Insta-success may be just an 'Idol' dream

By Sarah Rodman
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"American Idol" launches its seventh season on Fox tonight, but newbie vocalists vying for prime time's biggest prize may be troubled by recent news. It seems that the days of winning "Idol" and automatically becoming one not only are long gone, but were a mirage in the first place.

Last week, Taylor Hicks, who won season 5, was dropped by his record label after selling 699,000 copies of his 2006 debut, which disappointed Arista. Soon after that, his runner-up, Katharine McPhee - who didn’t quite hit the 400,000 mark with her RCA release - was also shown the door. Add to that list season 2 victor Ruben Studdard, who got the boot from J Records late last year. (All three recorded for subsidiary imprints of Sony BMG, which has contractual first dibs on "Idol" contestants.)

Of course, if being a finalist on "Idol" was all it took to become a pop star, then first season runner-up Justin Guarini would have enjoyed at least as much success as Chris Daughtry, who was season 5’s fourth-place finisher but who also had one of the best-selling albums of 2007.

But television viewers, many of whom simply enjoy "Idol" as a silly midweek diversion, are not always music consumers. Even if they were, the song is king in pop music. Millions of people may have voted for both Guarini and Daughtry, but only the latter had songs that connected with a mass audience. Even prior success is no key to continued popular embrace or record-label sponsorship. Season 1 winner Kelly Clarkson’s recent third record underperformed commercially, thanks to a dearth of radio catnip like "Since U Been Gone." Studdard saw a pattern of diminishing returns in urban soul and gospel music.

The true power of "Idol" isn't in creating pop stars - always a complicated equation - but rather in molding reality-TV personalities who are, briefly, offered a window to capture people's attention.

That some of the "Idol" winners and also-rans are able to open that window and step onto the red carpet of music, theater, film, or television instead of into a Red Lobster uniform - Clarkson, Daughtry, Carrie Underwood, and Oscar winner Jennifer Hudson - should cheer the more driven among this year’s crop.

Of the 60-plus finalists from the past six years, more than one-third have cobbled together some professional afterlife. There have been the ultimate
chart-scaling heights of Clarkson, Underwood, and Daughtry, and lower-profile pop, gospel, and country hits from folks such as Elliott Yamin, Studdard, and Kellie Pickler, respectively. Broadway shows and national touring companies have been deluged with former competitors, including Constantine Maroulis, Diana DeGarmo, and Latoya London. Some have worked as headliners at small clubs, county fairs, and rodeos; others have gone on soap operas or other reality television shows.

Maybe Hudson's work on Disney cruise ships would've led to an audition for "Dreamgirls," but we're guessing that national television exposure helped to put that Oscar onto her mantel. Perhaps shy bank teller Lakisha Jones or gawky Clay Aiken, who had worked with special-needs children, might have ended up with featured roles in Broadway shows, but neither was seriously pursuing that career. (Jones recently signed on to "The Color Purple," which has also featured season 3 winner Fantasia Barrino, and Aiken is joining "Spamalot" in a starring role.)

Hicks, McPhee, and Studdard all have projects on the horizon, too. Sony BMG has offered to consider Hicks's next album, McPhee is appearing in several films, and Studdard will be headlining a revival of the Fats Waller musical "Ain't Misbehavin'" alongside another former "Idol" contestant, Frenchie Davis.

The fact that many people still know Davis's name and those of Sanjaya, non-contestant William Hung, and, sadly, current "Celebrity Rehab" participant Jessica Sierra further underscores a crucial point. Singing talent or no, "Idol" isn't so different from "The Real World" and "Survivor" in churning out short-term bold-facers.

"Idol" itself recognizes the hunger for these people. A new feature of the 2008 season is a "Where are they now?" segment. Maybe we'll find out just what Guarini has been up to.

In recent interviews, acerbic British judge Simon Cowell has noted that one way to sidestep the minuscule dip in viewership that afflicted the 2007 season is to focus on the warbler's personalities and back stories. There hasn't been as much discussion of improving ratings - or record sales - by recruiting, you know, better singers.

So whether they want to sell records or host infomercials, this year's wannabes better bring the drama as well as the charisma and the melisma. ■
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