

'Idol' capitalizes on past success, creates tomorrow's stars

Hit reality TV show crowns America's next pop royalty amid millions of artists

Marc Schwarz
THE RECORD

In four years, it's become rote.

January comes. Millions of viewers turn twice, sometimes three times a week to Fox to watch "American Idol."

In May, millions more will buy, download and listen to the single of the new champ's winning performance.

Sometime in the last quarter of the year, the newest "Idol" will crack the charts with his or her debut release.

It's a routine that has become ingrained in the hearts and minds of pop culture. There is little doubt that the routine will repeat itself beginning Jan. 17 when "American Idol" returns for a fifth season.

But, why? Why has "Idol" engulfed both the world of TV and music?

Why is it one of the few guaranteed successes in an entertainment world that sees so many sure things crash and burn?

Why is some unknown singer already on the road to fame and riches?

The answers are simple: Variety is the spice of life: "Idol" is to 21st century TV what the original "Star Search" and "The Ted Mack Family Hour" were to 20th century TV. "It's a show about real-life young people competing in a musical competition, complete with comedy," says Marc Berman, senior television writer for Mediaweek, alluding to the auditions by the William Hungs of the world.

Plus, there's no comparison to other shows in the genre. "This is to 'Star Search' what modern quantum physics is to Newtonian notions of physics," says Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University. "It's so brilliantly put together. For one thing, it's two different shows. There's the show before they pick the final 12, which is essentially a delicious reality show with lots of mocking of people, laughing at the people who

are really bad and all that kind of stuff. And then it transforms after the final 12 into a really good, old-fashioned, family-friendly talent show."

Don't underestimate family-friendly: "Idol" appeals to a broad audience. "It is one of the few shows on American television, especially after you get past those first couple of weeks, where really little kids love it, grandma loves it," Thompson says. "It's got the kind of wide appeal we used to see all the time on network TV that we very seldom see anymore."

Cheese sells: Except for the acerbic comments from judge Simon Cowell, there's no friction or bad words among the contestants once they get down to the final 12. In fact, as Thompson points out, the show is almost "schmaltzy." "When they're voted out, they're hugging each other and crying. There is almost a 'Mickey Mouse Club' quality to it," he adds.

There's something real at stake: As opposed to reality shows such as "Survivor" or "The Apprentice," the winners don't disappear or recycle themselves on other reality shows. They go straight to the top of the

charts. "Maybe 10 or 12 popular artists have been introduced into popular music since the show's debut, and it's only four seasons in," says Barry Jeckell, editor of Billboard.com.

"With 'The Apprentice,' we thought how exciting, a real job with Donald Trump, then we began to realize, this doesn't mean that," Thompson says. "Bill Rancic didn't build that building in Chicago — essentially what that job was was for Bill Rancic to take George's place on the TV show when George is away. ... 'Survivor,' sure the person gets \$1 million, but what's that to us?"

"With 'American Idol,' the reward, the prize they're going for, really does mean something. Whoever wins this is essentially guaranteed a platinum record. It's like watching a 'making of a famous star' documentary for three months, before that person is a famous star."

Money talks: "Idol" sells, simple as that. "The instant built-in audience for the winners is enormous, so if even a fraction of viewers download a new single or buy a CD, it's an enormous amount of sales," Jeckell

says. "It's a huge payday for the artist and the label." Adds "Idol" judge Randy Jackson: "It's amazing what it's done for the music business, even though a lot of record companies don't want to admit it."

The ripple effect is hard to quantify, but it's there. When Constantine Maroulis covered Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" last season, digital download sales of Queen skyrocketed, according to Jeckell.

"It's definitely exposing certain music to people who have never heard it," he added. "Fantasia covered Gershwin and did it really well."

"When they focus on the music of Barry Manilow or someone else, those artists are definitely getting exposed to a whole new audience. That's good no matter how it comes out in sales the next day or the next year."

The winners are talented: As Jackson likes to say, "Every year the right winner won." While it's easy to look back and smirk at some of the near winners — Justin Guarini, Diana DeGarmo, Scott Savol, the four previous winners have made it. None more so than the original, Kelly Clarkson.

"She's a star in her own right — launched by the show — but has proven herself on her own," Jeckell says. "She proved with (her) second album, she has far more as an artist to her than flash-in-the-pan success."

That's still the hurdle that Fantasia, Ruben Studdard and Carrie Underwood will have to clear.

Fox hasn't killed the golden goose: By limiting "Idol" to just once a season, Fox hasn't overplayed its hand the way ABC did with "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

"You watch it beginning in January, it stays on the air until May and they cram it down your throat from January to May, but then it disappears for seven months, so viewers don't get tired of it," Berman says. "It gives the viewers something to look forward to."

"American Idol" as the American Dream? "Everybody aspires to be something," Berman says. "They watch other people living their dreams, going on television, putting themselves on the line, singing. This is a dream that I'm sure millions of people have that they're not doing. So to see other people doing it is compelling."

MUSIC • CONTINUED FROM 5

cooler of bottled water that was handed out to the crowd during Against Me!'s set to prevent heatstroke.

A surprising amount of ska acts hit Columbia, and one of the best ska performances was Streetlight Manifesto. Featuring the ex-songwriter of Catch 22, Streetlight played a tight set. The band was robbed twice in one month, so they seemed excited for the loving audience at NBT. Even though the show was on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, ska-punk lovers showed up to sing along to Streetlight's set featuring songs from their debut album "Everything Goes Numb." The band also played new material that is

being recorded in the band's home state of New Jersey.

The Colonial Center had many great mainstream acts pass through, including Elton John, who continues to focus on glamour and showmanship in his concerts, changing outfits and bringing fans to their feet with hits like "Saturday Night's Alright (For Fighting)" and "Bennie and the Jets."

Fall 2005 will be a hard season to follow for Columbia's music scene. The growing appeal of the city will no doubt attract more popular independent and mainstream music acts. Here's to 2006, a brand new year for music.

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'CASANOVA' • CONTINUED FROM 5

Audiences will wonder just who will end up with whom as love triangles turn into squares and if anyone will be executed as Pucci maliciously seeks to accomplish his goal of cleansing Venice of heretics. The ending is satisfying but slightly expected.

The film is loosely based on the legend of the lover and writer Casanova, who supposedly led an adventurous and thrilling life amidst his many sexual conquests in 18th-century Europe.

Ledger oozes enough charm and sexiness as Casanova, but Casanova's reputation inspires images of a more strapping man. Sienna Miller gives a respectable performance as the independent and feminist Francesca Bruni.

The romantic comedy is successful mostly because of its supporting cast. Oliver Platt is riotous as the revolting "pork king" Paprizio. And



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the interaction between Casanova and his butler/friend Lupo adds color to many scenes with their witty banter.

Director Lasse Hallström is best known for his films "Chocolat," "The Cider House Rules" and "The Shipping News." Hallström veers away from drama to the comedic "Casanova"

with flair. "Casanova" is not as memorable as his other films and has less substance, but it is entertaining.

Aside from causing the audience to wish their way onto a gondola ride in Venice, the beautiful setting helps to create the romantic tone for the film.

At times the film does feel overly silly. There is a hint of tediousness about the movie, as well — certain scenes felt unnecessary or drawn out.

The characters, especially Casanova, could have used more development. While Casanova's colorful past is implied, either telling or showing how his story began and other details would have lent more to his characterization. The blossoming love Casanova feels for Francesca feels forced and could have used more scenes between the two to demonstrate its genuineness.

"Casanova" will woo audiences with its light-hearted look at romance and its multitalented cast.

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