

Golden 'Idol' holiday gamble

Can these kids change forever the way we watch Christmas TV?



'Idol' winners from 11 countries, including Alex (left), Guy Sebastian and Will Young with Kelly Clarkson (below), face off.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

DOES the "American Idol" Santa have one more gift in his bag?

The talent show has been a ratings superstar for Fox and a ray of sunshine in the otherwise gloomy climate of record sales.

Tonight, "World Idol" airs in more than 20 countries, with "American Idol" Kelly Clarkson and original UK "Pop Idol" Will Young facing off against 9 other winners from around the world.

Why air such a potentially big show on Christmas night, when TV is usually a bunch of reruns and families traditionally go out to the movies?

Because elsewhere around the world, Christmas night is among the biggest TV nights of the year — jam-packed with specials and favorite shows, the equivalent of Super Bowl night here. In England, for instance, Christmas Day helped launch "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire."

Can America learn to love Christmas night TV?

"Fox has a tough task in changing American habits," says Marc Berman, the Nielsen ratings guru at Mediaweek.

"It should do okay," he says, pointing out that last year Fox aired a rerun of the animated movie "Anastasia." "World Idol" will certainly do better than that, he says.

"It's not a night people watch TV," says Berman adding: "But 'World Idol' should be the highest rated show of the night."

The idea is to entice viewers through their patriotism — encourage them to root — and then vote — for America's Clarkson to outshine singers from the Netherlands (Jamai Loman), Australia (Guy Sebastian) and Poland (who calls herself Alex, real name: Alicja Janosz), among others.

It's a nationalist karaoke match Europeans indulge in every year during a highly rated special called Eurovision that does much the same thing.

Even convincing Clarkson and Young to participate was a bit tricky. (If the show turns



into an annual event, future "Idol" winners will doubtless be contractually obliged to take part.)

As judge Simon Cowell points out, Grammy nominee Clarkson and Young had "no incentive" to take part, while the relative unknowns from elsewhere "would jump at the chance to beat those two. All Kelly and Will can do is go from winners to losers."

But while Young has proven Idols needn't be a flash in the pan — he's had five No. 1 sin-

gles and his second album just debuted in the top spot — neither he nor Clarkson has been able to parlay their relatively local fame into international stardom. (Young charmed the pants off journalists during a press conference last year for "American Idol," but his on-air American debut fell resoundingly flat.)

At worst, if US viewers don't huddle around the TV, at least the young singers have a chance to show off their chops in front of 50 million potential record buyers around the world.

ABC too sees potential in Christmas night. It is debuting its NBA basketball season (with Justin Timberlake singing the new theme song — take that, Kelly Clarkson) tonight also.

Perhaps, Christmas night TV will become the same draw that Thanksgiving was when "Friends" and Must See TV began offering new episodes during the late '90s and created a sort of instant tradition.

"It worked for NBC," concedes Berman.

Betting the 'World' on Kelly

A MERICAN "Idol" winner Kelly Clarkson is also the odds-on favorite to win "World Idol," airing tonight (8 p.m.) on Fox.

Several Internet betting sites, including Betwwts.com and Mybetting.co.uk, have Clarkson beating U.K. "Idol" winner Will Young on tonight's show — which pits 11 champs from around the world against each other.

Snarky "Idol" judge Simon Cowell will be one of tonight's judges for the two-part competition, which wraps next Thursday, Jan. 1, at 9 p.m. (Ch. 5). — Post TV Staff