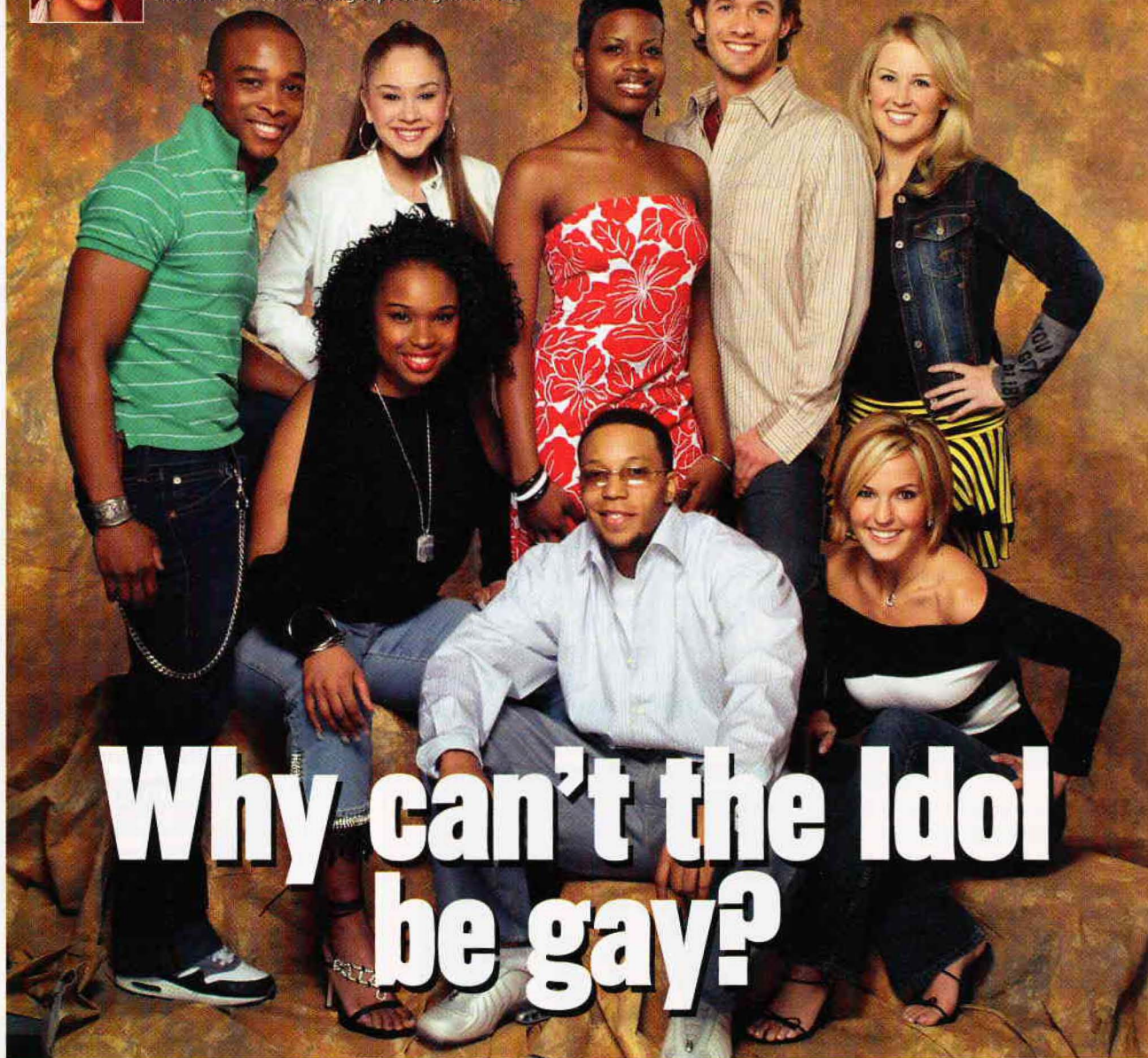




Girls and boys

Were semifinalists Briana Ramirez-Rial (left) and Marque Lynche (below, left, with other semifinalists) eliminated for not fulfilling expected gender roles?



Why can't the Idol be gay?

It was the Wild Card night of performances on Fox TV's *American Idol*, and 23-year-old Marque Lynche was standing in front of the judges. In a new twist, a dozen handpicked semifinalists who hadn't yet made it to the final 12 were told to practice all week, but they wouldn't find out until the live broadcast whether they'd get a chance to sing for their one last shot.

The judges took turns handing out the verdict, and Lynche—looking handsome and confident and very *Fame* with his sleeveless vest, stud earrings, dangling crucifix, and dancer's body—was

television

America's favorite reality TV contest may be cutting contestants who appear "too gay" By Michael Giltz

facing the tart-tongued Simon Cowell.

"Marque, we brought you back because we all think you are a good singer," Cowell said as more than 24 million viewers watched. "However, we think you are more of a stage singer. Therefore you will not be on the show tonight."

Lynche's mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?" he asked. "Sorry," said Cowell. Lynche walked off the stage in a haze, never to be seen again.

What happened? Why would someone who all the judges agree has a good voice not be allowed to sing?

Fox declined to put *The Advocate* in touch with Lynche, but some believe he was penalized for not seeming hetero enough. Lynche has a real theater background—he joined the cast of the stage musical *Fame on 42nd St.* on April 13—but many *Idol* watchers believe that when the judges say someone is

"too Broadway," what they're really saying is "You seem gay." Carla Hay of *Billboard* is one such observer.

"For people who don't know the [gay] culture, that comment may go over their heads," says Hay, who covers TV for the music industry bible. "But from my point of view, that's basically what Simon is saying. Anyone he deems 'too Broadway' is someone he feels is too effeminate. And he only says it about male singers. He didn't say that for Frenchie Davis, who has *been* to Broadway."

Contestants who read as gay have become scarce in the current third season—although that's an admittedly subjective observation, since only one contestant so far, season 1 finalist Jim Verraros, has come out. "When I first auditioned, there were so many, so many gay guys in the top 30," says Verraros, who begins a tour of gay clubs in May and stars in the new gay film festival favorite *Eating Out*. "We were definitely the most sexually diverse. Absolutely."

Since Verraros's departure, the only inarguably gay content on *Idol* has come from the mock gay-baiting between the

superstraight Cowell and host Ryan Seacrest, who happily embraces his metrosexuality but says he isn't gay—or from kidding contestants like footballer Matthew Rogers, who sang to Cowell after he was voted off on March 24.

Hay notes that this season also seems "less gay" because women contestants are dominating and the judges rarely single out women as "too Broadway." Instead, suspender-clad final-32 contestant Briana Ramirez-Rial (also unavailable to *The Advocate*) got the equivalent of an antilebian slam when she was deemed too "angry" before getting cut. Was she not feminine enough? "She looked very butch," Hay agrees.

The judges' gender standards may be enforced even in preliminaries. An openly gay *Idol* hopeful named David, who sang for an anonymous screening panel at Houston's Minute Maid Park, recalls that he was told "I had an amazing voice and was very talented—but I needed to work on my 'marketability.'" Leaving the stadium, he says, "I sulked down the dark hallway pondering what 'marketability' could be, exactly."

Would viewers care whether an *Idol* favorite was gay? British fans don't: Will Young, the first winner of the original *Pop Idol*, revealed that he's gay immediately after his victory and has since released two hit albums. Another U.K. talent show, *Fame Academy*, was won by "baby dyke" Alex Parks. No, it's not viewers who would mind, Hay says, "it's the record labels." Many fans, on the other hand, "would find Britney Spears portraying a Lolita when she was underage more offensive than if Clay Aiken was openly gay."

Aiken has said emphatically that he's straight—and *The Advocate* has no information about Lynch's or Ramirez-Rial's orientation—but Hay speculates that even the teenage Claymates probably wouldn't mind a gay *Idol*. "Kids now are more open-minded than their parents or grandparents," she says. "If Clay were gay and came out of the closet, I don't think that would hurt his record sales." But we may never know. ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.