

## A Dose of Reality: American Idol 7: The Top 9 Perform Dolly Parton

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Frequently, "American Idol" sends us themes that we're quite certain will be disasters.

Disco.

Barry Manilow.

Dolly Parton.

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No offense to she of the famed mammaries, but Season 7's "country week" had me very worried for a number of contestants, largely because the AI producers boiled country music down to one performer's music. Frankly, Dolly's music isn't all that well-known outside of a few crossover hits -- and "9 to 5" in particular. Honestly, I wasn't looking forward to hearing that number, nor was I expecting much out of the genre.

Fortunately, I was happily mistaken. This "most talented cast ever" largely rose to the occasion, delivering a number of solid performances, as well as a couple of stellar ones. Maybe I can stop worrying about Neil Diamond Night...

### Brooke White - "Jolene"

I'm glad that Brooke reminded us that Dolly Parton is "huge." How would we have known otherwise. With "Jolene," Brooke ventures into the realm of the frustrated other woman, and she largely stays emotionally connected to the lyrics. The boiled-down version suits Brooke well, as it's not quite coffeehouse, but is still planted firmly in the folk-rock world. Her vocals are improved over the past couple of weeks, though she does hit a stray note or two. The best part is that Gordon from Sesame Street apparently joined her on percussion. This wasn't exactly bad, but it also wasn't exactly groundbreaking. Brooke isn't losing ground, but she's not surging ahead, so she stands to be passed by others in this competition in the near future.

### David Cook - "Little Sparrow"

I've been hearing from people that David is a very good rocker, but that he's no Chris Daughtry. Frankly, after the past five weeks, I'd say that Chris Daughtry might be no David Cook. This week, David didn't have any pre-programmed versions of "Little Sparrow" to fall back on, so he simply came up with his own. The result was an acoustic feast for the years, with David's voice soaring like it hasn't all season. Last week, we were treated to his vocal power, but this week we heard some vocal subtleties, including a nice bit of falsetto. More and more, I'm beginning to look forward to Tuesdays because it's like going to a weekly David Cook concert. If he keeps this up, he'll have a major CD and a full-length concert for his fans to anticipate.

### Ramiele Malubay - "Do I Ever Cross Your Mind"

It's no secret that I haven't been a big fan of Ramiele's in recent weeks, so I watched this performance a few times to make sure I was being fair to her. Honestly, I do love her vocal quality, but she is so incredibly disconnected from her lyrics that I wonder if she's aware that the words that she's singing have meaning. Tonight was probably Ramiele's best performance of the season, but it was still just very good karaoke -- definitely not up to the standard of performances by David Cook or even Brooke White. So much of her appeal has been her cuteness, and tonight it was dialed up to full, but being sweet probably won't be enough to save her from here on in. My guess is that she's first in line to be cut Wednesday night.

### Jason Castro - "Travelin' Thru"

soothing quality to it, but I can't find anything about him that is truly remarkable. While he's not bad, he's also not special -- I saw at least half a dozen guys like him on campus when I was in college. Simon says that this type of music doesn't suit him well, but I'd assert that it's the **only** type of music that suits him. That's the problem -- he's locked into a single style and sound, and each week is starting to run together. He should be here for another week, but it's possible that he could be a surprise elimination after that.

#### **Carly Smithson - "Here You Come Again"**

Holy crap! Carly can smile! Tonight, Carly chose a fairly uplifting song, and she managed to perform it without looking like a Klingon. One thing I have to wonder is if Carly is familiar with the invention of sleeves -- it gets a little unsettling looking at Carly and having two faces look back. At the same time, the rest of Carly's look threw me a bit -- it was like "Avril Lavigne-meets-equestrian event." Very strange. What worked, however, was Carly's vocals. She truly is "the voice" in this competition, and the acoustic setting allowed her vocals to soar. Looking much softer and friendlier (aside from Avril's eyeliner), Carly delivered one of her stronger vocal performances tonight, and should definitely be safe for at least another week.

#### **David Archuleta - "Smokey Mountain Memories"**

At this point in the season, David's entering a realm when you'd expect a polished and seasoned performer to emerge. While there's no doubting that his vocals are sterling, his performance style leaves a lot to be desired. One reader has told me that he seems to "develop roots" whenever he's on stage, and I've started looking for how many lip-lickings and eye-closings David gives us each week (zero on the lips, but six for the closed eyes). All of this is simply to say that live music is more than just about the voice -- but in that department, David was phenomenal tonight. Armed with another ballad (and accompanied by the dreaded "sea of waving hands"), he was back in his comfort zone, and it showed. David put together a few nice runs and connected with the song with some genuine feeling. Once again, you can expect him to be this week's fan favorite, in spite of his deficient stage appeal.

#### **Kristy Lee Cook - "Coat of Many Colors"**

Fresh from her triumph with "God Bless the USA," Kristy runs headlong into a week with a country theme, so expectations were high. More than any of the others, country definitely suits Kristy, and she feasted on the genre -- from the simple, flowing, brown dress to the complete lack of footwear to the country-styled vocals. Unfortunately, at its best, it was very good country karaoke, and was at times a bit over the top. Granted, it's a huge improvement over the substandard fare Kristy was delivering a few weeks ago, but it's still not good enough for the company she's keeping in this cast. Her fans will love that she was so at home in this genre, but she'll still probably wind up in the Bottom Three. (And to be fair to Archuleta fans, Kristy seemed to be trying to outdo little David with the amount of time she spent with her eyes closed. Note to Idol performers: windows are the eyes to the soul. Keep 'em closed, and we can't connect to you. It's that simple.)

#### **Sysha Mercado - "I Will Always Love You"**

Was there any doubt that Sysha would venture back into Whitney-land with one of Dolly's best-known tunes? And was there any doubt that once she did, that the judges would make the unfair comparison by saying that she could never match Whitney's version (even though that's not what she was going for)? With her hair firmly under control, Sysha was a vision of loveliness. Moreover, she has such a beautiful voice, and she did a very respectable job with a big song (all while sitting ingenue-style on top of a piano). Unfortunately, she'll probably suffer by comparison when people reflect on this performance, and she's back in danger of elimination. (On a side note, what is it with Sysha and songs about guys she can't have? "Me and Mr. Jones" ... "Saving All My Love For You" ... "If I Were Your Woman" ... one might think there's a pattern developing here...)

#### **Michael Johns - "It's All Wrong, But It's All Right"**

I was waiting all season for the real Michael Johns to emerge, and for the second straight week he was commanding the Idol stage. And for the first time this season, Michael's voice was spot-on, which meant that he was the complete package. When he's on like this, it's hard to avoid comparisons to guys like Jim Morrison and Michael Hutchence. That's how good he potentially is, as long as he's singing the right songs and putting everything he has into them. It's clear that he has a physical appeal that a lot of fans love, but it's his talent that will make him a star. Like I said, he's the total package when all the pieces are in place, and tonight they were.

**Bottom Three:** Ramiele, Kristy and Sysha

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