

A Dose of Reality: American Idol 7: The Top 7 Take on Mariah Carey


by [Doug DeBolt](#)

Published: April 16, 2008

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Think quick -- which of the following things did I look forward to **the least**:

- My visit to the doctor for a nagging cough that deprives me of sleep.
- Finishing up my tax returns and praying to God I don't owe money or get audited.
- Mariah Carey Night with the *American Idol* Top 7.

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If you answered anything other than [The Emancipation of Mimi](#), I'm sending my cough and the IRS to you.

Honestly, how many times have you heard the *American Idol* judges rip into a contestant for going head-to-head with the "taboo" names in music -- Whitney, Celine and, yes, Mariah. But here we are, faced with a theme wrapped around one of those names. The prospect wasn't just daunting -- it was nauseating, especially for the guys. How could this year's crop of Idols -- or any year's group, for that matter -- tackle Mariah's songbook and bring any justice to it?

In retrospect, the evening was far less annoying than this cough (which is keeping me from getting this review done as quickly as I'd like), and far less painful than an IRS audit (or so I imagine, since I'm blessed to have avoided one thus far). "The most talented cast in Idol history" didn't do half-bad, though there were definitely a number of hiccups along the way. Still, I really wish this show's producers would be less concerned about marketing tie-ins than they are about finding the best undiscovered singer in America -- which is the purported mission of *American Idol*.

Now that "Mariah Night" is behind us, we can all worry about next week's theme -- the Andrew Lloyd Webber catalogue, which sports exactly zero No. 1 hits (unlike Mariah, who is now the most successful solo artist of all time). At least my tax return is behind me...

David Archuleta - "[When You Believe](#)"

It's a shame that David A. led off the show tonight, because my first thought about his rendition of "When You Believe" (from *The Prince of Egypt*) was, "This will probably end up as the best performance of the evening." Unfortunately, people who go first are often forgotten by the time the show ends, but I suspect that won't happen to young David, whose fans are among the most rabid in this show's history. Unlike some of his past performances, this one deserves that level of devotion. He absolutely chose the perfect song -- a slow ballad chock-full-o depth and meaning. And he performed it without a single flaw, and threw in some nice runs and a cool bit of falsetto at the end. If it had closed the show, we'd have said it was "a moment." As it was, it was a nice beginning to the night, and another feather in the cap for a kid who could fly all the way to the AI7 crown.

Carly Smithson - "[Without You](#)"

Week after week, Carly's wardrobe, hair and makeup continue to improve. Sadly, that often hasn't been the case for her performances. Tonight, she definitely looked the part of a diva, dressed in a low-cut black dress that she wore over sheer black leggings. But despite what the judges added to the mix (something that amounted to, "It had a few pitch problems and it wasn't your best"), Carly was infinitely better this week than last. Whereas, on "Inspirational Song Night," Carly came across as overly forceful and vocally brutal, tonight she started simply and built from there. The slow, basic arrangement allowed her to show some real feeling in her performance, and the result was a big improvement (though I do agree that it wasn't her best). One thing the judges didn't catch: At the end, Carly appeared to be surprised by something the band did, though she jumped back into the song and finished it well.

Syeshia Mercado - "Vanishing"

Last week, I told you that poor song choice was the Achilles heel of this year's competition. For once, it looks like Syeshia got that message from someone, because she made perhaps the smartest choice of the night with Mariah's "Vanishing." This song isn't well known, but it's not extremely unfamiliar (sorry, Paula -- back on the meds now). As one of Miss Carey's songs that wasn't a major hit, it's middling popularity gave Syeshia the chance to sing without the worry of the unfair comparison. She ended up giving what was probably her best performance of the season, though she sounded a bit whiny in the middle of her runs near the end. The bad news for Syeshia -- thought it was a nice step the right direction, viewers just aren't warm enough toward her to support her on the phones.

Brooke White - "Hero"

One thing you have to love about Brooke is that she's consistent. If she was a menu item, she'd be Kraft Macaroni and Cheese -- no bells and whistles, no frills and a nice taste that hasn't changed since its invention in 1937. (You'll later see the reason for food analogies...) Every week, Brooke will take a song and play it exactly the same way. I've come to expect that she can find a way to make any song somewhat boring. That held true again tonight with Mariah's "Hero," a wonderfully sentimental song that has the potential to be a bit of a showstopper. In Brooke's hands, however, it becomes completely forgettable, despite the fact that she was bold enough to accompany herself on the piano without any help from the band. Tonight, she really did need the band. From the first note, Brooke seemed off, and she started missing notes badly by the song's bridge. By the end, she was struggling with both the melody and the tempo. Instead of the comfort food Brooke normally gives us, this was like Macaroni and Broccoli. (Or as Simon said, a hamburger bun without the meat. The judges hotly debated this point and their comments became an argument over condiments.) Whatever meal was served, it was much less than satisfying. Expect Brooke to sweat out the results in the Bottom Three.

Kristy Lee Cook - "Forever"

When this season started, could you ever imagine Kristy Lee Cook in the Top 4? Seriously, it could happen, because now the three other ladies in the cast are fighting more for their Idol lives than she is. This evening, Kristy made an interesting song choice -- maybe not a great one, but one that pretty much worked for her. As always, she looked radiant, this time wearing a champagne dress; each week, Kristy looks like this season's movie star. But how about a singing star? Not quite. Though it wasn't exactly bad, Kristy's performance of "Forever" wasn't exactly great either. When she dips into her lower register, her voice disappears a bit, but she begins to soar when she goes for the bigger notes. As opposed to her hillbilly country efforts on the Beatles "Eight Days a Week," this arrangement had a light country flair and came off quite nicely. At the end of the night, it will never be anyone's favorite, but it will be remembered fondly. And that will probably save Kristy for the Top 6.

David Cook - "Always Be My Baby"

Ordinarily, I'd be the first guy to champion one of David Cook's performances. Hey, why not jump into the judges' love-fest for this season's rocker? Honestly, his re-arrangement of "Always Be My Baby" was very original, and came complete with a string accompaniment. The guy Most Likely to Figure Out a New Way to Do An Old Song did it again -- and it was one of the evening's better offerings. But it wasn't really worthy of the way the judges practically fell over themselves in their efforts to praise David. His vocals were once again rough in the beginning, and he missed a lot of notes on the way to the finish line. At the end, there was the obligatory "money note" -- which David hit -- and it did send the crowd (and the judges) into a frenzy. Again, it was one of the top few performances of the evening, but it wasn't amazing, and it certainly wasn't David's best performance. On a side note, David's emotions at the end were very sweet and genuine -- and undoubtedly tied to his brother's presence in the audience. David's brother is apparently battling brain cancer, and that's one fight that takes a toll on an entire family. If that had been my brother, I'd have been overcome by the emotions of the moment, too.

Jason Castro - "I Don't Wanna Cry"

Normally, I'd put Jason in the same boat as Brooke -- like a reliable bowl of chicken noodle soup on a cold, wintry day. Tonight, however, Jason put a bit more flavor in our comfort food and the result was savory and flavorful. While I still question his choice of "I Don't Wanna Cry," his boiled-down Latin arrangement definitely worked. Instead of a complicated arrangement, the simplicity of the number allowed the focus to

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with Simon -- this was a cool version. As the closing number of the evening, it worked pretty well -- but it was far from the evening's best.

Bottom Three: Brooke, Carly and Syesha

Going Home: Syesha

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