In the fame game,'Idol' dropout shows he can play

By Matthew Gilbert, Globe Staff | March 17, 2005

Was it a porn past? Perversion? Prostitution? Profligacy? Or maybe just privacy?

This week's raging speculation about why "American Idol" finalist Mario Vazquez quit the show reached its nadir when the tabloids linked the young singer to Michael Jackson. Having sung backup for Jackson in 2001, Vazquez was surely about to deliver racy testimony in Jackson's child-molestation trial. Oh, blessed two-fer! Obviously, the Bronx-born "Idol" favorite was holding on to proof positive of Jackson's pedophilia.

But Vazquez, 27, who has been coyly evasive about why he rejected the "American" dream, may have left for the dirtiest "P" word of them all: Publicity. In what could be his terrific joke on the music, TV, and tabloid industries, Vazquez may be orchestrating a pre-emptive media move in order to avoid obscurity. He may be a neophyte stunt artist, outsmarting the ruthless publicity machine that has rendered a few dozen "American Idol" hopefuls into forgotten nobodies.

After all, for every Clay Aiken or Kelly Clarkson, there are about 10 A.J. Gils and Jennifer Hudsons who have been defined as losers on Fox's hugely popular TV series. They sing on the "American Idol" tour for a few months, looking like the fifth-string touring company of "Rent," then listen to the bell toll on their 15 minute of fame.

An oddsmaker's favorite going into the final rounds, Vazquez nonetheless stood to face a fickle public whose voting habits have left some of the most talented contestants -- La Toya London, for example -- in the cold. Despite his trademark affection for hats and his sweet smiles, he had no guarantee of fan loyalty. Staying in the "Idol" game was a gamble; leaving it precipitously and mysteriously may have been a more dependable attention grab.

All week long, Vazquez has been quite vague about his motives. In fact, he has performed the press dodge-and-dart like a pro, as if aware that the truth is probably a lot less compelling than all the mystery. If he had delivered a specific explanation for his decision last weekend (such as a rumored deal with P. Diddy), the media would simply have reported the news and moved on - - back to the trials of Jackson, Blake, and Spector. There would have been none of the rampant guesswork, just the kind of brief, unshining moment that greeted Corey Clark when he left "Idol" in Season Two, after assault charges surfaced.

Despite its game-show trappings, "American Idol" is a form of reality TV, a genre whose most famous and enduring cast members are those who refuse to play by the rules. Reality
dramatics -- think Omarosa on "The Apprentice," or Boston Rob on "Survivor" and now "Amazing Race" -- are a popular currency these days.

The clearest statement Vazquez has made this week, amid his hemming and hawing about how he didn't quit because of his family or past mistakes, has been telling: "This won't be the last you hear of Mario Vazquez." Indeed, since he quit, he has been interviewed widely, by MTV, USA Today, "Access Hollywood," and the Associated Press, and he has made prominent TV appearances on "Live With Regis and Kelly" and "The Late Show With David Letterman." While "American Idol" only briefly mentioned his withdrawal on Tuesday night -- "We all wish him the best," host Ryan Seacrest said -- the rest of the media have more than compensated for that dearth of Fox limelight.

On "Letterman," Vazquez laughingly read the Top 10 "Reasons I Quit 'American Idol,' " including, as No. 7, "After seeing Michael Jackson, maybe I don't want to be a pop star." When he reached No. 4, Vazquez said, "Screw it -- I'm quitting this, too," and walked off the stage. If he is concerned about protecting his personal life -- "I want to keep the little privacy I have private, and I want people to respect that," he told MTV -- still, he is far from fame-phobic.

And if it turns out that Vazquez does have a past waiting to surface, he has nonetheless made the savviest decision. He left "American Idol" on his own terms, securing the possibility of having an independent career unsquelched by "Idol" shame. The show's producers say Vazquez signed a contract stipulating he can't record elsewhere until August. In the long run, that might not be a hard price to pay for a week or two of promotional headlines, photos, and sound bites.

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