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## A Dose of Reality: American Idol 7: The Top 8 -- What Doesn't Inspire Us...

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Published: April 9, 2008

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Things that make you go, "huh?"

- Brooke White follows up her Bottom Three appearance with less than stirring version of a folk-rock standard.
- Michael Johns goes head-to-head with one of rock's all-time supergroups.

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- Syesha Mercado's encore to a song by Whitney Houston is a retread of *American Idol's* biggest signature moments.



- Carly Smithson flees from the warmth and tenderness of last week's performance for yet another power ballad.

To all this, I have to wonder, "Don't these jokers have any clue why they're on the show?" In order to win, they should be creating moments to remember.

Instead, too many of them are just going through the motions, seemingly pulling songs out of a hat and then hoping that America loves them in spite of it all.

Just in case they don't know, I thought I'd let this season's Idols know exactly what America really wants.

We want a memory. An experience. A moment. We crave something fresh, unique, original and special. We want a song that stirs the soul, delights the imagination and makes us want to share it with our friends.

What we don't want is karaoke. We don't want run-of-the-mill retreads of songs we may have loved from the original artists, but mostly want to hear on oldies stations.

So pay attention, Brooke White. Carole King is great, but if you want to try one of her songs on for size, try doing it a little differently than Carole did.

Heads up, Syesha Mercado. Things we loved from Whitney Houston and Fantasia Barrino are probably best left to those divas unless you can do better than the original.

Take heed, Michael Johns. Unless you aspire to record an album along the lines of Aerosmith, it's probably better not to venture into the territory of their greatest hits.

And listen very carefully, Carly Smithson. Singing every week with a scowl on your face doesn't exactly lead fans to believe that you're the singer they want to see gracing the cover of a CD.

Do I think that any of this will do any good? Not at all -- especially when I hear that some of the performers haven't even watched the show's previous seasons. I fully expect that some of them will continue to make the same flawed choices that we've come to expect from them in the weeks to come. Of course, that will just make it that much easier to figure out which ones will be going home next...



### Michael Johns - "Dream On"

Michael has such charisma that he should now be able to stand on his own. Instead, he chooses to go head-to-head with Steven Tyler, the lead singer of Aerosmith, for who "Dream On" is a centerpiece. There's

the show we're looking for what kind of artists these singers will be, and I doubt that Michael is aspiring to be the next leader of Aerosmith. Throughout the performance, I kept thinking, "Will the real Michael Johns please stand up?" Those thoughts turned to, "My ears, my ears!" when Michael howled the high parts at the end. Paula may think this was great, but consider that she also thought the world of Ramiele. Mr. Johns will undoubtedly be safe, but this performance certainly can't be expected to boost his numbers.

#### Syesha Mercado - "I Believe"

Syesha's big hair returned tonight, perhaps as a signal that her big attitude was also on stage. Don't get me wrong, I like someone with a lot of gumption. But taking on Fantasia Barrino's signature song, the one that launched her into *American Idol* lore? The last time we heard this song on the show, LaKisha Jones was performing it pretty badly in last season's "Inspirational Songs" night. Tonight, Syesha did a much better job, looking radiant on stage in an understated pants outfit and beaming as she sang "I Believe." But the passion that we assign to Fantasia's rendering of "I Believe" (and that I still get out of her recording of it) was singularly lacking in Syesha. Instead of a "moment," we got a very respectable performance with some nice nuances. At first, I kept waiting for the other shoe to fall -- for Syesha to blow it -- but as she went along, my expectations built, as I looked for this to be her moment in the spotlight. In spite of the really nice high note at the end -- something that even Fantasia didn't have in her bag of tricks -- the magic just never happened. The few special things she added to "I Believe" may save her, but Syesha will still likely end up in the Bottom Three.

#### Jason Castro - "(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow"

One word stood out on my pad at the end of his performance -- "overpraised." Jason was the judges' sweetheart early on tonight, but that might have been because he was clearly better than the night's first two performers. As he started his rendition of "(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow" (popularized by Israel "Iz" Kamakawio'ole -- a hugely popular Hawaiian folk-singing legend), Jason looked a bit silly sitting and playing the ukulele. That image stuck in my mind throughout, so I backed up and started the performance over, this time closing my eyes. I was struck by the simplicity of it all, and how it created such a stark contrast with the big production values of "Dream On" and "I Believe." In spite of that, there was no doubt that Jason mopped the floor with Michael and Syesha. He added some nice falsetto to the mix, creating a sweet, pure moment. It will be remembered at the end of the night, and perhaps as the evening's best. But magical? Blazing hot? Not really. However, it was certainly leading the pack at this point.

#### Kristy Lee Cook - "Anyway"

At long last, Kristy has finally figured out how she plans to stay on the show -- stick with country music. That's where Kristy feels most at home and it's where she's the best. Tonight, she took on a pretty big number in Martina McBride's "Anyway," and she was close to her best (I still prefer "God Bless the USA"), and she looked as good or better than she has all season. Simon told her tonight that she looked like a star in a lovely gold top and tight-fitting white jeans, but I'd assert that she's one of the few who looks like a star almost every week. That's not Kristy's problem. Her issues have been with *sounding* like a star, and tonight, she came close. As always, pitch issues were key (sorry, Paula, but little things like pitch are kind of important in a singing competition). And though I kept feeling like Kristy and her gospel choir were trying to move us into a "moment," like Syesha, this only got to a pretty good performance. At one point, Kristy sang the words, "You can pour your soul out singin'/ A song you believe in/ That tomorrow they'll forget you ever sang/ Sing it anyway." When I heard those words, instantly my thoughts turned to Thursday night's results show. Kristy has thus far failed in her efforts to create a moment on performance nights. Sadly for her, I think we'll have her only real memorable performance on Thursday night as she ironically recites those lines at the end of the evening.

#### David Cook - "Innocent"

It was bound to happen -- after weeks and weeks of being so impressed by this season's resident rocker, I finally ran headlong into a rough performance by David Cook. Earlier today, when news his that David was singing this song by the Canadian alternative band Our Lady Peace, his fans were absolutely ecstatic over the song choice. I was somewhat less impressed. David's mark on this competition has been made through savvy renditions of mostly well-known tunes done in a completely unconventional way. This week, he opted for a by-the-numbers performance of a song by his favorite band, and it paled by comparison to the original -- which most people have never heard anyway. Like Simon, I wasn't too thrilled with David's short white jacket (which reminded me too much of an unbuttoned straight jacket), and I didn't love his foray into the audience, nor his unveiling of the words "give back" on the palm of his hand at the end of the song. Instead of originality, this week we pretty much got "trite." I've come to expect a lot more than this from David, and

**Carly Smithson - "The Show Must Go On"**

A week ago, I fell in love with Carly's version of "Here You Come Again" to the point that it was the first thing I downloaded the next day. I really hoped that she'd learn from the success of that evening and find a song she could connect with in a similar way. Instead, Carly ran right back to the overly serious, often angry-looking Carly who tends to grab a song by the throat and choke it until it cries for mercy. Looking very much the part of the rock star tonight (in an outfit reminiscent of Pat Benetar), Carly showed off her vocal power tonight, but it came across like a 16-year-old gunning the engine in his dad's new Ferrari. You knew there was a lot of horsepower under the hood, but you could also tell that it would get away from her once she gave it the gas. Honestly, my first thoughts on hearing that Carly would be singing "The Show Must Go On," I jotted down, "If it's done right and if she doesn't oversing it, it might work well for her. But this is a song that could easily be oversung." Talk about being prophetic. Rather than the friendly, sweet Carly from a week ago, this song produced the return of Vulcan Carly, complete with a frequent scowl. I doubt she'll get the boot for this, but the Bottom Three isn't out of the question. (And on a side note, why does she insist on never wearing sleeves, forcing us to to face the face on her arm? That, combined with the aboriginal visage of her overly tattooed husband, will certainly not win over many new fans...)

**David Archuleta - "Angels"**

If there was ever a theme that played right into the hands of a specific performer, it was "Inspiring Songs" and David Archuleta. This is a kid who tells us every week about the messages in the songs he sings. So it was natural to assume he'd choose a pop ballad (his favorite style) and something rich in meaning (Robbie Williams' "Angels"). And the result was predictably one of the night's best performances. Sitting at a piano (and staying there for the entire song this time), David's pitch wavered and wobbled a bit in the early going, but as the song swelled and the intensity grew, so did David's confidence. By the end, he was expertly making his way through the notes with some beautiful runs, and the richness in his voice was on full display. Was it his best. Not by a long shot. But it was incredibly solid, and it gave a boatload of momentum to the guy in the show who needed it the least.

**Brooke White - "You've Got a Friend"**

This season, I've dropped the name Carole King as a way of describing Brooke more than once. OK, three times in the past five weeks. Now you know why. In her interview piece, Brooke herself said that Carole inspired her to pursue music -- and no doubt directly influenced her style. We even learned that Brooke performed "You've Got a Friend" in a school talent show. Frankly, that's what tonight's performance felt like -- a really good number in a talent show. Not something that would "wow" an audience in the world's biggest talent show, though. No, this was the runner-up at my junior college. Week by week, Brooke has moved from the ranks of the front-runners simply by doing the same thing over and over (though in most of those weeks, she wasn't wearing her grandmother's pink frock as she seemed to be doing this week). To Brooke's advantage, she was the last performer of the evening, so she'll likely be safe. Had this come earlier in the broadcast, she'd absolutely be bound for the Bottom Three. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't memorable either. On this show, that can be fatal.

**Bottom Three:** Brooke, Carly and Syesha

**Going Home:** Syesha (*She's simply tried to outsing one diva too many...*)

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