



AMERICAN IDOL

by Norma Coates

Media scholar Henry Jenkins calls *American Idol* “the first killer app of media convergence.” It may also be the first killer app of media globalization, as the program that originated in the UK as *Pop Idol* in 2001 now has local versions in forty countries. Worldwide votes for *Idol* competitors exceed 3 billion. At the same time, *American Idol* is the last killer app of old media during a time when digital technologies and the increasingly global economy rapidly undermine entrenched entertainment industry business models.

American Idol gets some of the highest ratings on current American television, consistently drawing upward of 25 million viewers to each program. The show is propping up the major music industry during a time of inexorable change in which the traditional business model is increasingly unable to reflect and react to market reality. *American Idol* is one of the last means to produce the type of performer whose sales can keep this model going. Several *American Idol* contestants, whether they won the contest or not, have released top-selling records. First-season winner Kelly Clarkson and Season 4 winner Carrie Underwood are major stars and Grammy Award winners.

Through Season 8, the judging panel consisted of producer Randy Jackson, singer/dancer Paula Abdul, and Simon Cowell, the record industry executive whom everyone loved to hate. Abdul left after Season 8 and was replaced by songwriter Kara DioGuardi. The panel was augmented in Season 9 with the addition of American comedian and talk-show host Ellen Degeneres. That season was rocked by the announcement that Cowell, the show’s drawing card, would be leaving. Season 10 constituted a “reboot” of the program. Of the original judges, only Jackson remained, joined by Aerosmith lead singer Steven Tyler and pop diva Jennifer Lopez.

American Idol is, at its heart, a combination of old-style television talent contests and game shows revived as “reality programs.” Reality television depicts “real people” as they participate in some sort of competition or task. Reality programs are heavily mediated and edited, yet viewers go along and identify with contestants who are “real people” like themselves. Reality television is much cheaper to produce than scripted television, given that it dispenses with writers and actors beyond hosts and occasional guest stars. Television sponsors love reality television because successful programs draw large audiences to advertisements for their products.

American Idol is “clean” family entertainment, unlike some of the competitions that revolve around romance, or that examine the bad behavior of fashion designers or chefs under stress. *American Idol* provides many different types of pleasure to viewers across age and gender. For sponsors, it provides a giant stage for product placement. In Season 6, for example, each judge drank out of a large cup that prominently featured the Coke logo. Ford commercials in each of the “final ten” episodes starred the

remaining contestants, blurring the line between program and advertisement so as to render them “DVR-proof.”

So why do people watch? *American Idol* is varied in format, has dramatic ups and downs, gives the at-home audience an active role in the outcome, provides different forms of entertainment, has heroes and villains, and, in the immortal words of Joni Mitchell, “reveals the star-making machinery behind the popular song.” In short, *American Idol* is riveting television.

Each season of *American Idol* begins with the audition process, in which the judges travel to several American cities for open auditions. The first few weeks of each season then show the at-home audience the worst of the performances—and some of the best. Until he left the program after Season 9, Simon Cowell’s often offensive comments in this phase sometimes attracted attention in the mainstream media. Thousands are then whittled down to a hundred, which are winnowed down to twenty-four in Los Angeles, where home audiences vote via phone or text message for the “final ten.” Then the real drama begins, and viewers get to vicariously live out a certain type of pop-star daydream by identifying with the contestants.

American Idol also has an active online culture. Fans can go to the Fox network’s *American Idol* website to participate in program-related activities. Fallen idols appear on television talk shows, and draw fans to their websites. During Season 6, spoiler websites proliferated and www.votefortheworst.com, associated with radio “shock jock” Howard Stern, received national attention in its attempts to manipulate voting in favor of a contestant with a lot of charisma and a penchant for interesting hairstyles, but minimal singing talent.

Records by “Idols” do sell, in part because of the exposure the buying public has to their voices over a television season, and in part because the chosen winner and the runners-up have been molded to produce “sellable” sounds. Some music fans rail against the inauthenticity of the process and the program.

Winners over the last few seasons have hewed to more conservative images and sounds than those presented by the most truly popular current pop artists, such as Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, and Beyoncé. For example, vocally and physically innocuous Kris Allen won over flamboyant Adam Lambert in Season 8. Lambert later came out as gay, but to date no serious *Idol* contestant has been out during his or her time on the program. The equally milquetoast Lee DeWyse won over the Janis Joplin-esque, in sound and biography, Crystal Bowersox in Season 9. Season 10 seemed to ignore trends in pop music in 2011. Two country singers went to the finals, which crowned a seventeen-year-old retro-country singer, the deep-voiced Scotty McCreery, as winner. *American Idol* may be diverging from what is most popular on the Internet, the radio, and iTunes, but it still taps into a large market. That’s enough to keep the hit-making machinery—and the entertainment industries and corporations that depend upon it—going, for now.

Norma Coates (University of Western Ontario) has written on the interaction of popular music, gender, and cultural industry. Her current book project is called Rocking the Wasteland: A Cultural History of Popular Music on American Network Television from Elvis to MTV.