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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted February 18, 2009 | 11:35 AM (EST)

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American Idol -- Top 36 Round One



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UPDATE: Hollywood Reporter says that **American Idol drew 25.1 million people** for its two hour broadcast, up a tad from last week.

Now I start to pay attention. Some people love the goofy auditions. Some love the high drama of Hollywood Week(s). I really enjoy the show once the focus is on the singing and we actually get to vote. How much did America enjoy it? We won't know until Friday because **the ratings are being held back for three days by Nielsen** while 421 stations around the country convert to all digital.

This could seriously mess with the overnights and Nielsen wants to make sure it gets the numbers right.

So on to the **Top 36**, with a guarantee from me that 20+ million people were checking out Tatiana, Danny and the rest. I listed Tatiana first, but the suggestion from Mediaweek's Marc Berman that she will be the top female vote getter is too horrible to contemplate. For the next three weeks, we get 12 contestants performing for 80 seconds each. The top male and female vote getter move on, as does the next highest vote getter of them all. That makes nine in all with a Wild Card round where the rest get to perform again and the judges select three more. So out of 100,000 auditions, it's down to this. I suppose you could argue about the mix of people in each group but it seemed to work out alright. I don't think more than three people gave a decent performance.

Jackie Tohn -- raspy rocker chick wearing some hot pants from the Seventies and singing Elvis Presley's "A Little Less Conversation," a minor tune of his reworked and made famous via a Nike ad. She sort of rapped a bit and growled a bit and I liked her Farrah Fawcett hair. But very unmemorable. Bizarrely, Randy, Kara and Paula all said it was great...except for the singing. Huh?

Ricky Braddy -- One of a number of people being introduced to us practically for the first time. Clearly a judge favorite and I dug the red velvet jacket, but he was draggy and a bit precious to me,

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especialy with the fluttering eyes and iffy falsetto. His parents were already sporting "The Braddy Bunch" t-shirt and I couldn't help wondering if they made them for the show or have had them for years. Randy, Kara and Paula all seemed wowed but Simon nailed it by calling him "a nice shy guy with a very good voice."

Alexis Grace -- looking rather mature and dressed up, Grace sang Aretha's "Never Loved A Man" and while she never owned it and was a tad dowdy looks-wise, all the judges loved her and Smon trotted out the Kelly Clarkson reference, which was the first time Grace lost her reserve and seemed overwhelmed. In the audience we get a glimpse of Neil Patrick Harris (a hell of a singer himself) and Ted Danson. If only they would have a theme week devoted to Dr. Horrible.

Brent Keith -- sang "Hick Town" with some serious dimples on display. He wasn't great, but this was the first time I felt like the performer knew who they were and what kind of artist they wanted to be. Randy and Paula liked him, Kara was mixed and Simon thought no one would remember it. Simon also got off the funniest line when Paula named some former Idols who recorded country music as an example of the success Brent could have and Simon responded with "What HAS happened to Bucky Convington?" As always, he is seen as mean for being blunt when in fact it was Paula who was silly for touting Bucky as a success story. I think country fans could support Brent but unfortunately two much more popular male singers performed tonight.

Stevie Wright -- 17 year old sweetie who sang Taylor Swift's "You Belong With Me" very poorly. All the judges panned her, with Randy, Kara and Paula all saying, "Who are you?" instead of just saying a performance was bad, they repeatedly spent the night telling performers they should have stuck with the type of song they wowed them with during auditions. (Was Stevie really supposed to keep dragging out old soul classics like "At Last" every week? The truth is that you have to sing all sorts of genres to win on Idol, so anyone showing versatility has a big advantage. And if Wright had done a good job, they would have praised her for showing another side of her personality. Simon almost made her cry by saying she would be going home.

Anoop Desai -- sang "Angel Of Mine," a tune I don't even know. It was too serious an the judges were all mixed, saying they liked him but not the song. Still, Simon said he had "massive likability" and thanks to all the airtime he enjoyed, I bet Anoop has enough of a fan base to make it through.

Casey Carlson -- sang "Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic" by the Police. Tons of hair on display and the band sounded especially tinny in the background, prompting Simon to make one of numerous derogatory comments about the arrangements and the band's performance. Everyone hated it but I hated it when the judges acted as if no one should ever sing a Police tune. "Nobody does those songs" insisted Kara. By the way, this is really Kara's first chance to shine and she hasn't. I thought she fit in smoothly during the auditions, but I'm waiting for her to offer up one fresh insight that none of the others had. So far, she's either gushing too much or seeming to echo Randy. There's only so much you can say about an 80 second performance, so that's not a lack of imagination on her part. But if you've got a new judge, you want to hear them SAY something new and different. Otherwise, why are they there?

Michael Sarver -- dragged out that Gavin DeGraw tune and to my mind made Brent look good. All his attempts to get gritty or rock out fell flat.

Ann Marie Boskovich -- more Aretha, this time "(You Make Me Feel Like A) Natural Woman." She's one of the ringers, a demo singer and she looked great in a blue dress. I felt like the judges were harder on her because of her pro background, which is appropriate in my book: she should have the experience to shine more at this early stage. Simon's comment - that if they were looking for the "best hotel singer in California" -- was especially apt and cruel.

Stephen Fowler -- butchered Michael Jackson's "Rock With You," especially on the big high notes, which strangely was the one part of his awful performance the judges complimented. Agai, kara insisted that "'Rock With You' is the kiss of death. It belongs to one artist. Michael Jackson." Unless of course you sing it well, in which case it would have been a great performance.

Tatiana Del Toro -- a nice pretty outfit that wasn't too dressy (often the mistake women make when singing something like a Whitney Houston ballad), Tatiana was relatively demure, sure, but exactly how kooky could she behave when standing onstage and singing "Saving All My Love For You?" Really, what did the judges expect her to do? Her dramatic pose at the end was priceless, as was her response to the question 'who are you?' "I fit everywhere," said Tatiana. "It's world music. It's all genres." Yes, book her on a reality show pronto. No, do not put her through for not totally

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Danny Gokey -- sang Mariah Carey's "Hero," a song I don't like in the least. My friend Aaron warned me that the judges whooped it up as if Danny had just delivered the knockout performance of all time and indeed Randy, Kara and Paula were over the top in their praise. On the other hand, Danny was in fact 100 times better than everyone else tonight. I wasn't listening for sharp notes or checking out facial tics or how he moved on stage. I was watching a genuine performance. If the song had been great, I would have liked it even more. But he definitely has a Michael McDonald/Taylor Hicks raspy soul thing going on.

So my prediction is that Danny Gokey will be the top male, Alexis Grace the top female and Anoop will slide in thanks to a strong Desi vote and his massive airtime. Who was your favorite and who do you think will get through. You can read [Ken Levine's rundown here](#) or savor [Entertainment Weekly's Michael Slezak here](#). And if you miss Melinda Doolittle, her first solo album has received some strong reviews and you can [catch up with Melinda here](#).

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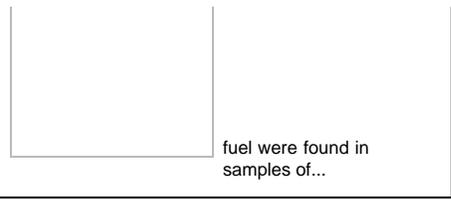
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Umm.... I said this to Simon last night (yelling at the tv): Bucky Covington has done really, really well for himself. Since his days on Idol, he's enjoyed three consecutive top 10 singles from his first CD and is



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working on his second CD. He's a regular on GAC and the country music world has embraced him wholeheartedly. He'll be playing music for a living for the rest of his career.

Simon always downplays the success that non-winners experience as a result of their exposure on the show. Every year, on the show at least, he pretends that there is only one "winner" even though the show has launched many careers. I can understand that he wants the contestants to be competing, out to win it all. And, of course, in order for the show to remain relevant (and profitable) America must keep caring enough to vote. If the show lauded the success of every 8th place contestant, like Bucky, then what would be the point of voting?

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Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Thanks for the Bucky update. I see he also has a brief role in the Hannah Montana feature film opening in April. Simon aside, I disagree with your take on the show's attitude towards the success of non-winners. It is a HUGE part of the show's appeal that numerous people in the final 12 get a genuine shot at success and make the most of it. Clay Aiken, Jennifer Hudson, Daughtry -- the list of people that didn't win but have validated the show's ability to find and promote talent is growing constantly. Heck, they even used a Daughtry song to say goodbye to contestants. They're no fools: the bigger the stars these people become, the more the show is proven a success on every level. That's why they're all invited back regularly and made a fuss over.

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