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# Idol Worship

Today's reality television shows are mass-producing pop stars with assembly-line regularity. But like disposable products, if the winners are here today, they're likely to be gone tomorrow.

By Janice Page, 5/11/2003

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**Q**uestion: Would you rather be rich or famous?

"Famous. I guess just to have the most people know you and admire you." – Alexandra Thornton, 13, Abington, Massachusetts

"Famous, because it'd be fun to be liked by a lot of people who would want you for a friend and want you to do stuff with them." – Chelsea Thornton, 10, Abington

"Famous. If you're rich, you'll get everything you want, and then there's no point of life." – Chloe Conceicao, 9, Manhattan Beach, California

"Famous, because then you may get



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**Elizabeth Neuffer**  
1956-2003

rich." – Patrick Vanderknyff, 8,  
 Carlsbad, California

**A** couple of generations ago, if you'd asked kids to choose between wealth and celebrity, it's a good bet that most would have elected to take the money and run. We were a more practical nation then and maybe not so easily impressed. Fame was harder to come by. It wasn't everywhere you looked or looking to be photographed from every angle. And it was hardly the insanely lucrative proposition it is now.

A brief look at the "teen idol" phenomenon in popular music shows you just how much things have changed in America's last half-century. From *Billboard* chart-toppers Justin Timberlake and Avril Lavigne to the contestants of Fox TV's teeny-bopper-minded *American Idol*, young pop stars today are molded, marketed, managed, and exposed as never before. They embrace a world that their graying predecessors could not have imagined, with technologies and industry changes influencing everything from how recording artists get discovered to what brand of soda they should drink.

The teen- and preteen-targeted marketing machine that was launched alongside rock 'n' roll idols Elvis Presley and Pat Boone is slicker and more efficient today, spitting out fresh new faces in every direction and leaving far less to chance. Indeed, the machine is indispensable now. Stars can still be born, but they're always made, which ensures that the



unmaking will be easier than ever.

**B**efore Julia DeMato became the third contestant eliminated by *American Idol* viewers in March, she was one of a dozen finalists experiencing life in the middle of the most unrelenting spotlight that marketing and production dollars can buy.

"Every day is different, but a normal day means up at 6 o'clock, out the door at 8," she says of the twice-weekly talent show's rigorous schedule. "Hair and makeup in the studio takes about two hours. There are group rehearsals, plus – depending on the day – we might do photo shoots, interviews, autographs, go shopping for our performance outfits, have individual rehearsals. We usually don't stop till 10 or 11 at night. No, there's not a lot of time to think, but that's just the way it is. I love it."

The second season of the televised amateur singing competition launched in January featuring the best and worst of 70,000 contestants who auditioned across the country. Since then, weekly cuts have winnowed the field of 16-to-24-year-olds. The last idol left standing on May 21, after call-in voters and industry expert judges have their say, walks away with a major-label recording contract and untold fame.

That winner obviously won't be DeMato, but she'll be on the sidelines cheering, because she's now a full-fledged, self-professed wannabe. The 24-year-old former hairdresser from Brookfield, Connecticut, came away determined to parlay her big break into some sort of career. "I've never worked so hard in my life," she says, "and I don't want to stop."

She's hardly alone in that sentiment. They may be yawning during interviews in the hallways at CBS Television City in Los Angeles, where *American Idol* is broadcast live each Tuesday and Wednesday, but contestants unanimously express boundless joy at being chosen for this life. Whatever they're giving up, they say, can't compare with what they're getting out of the experience. And, anyway, there's little time to dwell on



*American Idol* finalists, from top, Joshua Gracin, Ruben Studdard, Trenyce, Clay Aiken, and Kimberley Locke. (Photos / Fox)

the things they've left behind.

Other than meals sometimes taken in transit, and maybe six or seven hours of sleep, DeMato estimates that *Idol* finalists have about half an hour a day to themselves – precious unstructured minutes that can be used to make phone calls, watch television, write e-mails, or just chill out. "I'd try to stay off the phone, because, first of all, it's not good for your voice to be talking all the time," she explains. "So I might just go sit outside, put on my headphones, and listen to some music."

Some would say those headphones are redundant in the *American Idol* bubble, where the finalists live cushioned lives in a massive Spanish-style Hollywood Hills mansion, complete with a sweeping view, a swimming pool, and a cook. Chauffeurs take them to where the fans are carefully assembled, entertainment reporters line the red carpets, and every note they will sing has been decided in advance. Those shopping trips for performance outfits? Undertaken in the company of stylists who guide the would-be idols toward their full fashion potential, albeit on the contestants' own dime.

"They really helped me with what looks good on me and what doesn't," enthuses DeMato, whose on-camera ensembles undeniably improved as the season went along, taking her from New England mall-inspired to something approximating Hollywood hip-hop sexy. "They made me see that things look different on TV than you might think they do."

And the help doesn't stop there. *Idol* producers even provide a staff psychologist to attend to their charges' emotional needs, which can be most pronounced on the night they're dismissed for having the lowest number of viewer votes. In DeMato's case, the boot was somewhat anticipated – she'd been in the bottom-ranked trio for three straight weeks – so she didn't much require the doctor's services. "This is a reality show, and you have to be in a reality state of mind that there's only going to be one winner," she says.

The psychologist is just one of a whole fleet of people whose job it is to serve. These stars-in-the-making may not know what it's like to sing in a seedy lounge or struggle to be heard over a garage band, but they know

that if a water bottle spills during rehearsal, an assistant will towel up the mess before anyone can break vocal stride. Throat feeling scratchy? As if by magic, another assistant shows up with a fistful of soothing lozenges.

"They try to do everything for us to make us happy," DeMato says of the show's staff. "They're unbelievably attentive. We're their show, you know, so they want to make sure we're OK."

OK with the cameras, which are "literally in your face all the time," says DeMato, and OK with living a life that is by nature camera-ready. It's a lot for someone with no previous voice training or stage experience to get used to on the fly. Perhaps that's why, at the center of the whirlwind, it's old-fashioned camaraderie that seems to anchor these artistic newbies, in much the same way that bus tours threw together emerging pop artists in days of old. DeMato says they frequently even forget they're competitors, rooting for one another the way family members might.

She'll miss that most of all, now that she's off the show and on to whatever chapter brings her closer to her hoped-for career in showbiz. Without reservation, she likens her situation to Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera leaving the safe environs of the *Mickey Mouse Club*: scary and exciting at the same time.

The folks at *American Idol* have three months from the season's final performance to exercise an option on her contract. In the meantime, she is networking and keeping her fingers crossed, because this little taste of fame has convinced her that her calling does not involve going back to her old routine in suburban Brookfield. "There was nothing really that exciting about my life there," she says before stating the cruelly obvious: "It's not LA."

**A**nyone older than a Partridge family lunchbox has a certain idea of how a teen idol looks and sounds. Defined as a young performer created expressly for teens or at least appealing primarily to teens, they once included Ricky Nelson, Brenda Lee, Chubby Checker, or Bobby Sherman. Today's counterparts have more

collective chin stubble and racier lyrics, but that doesn't make them any less mainstream. The real differences between then and now are more than skin-deep, starting with the fact that the flavor of the month has become the flavor of the moment.

Talk to music industry insiders, and you'll hear strong testimony to the effect that pop stars of all genres get a narrower window of opportunity now than in the past. Teen idols nowadays might be the most disposable of all commodities, because they live and die not only by the whims of adolescents and preadolescents, but also by the accelerated demands of the entertainment industry that creates them.

Michael Marsden, co-editor of the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, says that we shuffle through our pop idols faster these days because we have so many things vying for our attention, and because we've developed what communications theorist Neil Postman calls the "Now . . . this" sense that all things are easily digestible in a sound bite.

Where once there were hundreds of record labels and radio stations programming exactly what they pleased, now the control of those industries is in fewer, more corporatized hands. On the flip side, there is cable television, the Internet, and a grand canyon of reality programming offering not just *American Idol*, but *America's Most Talented Kid*, *Star Search*, *Nashville Star*, *Making the Band*, *Popstars*, *30 Seconds to Fame*, *The It Factor*, *Project Greenlight*, and countless others that may or may not still exist by the time you read this. The net result is a kingdom that has simply gotten too big for Elvis-like domination.

And we did not slip into shuffle mode all by ourselves; we had help from those folks in marketing and advertising whose job it is to pace consumption habits. A show like *American Idol* might previously have been designed to create an icon that stuck around without internal competition for a period measured in years – the word "idol" implying at least a degree of divine permanence. Instead, the show's first two seasons suggest that an idol created in autumn needs to be unseated by spring. We now "mass-produce idols the same way we mass-produce Chevys," says Robert Thompson, founding director of the

Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University.

The process may be brilliant economic lubrication, but it's a bit dizzying. First Britney Spears is everywhere you look – making movies, hijacking Super Bowl halftime, shilling for Pepsi, dominating Internet chat rooms; then, suddenly, she's nowhere. The Britney clones (Jessica Simpson, Mandy Moore) are followed inevitably by the anti-Britneys (Pink, Avril Lavigne), who presumably will cycle through at the same warp speed of their predecessor.

It wasn't always this way, of course. Pop music's original teen idols were often born of unique talents, and even the untalented, plug-in variety were expected to hang around awhile. Their young fans were loyal longer, maybe because having musical icons of their own was so new. Those icons were predominantly male, pretty, clean-cut, and (Elvis notwithstanding) safer than a chaperoned date. Best remembered for calmly commanding the days between Buddy Holly's death and the '60s British Invasion, boys like Frankie Avalon, Bobby Rydell, and Fabian established a white-bread legacy that still hangs over teen idols in America today, effectively ignoring the grittiest artists in rap and other counterculture genres.

It's not the only legacy that stalks young pop idoldom. Since the '60s, the bubble-gum music industry has done its part to exploit the teen idol label for the most crassly commercial purposes, even though there have been genuinely gifted and stridently original young performers in the mix of every decade. Encouraging girls to fantasize via posters, T-shirts, and David Cassidy underwear has been an enduring cornerstone of teen idol popularity.

But there is a difference between "I have a dream" and "I have a dream that hinges on millions of call-in votes," as it does with such shows as *American Idol*. What happens when our most impressionable young minds see their pop music heroes as something not only to worship but to become? One of the problems with so many new channels and vehicles for would-be teen idols is that they're encouraging more unfulfilled fantasies than ever.

In much the same way that climbing Everest has become a ready diversion for bored rich people, the access ramp

to celebrity can seem awfully expedient when it's as near as a regional audition. And to make matters worse, today's reality shows purposely encourage the mediocre and the lame right along with, if not ahead of, the truly talented.

Inside CBS Television City, where *American Idol* is broadcast live from Stage 36, the contestants gather in a drab, windowless rehearsal room accompanied by vocal coach Debra Byrd. They run through intricate renditions of "California Dreamin' " and a Motown medley, stopping frequently to adjust pitches and nail key changes. Several hold lyric sheets they haven't yet memorized with just hours to go before a live performance at the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

"Don't sing louder than you listen," Byrd advises, referring to their safety net: a backing track, there for mere accompaniment or full-on lip-syncing. "I'd rather have you Milli Vanilli on me than have wrong notes," she concludes before sending them out into the world.

Her young disciples nod, and one of them, a playful giant named Ruben Studdard, belly-bonks the slender Clay Aiken into a row of folding chairs as they and fellow contestants push downstairs toward their waiting limo.

The fun has just begun.

In an expertly orchestrated afternoon performance and panel discussion at the television academy, the wannabe idols emerge from their super-stretch limo onto a red carpet ringed with paparazzi. They wave to their prearranged public, answer questions from a handpicked moderator, and sit for a brief press conference where the most newsworthy revelation is that 18-year-old contestant Carmen Rasmusen aspires to become a dermatologist so she can "find a cure for zits."

Always, *American Idol* executive producers Nigel Lythgoe and Ken Warwick are close by. They insist to a reporter that these talented young people are unique, because competing live means they can't rely on any of the technological tricks of the trade that other teen pop

idols employ. Yet then the producers stroll off to watch the kids perform inside the packed auditorium, where the backing track is cued up and waiting.

*American Idol* contestants *do* compete live and without a net on national television each Tuesday. And each Wednesday they live or die by the results of the call-in votes. Even then, though, to peek behind the scenes is to see the idol-making machine operating at full bore.

This season there's a new space-age set (a swirl of neon blue and Jetsons furniture), with plenty of room for host Ryan Seacrest and the competitors to move around. In-studio viewing capacity has gone from 450 to 600 fans. The regular judges – '80s and '90s pop singer Paula Abdul and record executives Randy Jackson (the former Journey bass player) and Simon Cowell – now make room for guest panelists such as Smokey Robinson. Producer Lythgoe roams a la Jerry Springer as the clock draws closer to airtime.

"Can I have some of Simon's soda?" is all an audience member can think to ask when confronted with the producer's roving mike.

"Will you spit in it?" Abdul jokes.

Different set, same banter. Everybody loves bashing the curmudgeonly Cowell, a BMG record executive known for mincing few words. "I'm a musical shepherd," Cowell says off camera. And here come the sheep now.

One by one, contestants stroll onstage to perform earnestly and unevenly, with karaokelike prerecorded accompaniment and the occasional flaming video backdrop that Cowell says lends the feel of a Burger King commercial. These live broadcasts are a curious mix of spontaneity and scripting, sometimes punctuated by ensemble vocal numbers engineered with the artistic conscience of *The Brady Bunch Hour*.

During commercial breaks, Lythgoe reminds audience members to look enthusiastic, applaud heartily, even get up and dance if they (just a suggestion) feel like it. Cardboard signs among the crowd announce "I'm Aiken for Clay," "Kiss Me, Simon," and "I'm the Next *American Idol!*"

Careful what you wish. Several contestants this season have been booted for failing to uphold the image promised in the show's title. The list includes Jaered Andrews, charged in a fatal bar fight; Corey Clark, arrested for battery; and Franchelle "Frenchie" Davis, who once posed on an adult website. Frenchie actually walked away with all of the fame and none of the typecasting or onerous contractual obligations that go along with being an *Idol* winner. But Clark's torturous on-air apology underscores that there's a high price to pay for coveting the spotlight.

"These days, I don't think you can have an idol who doesn't understand everything that comes with it, and that is performing almost all the time," says Seacrest. "With all the media out there today, step outside your house, and you're on."

The unknowable is the impact all this "reality" television will have on the nostalgia factor that keeps middle-aged women buying Davy Jones concert tickets. When we're in on the magic trick, does that teen idol hold any lasting magic?

"That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?" Cowell says.

**I**n a world where technology and packaging can make Kelly Osbourne a recording star after a single season of exposure on the MTV show featuring her family, how do you know if you're one of the handful who've got what it takes to have staying power?

"These kids don't know how talented they are," says Timothy Scheurer, past president of the American Culture Association and a professor of humanities at Shawnee State University in Ohio. "They're being told it, and their talent is being packaged, and they're being guided the whole time, but they don't actually know.

"So when it comes time for them to reinvent themselves, I bet they don't have a really good sense of how good or bad a performer they are. People in LA start talking to each other and start believing the lies."

Former teen idols who've been around that particular block say that if today's young performers paid more attention to the sound of their own voices, they would see that there's not a lot that's distinctive or enduring in what's blasting out of radios today.

Start with Frankie Avalon, who pulls no punches when he comments on the most recent Grammy Awards. "Norah Jones aside, a lot of this other stuff is gone, forget it, you can't sing along with it, you don't remember it, it's nothing. You have to be on the charts for at least four years before you're not a fly-by-night phenomenon." Beyond that, he says, you have to have good songs that stand the test of decades. "When I sing 'Venus' today, I know it's still reaching out to a lot of people, and they instantly know it's me singing."

Jump ahead a few eras in former idols, and the commentary doesn't grow any brighter. Seventies heartthrob David Cassidy says flatly that the look of today's performers tends to be more important than the substance, "meaning the sizzle is more important than the steak.

"That's the difference between when I was the thing, and before me, until now," he concludes. "It became Milli Vanilli" – the duo whose act withered when they were revealed to have lip-synced studio singers – "from the middle '80s on."

Late-'80s teen queen Tiffany could challenge that last assessment, but instead she points out that part of being a successful pop star is having a very strong stomach.

"I don't think that anyone who's really made it hasn't had doors slammed in their way, hasn't had criticism," says the woman who not only got beat on *Star Search* but also survived the very first shopping mall concert tour. "That's a good thing, because if you're successful in this business, be prepared for a lot of praise and rejection coming hand in hand. As soon as you're holding that Grammy, somebody will come along and hit you upside the head with it."

The bashing, in fact, still goes on for New Kids on the Block, which sprouted in the 1980s when idol maker

Maurice Starr raided the streets of Dorchester for a white-boy version of his successful New Edition. Former New Kid Jordan Knight thinks the too liberally applied "prefab" label has become particularly unkind with the advent of reality programs such as *Making the Band*, which, he says, does all boy bands a disservice.

"The show makes the performers look kind of cheesy," Knight says. "And they overdo the whole Svengali thing. It's good TV, but the producers are really kind of showing off. Let's not forget they used to prep Motown artists, too."

Roll back even further. In the early days of rock 'n' roll, when prepping seemed slightly less cynical, it was also called grooming, mentoring, and nurturing. It would be a mistake not to recognize that there was an idol-making machine then, too, just a fuzzier, less fine-tuned one.

Brenda Lee, a country-pop artist who was launched by 1950s television at age 11, remembers being taken under the wing of such legends as Patsy Cline, Sophie Tucker, Elvis Presley, and producer Owen Bradley. She played kick-the-can with the children of Decca Records executives, who, she says, always made her feel truly cared about, even if hindsight reveals their generosity didn't extend so often to her piggy bank. She admits she always knew there was a bottom line – "I don't fool myself about that" – but it didn't get in the way of a balanced and firmly grounded life that she thinks few young singers are currently allowed. "They are so insulated today, sometimes I feel like they're not even in the world of reality. You can't survive like that," she insists.

Not that all her memories are so rose-colored. The other side of the coin was unheated buses, infrequent pampering, and promoters who would skip town with the gate receipts. Lee says good money for a club engagement in the early '60s was around \$3,000 to \$5,000 per week, minus the costs of manager, agent, band, hotel, transportation, food, and assorted other things. Even adjusting for inflation and compound numbers of fingers in the pie, there's no comparison between her finances and that of a young artist today pulling in hundreds of thousands of dollars for a single concert. One reason why nurturing could be considered optional now is that even a

one-hit wonder can make a nice pile of money for everybody involved.

That said, tap into the grass-roots image of a teen pop idol, and you will always have something marketable. *American Idol* banks on the faux-homespun concept every week, giving its audiences the slickest illusion thus far created that celebrity belongs to everyone.

"They think what happened to me can happen to them," the show's first-season winner, Kelly Clarkson, says of the fans she's counting on to support her film (the upcoming *From Justin to Kelly*) and debut CD, *Thankful*. "People feel comfortable around me, which is kind of cool."

One wonders if they would feel as comfortable knowing that Clarkson is a self-proclaimed "mosh pit girl" at heart, fonder of songs penned by Steven Tyler and Axl Rose than of Diane Warren ballads. On the other hand, does it matter that the show paints a one-dimensional portrait? Isn't that what teen idols are all about, anyway?

"We could go all day dissecting the merits of a teen idol, but who's it for?" asks former New Kid Joey McIntyre. "A 10-year-old girl doesn't care. And that idol is hers, not ours. It's great when teen idols can make music that crosses over and stands on its own, but for the most part they have their audience, and it's a special thing, and if you don't like it, then don't come."

Define them however you will, teen idols will always be singing that refrain. They have to. Because, even for the truly talented, reinvention is no easy trick. The dumpster is filled with pop stars who thought they had what it takes, idols who believed their own glossy-lipped press in magazines like *Tiger Beat* and who thought *American Bandstand* would love them forever. For every Madonna, there are dozens of Leif Garretts; teen pop, like teen life, is a rather cruel and narrow place.

It helps, in the long run, to be multifaceted. Like a couple of his friends named Wahlberg, McIntyre went the acting route after his red-hot idol days were over. He's now on Fox TV's *Boston Public* and will reprise his off-Broadway role in Jonathan Larson's *tick, tick . . . BOOM!* at the Wilbur Theatre in Boston later this month.

David Cassidy dug into a variety of projects, even co-writing a show called *The Rat Pack Is Back!*, which rakes in cash touring casinos like Mohegan Sun (next month) while he's working on his next CD.

Whatever else can be said of their teen idol days, they've learned what to do when, as Avalon puts it, "the kids stop screaming." The growing fear today is that young pop idols are so overpolished and overamped they may be that much closer to emerging from the experience permanently deaf to their own voices.

"I know that technology improves, and Lord knows we all have to progress or get left behind, but studios and image-makers just take the guts out of everything now; they take the soul," Brenda Lee sighs. "I mean, hit a bad note every once in a while. Who cares? If the feeling's there, and you're touching somebody, they're never going to mind."

Once upon a time that was the best way to be famous.

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