versions between artists, and I think that some try to differentiate the Cover artist so that the judges will know which version they are singing.

And have you seen most of the contestants? They are mostly armatures who don't know left from right, give em some time and they will learn how to credit the song writers, rather than other performers. They are young and ill informed on the in's and out's of this stuff.

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PANTS ON THE GROUND!!! LOL

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SILVANUS 06:45 PM on 1/25/2010

124 Fans



True.

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jesselee26 10:11 AM on 1/24/2010

85 Fans

i think if you're performing a standard, maybe because you're a non-professional auditioning for a televised talent competition, you can get away with that kind of stuff.... but come on, even if you don't know gershwin wrote it... surely you realize sinatra's not the only dude who has... and one would think, to up your chances you would've checked out several versions of the song and somewhere along the line you would have come across the name gershwin. but like i said, its a goofy televised contest. the reason people like it is because these kids are not professionals.

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Michael Giltz 02:06 AM on 1/28/2010

59 Fans



Hi Burnsey, thanks for reading. I agree with most of the things you say. And if I had been harsh with the singers I would agree I should tone it back. In fact, I didn't quite remember what I wrote and wondered how biting/mean I'd been. But all I said was, "Not a big deal, but can't contestants who plan to stand in line for ten hours to audition google their song...." That seems like good advice to me and hardly a slam or parsing every word. And somehow Tin Pan Alley songs seem very different to me than pop songs when it comes to this. I wouldn't get uptight about someone calling Red Red Wine" a UB40 song even though it was written by Neil Diamond and hit by others before them. But surely "Someone To watch Over Me" is primarily a Gershwin song? Sinatra never technically had a hit single with the tune, but it was on his first (and one of THE first) albums which was a big hit in 1946. I'm a huge Sinatra fan and think his Columbia work is usually ignored but even I don't think of that standard as "his. I suppose it's possible the guy modeled himself on that version, but it doesn't sound like it to me. Cook was performing Cornell's arrangement of "Billie jean." It wasn't just polite to say that but smart since people would have wrongly accused him of ripping Cornell off if he hadn't.

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Michael Giltz 02:14 AM on 1/28/2010

59 Fans



Burnsey, you did educate me on "Smile." I had always assumed Chaplin had written the lyrics as well as the music so it's interesting to see that the authorship is contested and that the people you cite most likely wrote them, per Wikipedia at least. However, Nat King Cole was the first and only person to have a Top 10 hit with "Smile," which he did in 1954, followed by some quick copycat versions. Tony Bennett only took it to #73 in 1959, but as you say people associate a song with their favorite version. I only mentioned it in an aside. I'm glad I wasn't overly obnoxious about this in my original comments. But my advice is still good: people should spend a minute to google a song they plan to sing in their audition and make sure they have the title, artist and lyrics correct. Besides, Kara is a songwriter and it can't hurt to tip your hat to the original artist behind the tune you're singing. And it's smarter to avoid comparisons by not pointing out which version you're following. They'll know anyway.

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anonimost 01:24 PM on 1/22/2010

6 Fans

I agree with Michael on the judges. It's all about Simon, which makes me worry about Idol's future without him. I don't get the producer's appeal for Randy at all and though a scintilla better, Kara is still cringe inducing, particularly when she's trying to act cool. Simon doesn't have to act cool, he just is.

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goodgravy 07:18 PM on 1/21/2010

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i zip through the audition shows with the DVR so i can miss all the back story stuff and weed out the awful ones. the guy who split his pants won't last 5 minutes. shelby? wha? she won't last either. no one really stood out for me last night. maybe the BB gun guy but even him i'm not sure about. and if i hear "yes one billion percent yes" again from randy (kara picked up on it too last night) i'm gonna kick me a dawg.

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CAMBEL 03:58 PM on 1/21/2010

304 Fans



I'm already sick of the "Stories". The way to get through this year seems to be to recyle some personal tragedy from 5 years earlier. I mean come on, with one girl they had the mother crying about an asthma attack the girl had something like 10 years earlier, another person was talking about diseases they'd had years before, juvenile incarceration over a decade earlier etc.... Is it too much to ask that American Idol stop demanding everybody try to whore out some sort of personal hard-luck tale?

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SILVANUS 03:58 PM on 1/21/2010

124 Fans



Except for the giddy enthusiasm and energy of Jay Stone, the whole show was TORTURE.
TORTURE
TORTURE
TORTURE

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lynninny 08:49 PM on 1/21/2010

4 Fans

Agreed. Listening to Kara was just painful. I hit the mute when she was talking...that part with her trying to work the waiting crowd, urging them to "go for it..." Ugh, and her antics stretched out every audition .Letting that guy through because his pants ripped and he was "hilarious?" Really?

Talent wasn't so great either.

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SILVANUS 06:46 PM on 1/25/2010

124 Fans



Torture. Torture. Torture.

Listening to "sound" on MP3s and downloads has had its effect on mass tone deafness and shrieking.

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majormoderate 10:50 AM on 1/21/2010

10 Fans

Wow, Jay Stone was AMAZING! That was the most entertaining audition (and entertaining in a good way) that I saw so far this season! Good voice and an incredible beatboxer! Maybe more

suitied for Americas got Talent though. That kid has some serious talent.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 01:32 PM on 1/21/2010
59 Fans



Well, you're right. His beat boxing was pretty good and Blake went much farther with it than I expected -- because he could also sing without beatboxing and ultimately used it just to spice up a song when appropriate. I'm not sure Jay can do anything but beatbox. I agree with you -- America's Got Talent would have been a better fit.

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Burnsey 04:45 PM on 1/22/2010

14 Fans

looking back (via You Tube) Blake Lewis' audition was almost identical to that of jay Stone. They are both on You Tube, and Blake started out beat boxing, then sang. Jay Stone started out beat boxing and then sang. So, I'm not sure what the point is. With almost identical auditions, the only way you can make a distinction between the two is through the actual singing Blake did on the show. But the only way to make that distinction honest, equal and relevant, would be to watch jay on the show and then evaluate. From the content of the audition tapes only, there is no difference between what the two individuals presented. You are writing from the position of applying hind site to one performer.

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