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## A Dose of Reality: American Idol 7: The Top 10 (and the Years They Were Born)

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Tonight we were "treated" to songs from the years that the remaining 10 Idol contestants were born. Of course, "treat" isn't exactly accurate, at least for most of the performances. It was really more like being able to witness the Titanic as it sped toward an iceberg, but not being able to yell at the crew to slow down.

It's hard not to keep repeating this frustration, but you'd think that after the previous five weeks of performances that our Top 10 would get at least a vague idea about how to pick a winning song. Some of them have. But curiously, many of them are still forgetting that this is about impressing voters. On "American Idol," you have less than two minutes to make a connection with potential fans, and you'll lose precious time if you're singing something few people have ever heard. And if you choose something familiar, make sure it's something that presents somewhat of a challenge, but that doesn't require more from you than you're capable of delivering (or more than what the viewers want to hear).

Tonight, several of our performers wandered into those icy waters going full-steam-ahead, and at least one nailed the proverbial iceberg head-on. Others may have suffered only glancing blows, and one that appears indestructible, meaning that the iceberg itself incurred most of the damage. This evening, the S.S. Malubay soared toward a date with the Bottom Three, and may end up at center stage "Alone." After a great "Yesterday," the S.S. Mercado's tomorrow looks less certain, even after a good vocal performance of an unfamiliar tune. Sailing next to her was the S.S. Eze and the S.S. Castro, both of whom were respectable with little-known songs by very familiar artists. And rounding out the fleet -- the S.S. Archuleta, a ship made of such hardened steel a mere iceberg will likely do more damage than a small scratch.

OK, so this may be a stretch, but honestly, don't you usually want to hear fresh new performances of familiar songs? There were a few of those tonight, and to those performers we give lifeboats so they can raft away to the next week's theme. Unfortunately, most of tonight was a curiosity; we have to hope that they'll start getting the picture soon, and that better song choices and performances -- calmer seas, if you will -- lie directly ahead.

### **Ramiele Malubay - "Alone"**

Last week, she "should have known better." This week, she reminds us that she should be "alone." Frankly, I wish I'd been alone without a TV during this performance. So Ramiele was sick this week. I'm genuinely sorry to hear that, but to be honest, she didn't sound so hot when she was healthy. Leave it to cast mama Paula Abdul to tell America just how sick Ramiele was this week. What was strange here is that Randy Jackson played the heavy to Simon Cowell's good guy. Pardon? We're really in for a strange week if this performance -- and the judges' reaction to it -- is any indication. Back to Ramiele; her vocals this week were shrill and unlistenable for much of it, and Randy was dead-on -- the pitch was all over the place. This was bad karaoke done badly, and it should earn Ramiele a trip home ... but it probably won't.

### **Jason Castro - "Fragile"**

America's favorite dreadlocked stoner is also becoming this show's most predictable performer. Each week, we know that he'll most likely pick up his guitar, sing the first part without the band and then launch into a number we'd hear in a college coffeehouse. This week, the number was Sting's "Fragile," and it wasn't really bad. It just wasn't really memorable, and its utter predictability stripped it of any originality. The song's saving grace was its semi-Latin arrangement, as well as Jason's Spanish lyrics toward the end. Jason has a sizeable fan base and is almost certainly safe this week, but he's rapidly becoming boring,

big-haired Syesha, but with her came the big-voiced Syesha, who belted out this song like a true diva. Initially, I would have thought a more recognizable song would have worked better for her, but Syesha was also born in 1987 -- the same year as Ramiere, and we know how well "Alone" didn't work for her. My guess is that America will appreciate Syesha's performance, but that she will have missed the connection with the audience because most of them simply didn't recognize what she was singing. Hopefully, enough viewers and (callers) will remember how good she was with the Beatles' "Yesterday" to save her for at least another week.

#### **Chikezie Eze - "If Only For One Night"**

I really like Chikezie, but like Syesha, he chose a great song -- that most people weren't familiar with. He chose a number by Luther Vandross, but it seems to me to be the wrong song by Luther. The better choice might have been "Wait for Love," or even Billy Ocean's "Suddenly." Instead, Chikezie opted for "If Only for One Night," and he was very good in his delivery of it, as he performed it with a lot of style and panache, and I absolutely love his tone and vocal quality. But Chikezie is so close to the bottom of this competition that being memorable each week is an absolute must. Despite his best efforts, I fear that Chikezie will be easily forgotten, especially after a host of more memorable performances that followed his.

#### **Brooke White - "Every Breath You Take"**

Brooke's choice tonight was an interesting one. I was hoping to hear her rework a number by a male artist, perhaps something like Lionel Richie's "Truly," or Kenny Loggins' "Heart to Heart." Indeed, she did choose a guy's song -- The Police's "Every Breath You Take." Somehow, I think that a lot of guys wouldn't mind if someone as sweet and beautiful as Brooke was obsessed with them. Brooke looked more beautiful tonight than she had all season, but that was probably what worked best for her. A semi-positive aspect to her performance was how she started it -- with a missed note. But like a true professional, she immediately recovered from it, and never looked back. The arrangement itself was the big problem. This was almost a cross-section of "Let It Be" and last week's "Here Comes the Sun" -- Brooke was apparently trying to be tender and sincere at the piano, but the arrangement seemed to be trying to infuse this song with energy when that energy wasn't called for. I tend to agree with Simon and Randy -- this might have worked a lot better if she never used the band. As it was, this came across to me a little like Muzak. Brooke will be safe, but she needs to start choosing better numbers if she's to have a chance to be the winner.

#### **Michael Johns - "We Will Rock You/We Are the Champions"**

After weeks of disappointing us with questionable song choices and less-than-stellar performances, Michael finally hit the jackpot tonight. His choice of Queen's "We Will Rock You/We Are the Champions" gave us one of this season's biggest moments. On stage, Michael looked the part of the rock star, and Idol gave him the rock star treatment with a solid band arrangement and a big light show. More important, Michael sounded the part of the rock star. His vocals were better than they've been all season, though he did undersell the biggest notes (after all, he *isn't* Freddie Mercury). For the first time this year, Michael finally revealed that he's interested in being more than a contestant on this show -- now we know he'd actually like to win it.

#### **Carly Smithson - "Total Eclipse of the Heart"**

More and more, I'm beginning to agree with some of Carly's critics who claim that she basically wrings the life out of every song she sings. Tonight, I'd go as far as saying that she took a butcher's mallet and tried to tenderize "Total Eclipse of the Heart" by beating the ever-living hell out of it. I've said all season that Carly is "the voice," and I still think she has the best vocals of anyone on this show. The problem is that she's so utterly intense that she looks angry every time she sings. Tonight, her "evil glare" was back, but she added a new wrinkle (aside from the ones in her too-tight skirt) -- some interesting hip thrusts as she sang "...forever's gonna start tonight..." It wasn't exactly bad, because Carly did hit every note -- perhaps because she was being so intense. But then there was the ending -- and it all came apart at the seams. Carly tried to deliver the big ending instead of ending it with a simple, single note. She missed the mark, and the effect was overkill. Carly has been having trouble making a connection with fans all season, and I doubt this performance will do much to help her in that regard.

#### **David Archuleta - "You're the Voice"**

David has largely been bulletproof, even following a disastrous performance of the Beatles' "We Can Work it Out." Unfortunately, this week's theme caused some problems for David in that he was born in a year (1990) when good music decided to take the year off. He already performed his natural choice -- Phil Collins' "Another Day in Paradise" -- several weeks ago, and most of the year's top hits weren't things you'd ever

have recognized it instantly and he could have rekeyed it to fit his range. Instead, we had David awkwardly dancing (if it was dancing at all) and singing with his eyes closed for most of the performance. Granted, he did a respectable job vocally, but it was a far cry from his best, and it was another crack that left the door open for another David to creep toward the front of the pack.

#### **Kristy Lee Cook - "God Bless the USA"**

When the song list for this show came out a few hours in advance of the airing, I looked at Kristy's song selection and had to smile. Finally, she got a theme that gave her room to work, and Simon described her choice perfectly -- it was one of the shrewdest choices I've ever seen on "American Idol." In singing Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA," Kristy picked a number that was a perfect fit for her preferred genre, while at the same time choosing something that virtually every viewer would connect with. Did she sing better than in previous weeks? Perhaps, but not markedly so. Kristy's connection with the audience was through the song itself -- a patriotic number that made me want to stand up and wave a flag. I doubt it will do anything more than save her for another week, but right now, she just needed a break from the Bottom Two or Three. For the song choice alone -- as well as for a somewhat improved performance -- she deserves to come back for another round.

#### **David Cook - "Billie Jean"**

I know what a lot of you are saying -- Billie Jean? The Michael Jackson number? Frankly, this initially seemed like a good song choice to me, and it still does. It was the arrangement that threw me a bit. A lot of people are beginning to think that Chris is an amazing arranger, but truthfully, he is mostly a great student of other people's works. Tonight, he borrowed this version from Chris Cornell (formerly of Audioslave and Soundgarden), and it came across as a bit strange to me. To be honest, I really didn't recognize most of the song outside of the lyrics and a shred of the melody once in a while. What worked was David's vocals, which had been criticized in the past as average, but tonight were exposed as phenomenal. While Michael's performance was probably the night's best moment, David C.'s vocals were the tops of the evening -- by a mile. He also gets huge props for taking a big risk by performing an unfamiliar version of an incredibly popular song -- and then pulling it off in spite of the arrangement. Look for David to remain near the front of the pack in the race for the finale.

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