

"American Idol" Is Back, and I've Got It Covered

by Joe Mulder

I love "American Idol." Or, at least, I really like "American Idol;" I imagine if I loved it, I wouldn't fast-forward through quite so many actual performances once the competition part of the show got going.

But I really like it. So I figured I'd just do a stream-of-consciousness, real-time commentary of the two-hour Season 8 premiere as we kick off the search for the next Kelly Clarkson, Ruben Studdard, Fantasia Barrino, Carrie Underwood, Taylor Hicks, Jordin Sparks and David Cook (I really just wanted to see if I could list all the winners in order off the top of my head, and spelled correctly. Turns out I can). This should net us at least 2,000 words, if nothing else.

We open with a quotation from David Foster. I don't know who that is, I'm afraid.

Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" accompanies a montage of memorable moments from auditions past. Hey, there's Kellie Pickler. Sanjaya. William Hung. Mikalah Gordon, to whom I was – and remain – inexplicably attracted. What a wonderful word, indeed.

"This is 'American Idol,'" Ryan Seacrest informs us, while standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. Don't try that at home, kids! Or, actually, if your home is the Grand Canyon, then try whatever you want, because you clearly kick ass.

We see a home video of a bunch of tween and preteen girls watching last season's winner, David Cook, being crowned. They've got David Archuleta signs and shirts; when the winner is announced, they're pissed. They remind me of nothing so much as that clip I saw of an Oscar party at a gay cowboy bar reacting to *Crash* being named Best Picture over *Brokeback Mountain*.

Footage of sunrise. Or sunset; I can't tell. Probably sunrise, since this is the season premiere.

A bunch of people taking into the camera, saying they're the next American Idol, then requisite crane shots of crowds outside of arenas, shouting the same. I'm anxious to see which city we're in first, and I want to see this new judge they've brought in to phase Paula Abdul out – I mean, to spice up the show.

Seacrest back at the Grand Canyon; I suspect that means we're starting out in Phoenix?

Commercials.

A commercial for "House" makes me think, "'House' rules." Then, after I think that, I think, "hey, that's an expression!"

This is honestly the first time that I realize that "'House' Rules" would make a good headline for a laudatory review of the show. That took five years, for me to think of that. That's okay, though; when "Shark" (with James Woods) was on, it took me about three seconds to think of "'Shark' Weak." I think that more than makes up for "'House' Rules."

Yep, we're in Phoenix. Where, apparently, it was quite hot for the people lined up in line for hours in the mid-summer Arizona sun. Who knew?

The new judge is Kara DioGuardi; I'm sure every single other person who follows "American Idol" as much or more than I do already knew that. In any case, there we have it.

We see a half-Asian guy with a ridiculous afro as our first contestant of the season, and he's doing some sort of ROTC dancing, as he calls it. I had heard we were going to get less of this sort of thing this season, less of the making fun of social retards and schizophrenics, less providing of showcases for jackoffs whose friends dared them to get on TV, and more of the actual good singers. This dude says he wants to be as big as Michael Jackson and Britney Spears. We can only assume that if he were an athlete, he'd want to be as big as Michael Vick and Plaxico Burress. The judges make short work of Tuan, we shan't see him again.

Emily Hughes has pink hair, a tongue piercing and multiple tattoos. We see home footage of her, so you figure she's going to be good, because she doesn't seem funny or clueless enough to be mocked. I find her screechy and inauthentic, but she's on to Hollywood. I could see her in the Top Ten, but most certainly not the Top Four. We may hear from her again later. Her band will be mad if she goes on in the competition, because then she won't be able to go on a European tour with them. This is what we call a "First World" problem.

Commercials, one of which stars a guy I used to play cards with.

Randy Something is a rocker with a bandana on his head. He cries and stuff before his audition. Some people just look, in their faces, like you can tell they're not going to be able to sing, you know? This guy is one of those. He sings "Livin' On a Prayer," and not particularly well. I've always considered "Slippery When Wet" to be one of the greatest albums ever recorded, incidentally, but I think that's mostly because when I was a kid, and I needed to get cavities filled, the dentist would give me a Walkman and like 25 CDs to choose from, and "Slippery When Wet" was the one I always picked, because the pickings were slim. So I'd get shot up with novocaine, and then I'd get high off nitrous oxide, and by the time "You Give Love a Bad Name" kicked in I was convinced that this was not only the best music ever, but one of the best things that any human beings had ever done, in the history of the world. Anyway, the rocker guy is told that he's bad, and cries. The judges pretend to fight.

J.B. Ahfua sings loud, which, if you know anything about music from watching this show, means therefore that he sings good. I'd say he's good enough to be preliminary round cannon fodder, but they've already shown him onscreen, so now he can't be. I mean, we all know how this show works by now, right? They pick seven people they want to really have a chance to win, and then load up the rest of the Top 24 with people they haven't shown at all, so the viewers vote for who the producers want. Anyway, J.B.'s through to Hollywood.

This poor kid in a stripey polo shirt gets his own package about how nervous he is. He sings a song I've never heard, and, based on his performance, wouldn't recognize even if I had. Simon Cowell tells him he "could have been singing in Bulgarian," because he couldn't understand a word. A quick search on the internets confirms that "Bulgarian" is, in fact, a real language. I would have bet against that. Score one for Simon.

They tease the commercial break with the idea that the stripey shirt kid might have collapsed and died after his audition. I suspect he didn't, or it would have been on the news.

Commercials.

They give the stripey shirt kid a banana, and I guess he's fine.

Montage of people winning dares or getting let into frats by successfully getting shown on "American Idol" intentionally singing horribly. One of them might have been an incredibly self-deluding gay guy, too, though.

Way-too-much-energy guy hops into the audition room holding a guitar. Say what you want about Simon Cowell, but, cutting away to him while way-too-much-energy-guy does his schtick will always, always be funny. Way-too-much-energy guy pretends to be shocked when the judges give him four "no"s.

We've got an adorable 16-year-old of indeterminate ethnic origin who does nice things for senior citizens. I don't think we even need to hear her sing; we can assume she'll be going on to Hollywood. She does have a nice voice, as it happens.

Commercials.

Day 2 in Arizona. It's still hot. A crowd shouts out "I'm the next 'American Idol!'" The odds say that each and every one of them are damned liars.

Montage of bad singers from previous seasons. Not sure what that accomplishes; we're almost an hour in, and they've shown three people we have any chance of seeing again.

A skinny black guy with a comically, cartoonishly low voice

that he must be faking, even though he insists he isn't. Remember Baloo the bear, from Disney? If Baloo didn't sound like he actually sounded, he would have sounded like this guy singing.

A perky strawberry blonde in a pink shirt and pink cowboy hat immediately makes me feel terrible about myself, because she says she's 16. She's insane, but the fun kind of insane. She claims to be the new judge's "biggest fan." She's got some sort of binder... it's her "songwriting book." Something's off here; this young woman is far, far too attractive to be behaving like this. Something went terribly wrong at some point. She tells the judges what song she'll be singing (I don't recognize the title, which will generally be the case), and Simon's eyes sort of bug out. She's not God-awful, but she's not good. I need to know what's up, here. I think she just, um, blossomed in the last 18 months, and prior to that may well have looked like the type of person who would travel from L.A. to Phoenix to audition for "American Idol" and bring along her songwriting book with her 100 original songs in it. Anyway, good luck to her, with life in general. She seemed upbeat and harmless.

Next up is a young woman named "Stevie," after Stevie Nicks, to whom my mom's cousin was married at some point. I have to imagine she'll be good, otherwise there's not really any reason they'd be showing her to us. She sings "At Last," by Etta James, which they'll only show someone auditioning with if it's either a train wreck or a home run. This one's a home run, although not a towering one; she's through to Hollywood. Paula says she's got "Kelly Clarkson" strength. I respectfully disagree.

Commercials.

Michael Sarver, a big dude who works on an oil rig, gets his own introduction package, where they go to his job and his home to show his wife and kid. He sings a song that – believe it or not – I don't recognize. He sings in tune, pretty much, but he's not all that good. But they went to his job! They shot B-roll of his family! He's through to Hollywood easily. When he comes out of the audition room, we clearly hear Ryan Seacrest say, "Jeremy, congratulations." I go back and check, and his name is definitely Michael. In any case, I predict we won't hear all that much from him again. Seems like a good guy, though.

Montage of performance artists, dare-winners, and Asperger's cases singing badly.

So, you don't have a pretty face, talent, or boobs. How do you get on TV? You show up to "American Idol" in a bikini that shows off your flat tummy and nice legs, that's what you do. Bikini girl tells Ryan Seacrest that the two of them are going to make out. Seacrest pretends to pretend that he really would love to do that. He's got us all fooled, Seacrest does, and one day he'll be recognized for the mad genius he is. Bikini girl sings, and she's not quite as bad as you'd hope

she'd be, but Kara the new judge's claws still come out. She actually sings the song back to bikini girl, and bikini girl claims that her own version was better. Simon and Randy pretend to agree with bikini girl. Kara is disgusted that Simon and Randy put bikini girl through to Hollywood as a joke, just because she showed up in a bikini. Kara begrudgingly admits that bikini girl really does have a nice butt, which she really does, if that's your thing.

Commercials.

Montage of people not knowing whether it's "Kara," like "CARR-uh," or "Kara," like "CARE-uh." Apparently it's "CARE-uh." You'd think that a person with a name like that would eventually just develop a "screw it; pronounce it however you want" attitude and a slight hatred of the parents who gave them such a name, but apparently she feels strongly about "Care-uh."

We see a young man with "Sexual Chocolate" tattooed on his back. There was a professional wrestler with that moniker a few years ago. This version sings something from Stevie Wonder. I notice that the graphic showing his name, hometown and occupation lists him as "unemployed," and "17." Can a 17-year-old even technically *be* unemployed? Isn't he either a "student" or a "truant?" Aren't those pretty much the only options? I want to know how "Sexual Chocolate" gets listed as "unemployed" at 17. I want answers!

Sexual Chocolate's rejection leads us to a brief montage of people being sad that they got rejected, and then we meet Brianna Quijada, 22, from Tempe ("College Student," it says. See, at 22, *she* could be unemployed). She does a low-key version of "Let's Hear It For the Boy," which I wish had more oomph, but they let her sing another one, and she false starts a couple times on "Killing Me Softly." She's a terrific young woman; not really good enough for this show, but she's wonderful TV, so Paula and Simon put her through after Randy and Kara say "no."

Commercials.

Montage of people who brought their families with them. Awwwww.

A cute blonde with an exaggerated southern accent sings a self-consciously Janis-Joplin version of "Sittin' On the Dock Of the Bay," which the judges respond to because it sounds almost exactly like something they've heard before, and that's how the music business works.

A painful 17-year-old from Detroit has his whole family there with him, watching him audition. He likes making horror movies. This won't go well... nope, I'm wrong. He's not bad. He's not great, but he's got an "angle," in which he looks creepy and femmy but doesn't sound at all like that. Needless to say, he sails through to Hollywood.

Commercials.

We come back, with a montage of Simon asking people which three countries they'll be most popular in. One 19-year-old kid from Studio City, CA, Alex Wagner-Trugman (he'll have to fix that; doesn't really roll off the tongue), has what the show instructs us to believe is a cute answer, but it's not worth remembering. Simon says something about the kid having just "come out of the closet," because in the kid's bio it says something about how he used to practice singing in a closet, but had to stop because the closet had mold in it. The kid completely rolls with it, and is not remotely flapped, leading me to believe that he's unflappable. Simon doesn't like his singing, so the kid offers to sing "God Save the Queen." I like this kid. Randy likens him to Joe Cocker, and Simon replies, "I would say more cocker spaniel." Almost under his breath, and for his own benefit, the kid says, "that would be good joke, if it made sense." The three other judges put him through to Hollywood, while Simon correctly points out that he can't do well in this competition. But, still. Well done, Alex.

Various people singing "Wanted, Dead or Alive" by Bon Jovi quite badly. For every audition site, they have a song they obviously ask everyone to show up and sing. It's disorienting, this part, because they'll show someone's "entire" audition, where they don't sing that song, and then they'll show them later in the episode, in a montage, singing that song. I don't know exactly how that works, but I don't really care.

Commercials.

Our last auditioner is nearly completely blind. He's a singer-songwriter, and we're meant to find him incredibly inspirational. And it's not that he isn't, but, it's just that visual impairment is almost neither here nor there when it comes to singing and songwriting. It would be like a guy saying, "I will *not* let my inability to speak Latin hold me back from making it in the National Football League!" I'm not making fun of the blind guy, mind you; just the show, for presenting it like it's some huge obstacle, and this guy's so singularly heroic. I'm not sure the guy himself is wild about that angle being played up. He sings "And So It Goes," a hard song not to sing well, and he's through to Hollywood. Good for him. I wonder if they'll mention that he's blind again?

[update: I have failed you. I missed it, but apparently Ryan Seacrest, after the blind singer's audition, held his hand up for a high-five. Predictably, the blind guy didn't reciprocate until he was made aware that a high-five request had been made. Go to YouTube and search "Seacrest" and "high five;" you'll find it. To miss this when I watched the show the first time was inexcusable, and I apologize to you all.]

[I retract none of my previous statements about Seacrest being a mad genius, by the way. If anything, I'm now even more convinced.] A montage of the potential cannon fodder

POOP READING

who got through to Hollywood but didn't warrant screen time closes us out.

And, I have to say, for all the talk about changes, "American Idol" actually seems quite the same.

Thanks goodness.
