Building the Authentic Celebrity: The “Idol” Phenomenon in the Attention Economy.
by Charles Fairchild

Abstract: The “Idol” phenomenon is a spectacle founded on the creation, perpetuation, and maintenance of specific kinds of carefully structured consumer relationships. Several of the more successful contestants are gradually formed into recognizable and familiar brands centered on varied and mostly familiar pop star personae intended to form the foundations of the relationships between the various contestants and their supporters. However “Idol” relationships are not limited to familiar musician-fan binaries, but grow and evolve into a series of intimate, active relationships that stretch well beyond the life of the show. By the end of each series the primary relationship is no longer confined to contestants and fans, but include a series of relationships between the program and its audience created through a wide range of channels. The main goal of “Idol’s” producers is to build affective investment in contestants and gradually shift that investment to the narrative and drama of the program itself.

The Strategic Imperative

The advent of the “Idol” phenomenon near the turn of millennium appeared to be overkill. At the time, we did not seem to be running short of pop stars nor were we light on manufactured pop confections. Of course, “Idol” is not a response to any perceived aesthetic crisis on the supply-side, but a reaction to a whole other set of concerns on the demand side. With the vertical integration of global cultural production, a sea change in the technology used to distribute, consume, and experience music, and a music industry now permanently embedded in the larger structures of the entertainment industry, music producers are faced with both grave crises and surprising opportunities. Given the debt load most media mergers dump on new corporate partnerships, the pressure to make greater profits at lower costs has become intense. The dwindling number of major labels have begun to find new ways to turn costs into profits in response to a corporate practice that presents extensive
possibilities for cross-media ‘synergies.’ (Greider, 1997; Haring, 1996; Herman and McChesney, 1997: 52-61) When viewed through the prism of contemporary business strategy, “Idol” is a remarkably clear reflection of the priorities of a music industry that has morphed into a very different beast than it was just a decade ago. “Idol” provides an opportunity for its producers to turn the often expensive and unpredictable process of finding and cultivating new talent into a profitable promotional spectacle and “marketing juggernaut.” (Maley and Davis, 2003) As a result, “Idol’s” creators have found novel ways to maintain and help reproduce the structures of feeling created by the relationships between fans and pop stars upon which their industry is utterly and completely dependent for its survival. It can act as a public midwife to the births of new pop stars, foregrounding its assumed role as transparent, earnest, and benevolent facilitator of the best undiscovered talent it can find, and through this giving us all the drama, tears, pleasure and pain we can stand.

In what follows, I will analyse the ways in which “Idol” produces a series of musical celebrities through aesthetic choices made within an overall strategic environment. From this analysis, it is clear that “Idol” is a thoroughgoing and mostly planned reaction to a difficult and demanding arena of global commerce in which the production of popular music is not simply integrated into the larger structures of the entertainment industry, but is in fact structurally and often textually inseparable from them. (Gotting, 2003) The strategies for effective publicity developed through “Idol” cleverly exploit and respond to consumers’ evolving uses of a variety of media within an extraordinarily complicated communication environment. These strategies can be discerned in all areas of the spectacle, from the choices made by producers, judges, and contestants alike. These choices extend to the conveniently ambiguous and malleable regime which shapes the success and failure of the hopefuls as well as contestants’ choices of repertoire and modes of self-presentation, shaped and motivated by the practical demands of the contest itself. These systems of value are couched within forms of ‘art talk’ that are vague, pervasive, and impossible to dislodge from the larger strategic imperatives which shape and produce them.

Crucially, it is “Idol’s” system of aesthetic order, in the guise of gradually branded contestants acting within a rule-bound series of media events, through which the larger values of the music industry are made comprehensible and material. Each “Idol” franchise is a long and complicated process of establishing and re-establishing what Couldry has defined as “media rituals,” or social relationships created and facilitated by symbolic means. (Couldry, 2002a) My objects of analysis, then, are the social relationships mediated and facilitated by “Idol.” “Idol’s” rituals, the activities that constitute it as a spectacle, are presented through a series of familiar actions on the part of audience members, performers and judges all placed within a formal terrain of consumption connecting the audience to “the wider transcendent patterns within which the details of social life make sense.” (Couldry, 2002a, p.3: emphasis in the original) These ritual frames and the terrain on which they do their cultural work are informed and structured by an evolving regime of strategic thought and action designed to clarify and contextualize the very idea of what it means to be a pop star in
an environment in which many of the traditional methods of producing musical
celebrity have been shaken to their foundations. “Idol” claims to put things right for us.
As Silverstone (1993) has noted, television often acts as a “transitional object”
sustaining what he called our “ontological security.” (1993: 590-2) Our experience of
the world, our formed sense of the common and the practical everyday knowledge that
sustains these implicit social connections to the larger world are given support and
confirmation by a whole range of symbolic expression. “Idol” is one such semiotic
security blanket.

Branding and Performance Personae
Curiously, the debates, strategies, and motivations of the public relations
industry have received little sustained attention in popular music studies. While much
has been written about the contradictions between the rhetoric of rebellion and the
contentious realities of corporate success (Frank, 1997; Negus, 1992; 1999), less has
been written about the evolution of specific kinds of publicity and the strategies that
shape their use. This is surprising given the unavoidable and foundational role of public
relations strategies within the culture industries generally and the music industry in
particular. Specifically, what Turner et. al. (2000) define as “the promotional culture” is
of increasing importance to a music industry faced with declining sales of compact
discs, an advertising environment that is crowded with all manner of competing
messages, a steady rate of trade in digital song files and ever more effective competition
from video games and DVDs. “Idol” offers a rich opportunity to examine one strategic
culture of promotion created and used by one member of an industry that is becoming
dependent on ever more elaborate and subtle regimes of publicity. “Idol” has proven to
be a bundle of highly successful methods for making money from popular music.
Importantly, selling CDs seems to be almost ancillary to the phenomenon, acting as
only one profit centre among many.

The means to establish these multiple profit centres are the processes through
which Idol’s producers try to establish long term and increasingly intimate relationships
with their audience. These processes rest most centrally in shaping audience perceptions
of the contestants themselves as performers deserving of praise, success, and celebrity.
Through the close descriptive and analytical reading that follows here of one iteration of
the phenomenon, “Australian Idol,” we can track the progress and deployment of
specific strategies for shaping the creation of a series of what Tolson calls “authentic
celebrities.” (Tolson, 2001) While Tolson argues convincingly that authentic celebrities
are those perceived to embody comforting and familiar ways of “being yourself” in
public, I would transpose his formulation slightly here. In order to describe the mode of
celebrity gradually inhabited by the ‘Idols’ we have to understand how they embody the
process of ‘becoming yourself,’ as their celebrity is dependent for its public validation
on the ways in which each emerges from anonymity to inhabit the role of pop star.
Further, the process of crowning an Idol is replete with so many varied marketing
mechanisms at every turn in the contest that
the evolution and moulding of the public experience of “Idol’s” most visible products cannot simply be considered to be what Auslander (2004:6) defines as performance personae, those public personalities assumed through the creation of musical celebrity. Instead, the performative skins through which the ‘Idols’ touch us most directly stretch well beyond these personae and eventually begin to act more like brands than the familiar forms of musical celebrity that have been so thoroughly analysed elsewhere. (see also Frith, 1996)

Indeed, ‘Idol’s’ producers are unusually obvious in their use of the rhetoric and strategies of branding. The defining aspects of branding are not confined to the dictates of mere customer satisfaction. Instead, branding is primarily about creating sustainable relationships with consumers specifically by constructing and mobilizing their loyalty and trust of a long period of time. In the case of “Idol,” trust is required not only in the contestants, but in the enterprise as a whole. Establishing this trust requires a demonstration of the producer’s credibility to craft a context in which authentic musical celebrities can emerge. However, while the description and analysis of the first series of ‘Australian Idol’ which follows below shows how deeply embedded strategies designed to inculcate such trust are in the structure of the show, structural mechanisms aren’t worth much without compelling content. As will be made clear in the latter sections of this work, the structure and content of “Australian Idol” work in specifically musical ways within this carefully structured context to build affective relationships between the contestants and the audience in order to transfer that investment to the show itself. The producers walk a careful line between extensive use of Australian music and more international styles in a clear effort to position the show as a credible forum for the launch of real pop stars who are both of Australia and the world. While several of the contestants were eventually shaped into recognizable brands, it was only in the service and context of a larger franchise defined by complex relationships of mutual dependence between performer and audience as facilitated by the show’s producers. The contestants were catalysts for the establishment of very particular kinds of relationships and entered into an expressive context that was carefully designed to capitalise on the relationships they were expected to establish with various segments of the audience. Initially these relationships only required the contestants to turn up and perform well. As the contest progressed however, it was clear that the burden of being a pop star was far more complex that had originally been acknowledged. As was made clear throughout the life of the show, contestants were never there simply to express themselves. They were there to satisfy that portion of the public upon whose will their success depended and establish a strong relationship with them. Thus, it is both useful and important to read the presentation, branding, and shaping of “Idol’s” attractive young charges specifically as these are facilitated through a spectacle that is primarily a vehicle for the music industry to create intimate, active and long term relationships with audiences, animated by a continuous process of strategic publicity in which we are all invited to participate.
The producers of ‘Idol’ have clearly chosen to pursue branding opportunities in almost every conceivable manner throughout the life of the contest. Their emphasis on long term loyalty, trust, and credibility, concerns at the heart of the branding process, have been inspired in part by the dramatically increased commercialization of public culture. For example, it has been somewhat hysterically estimated that the average resident of a large metropolis like Sydney might be presented with 3000 commercial messages a day. (Lee, 2004b) It is this kind of communication environment that makes account planners go weak in the knees. Many have taken to paying people to go to bars, cafes, clubs and even dinner parties to talk up the relative merits of a product to complete strangers and friends alike in the guise of casual conversation. Similarly, commercial buskers have recently appeared on City Trains to proclaim the virtues of the wares they’ve been contracted to hawk. “Cockles and Mussels” has been updated as “MP3 Players and Really Cool Footwear.” These phenomena are referred to as “viral,” “tipping point,” “word of mouth” or “whisper” marketing. (Gladwell, 2001; Godin, 2001; Henry, 2003; Lee, 2004b; Rosen, 2000) The problem inspiring these promotional chats and arias is the same: advertisers can no longer count on getting and holding our attention. As Davenport and Beck (2002), Brody (2001) and even Nobel Prize winning economist Herbert Simon have noted, the more taxed public attention gets, the more valuable it becomes. Regardless of its sociological vacuity or validity, the attention economy is by now an established reality for advertisers. It has inspired new thinking about how to create lasting, flexible and evolving relationships with consumers. The competition for attention and through it consumer action, represents a significant shift of emphasis away from traditional methods of reaching consumers, acknowledging and struggling with the overwhelming messiness of our advertising cultures. The attention economy is a complicated and often contradictory response to a media environment that appears less and less reliable and to consumers whose behavior is often poorly understood, even mysterious. (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003)

This challenging backdrop, however, is only the beginning for a seemingly beleaguered music industry. Faced with the very real threat of global piracy, the expansion of television and video games to mobile phones and hand held players, and increasing amounts of money spent on DVDs and ring tones, selling CDs has become almost a sideline to the very profitable multimedia use and reuse of the industry’s vast stores of intellectual property through all manner of media, most which didn’t exist ten years ago. (Coultan, 2004; Gliddon, 2003; Petradis, 2004; Shedden, 2003) The “Idol” phenomenon shows us how the music industry can incorporate existing pieces of the media environment to establish and maintain connections with audiences through almost every type of media and the varied formats and inventive ways in which we consume and use them. “Idol’s” varied relationships gradually grow into evermore intimate, active, and reciprocal relationships over the course of the contest by encouraging increasingly specific
acts by consumers to complete a continuing chain of transactions. In order to overcome the perceived attention deficit, the producers of “Idol” created a series of texts and events that exist in parallel to a related series of continuously available sites of consumption. The broad range of opportunities to participate in “Idol” is important to its success as it demonstrates a willingness by the show’s producers to bend significantly to the audience’s uses of media while not being particularly fussy about how participation actually happens. Producers allow for many kinds of participation while constantly offering more specific and more active levels of involvement. It is the structured narrative of the contest that ties its disparate expressions together. The stories of contestants rising through the ranks of pretenders is intended to most directly shape our experience of “Idol,” maintaining and heightening our interest as the drama unfolds. It is this narrative of aesthetic order, in the face of a perceived industrial chaos that is intended to draw us into the spectacle. Instead of a fairly simple and potentially monotonous series of judged performances upon which we are asked to comment through statistical tabulations of our sentiments, ‘Idol’ presents us with performers who grow into real pop stars right before our eyes, just as we expect them to. We are asked to embrace or reject the mostly familiar pop star personae that are collectively formed around them throughout the competition as we also choose a few to rise above the rest. As the continual enticement to increase our levels of interest and participation in the show continues month after month, several of these personae began to grow beyond the show itself into something larger. The producers cast the music industry itself as a neutral carrier of the story; it is the public that writes the ending.

The structure of a spectacle

In many quarters, ‘Australian Idol’ has become a byword for bullshit. The competition appears so carefully controlled and scripted as to be rigged. The contestants are not generally seen as ‘real’ musicians by many in large part because their experience appears to be so transparent and so transparently commercial. As the mythology of the music industry has traditionally had it, deserving pop stars are established as legitimate celebrities through what is a more or less a linear progression. Early success is based on a carefully constructed sense of authentic cultural production. Credibility is established through a series of contestable affiliations to ostensibly organic music cultures, earned through artistic development and the hard slog of touring and practice. (see Maxwell, 1994: 118) The fraught possibilities of mainstream success continually beckon to musicians as they either crossover or preserve their independence through some publicly validated, but elusive measure of credibility and honesty. While this mythology as a whole is implicitly unavailable to the producers of “Idol,” the show’s producers continually play on existing notions of what constitutes an ‘authentic’ relationship between public and star to construct a different kind of celebrity. From the cattle call auditions through to the grand finale,
those chosen to continue in the contest were required to constantly re-establish their credibility and develop, in seemingly full public view, those mystical qualities that will inevitably lead to pop stardom. We can follow this crucial dynamic from start to finish.

The “Australian Idol” relationship begins with what has proved to be a engaging first act. vii ‘Thousands of ‘ordinary’ Australians line up outside venues throughout the country, many sleeping in car parks and on footpaths, practising, singing and performing for the mobile camera crews with a seemingly spontaneous abandon occasionally mixed with a measure of meticulous preparation. We are presented with their youthful vigour in all its varied guises. Idol’s spectacle of the ordinary begins here. (see Coulardy, 2002b: 287-290) The image of the initial auditions is as a kind of first come, first served festival. Those in the queue who can get into the massive waiting area enter an informal gladitorial arena. The assembled hundreds or thousands wait on their convention centre chairs, many with family members and mates in tow, a gesture of intimacy and support encouraged by the producers. (“Sydney Auditions…””) A staging area with a conveniently available piano provides a venue for impromptu performances ready-made for broadcast. The shoulder-mounted camera and lurking boom mike, the staple instruments of reality television, collect hours of footage to be culled and edited for controlled distribution throughout the life of series. This bounded chaos provides plenty of shots of nervous wallflowers and demonstrative performers, all waiting for what can only be seen as a daunting or even terrifying two minute a capella recital in front of judges whose potential for abuse or dismissal is well-established. viii We cannot help but be convinced of the worth of those who survive such a process. (“Australian Idol: Series Two,” July 13, 2004; Australian Idol’s Greatest…) 

However, behind the façade of the legions of deluded also rans, the random good luck visited upon those apparently unaware of their ‘gifts,’ and a sense of tenacious accomplishment by a few suspiciously polished performers, is a structure designed primarily to craft compelling television. It begins with the rules of participation which govern access to the auditions. The ways in which these rules work out in practice form a kind of ‘how to’ guide for making a contemporary pop star. The “auditionee” must be between 16 and 28 years old, they may not have entered into any contractual agreement with a publisher, manager or agent, and they must agree that any record of their presence at the auditions remain the property of the producers in perpetuity and they must “dress to impress.” (“Sydney Auditions…””) These rules are supplemented with two far less visible sets of “producer auditions” through which every potential participant must pass; talent is only one of many concerns in these hidden hurdles. While these preliminary auditions are not quite invisible, neither are they a central part of the narrative. ix It is clear that these initial interviews are useful as a tool of entertainingly edited ‘reality’ television to produce the ‘freak show’ element of the proceedings, but also to firmly fix an aesthetic hierarchy from the outset. These rules establish the lines of aesthetic authority to be followed throughout the contest. The consequences of these early funnels are
significant, but the television viewer is confronted only with the alternately elated or crushed auditionees and exhausted judges whose efforts by no means go unrecognized. Their arguments and assessments frame what will become an extended aesthetic discussion on ‘what it takes,’ ‘who has it’ and who doesn’t. It’s not entirely clear at this stage what ‘it’ is, but the judges seem to know it when they see it. The credibility of the process and its assessors is re-established at every opportunity at this early juncture.

Round two raises the stakes considerably. It is perhaps the one stage of the competition intended to sift out those who, while talented, are routinely described as ‘not ready’ for the intense demands of success. Instead of a ‘battle of the bands’ (read: brands) format, the “Idol” producers are unusually public about the importance of presenting ‘unbranded’ aspirants as the contest moves forward. This contractual condition of participation has obvious benefits for the producers. It frees them to create and build a publicly credible image for each poteniate more or less from scratch; it is a central pillar of the narrative of the enterprise itself. To appear credible, the contest must appear fair; anyone with a perceived head start can not fit the pre-existing container of Idol, by definition. As a result, several singers who had already signed management agreements before the contest or had engaged in unauthorized bouts of self-promotion during the show, were not only ousted, but were forced to make public apologies to those who supported them throughout the show for these various excursions beyond the bounds of the Idol brand. (“Australian Idol: Series Two,” 27 July 2004; Australian Idol: Greatest…)

The decreasing number of hopefuls who survive such rigours are presented as appealingly ambitious or naively optimistic individuals with varying degrees of talent. It is at this stage of the spectacle that we begin to see the crude moral economy of “Australian Idol,” present at the inception, work more visibly and in increasingly refined forms. Judges pointed out more than once to suspected underachievers, that a decent performance was simply not good enough. When one singer objected to criticisms of his choice of repertoire by stating that he chose the song because he liked singing it, he was upbraided for his pretension; he was strongly rebuked for not taking the public into account in his aesthetic choices. (“Australian Idol…,” 15 August 2004) It is made clear through such episodes that talent is never enough. Those truly blessed are not only possessed with the voice or look, but the will to work both into saleable shape. Already carefully chosen from the multitude, they are offered an opportunity to make the most of their inherent yet unformed ability; for this they should be grateful. Their aesthetic authenticity is assumed to be an implicit, but inchoate presence at this point in the contest. They merely require the guiding hand of industry insiders to reach full flower and the eventual ratification of the public to achieve ‘true’ stardom. Through the facilitation of the competition in the form of knowledgeable industry veterans who never tired of giving stern admonitions and warnings of wasted charisma, contestants are asked to prove themselves through an extremely short period of intense self-presentation and recreation.

While the initial rounds of televised auditions are rendered complete through extensive commentary and occasional gnashing teeth on the part of the panel of experts

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and rejected contestants, it is round two that confronts the potential Idols with the enormity of their responsibility. In one day, they must collaborate with two or more other contestants and give yet another ‘performance of their lives’; it is this harsh task which demonstrates to us the earnest intent of those still involved. The 70% attrition rate reduces the talent pool from over one hundred possibles to a mere thirty. We are guaranteed drama and it is made clear to viewers and performers alike that being an “Idol” is not really much fun at all. It is in fact an ethical relationship with the public to whom, it is stated repeatedly, all ‘real’ pop stars are indebted and beholden. The two former stars and industry starmaker on the panel can appeal to their own lives and careers for unassailable evidence of this fact. The spectacle now gets serious.

The semi-finals offer viewers their first opportunity to participate directly in the proceedings, but viewers are only asked to vote well after the formation of each contestants’ broad persona has got under way. Lazy claims of some nascent televisual “democracy” made by producers and commentators alike moved through the promotional culture surrounding the show as more and more voters participated. (‘Australian Idle…,’ 2003; Davis, 2003a) However, it is clear that the remaining contestants are already established at least as potential pop stars, by design and necessity, before voting begins. It could hardly be otherwise. Semi-finalists are surrounded by all the trappings of their presumed roles and are well on their way to ‘becoming themselves’ as the musical celebrities they might already be. The idea of asking the television audience to vote on participants with ambiguous brand appeal is just not good advertising strategy.

It is in the semi-finals, and especially the Wild Card round, during which the aesthetic dimensions of the competition take a dramatic turn towards the high stakes presentations of the Final 12. By this point, the contestants are not as distinct in their abilities and much finer distinctions have to be made in distinguishing between those who have the potential for stardom and those who do not. Contestants must work within the framework of pop stardom the contest has crafted for them thus far. The full range of aesthetic choices loom large in these rounds. Unusual choices in repertoire, wardrobe or performative gestures now have to be justified in terms of broader perceptions of appropriateness and fit. While only occasional asides are offered to acknowledge the growing infrastructure of aesthetic tutelage upholding these choices, including a vocal coach, choreographer, a “movement coach,” music director, wardrobe staff, not to mention the Maybelline style team, it is clear that a tremendous amount of effort is going into shaping every aspect of self-presentation in these high profile performances. Those chosen for the Final 12 give a short performance after their ascent, as if to demonstrate their gratitude and confirm their right to move forward. This is a subtle indication that public is not yet fully trusted to distinguish between the various emerging brands on offer. We are not quite the participants we are expected to become as the branding process proceeds.

The Wild Card round is an unusual aspect of the process of choosing the Final 12. It appears to contradict the drama of rejection by giving some contestants another shot. The Wild Card has several effects of note. First, it reasserts the authority of the
judges, giving them a chance to contest decisions made by the public. This re-centralizes the public service ethos of the program, paradoxically by destabilising decisions made by the public. The public is asked to vote again for contestants they have already rejected. The judges are presented as rising above the emotion of the moment and offering disinterested choices based solely on aesthetic criteria, often arguing with the newly-present studio audience. Thus, the Wild Cards have a contradictory status: their public validation is comparatively weak, but their aesthetic status is strong. By this I mean, their success is based on solely on their ability to grab what is well and truly their last chance. This last shot is not dependent solely on the whims of viewer preference, but also on the hard evidence of their adjudicated talent. Those who succeed acquire the indirect blessings of the judges.

Second, the drama of the semi-finals peaks in the Wild Card round. The Wild Card contestants perhaps understand what is at stake more than their peers. They have peered into the abyss and stepped back buoyed by their own abilities and internal fortitude. And no one is safe. All of the final contestants who stood on the brink of performing in the Grand Final at the Opera House in both Series One and Two had faced immediate elimination in either the semi-finals or the Final 12. We see here the relationship between “Idol” and its audience growing ever closer. Producers begin to forge broader connections. Affective investment begins to shift ever so gradually from particular contestants to the program as a whole. The lengthy rounds simply called the Final 12 cement this shift. Each week, the lowest three voter-getters are separated from the dwindling herd with the one contestant receiving the lowest vote total leaving the show. A short, emotional farewell documentary, entitled “Mazda’s Idol Journey,” is presented chronicling the “Idol” experience of the unhappy candidate. The documentary creates an almost funereal mood. Within the narrative of the program, this weekly display of “Idol’s” changing aesthetic hierarchy functions as the dramatic equivalent of a weekly Wild Card round, this time with permanent consequences.

Interestingly, during the crucial middle rounds of “Idol” and especially during the Final 12, the process of transforming appealing performers into successful brands begins to stretch well beyond the apparently incapable bounds of the contest itself. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of these rounds for producers is the difficult job of shaping distinct public personalities for a changing roster of as many as thirty people in less than a month. Three key pieces of this process are the magazine format show “Inside Idol” and the reality format programs “Idol House Party” and “Australian Idol: Up Close and Personal.” (“Australian Idol: Up Close and Personal,” 19 October 2004 “Idol House Party,” 1 September 2004; “Inside Idol,” 6 August 2004) On these programs we are offered what is redundantly described as “exclusive” access to the behind the scenes world of “Australian Idol.” We are presented with portraits of the contestants including descriptions of their family life and backgrounds as well as their thoughts and fears on the trials to come, not just on the show, but in life. While all three programs appear to be describing all that goes on
outside of the contest itself, including live appearances in various capital cities, each is crucial to the ultimate success of the show as any of the performances. It is the process of crafting each contestant’s public personality with its implied, but as yet unrealized brand potential that will persuade the public to continue participating in the lucrative voting process, not simply to support one particular performer, but to accept that all of the finalists deserve to be there. It is in these rounds of voting through which the producers hope to forge the peculiar kind of audience investment in the program itself that begins the downhill road to the finals. Further compounding the producers’ dilemma is the fact that mere affective investment in individual contestants is not nearly a sufficient outcome for a successful show. They have to create an aura of both good faith and credibility for the program as a whole so, as contestants inevitably fail and leave the show, those who supported failed Idols do not abandon their responsibility in choosing a singular Idol. The producers have to facilitate the transfer of investment to the remaining candidates through trust in the program itself.

Again we return to questions of credibility, achieved through the appearance of equity and fair play. The status of those proceeding to the higher rungs of the contest is never firmly established, but has to be continually and strategically re-established. The producers do this through a continuous, multi-format display of a gritty combination of ‘natural talent,’ hard work, and public appeal. Each increasingly weighty choice of repertoire, wardrobe, and performance style can only break the hopefuls; each successful performance only raises the stakes higher. This tense maintenance of status as a deserving celebrity runs in tandem with the increasingly attentive and reciprocal relationship between the producers and the audience. The lucky few who are told with a flourish “You’re Going to Sydney” after round one, were then faced with what appears to be a difficult challenge in the rounds two and three: establish yourself in short order as a performer with “the X factor.” (“Australian Idol,” 14 July 2004) A fine voice and interesting look must be supplemented with the hard work necessary to harness those intangible qualities only made available to the public and the performer because of the contest itself. When the public is eventually asked to participate directly, it is to both produce and ratify exactly this quality. Indeed, the X factor cannot exist without this curious and complex kind of tautological validation.

“Idol’s” sheen of participatory democracy grows throughout the Final 12 as the dwindling number of contestants rely more and more on our help to survive. Their celebrity is specifically produced to appear unstable, fleeting, and under constant threat by a fickle public whose decisions are not supposed to be reliable or predictable. From the semi-finals to the Final 12 to the Final 2, favourites can easily become also rans or potential wild cards, who might limp out of one round, but storm through the next. The drama can only be heightened, securing our interest by requiring our input. As any advertiser can tell you, an effective campaign must end in action on the part of the target audience. Through the clever branding regime established in the early rounds, the precisely-timed inauguration of text message and
phone voting, as well as extensive “fan management” through internet chat rooms and bulletin boards (see Stahl, 2004: 228), our properly channelled “word of mouth” participation will help shape, produce and complete the meanings of the contest. These active and often inventive relationships allow the eventual “Idol” to claim a credibility the means of their success otherwise renders suspect. These activities appear to consummate the relationship, but they require literally months of constant effort across a wide range of media to coax out of us. The producers need the requisite volume of participation to create at least the appearance of wide public acceptance and enjoyment of the program.

It might be counter-intuitive, then, to regard the finals as the least problematic aspect of the competition for the producers, but in a way, the success of the finals is more or less a done deal before the big nights arrive. Certainly the publicity campaign surrounding the finals is the most traditional of the lot, conforming to familiar expectations of what a gala should be. Contestants arrive before a screaming crowd in limos which are themselves well-placed products, symbols of the luxury to come for the eventual Idol. In the first series of “Australian Idol,” judge Marcia Hines performed in an outdoor concert heralding the arrival of the stars of the moment, a distinct honour given her status as both a sterling performer and earnest assessor. In Australia, only the Sydney Opera House will do as a venue, its white sails an instantly recognisable symbol of the nation’s expressive centre. In short, most of the major decisions are no-brainers. Indeed, the final vote itself confronts viewers with the clearest choice of the entire contest. Given the extensive polling (and wagering) which preceded the finals of the first series, which correctly predicted the triumph of Adelaide’s “bro with the fro’” Guy Sebastian, the entire event had an air of certainty to it that had not been felt throughout the contest. It was much more of a coronation that a completion.

The Finals, too, prove to be yet another strategic marker as the many firmly-established “Idol” relationships continue well beyond the expected gala. In a fascinating re-narration of the first series of “Australian Idol,” “Australian Idol: The Winner’s Story” aired on the Friday following the final night of the contest. The story of Guy Sebastian was presented in an hour long program that showed his home life, his life as a voice teacher in the Adelaide suburbs and his subsequent journey to stardom, including an “exclusive” peek into the recording of his debut CD, sessions which began before the confetti had been swept from the Opera House floor. The clips depicting his life prior to “Idol” were of ambiguous vintage, cleverly silent on the exact date of production; somehow they were not quite in the past, present or future, but floated in some eternal in-between. When his “Australian Idol” experience was chronicled, we were allowed to see an intimate portrait of an anxious contestant transformed into “Your Australian Idol.” There could be no doubt of the virtue of Sebastian’s struggles, nor of his well-earned victory, a feat retrospectively incorporated as a central pillar of the emerging contours of his brand. “New” footage showed the sudden sensation reluctantly commenting on other contestants at the original Adelaide cattle call audition at the prompting of the mobile camera crew. It
ended with his teary-eyed mother exultant at the final decision as she stood cheering in the Opera House. Further, not only is the entire run of both series’ dramatically recounted in documentary format on the *Australian Idol’s Greatest Moments DVD* series, so are the stories of each member of the Final 12 and the paths they trod through the contest. These reiterations serve to reinforce, not only the successful Idol’s swelling status as a tried and tested pop star, but the status of the program itself as neutral chronicler of a now-soaring career, confirming the benevolence of the industry it so dutifully profiles. We are taken behind the curtain of stardom, allowed to see its elegant and obvious machinery grind inevitably to what appears to be its long-awaited conclusion.

However, there is no off-season for “Australian Idol.” At the end of series one, a controlled series of rollouts of the lesser Idols began and continued right through the second series. The grand final runner-up, Shannon Noll mounted several tours in support of two hit singles from his debut collection. The first was a beefy remake of Moving Pictures’ eighties power ballad “What About Me?,” a cleverly implicit reply to the preceding hysteria over Guy Sebastian to which Noll could only be a supportive witness. It became Noll’s signature tune, even performed at the State of Origin rugby decider. The song cemented Noll’s regular Aussie bloke status so cleverly established during the contest. Noll’s second single was a pedestrian remake of Bryan Adams’ “Drive” which confirmed his power pop credentials via analogy. Another contestant, known simply as ‘Paulini,” who was widely perceived to have been treated poorly by both the judges and the public during the contest, emerged with her own debut collection. Entitled *One Determined Heart*, it was fronted by a series of conventional R&B songs extolling the virtues of struggle and belief in oneself. In both cases, the content of the songs explicitly played on public perceptions of their respective Idol experiences. The stories of these and other established “former contestants” from Series One also received extensive publicity in what can easily be recognized as a collection of product placement adverts on the “Inside Idol” magazine program during Series Two. The new lives, personal and musical, of these rising stars were chronicled and displayed alongside the profiles of the Series Two hopefuls, implicitly conferring upon the new crop at least the potential for the success enjoyed by the veterans. The profiles of those who had benefited from the program’s largess completed a blanket of Idols that stretched continuously over the seven months between the end of the first series to start of the second. Literally, not a month went by without an opportunity to consume our Idols in one form or another.

The content of a spectacle

While it is easy to forget that “Idol” is supposed to be all about the music, it is important to remind ourselves that the ways in which the “Idol” contestants are branded is very specifically musical. The first series of “Australian Idol,” despite the hundreds of performances, heartbreaks, and scandals, has been boiled down in retrospect to a fairly simple contest between two very carefully coded performers,
winner Guy Sebastian and runner-up Shannon Noll. While the musical coding of contestants may seem too obvious for any sustained analysis, we can learn two very important lessons from the ways in which the finalists of “Australian Idol” were framed. First, we can see how the producers were able to display and then ‘perfect’ the musical ability these two contestants brought with them to their respective auditions. The trajectory of each contestant from their a capella auditions to their last shots at stardom were central to the various reiterations of the “Australian Idol” narrative noted above. Displaying the trajectory from ordinary to extraordinary is perhaps the ultimate display of the contest’s credibility. ‘We aren’t inventing anything,’ said producers literally dozens of times through the many channels of communication they often commanded, ‘we are merely recognising it.’ This theme was markedly constant in the promotional culture surrounding the show. (see Davis, 2003b; Scatena, 2003/4) Second, we can see the precise ways in which a local iteration of a global phenomenon is produced. If “Australian Idol” were simply that, Australian, it would have little meaning, even in Australia. But for a music industry in which overseas success is a significant marker of value and credibility, not just for stars but for the industry generally, the global stage on which these performers were presumed to be performing gives the contest much of its meaning. Thus, the ways in which each of the two finalists represents some notion of what is means to be both an Australian and an Australian pop star shows us the ways in which the “Idol” phenomenon is able to mobilize the cultural meanings of local or national pop stardom on an implied global stage in order to demonstrate its value and purpose. The choices made by Sebastian and Noll with regard to repertoire, performative gestures, and wardrobe clearly show us how the strategic coding of each singer gradually coalesced into a publicly genuine pop star personality, each of which struck a chord (sorry) with specific segments of the Australian public.

When Guy Sebastian and Shannon Noll rocked up for their respective a capella tryouts, both chose material that would become musically central to their respective campaigns. Each audition was a kind of televised virgin birth captured in their entirety and recapitulated repeatedly in longer and longer versions as each grew in formal stature. These reiterations were crucial in building the reputation of each as a credible candidate for celebrity from the moment of introduction. Sebastian chose “Ribbon in the Sky” by Stevie Wonder while Noll chose the rock ballad “Hold Me in Your Arms” by Southern Sons. The well-worn music industry trick of comparing new talent to old framed their extant authenticity from the start. Adjudicator Mark Holden told Noll he could be the next Vince Gill while Sebastian was obviously compared to Stevie Wonder, an affiliation that has framed Sebastian’s continuing output. (Scatena, 2003/4: 81) What is of greater interest here, however, is the self-presentation of each singer and what each brought with them into the audition room. Both brought distinct styles of singing that started a chain of associations for each that continues to define their public image.

From the beginning, Sebastian’s musical style was founded on complex patterns of melismatic vocal invention familiar to fans of R. Kelly and Boyz II Men. Blessed with
a clear vocal timbre in the upper reaches of the alto range, he also sported a strong, full falsetto and the occasional dip into the upper tenor range. His vocal style, however, was rarely coded through associations with the contemporary style of African American male soul or R&B singers. Nor was it demonstrative of the often explicitly sexual modes of musical expression associated with those genres’ most prolific performers. Instead, Sebastian went out of his way to affiliate himself with a varied group of female singers such as Beyonce Knowles and Christina Aguilera, again with barely a hint of the explicitly sexual mode of musical expression of these performers. Nearly every choice Sebastian made confirmed his bent as an interpreter of songs popularized by American women. Following his crucial “back from the brink,” “do or die,” “bottom three” experience in the Final 12, Sebastian went way out on a limb and presented a stirring version of “Climb Ev’ry Mountain,” lately made familiar by Aguilera. Following this triumph he chose Knowles’ “Crazy in Love.” But Sebastian’s feminine mystique went well beyond his repertoire. His bright, easy smile, devout virginal Christianity, and sweet speaking voice formed the foundation of his pop star personality. His image included a penchant for soft, white mesh clothing, increasingly extensive adornment through all manner of jewellery and lithe dance moves supplemented with a seemingly constant touching of audience members in the front rows. His off-stage personality was free and easy, but he could slide into earnest, televised emotional admission at a moment’s notice. Sebastian straddled a very public line between accessible public pop star and private devotee of Jesus and gospel inflected R&B. Sebastian’s Australian and Malaysian origins, gorgeous mop of teased, kinky hair, and associations with specifically African American styles explicitly marked him as a glowing, safe example of Australian multiculturalism, safely feminized and removed from any hint of aggression or controversy. His home town roots in Adelaide, Australia’s “City of Churches,” and his low-key Christianity formed a pious backdrop as he launched into his signature song, “Angels Brought Me Here” and accepted the accolades that accompanied his ascent to the throne as Australia’s first Idol.

Noll remains comparatively opaque, but that is a huge part of his charm. His vocal range is quite close to Sebastian’s and his vocal timbre is just as clear and light with only the occasional, judicious hint of vibrato. But Noll’s style of singing centres around the presentation of strong, unadorned vocal lines accenting the clarity of the melodies rather than making cluttered or virtuosic forays in and around familiar tunes. Nor did he make use of the dips and slides characteristic of the country singers to whom he was often compared. Instead, he relied most heavily on the solid, straight, held notes of power pop. His careful use of a scratchy, raspy texture in his voice in particularly dramatic verses and the high notes of the final chorus of many songs added to the sense of personal expression in his performances. Notably, his performances were almost entirely bereft of the rhythmic use of his body. Most often, he stood almost stock still, perhaps swaying slightly, even poking fun at his penchant for bodily stiffness with a particularly clunky swing of his hips at the end of his rendition of “New York, New York.” The producers routinely associated Noll with
singers such as Bryan Adams and Richard Marx and not without reason. His clearly chosen ‘local’ affiliations were to traditional ‘Aussie pub rock’ performing the sacred “Workin’ Class Man,” originally produced by Jimmy Barnes, in a white singlet and jeans. However, Noll’s version of pub rock was shorn of those untoward elements of aggression or controversy that had long characterized the form, a process of cultural sanitization akin to Sebastian’s.

Noll’s self-presentation was homologous. He was a taciturn constant in the various Idol programs, calmly winding his way through a thickly crowded series of events with a subtle charisma that was rarely the subject of particular attention. He tended towards black t-shirts and jeans. His quiet, but strong presence was credited to his origins in the NSW country town of Condoblin. Importantly, Noll’s campaign was far more associated with the trials of his working life than any of the other contestants. He was a farmer at the time of the contest, suffering through drought and working with his siblings to keep the family farm going after the death of his father. He was seen as a kind of throwback to a brand of classic Australian masculinity summed up in the words ‘good Aussie bloke.’ He presented himself as a remarkably sympathetic figure who rarely spoke of his troubles unless prompted and never appeared to require any special ‘star’ treatment. This combined with his anhemaic and emotional remake of “What About Me?” made him the performer of the year for those living in Australia’s struggling, shrinking, oft-forgotten bush towns. (see Miller, 2003; Phillips, 2004)

The song put him in the forefront of a tradition of Australian rock singers that had fallen into disuse in recent years and made him a hero to many a ‘tweener’ less interested in the international style of R&B employed by Sebastian.

It is important to remember that each singer was the central catalyst for the gradual branding of each that began with the initial auditions. The ways in which each contestant’s audition was framed in the tightly-scripted televised versions of the early rounds of the contest depended on what each brought with them into the audition room. Both brought strong voices and definitive expressions of their public musical selves; these foundations changed surprisingly little during the long contest. Instead, a musical context was constructed around each performer using familiar expectations already attached to their chosen genres. Sebastian’s talents were seamlessly integrated into the genre conventions of the international style of R&B balladry. The inventive, improvised vocal lines of his signature tune, “Angels Brought Me Here,” begin as a soft, breathy evocation of earnest affection and became increasingly complex as the song reached its sentimental climax. The expected dramatic contours of the genre were perfectly confirmed. Noll’s sweet, but sturdy intonation during the early verses of “What About Me?” evolved into a raspy build up climaxing in the strong, long, held notes of the final chorus. This less celebratory song also exemplified the expected dramatic contours of the power ballad. The song began from a lone piano outlining the harmony of the bridge, easing into the first verse and growing to a full band sound replete with power chords on the guitar and a synthesized string section creating a remarkably thick, but not overcrowded texture.
“Idol’s” producers did not invent either singer’s talent as each performed within themselves to make a strong impression in their auditions; both appeared humbled by their success. Near constant narrative retellings of the story of each of their “Idol Journeys” helped to retrospectively mark each singer as a saleable commodity creating a forgone conclusion out those many months of doubt. But the producers were never credited with these narrative interventions on the behalf of each singer. Instead, the producers created a context in which each could fill in the blanks left by their subtly stylized introductions to Australian television audiences. Both singers were shaped to represent much of what it means to be Australian, and an Australian pop star, in ways that were far more complementary than they were competitive. Sebastian was routinely held up as a representative of urban, multicultural Australia. His wardrobe choices played on notions of ambiguous sexuality and his evident joy and humility made him a pleasant, popular, and non-threatening performer. Noll was the embodiment of the bedrock values of country Australia, which are, of course, often held up as the symbolic foundations of the entire nation. He had a hard go, but never complained. He just got on with it and took a punt at realizing his dreams.

However, if we accept the proposition made earlier that audience investment had to eventually rest, not only in individual contestants, but in the show itself, we can see how the ‘synergy’ of Sebastian and Noll placed a definitive stamp on the entire run of “Australian Idol’s” first series. The program came to represent all of Australia, according to the producers, from town to country. The sharp contrast in background and experience between the two finalists played on vague notions of ‘togetherness’ and ‘diversity’ while papering over some fairly significant social cleavages in the wider society. In this respect, “Idol” proved itself to be incapable of explanatory nuance not restricted to an individual’s life history and ignorant of cultural politics that were not resolutely affirmative. Clearly, the concerns of the producers lay closer to home. “Idol’s” producers were primarily concerned with managing ideal consumer relationships removed from the complexities of cultural life, not actual social relationships enmeshed in the ambiguities of an increasingly divided country. Without Sebastian, perceptions of the program as a provincial talent show would have persisted. Without Noll, the constant, ringing complaints describing “Australian Idol” as a sell-out to the multinational music industry would have resonated far more widely. The competition between these good-natured, attractive performers made the finals wildly popular, and lucrative. As it was, the final programs were some of the highest rating television programs in Australian history, even challenging the cultural pre-eminence of the historic final of the Rugby Union World Cup played between England v. Australia in Sydney’s Olympic Stadium less than a week before the “Australian Idol” grand final. (Dale, 2003)

Conclusion

The eventual Idol, and those publicly validated lesser Idols, took a remarkable trip. They entered a contest explicitly framed by fairly naïve ideas of celebrity, an initial
narrative frame that was repeatedly re-established in varied iterations from Round Two to well beyond the final vote. The edited footage of the early rounds captured contestants speaking only of their love of performing; they appeared to be seeking no more than a venue to display their talents and sentiments. As the process wound its complicated way from the initial auditions within the vast throng to a series of increasingly daring and very public musical gambles, the naïve vision of imagined celebrity gave way to the much more involved and burdensome role of pop star. As the judges made clear, being a pop star is not primarily about talent or ability, and only tangentially about ‘the music.’ These carefully crafted authentic celebrities found themselves trying to create and embrace a publicly credible performing persona that gradually grew into a credible commercial brand, at least for the most successful of them. Their success was repeatedly demonstrated to be unavoidably founded on an ethical and reciprocal relationship with the public. They were not allowed to forget that it is ‘we’ who put them where they are; in short, they owe ‘us.’ Yet within the structure of this curiously intimate spectacle is a nagging sense that “life is a constant audition” where you are only as good as your last performance. (see Stahl, 2004: 227) It is the music industry, embodied in the steadying hands of the judges resting on the tiller, sometimes lightly, sometimes heavily, but always unambiguously, that guide us through the course of events to which we are all subordinate. It is made clear that the producers, sponsors, audience members and the Idols themselves are all hostage to an unpredictable chain of fortune. We are reminded constantly, this is ‘our’ Idol. We created them so we should take them seriously.

While “Idol” is routinely pilloried for its crass commercialism, it remains an unalloyed success. Viewers keep tuning in, advertisers still clamour to sponsor all aspects of the production, and the CDs keep selling. Most importantly, the music industry has a rolling showcase for its operations. The structures of feeling it exists to produce take on a kind of subtle explicitness that ensures their perpetuation. Within an industry faced with threats perceived to be foundational, the creators of “Idol” have produced an audacious and arrogant spectacle. They have made a profitable virtue out of an economic necessity. The expensive and unpredictable process of finding and nurturing new talent has not only been made more reliable, but “Idol” has shown that it can actually turn a profit. The brand of celebrity produced by Idol possesses no mere sheen of populist approval, but embodies that more valuable commodity, public attention, however annoyed, obsessed, reluctant or enthusiastic it may be.

Acknowledgements
This core of this article is based on “ ‘Australian Idol’ and the Attention Economy” which was published in M/C Journal vol. 7, no. 4, as part of a theme issue on Fame in 2004. (Fairchild, 2004) I would like to thank issue editor P. David Marshall and the two anonymous reviews who have helped to improve my thinking on ‘Idol.’ I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for Popular Music and Society who helped improve the present work a great deal.
Brought Me Here’ during which Noll was clearly struggling at the upper reaches of his range and ability. Only point at which his repertoire overlapped with Sebastian’s was a Final 12 performance. The producer auditions are a kind of public secret, which receive only tangential acknowledgment in the media campaigns producing extensive coverage of many aspects of the contest. Of particular interest are the fann pages on the official website on which a variety of contests and betting games can be played. 'Australian Idol’ has used the following media formats to construct its promotional culture: live and prerecorded television in ‘reality’, magazine, music video, and documentary formats, extensive product placement, traditional ‘spot’ advertising, live and prerecorded radio programming, websites, chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards, e-mail promotions, mobile phones, DVDs, CDs, live performances and print media campaigns producing extensive coverage of many aspects of the contest. Of particular interest are the fan pages on the official website on which a variety of contests and betting games can be played.

Notes

1 Obviously, I do not wish to imply that the drive for high profits is somehow new. What is fairly new is the reach for greater profits at lower costs through economies of scale and intrafirm synergies made possible through vertical integration. These goals have predominated largely due to increased competition for finance capital in recently deregulated capital markets. Greider’s book is a lucid and clear introduction to the central role of deregulated finance capital in the global economy. Haring’s hyperventilating critique of the music industry takes on added significance when these two unrelated books are read in tandem. (see his Chapter 4: ‘Smoke and Music’)

2 While CD sales figures are a fairly controversial piece of the piracy debate in particular, it seems certain the figures are going into a decline that many in the industry regard as permanent or even terminal. But I do not wish to imply that piracy is the primary cause. It seems clear that the industry’s robust rhetoric blaming ‘pirates’ for the sales slump is based on the fact that it is the only aspect of the phenomenon over which they do not have control and for which no part of the entertainment industry can be blamed. Thus, attacking ‘pirates’ is the only course of action open to record labels that does not involve criticism of any part of their own industry. (Chalmers, 2004; Shedden, 2004; ‘Piracy….’ 2003)

3 This paradox has been crucial to 'Idol’s success. To take just one example, the wardrobe choices of the Idol contestants become an increasingly important aspect of the branding and shaping of each as the contest wears on, so to speak. Yet, despite extensive features on the fashion designers involved in the production on magazine format television program ‘Inside Idol’ and elsewhere, this aspect of the production received almost no critical comment. The appearance of each potential Idol was simply naturalised and presumed to be part of ‘who they were becoming;’ Such naturalisation and transparency marks the ultimate success of product placement advertising.

4 The range of activities constituted by such marketing practises is very broad. Some marketing firms have hired actors to pose as tourists who ask actual tourists to take their picture. They take the opportunity to extol the virtues of particular digital cameras. Others use cars with film projectors in the boot to show promotional videos on the sides of buildings near traffic clogged roads during peak hour. Still others take to footpaths with chalk and the now familiar use of stencilled logos. (Lee, 2004a&b)

5 ‘Australian Idol’ has used the following media formats to construct its promotional culture: live and prerecorded television in ‘reality’, magazine, music video, and documentary formats, extensive product placement, traditional ‘spot’ advertising, live and prerecorded radio programming, websites, chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards, e-mail promotions, mobile phones, DVDs, CDs, live performances and print media campaigns producing extensive coverage of many aspects of the contest. Of particular interest are the fan pages on the official website on which a variety of contests and betting games can be played. (http://au.australianidol.yahoo.com/fancentral/)

6 The analysis in this section is based on the first two series’ of ‘Australian Idol.’ (see Australian Idol’s Greatest...; ‘Australian Idol: Series Two.’) The first series of Australian Idol ran from July to November 2003. Series Two ran during the same period in 2004.

7 The ratings for the first two series’ of Australian Idol followed the same general pattern. The initial programs rated well, but the subsequent rounds between the introductory programs and the performances of the Final 12 dipped somewhat. Then, ratings grew from the ‘Wild Card’ rounds through to the grand final. The final three programs of the first series were some of the highest rating programs in Australian television history. (Maley and Davis, 2003; Dale, 2003)

8 The first series of ‘Australian Idol’ began well after the first series’ of ‘Pop Idol’ and ‘American Idol’ had established a template for the format. It should be noted, however, that ‘Australian Idol’ never quite sank to the depths of humiliation and abuse that ‘American Idol’ often reached. (see Dale, 2003) In fact, the narrative of ‘Australian Idol’ ran a distinctly different course throughout for reasons that are well beyond the scope of this article. For an excellent reading of the narrative structures of ‘American Idol,’ see Stahl (2004).

9 The producer auditions are a kind of public secret, which receive only tangential acknowledgment in the promotion regime surrounding the show. They have, however, been the subject of much caustic comment by rejected applicants on the extensive ‘Idol’ message boards. (http://au.messages.yahoo.com/australianidol; Chartsong Productions…’ 2004)

10 See the following web pages for illustrative examples: http://au.australianidol.yahoo.com/fancentral/ and http://au.messages.yahoo.com/australianidol.

11 Most of the articles assessing the success of ‘Australian Idol’ were framed by some version of this defensive attempt to establish the specifically musical credibility of the program and its contestants. It is not entirely clear if Noll is capable of the highly ornamented vocal lines used by Sebastian. The only point at which his repertoire overlapped with Sebastian’s was a Final 12 performance of ‘Angels Brought Me Here’ during which Noll was clearly struggling at the upper reaches of his range and ability.
Noll’s recorded version on the limited edition bonus disc from his debut CD is not as accomplished or confident as Sebastian’s version on his debut collection.

Over 10,000 people trekked to Condobolin for a special ANZAC Day concert by Noll, representing almost three times the town’s resident population.

The judges were clearly well-prepped for Noll’s audition at least, and asked him numerous leading questions about his background and personal life.
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