Commentary: The popular cruelty of 'Idol'

- "American Idol" popularity not about the music, says AP critic
- Early shows feature unqualified contestants
- AP critic: Putting bad performances on TV invites cruelty

By Frazier Moore
Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) -- Three weeks and nine hours into a new year of "American Idol," the song remains the same. Just bigger, louder and nearly impossible to get out of your head. More than ever, "American Idol" is in heavy rotation in the cultural psyche.

No one can say for sure why, in its sixth season, the "American Idol" phenomenon continues to metastasize. However, as always at this point, it's NOT the music, stupid. Not yet.

On Tuesday at 8 p.m. EST, the seven-city audition tour concludes in San Antonio, where Idol wannabes were waiting by the thousands last summer.

Just like everywhere. And for all sorts of reasons. At this early stage, "American Idol" is a playlist of human pathologies. It highlights people whose mix of self-delusion, grandiosity and craving for attention -- not singing talent -- is the driving force. (Watch an "Idol" reject bash the show .)

Consider Jennifer Chapton, aka "The Hotness."

Her Seattle tryout got off to a bad start when she had nowhere to park her chewing gum.

"It was a terrible audition," Simon Cowell said after she had slogged through a song called "I Want Your Love," a performance so bad he proposed she "get a job down in the port."

Unsurprisingly, The Hotness got heated.

"Your opinion don't mean nothin'," she hissed at the notoriously judgmental judge. "You don't know nothin' about music."

Never mind. The music phase of this Fox juggernaut will kick in later, in Hollywood. Most of the singers who get there will be capable of singing. (EW.com: 'Idol' crosses the line )

For now, that's a happy exception as viewers share with the judges the occasional pleasure of meeting someone who's really good. Like soulful Jason "Sundance" Head in Memphis. Or the adorable teen Shyamali Malakar and her equally adorable younger brother Sanjaya, rival siblings who auditioned in Seattle. (Gallery: Where are the "Idols" now?)

Exposed to people like that, viewers take a break from cringing. Cowell and his fellow judges Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson put their jeering on hold.

Then, all too quickly, it's back to the other extreme.

Back to Martik Manoukian, aka "Panther Man," who, after stripping off his shirt in his Los Angeles audition, snarled like a...
wildcat and managed to reduce his song to gibberish.

Or Steven Thoen, a hulking redhead in Seattle who squealed through what he said was Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody."

"It was like a 1-year-old singing that song," said Cowell, once he and his mates had their helpless giggling under control.

Are the judges being cruel? More cruel than ever this season? That's what some people say, including Rosie O'Donnell speaking out on "The View."

Which, of course, is baloney. If you consider the cruelty inflicted on the judges by someone like Trista Giese (who, in Minneapolis, gurgled through the Cowardly Lion's anthem, "If I Were King of the Forest") you can see how the judges aren't cruel enough.

Anyway, what's wrong with a little honesty, even when conveyed with brass knuckles? There's nothing wrong with a wakeup call -- however unlikely its recipients will heed it.

**Encounter with an un-'Idol'**

The wrong part, if any, is this: putting it on TV. Putting it on TV can be cruel. Which makes "American Idol" a pretty cruel show. If it weren't, the most appalling contestants would be weeded out beforehand, safely out of view -- not hand-picked to face the judges' on-camera scorn.

Any reasonable quota for a season's worth of cruelty was more than satisfied last week with an appearance by a 20-year-old New Yorker named Sarah Goldberg.

After savaging Selena's "Dreaming of You," Goldberg, already wound much too tight, admitted that she was "not a singer," that friends made fun of her for being tone-deaf.

Then, getting more and more keyed up, she told the judges, "Even if I don't sing, I can be the next American Idol. And you want to know why? Because I've never sung before. And so you can teach me how to sing."

"Huh?" said Jackson.

"I think you don't have to sing to be an American Idol, I really don't," she seethed, by then her face gripped in a wild grin while tears rolled down her cheeks. "Paris Hilton can't really sing!"

"She's not an American Idol," noted Jackson, triggering an angry I-knew-that retort.

"I could be the only American Idol who has never sang before," wailed Goldberg, who then finally accepted her fate and made her bitter exit.

It was a spooky display, spellbinding to watch. And kind of demeaning. But no one could blame Randy, Paula or even Simon with his reservoir of synonyms for "awful" (by happenstance, he wasn't even there for this meltdown). The judges didn't choose to showcase Goldberg's audition as a 4 1/2-minute exhibition of a troubled person falling apart.

No, the fault, if any, lies with the show. And with its vast audience, of course, for savoring each spectacle of shame.

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