



Idol: Finding local singing stars

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drum major at Rosa Parks and one of 22 high school students competing in this year's Black and Gold Idol, a local singing competition modeled after the TV phenomenon "American Idol."

Jasmine's performance, which left her in tears and the audience ecstatic, was enough to make a person wonder: Who needs American idols when you have your classmates?

If anything, Jasmine proved that it only takes the right song paired with the right voice to create a truly stirring experience.

And for the nearly two dozen students competing in this third annual contest, the chance to sing before a live audience proved to be worth more than the sum of the prizes at stake: \$1,000 in cash and an audition at a major label record company. It is a chance to live, if momentarily, the dream of mounting a stage and holding an audience captive to the sound of your voice.

Or else it could indicate that a singing career is not in the cards.

If anything, the competition offered a chance to sing outside the confines of one's bedroom and to an audience larger than one's mirror.

Before the show, the students spent hours battling jittery nerves and dry throats that preceded stepping onstage and bracing for a critique by the panel of judges, whose ranks included a gospel band manager, school officials and Josie Barrino, a woman said to be an aunt of Fantasia Barrino, the winner of "American Idol" season three.

The format of Black and Gold Idol is familiar to anyone who has watched its televised cousin: Twenty-four students were picked from auditions held at area high schools. Over a series of three public concerts in which contestants sing over prerecorded music, judges and the audience will whittle the finalists down to one.

Already, fate has taken out a few contestants.

"One of the young ladies' grades weren't good, so her mother took her out," said Dale "Skip" Van Rensalier, a social worker in Paterson's school district who has spearheaded the competition. "One couldn't get a CD of her music."

Two others couldn't make the concert due to a prior engagement; Van Rensalier decided to automatically push them to the next round.

"I'll probably eliminate 10 tonight, seven the next time. I'll bring five to the finals," he said as he crossed the four no-shows off his list.

That news was less well received by the competing students, who hailed mostly from Rosa Parks and Passaic County Tech.

"Gosh," one young woman muttered. Another crossed herself for good luck. The few young male competitors tried to affect a tough gaze, but not even their sunglasses and loose fitting clothes could hide their trepidation.

"Can I hear the order?" asked Fabiola Frank, from West Orange High School.

"You're first," Van Rensalier responded.

More than an hour passed before Fabiola inched onstage to face an audience of more than 300, plus the six judges who would decide her fate. It was hard not to see her knees quiver beneath the white fabric of her pantsuit.

The judges quickly tried to assuage her fear.

"I must say, Fabiola, you look great in white," said Andre Sayegh, a member of Paterson's Board of Education, who is up for reelection this month. "If the rest of the competition is going to be like this, we're in for a tough decision."

Just offstage, a giant novelty check sat propped up as a reminder

of the prize for which they were competing. But nobody paid much attention to it. The audience stayed focused on the young men and women trying to find themselves onstage.

Some felt validated by the reception they received. Some never found their center, singing with their shoulders stooped low or their eyes betraying fear. Others found themselves quickly, strutting confidently around the stage, belting out well-rehearsed lines made famous by the pop stars they aspire to be one day.

Who needs American idols when you have your classmates?

The judges did their best not to imitate their TV counterparts. Rather than give stinging rebukes or flaccid advice, they tried to boost self-esteem while offering genuine critiques.

"That song is you, sweetheart," one judge said to a chorus of audience approval.

"What I would caution you on is your pitch, especially in the higher registers," judge Jayne Hernandez told Nikia Garry, a Rosa Parks student. "Also at the end, I started to notice that you started to run out of breath."

Harsher words came from the audience. "Ooooh, trying too hard," one mom moaned as a girl (not her daughter) tried to woo the judges with her rendition of 702's "I Still Love You." When another student's voice bottomed out during her rendition of Billie Holiday's "Summertime," the mom chortled, "In your dreams, girl."

But as the night progressed, the concert felt more like a celebration than a contest. Even when Van Rensalier started to name the first few advancing to the next round, the audience was united in its cheers. But something changed when he announced the fifth finalist. The mood turned to fist-clenching, nail-biting anxiety.

"Five more, five more," Van Rensalier said. It sounded almost like a taunt.

"One step closer to \$1,000, one step closer to an audition with a record company," Van Rensalier said as he ticked off the next few names.

Then just two spots remained. Two more finalists to be announced. Twelve people stood onstage.

"From Passaic County Tech, Jazmyn Arroyo," Van Rensalier intoned.

Much of the crowd burst into cheers. Others sat silent. One young woman in the fourth row closed her eyes, tapped her feet, clutched her sweater and bowed her head in apparent prayer.

Van Rensalier stoked the fevered excitement. There was one finalist remaining, he reminded the audience, which he would announce "right after this commercial break."

The audience groaned. Van Rensalier smiled and held his card. The young woman held her prayer pose.

"From Rosa Parks," Van Rensalier said. "Taralyn Brown."

The young woman stopped praying and sighed. Whoever she was hoping for didn't make the cut. In the explosion of joy that ensued, there was the silent crush of defeat.

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