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A Dose of Reality: American Idol 7: Top 3 -- The Battle for the Finale

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If you've read anything I've written recently, you've probably picked up on a common thread:

I hate *American Idol's* producers.

OK, I don't hate them. I just hate how bad they are at their jobs. How do I hate thee? Let me count the ways:

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1. The waving hands of hell.
2. The cheesy, one-artist themes.
3. The bedpan-stools of doom.
4. The constant references to the "best cast" in the history of the show.
5. The over-the-top shameless marketing plugs.
6. The ludicrous mob of girls on David Archuleta.
7. The treacly, sappy songs chosen for *American Songwriter*. (More on that in my next power rankings.)
8. And tonight's addition -- three unbelievably bad song choices for the "Producers' Choice" round.

There's a common theme in all of this -- nothing is wrong with *American Idol* that a change in the production staff wouldn't remedy. Some, of course, would say that you don't change horses midstream or some such cliché designed to show that this contest is still the hottest property on television. Viewing trends, however, reveal chinks in the armor, and the time to make changes is when the tides shift in the wrong direction -- and before the situation becomes desperate.

Tonight, instead of picking three numbers that put the season's three most successful performers in situations where they could shine the most, AI's producers picked three very odd songs that did illustrate one thing -- they apparently know a lot less about music than even the owners of the waving hands of hell. Pick any one pubescent fan from the mosh pit, and I'd be willing to bet that they could pick out a better song for the remaining cast. Instead, the supposed professionals are put in charge, and the result is something like allowing a McDonald's fry cook take charge of a five-star Manhattan restaurant.

Granted, it's still not a bad show -- but it's headed in the opposite of good far to quickly. Next week, we'll get to discover which of the 20 songs from *American Songwriter* will (dis)grace the Top 2 performers. (And I'll give you the low-down on all 20 in my final Power Rankings.) After that, I hope that the show makes a few positive changes made between now and when it reappears for its eighth season in January 2009.

Round 1: Judge's Choice

David Archuleta - "*And So It Goes*"

by Billy Joel

Honestly, the most impressive thing about David's first performance was the handlebar moustache of his hometown mayor, Dan Snarr. Instead of forcing David outside of his comfort zone into something a little more entertaining, Paula Abdul picked this song for David -- one that too closely resembles "Oh Danny Boy." Paula cited "vocal difficulties" in the melody, but the only difficulty is what David creates for himself by throwing in a lot of runs. There was a slight lyric mish-mash toward the end, but he did an admirable job with a job that was far older in its appeal than he is. I love this kid's voice, but he's really starting to bore me. Please, God, let him sing something upbeat in the finale...

Credit goes to Randy for not choosing a show tune for Syesha. After all, the rotund one has been trying to force her onto Broadway for several weeks now. Instead he chose this Alicia Keys classic for her -- which, amazingly, is a song she also sang two years ago on "The One," the short-lived ABC rival to Idol." She was much better tonight than she was then, but she still suffers by comparison to the original. Technically, Syesha was very good, but she lacked the passion that was needed in this number. Despite David A.'s lackluster opening to the show, Syesha probably lost ground on this one. She needed a home run, and the best she got was a double.

David Cook - *"The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face"*

by Roberta Flack

Talk about strange song choices. Simon chose this one for David, presumably because he wanted to increase the level of difficulty. Granted, this is a bold choice in that regard, but Randy's right about this song -- it does nothing to show us anything about what kind of artist David will be once the season ends. To his credit, he did his best to put a rock vibe on this song, and the result was pretty good. I didn't love the continual shots of his mother standing alone in the crowd, but I did love the high end of David's voice. If there was any doubt before tonight, there should be now -- short of a meltdown in the next couple of shows, this guy is probably your next American Idol.

Round 1 winner: David Cook

Round 2: Contestant's Choice



David Archuleta - *"With You"*

by Chris Brown

I'll hand this much to little David -- at least he tried to take his act in a youthful direction with this song, a platinum seller which is currently in the Top 20 on the charts. It definitely connected with the younger part of his audience, which likely makes up the majority of his following. But David's not nearly the kind of performer this song needs. He doesn't work a crowd -- rather, he does his George Huff-ish "surfer bounce" and injects a number of runs into the lyric line. Again, I love his voice, but his performance style leaves me a bit flat ... kind of like his feet on the stage. However, at least he's paying homage to the sorts of songs that producers will insist make up the bulk of his debut CD.

Syesha Mercado - *"Fever"*

by Peggy Lee

In the first round, Syesha was forced to take on Alicia Keys. In the second round, she told us that she was tackling a Peggy Lee song ... but I'd say this version much more closely resembles the one that Beyonce delivered in the film "The Fighting Temptations." In that respect, Syesha is still showing me that she's trying to prove that she's a diva on the level of the industry's best and brightest. She has some moxie -- I'll give her that much. But she's not Alicia or Beyonce. She's Syesha, and I wish she'd just show us who that is. Tonight was her time to prove that she belonged in the finale. Sadly, in spite of a very nice vocal performance, she instead chose to demonstrate why we should have an all-David finale.

David Cook - *"I Dare You to Move"*

by Switchfoot

For his personal choice, David a very strong song choice by choosing a number that shows us just who and what we can expect to see on his debut CD. Unfortunately, the vocals on this performance were pretty weak. His lower register at the beginning of the number had loads of pitch flaws, and though he soared a bit once the stronger parts of the song kicked in, he still never really found his voice. In this cast, it's pretty clear that Syesha has the best moves on stage, while David A. has the purest voice. But David C. is the most mature performer and the one who will most easily make the leap into the concert environment. He just needs to

Round 2 winner: David Archuleta

Round 3: Producers' Choice

David Archuleta - "Longer"

by Dan Fogelberg

Bad producers' choice No. 1. Again, instead of giving the kid something upbeat that will reflect who and what he'll be as a recording artist, they picked a tune that's almost 30 years old. Even worse, the arrangement sounded very much like a backing track for a wedding performer, so that's how his performance resonated. Yes, David's a lot better than the average wedding singer, but he also doesn't really have much of a clue about lyrics like, "Though the binding cracks/and the pages start to yellow/I'll be in love with you." I absolutely love this song, but not coming from David Archuleta. Let him fall in love once and then try this again. Until then, I'd much rather hear "With You."

Syeshia Mercado - "Hit Me Up"

by Gia Farrell

Bad producers' choice No. 2. At least we finally got an upbeat song, but a song from the closing credits of "Happy Feet"? Wow, they must have looked as far as their kids' DVDs before they chose this one. Syeshia did have fun with this one and made the most of it, and she again looked incredibly sexy in a shimmering white top and tight black pants. She uses her physical appeal to her advantage, but she doesn't do much different with anything musically. Once again, Syeshia had a solid vocal performance, but it was still was a full cut below Gia Farrell's original, which is troubling since Gia doesn't even have out a debut CD yet. As a hopeful for the Idol crown, Syeshia should be setting standards. Instead, she seems comfortable following the trends and arrangements of others.

David Cook - "I Don't Want to Miss a Thing"

by Aerosmith

Bad producers' choice No. 3. Let me qualify that by saying that at least David got a chance to use the upper end of his soaring voice, but is David going to record a Diane Warren ballad in the near future? OK, so it was nice that Diane was in attendance for tonight's performance, but what would have impressed me more is a song choice of something remotely current and in David's hemisphere of musical style. Despite the producers' ignorance about this cast's strengths and weaknesses, David by far did the most with his choice. More than Syeshia or the other David, he looked the most like a star.

Round 3 winner: David Cook

Overall winner: David Cook

Going Home: Syeshia Mercado

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