

## A Dose of Reality: American Idol 7: The Top 4 Try to Avoid the Hall of Shame

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All season long I've been a pretty big critic of *American Idol's* single-songwriter genres, which have often contributed to making some fairly curious song choices. Tonight, those genres were cast aside in favor of songs from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame -- a 500-song catalog that allowed contestants to finally choose on a level playing field that would hopefully reveal what kind of artist we could expect them to be once the show ends.

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At this point in the series, the performers' tendencies should be telling us a lot about what will happen once the final curtain falls. Tonight's show further confirmed my conceptions about each of the "final four" -- in both positive and negative directions:

- **David Archuleta** appears to have an abundance of involvement from his father. Unfortunately, that could create some uncomfortable post-Idol situations when the 19E powers-that-be start to make decisions for little David's career. While David is completely enamored of deep, meaningful ballads (which he once again chose for tonight's performances), it's fairly certain that his future producers will steer him toward some Top 40-friendly upbeat tunes.
- **Jason Castro** is an enigma. I will grant his fans this: He's a completely unique and uncommon young man. But I'm not yet sure if that's a positive or it more likely means that he's uniquely odd and uncommonly stubborn. Does he have talent? Yes. But does that talent extend to songwriting and supreme instrumental gifting? That remains to be seen. His chosen genre -- folk -- will never sell millions of records, and it's generally populated by artists who compose most of their own songs. As yet, Jason doesn't strike me as much of a singer-songwriter.
- **David Cook** is very sure of himself and will undoubtedly release a slightly alternative rock CD (as long as 19E's producers don't get in the way). Tonight's song choices weren't his strongest, but they did show that he'll totally gravitate toward rock in his post-Idol career.
- **Sysha Mercado** is another curiosity. For most of the season, I was convinced she fancied herself to be the next Whitney or Mariah. She still might, but in the past few weeks, she has developed into this show's most interesting performer. She seems to live to entertain, and in that respect, she might have a decent chance at post-Idol success. Her name might be bound for Broadway lights, but I wouldn't write off a decent CD for Miss Mercado.

Of course, those CDs will have to wait a couple of weeks until the penultimate winner is announced. It's hard to believe, but we're only 14 days removed from the finale, and the next 15 performances we hear on the final two performance shows will hopefully clarify just who has the best chance as at success as the next American Idol.

### David Cook:

**Song #1 - "Hungry Like the Wolf" (Duran Duran)**

**Song #2 - "Baba O'Reilly" (The Who)**

It's no secret that Rocker David has been one of my favorites on the show this season, but I was a bit surprised by his choice of Duran Duran's "Hungry Like the Wolf." That group was the definition of early-80s pop-rock, and Simon LeBon's vocals are indelibly linked with the tune. Stranger still was David's decision to sing the song pretty much straight-on, with very few Cook-like liberties taken with the arrangement. It wasn't exactly bad, but it also wasn't up to the standards that David has set for himself.

Better was his version of The Who's "Baba O'Reilly." This time, he did mix up the song a bit, and though his vocals weren't incredible (see his performance of "Music of the Night" on Andrew Lloyd Webber Night), they were still above average. David definitely commands the stage, and after tonight, he almost certain still commands attention at the head of the pack.

**Syeshia Mercado:****Song #1 - "Proud Mary" (Tina Turner)****Song #2 - "A Change is Gonna Come" (Sam Cooke)**

For once, the judges didn't use the dreaded "B" word in their assessment of Syeshia's performances. This in spite of her obvious theatrics on her opening number, Tina Turner's "Proud Mary." The judges also gave her a pass in not comparing her to Season 2's Trenyce, who had a stellar turn with the same song. Syeshia's version came across as a little **too** rehearsed, but it was entertaining nonetheless. On top of that, Syeshia looked every bit the part of the star with her straightened performance-night hair and her shimmering metallic dress. Frankly, she's sexy and she knows it.

For her second number, she chose the lesser-known "A Change is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke, and the result was pure emotion. In spite of a downgrade in her vocals, Syeshia sang with passion and conviction, and her post-performance emotions only confirmed that for me. (And on top of that, her flowing gold dress was a huge upgrade from the previous performance. She seems to get more beautiful with each passing performance.) I know that some will say that it was all an act, but if it was, she deserves an Oscar. Amazingly, Syeshia has turned on the charm and hit a chord with her performances at exactly the right time. Can you imagine her now singing in the Top 3? Mark it down -- it's going to happen.

**Jason Castro:****Song #1 - "I Shot the Sheriff" (Bob Marley)****Song #2 - "Mr. Tambourine Man" (Bob Dylan)**

In my power rankings, I cited a report that quoted Jason as saying that he was ready to go home. That earned me a letter from a reader that said that quote was taken out of context. Based on tonight's performances, I'd assert that the article was right and the reader is wrong -- Jason looks every bit like that guy who's lost interest in this show. To begin with, he played straight into the "stoner" image (which, granted, cannot be proven) by singing Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff." Instead of keeping his dreadlocks pulled back in a ponytail, Jason let them flow down unhindered in an effort to play on the reggae image. Of course, his performance was also a carbon copy of what you'd expect from a decent cover band -- not what you'd expect from one of the four best unsigned recording artists in America. At worst, it was total cheese; at its best, it was pretty good karaoke.

Song No. 2 was a song by another Bob -- Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man." This time, average karaoke was marred by something you won't find from karaoke -- dropped lyrics. And frankly, it was one of the worst examples of line dropping I've ever seen. Early in the song, the words disappeared from Jason's head and were replaced by, "And emp em enna uh uh uh uh fallowin may." The version was so bad that not even Jason's fans in the crowd could muster much enthusiasm for him. It was a meltdown of an evening for him, and he's almost certainly getting his possible wish for a trip back to Texas.

**David Archuleta:****Song #1 - "Stand by Me" (Ben E. King)****Song #2 - "Love Me Tender" (Elvis Presley)**

Little David seems to alternate between great weeks and average ones. This week he was due, and he delivered in a big way. On his first number, standing in one spot (yet again) he tackled Ben E. King's "Stand by Me," and he was at least as good as when he sang the song to himself in the bathroom mirror (as he admitted doing in his pre-performance interview). No, his wardrobe is not great. (Who put him in the black and white Jonathan Livingston Seagull-esque T-shirt?) And it's true, he has very little stage presence. But no one can run around notes like little David does. In spite of his flaws, this was the best song of the night to this point.

That is, until his second song, Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender." Seated on a stool and backed only by a piano, David ran circles around the classic melody. I know that I say that the stool usually sucks all energy out of a performance, but David's vocals had all the energy this number required. Despite a couple of missed notes and a vocal disappearance on one note at the end, David absolutely nailed the last song of the night. Coming into this week, I said that he had lost the momentum heading toward the finale. In my opinion, he seized that back tonight.

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