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Is this blind guy the new Stevie Wonder?

Not a chance. But he did beat odds of 10,000-to-1 on 'American Idol.' See for yourself

By MICHAEL GILTZ

THINK reality shows are over? Get real. "American Idol" — a talent contest in which viewers vote for their favorite singers and decide who survives — is the latest. If it's half as successful as the British edition, Fox will have the smash of the summer.

Debating Tuesday at 9, "American Idol" will air twice a week, an hour-long show on Tuesdays and a half-hour show Wednesdays at 9:30.

More than 10,000 singers between the age of 16 and 24 have answered open calls around the country. They were winnowed down to 120 appearing on the first show, which quickly gets cut to 30.

Judges — pop star Paula Abdul, record industry veteran Randy Jackson, and British impresario Simon Cowell — pull up people from the 30 to be the finalists.

That's when viewers take charge — voting takes place each Wednesday after the singers tackle songs from categories like pop, standards, and R & B. And that's why co-executive producer Nigel Lythgoe says the show was such a smash overseas.

"The public was involved," says Lythgoe, who made a name importing "American Gladiators" to the UK in the '90s and working on "The Muppet Show" in the '70s. "They knew it was up to them."

"Survivor" and other reality shows — they don't actually get to vote."

One clear difference between the UK and American editions appeared immediately, the producers say.

"The talent we've got on this American series far outweighs what we had in the UK," says Lythgoe. "We've got 33 kids now and at least 10 of them have the tal-



Blind singer Danny Keane (above) from Farmingdale, Long Island went to an audition of "American Idols," where judges (l-r) Randy Jackson, Paula Abdul and Simon Cowell gave him the OK.

ent and the opportunity to become stars." Cowell — who became notorious for his cutting critiques and who runs the BMG label in the UK — agrees.

"I really do believe the talent that's come out of this show already is unbelievable," he says. "I think we've unearthed three or four people who are fantastic."

Jackson, who's worked as a musician or producer with everyone from Mariah Carey to Bob Dylan, says: "Having done A&R [artists and repertoire] for 12 years, I think it's some of the best talent I've ever seen. It's probably better than when I was with a label."

But the real fun of the first episode are glimpses of singers who are utterly char-

less about their chances in show business — and become furious when the judges tell them in no uncertain terms it would be best if they found another career.

"The kids without talent had more attitude than the kids with the talent," says Lythgoe. "It's never good to hear: 'Your voice sucks.'"

Cowell felt they were doing these misguided souls a favor. Besides, it's hard to remain polite after hearing the "I Believe I Can Fly" the first 100 times.

"People say, 'God, you look so irritable,'" Cowell says. "I say, 'You sit there for nine hours and listen to 150 versions of 'I Believe I Can Fly.' And you try and smile.' It's soul destroying and boring."

One contestant who made it past that

first gauntlet is Danny Keane, an 18-year-old artist from Farmingdale, Long Island.

Keane, who is blind, went to the audition on a lark. He performs around the tri-state area regularly, is working on a demo and has performed in front of thousands of people, so singing for some judges should have been a cakewalk.

"But I was so nervous," admits Keane, who may have helped his cause by singing the classic Stevie Wonder song "You Are The Sunshine Of My Life."

Talent is what the show is about but Cowell is clearly its secret weapon and biggest drawing card. He is a prickly, opinionated judge that viewers either love for saying what they were thinking — or hate after seeing him reduce a contestant to tears.

Cowell's nickname after the show began airing in Britain? Mr. Nasty.

"I always denied I was being nasty; I was being honest," says Cowell, who also found himself compared to "Weakest Link" dominatrix Anne Robinson.

Even the successful, original UK version took its lumps, with celebrities like George Michael decrying it for "manufacturing" celebrities.

"This is a case of the pot calling the kettle black," Cowell says. "Here is a man who used to wear the tightest shorts on earth singing songs called 'Wake Me Up Before You Go Go' and he's lecturing me on credibility! Yeah, right."