

NZ Idol: Performance, Talent and Authenticity in a Song Contest

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning”

Signed

Date

Rebecca Wright

Ethics approval number: 07168

Abstract

NZ Idol: Performance, Talent and Authenticity in a song contest

NZ Idol was a highly rated Reality Television series with three seasons spanning over three years since 2004. The production of this show has caused much media controversy and debate over its musical and/ or artistic worth with speculation centering on whether the show's competition is based on musical talent or on audience popularity. The media generally claim that popular music shows or talent quests such as NZ Idol create instant celebrities (or as Rojek calls them Celetoids) whose talent is slight and whose career is short lived. Such talent quests therefore offer nothing of worth to New Zealand's Music Industry, or for that matter to the contestants themselves.

This thesis analyses these views in relation to NZ Idol as an unfolding media performance. The social impact of the show on New Zealand musical culture and on the music business in New Zealand is assessed as well as the experience of the show as a media ritual. The importance of popularity and perceived authenticity is discussed as well as notions of instant stardom. In addition, the thesis is concerned with the attitudes of musicians toward their craft as well as attitudes toward the talent shows themselves. Therefore an important aspect of this thesis is primary research based on a survey of the views of professional musicians. The data elicited through the survey centres on musician's perceptions of their own careers, attitudes toward instant stardom as well their thoughts on the Pop Idol format, specifically NZ Idol and its contribution to the local Music Industry. Data on employment and earnings are also included in the data set.

Another aspect of this research is to uncover the predominant media attitudes toward NZ Idol, which are often surprisingly at odds with the views of the musical community and these are the views the media claims to represent. Also discussed in greater depth are the ways in which the media portray and represent NZ Idol and the particular images that are generated about the show, the contestants and judges. All of these matters serve the purpose of advancing the public understanding of the limits and opportunities provided by talent contest shows and the prevailing attitudes towards them.

Finally my own personal experiences from the weeks I participated as a contestant in NZ Idol Season Three are examined and reflected on along with the actual benefits to a contestant's musical career once the series has ended and the ways in which participating in such a Reality Television show could possibly have more adverse effects than positive career enhancing possibilities.

Introduction: A Production of Culture Perspective.

This thesis examines, through an analysis of its local manifestation in New Zealand, the global phenomenon of televised Talent Song Contests, specifically the series Pop Idol. The subsequent analysis draws upon the theoretical foundations of the Production of Culture perspective and such a perspective offers a combined analysis of the impact of the various features that create a field of cultural production:

“The production of culture perspective focuses on the ways in which the content of symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved” (Burke & Onwuegbuzie et al, 2007: 120).

No single study can hope to accomplish the task of providing a definitive analysis of all the influences that shape a particular cultural practice. But it is possible to provide, on the basis of the existing research literature and the contribution of my own research, a thesis that makes a contribution to the emerging patchwork of studies that make up the Production of Culture perspective, particularly as this applies to popular music. It is the fundamental purpose of this research to advance this task in respect of the Television Song Contest. Song Contests are about the selection of talent and, because of the mass level of exposure they involve, also about the social impact of personality or what is more often identified as fame, celebrity and stardom. These latter phenomena have a complex relationship that includes and joins together systems of cultural and “artistic” activity. In what follows, although drawing selectively on the literature of fandom, the greatest emphasis is on the production end of the circuit of production and consumption.

Although the term is complex, stardom (or celebrity) is an organisational system that has a major impact on the performing arts as well other areas of cultural production. Although the areas of consumption, where cultural products are evaluated, taught and preserved, provide powerful feedback effects, it is the area of creation and distribution that frames the scope of audience influence. In particular, the nature of the economic relationships that direct the development of organisational forms have a key impact on the way in which a particular “art” form is developed. The strong market orientation of Pop Idol, a format designed to standardise the way contestants are selected, performances delivered and audience feedback channelled, is a case in point and one I will examine at length in what

follows. In the case of the performing arts it can be said that a key determinant of what is practically and aesthetically possible rests on the relationship and the balance of power between the creative producer/performer and his or her audience.

In line with this broad orientation, a number of research questions can be formulated:

- (a) What is the influence of television talent contests, particularly song contests on the creation of pop music stars and celebrities in the New Zealand Television and Music Industry?
- (b) What are the attitudes of the New Zealand media towards the television talent contests, in general and NZ Idol as a song contest in particular?
- (c) How do professional musicians evaluate the impact of NZ Idol on the Music Industry and what are their views on the meaning of these shows in terms of the relationship between craft values and commercial success?
- (d) How do the contestants in such shows view the experience, particularly in the case of NZ Idol 2006, in which I was a contestant?
- (e) What do the answers to the forgoing questions suggest about the social meanings accorded to notions such as talent, authenticity and fame in New Zealand popular culture?

It is important to note that there is very little research on television song contests, “making it more difficult to assess Pop Idols innovation” (Holmes, 2004: 151). This is particularly the case in New Zealand where the format is a fairly recent phenomenon, first broadcast in 2004, and looking to exploit an already well-established track record of global success. Another factor contributing to the relative lack of research is the fact that shows such as Pop Idol are often seen as ‘low-brow’ entertainment not worth academic study. But since the entire concept of reality pop programs originated in New Zealand, I believe this study will provide a useful contribution to the nature and impact of a global phenomenon.

Methodology

The logic of inquiry and the deployment of methods used in this thesis draw upon the emerging field of mixed methods research. Mixed methods research has proven popular in practice oriented fields such as education, nursing and evaluation and has been defined as:

“The class of research where one researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study or set of related studies “ (Burke & Onwuegbuzie et al, 2007:120)

“Practitioners sought to use various methods because the practical demands of the contexts in which they worked called for both generality and particularity. And they called for defensible patterns of recurring regularity as well as insight into variation and difference. And they called for results that conveyed magnitude and dimensionality as well as results that portrayed contextual stories about lived experiences” (Greene, 2008: 7-22).

Mixed methods research seeks to negotiate a path of enquiry and data collection that moves between that of quantitative and qualitative research. Since musical performance is a practice-oriented field, the use of mixed methods is appropriate.

Mixed methods approaches have two broad objectives. First, to improve the validity of qualitative and quantitative data by using data generated by one method to strengthen the data collected by another. Thus to take a very simple example, data on participant interpretations of a particular phenomenon may be strengthened by quantitative data on years of schooling. Secondly, to produce a richer more detailed picture of a phenomenon in depth through the bringing together of complementary findings. It is the latter objective that informs this research.

Both quantitative and qualitative data has been collected within the same timeframe for this thesis and has been used to construct a united account (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

A survey of local musicians was conducted and used to further contextualise the data, as does the account derived from the literature survey. A questionnaire was designed and distributed to working musicians along with a covering letter (see appendix one and two) explaining the research, stressing the fact that it was an academic enquiry designed to

advance public understanding of the attitudes of musicians to their craft and to Talent Shows, specifically NZ Idol and not a commercial venture. The survey was completely anonymous and was sent to each musician by post. The questionnaire asked about the musicians own particular experiences within the Music Industry as well as reasons why they chose such a career path, their own musical tastes and most importantly their views on the NZ Idol process and whether or not they believed such shows, and contestants that appear on them, contribute any musical and cultural worth to the musical community. Approximately 50 surveys were distributed with 31 completed and returned. One issue that may have affected the way in which particular questions were answered was the fact that many of the participants knew that I had been a previous contestant therefore may have been less forward with their answers.

The results of the analysis are intended to uncover the social and cultural context of meaning in which NZ Idol operates and do not claim to be predictive.

Chapter One: Theorising Reality Television

In 1999 a show called ‘PopStars’ was broadcast on New Zealand screens and indicated the beginning of a long run of reality based pop programmes in New Zealand and around the world. The ‘PopStar’ concept was sold to other parts of the world and later adapted to form Pop Idol in 2001, which was originally broadcast in the United Kingdom. Our local version, NZ Idol first screened in 2004 on the channel two network owned by TVNZ and since their conception these shows,

“...Have occupied a central place in the phenomenal rise of reality TV. More specifically, with their bid to place the entire notion of stardom at centre stage, they raise important methodological and theoretical issues concerning the conceptualization of fame in reality TV” (Holmes, 2004: 147).

An important aspect of this thesis will explore the influence of television Talent Contests on the way they help create and receive celebrities in the New Zealand Television and Music Industry. It will also explore attitudes of the New Zealand media towards made-for-television stars and analyse the reasons why contestants are successful – natural talent or the power of media exposure. In particular I will focus on a sample of professional musician’s perspectives about the winners of such talent shows, specifically NZ Idol, what their success means in a commercial and artistic sense as well as the perceived value of Pop Idol within the Music Industry. It is important to note that there is very little research on Pop Idol and more specifically NZ Idol, “making it more difficult to assess Pop Idols innovation” (Holmes, 2004: 151). This is perhaps because NZ Idol is a fairly recent phenomenon, first broadcast in 2004, and is often seen as ‘low-brow’ entertainment not worth academic study. But as already pointed out the underlying format of reality Talent Contests such as NZ Idol was originally developed in New Zealand so the format is worthy of study from a New Zealand perspective.

The Pop Idol concept is based on the premise of displaying the process performers must go through on their way to “stardom” mimicking what is believed to occur in the development of stars from discovery through to contract signing with a mainstream record label (Frith, 2004). The Pop Idol format invites audiences to witness this transformation as it occurs. To witness the ordinary person change as he is groomed to become a star and because of

reality shows like this ordinary people are now a major fixture in television programming (Holmes, 2004). Pop Idol combines both game show principles as well as variety show concepts of the past but with the added promise of inviting the viewers to observe how the Music Industry works by exposing its “internal workings” (Holmes, 2004: 148) and in doing so the format demonstrates the way in which celebrity stardom can be discovered or, some would say manufactured. As a result the show has prompted public debate about the formation of celebrity, what it means to be a star, as well as the relationship between popularity and talent and something especially important in the music world, the battle between originality and conformity.

Television and media programming have changed drastically over the last decade affecting the ways in which the media helps construct cultural identity, as well as society’s attitudes to the notion of celebrity. It is clear that no other type of television format has been so actively marketed by television production companies than Reality TV (Friedman, 2002) and this, arguably, is a consequence of increased commercialisation and deregulation of networks during the 1990’s as Dovey explains:

“The explanation... is to be found in the increased commercial pressure on all TV producers which follows from varying degrees of deregulation and increased competition for audience share with new channels. This, it is argued, has driven down the costs of production throughout the early years of the 1990’s, as well as increasing the necessity to produce more and more ratings-friendly forms” (Dovey, 2000:83-4).

The documented global success of Reality TV shows, such as Big Brother, Survivor and of course Pop Idol, has meant that formats are now bought and sold often as international blockbusters and are no longer merely low budget daytime fillers (Holmes & Jermyn 2004) underscoring the importance of economic performance. The economic interests of television programming mean that it is best to buy ‘proven’ international programmes or clone them through format adoption rather than risk failure or low ratings with local material. Local material is also more expensive to produce and television producers must find the best ways in which to raise the profits of a television production for the networks, their production companies and the investors. Competitive market pressures have forced the media to turn network programming into a profit driven organisation,

“a direct change from past media models where it was expected that the media would operate as a medium or a carrier rather than as itself a motivating ideological force”

(Turner, 2006: 159).

Because of this economic pressure, the system is built around continually gaining short-term commercial success through audience ratings and the media have become “shamelessly contingent in the tactics chosen to pursue that outcome” (Turner, 2006: 161-162).

Defining Format

With the increase in globalisation within the television and media sectors it is not surprising that formats, such as Pop Idol, are sold to national broadcasters across the world and can be altered or adapted to fit in with the expectations of local markets. Originally the term ‘format’ was used in the printing industry and referred to a “particular size in a book” (Moran, 1998:13), in television the term is directly linked to the serial production of specific television programs (Moran, 1998). Moran suggests that:

“Format is a technology of exchange in the television industry which has meaning not because of a principal but because of a function or effect” as it helps to “organize and regulate the exchange of program ideas between program producers” (Moran, 1998: 18).

Pop Idol and subsequent Reality TV shows are controlled and copyrighted foreign formats in which a license must be obtained to reproduce and broadcast a local or national version. The license also controls the right to advertise under the copyrighted banner or use its name. Purchasing overseas formats is now a key element of the international television market as there is far less financial risk purchasing a product that has already been proven to succeed in overseas markets, than the risk associated with developing something original. Due to its massive success worldwide this is especially true of Pop Idol:

“An original concept is exactly that; it is untried, untested and therefore offers a broadcaster little in the way of insurance against possible rating failure. Format, on the other hand, are almost invariably based on programs, which were a popular success in another national territory. In other words, formats come equipped to survive the trialing process of being tried and tested” (Moran, 1998: 20)

By taking an international format and replacing the participants, and/ or hosts, with local people helps to create the illusion that the audience are viewing a local production rather than an overseas import. There are numerous examples of local format adaptations where the television networks have tailored certain aspects like those mentioned above to give

them a localised or national feel:

“...A locally produced version of *Wheel of fortune* will be more expensive than the imported version but, with local contestants, hosts, question and references, prizes and so on, is likely to have more national appeal and is therefore likely to achieve better ratings” (Moran, 1998: 19).

Although, as Moran suggests, localised format adaptations do not always work they do offer some reassurance of security to broadcasters and in an industry plagued with uncertainty even a small amount of proven success internationally is worth the risk (Moran, 1998).

In the case of Pop Idol, Fremantle Media, in association with Grundy Television, own the rights to the format and Fremantle Media is the content and production division of RTL Group, Europe’s largest TV, radio, and production company acquiring various British and Australian production companies including Grundy Television, Crackerjack Productions (which have now merged to become Fremantle Media Australia), which control the Pop Idol format. Within Fremantle there are two key divisions, the Creative Networks, which consists of all the local production and Fremantle Media Enterprises, which is in charge of distribution and licensing of the formats. The most commonly traded formats are game shows which can be easily remade with local contestants and in recent years, key examples would include Survivor, Pop Idol and Big Brother all of which have proved successful worldwide (Moran, 1998).

There are many legal issues associated with purchasing overseas formats, as they are hard to protect by law. In April 2000 FRAPA, an international body of industry professionals including the format creators, producers, distributors and broadcasters came together to form a non-profit organisation to help combat television format piracy. Their aim was to ensure that television formats are respected by the industry and protected by law as intellectual property. FRAPA registers all format proposals and can act as mediator for format plagiarism disputes. It creates guidelines and education about the laws in place supporting the notion that television formats are unique forms of intellectual property (<http://frapa.org>). This is especially important for television formats which are vulnerable to plagiarism as copywriting format ideas can be difficult within the law that often considers them to be basic programme ideas and not necessarily creative works of intellectual

property.

The effectiveness of protection by the copyright act is limited as a new production can be created by simply changing one element in the format; the combination of the elements may be protected by copyright but such protection exists in limited degree for the individual elements. Excessive imitators can be fought with the Copyright Act but the imitator who makes some minimal changes is likely to succeed. Often the strength of the format lies within the idea that forms the basis of the format and it is that which has been shown to be least protected. In any case, there are doubts as to whether program formats can be copyrighted (Van Manen, 1994: 25-6 paraphrased by van Canon cited in Moran 1998).

In the case of Pop Idol copycat versions have infiltrated the market, in New Zealand 'Pops Ultimate Star', screened in June 2007, is an example of such format adaptation, where the show is based on the same format as NZ Idol but with minor changes thus ensuring the issues of copyright are overcome.

Ethics and Reality Television

"Reality television is a genre which, by its very nature, focuses our attention on the ethics of representation" (Lumby & Probyn, 2003: 12).

How people are represented within the different reality formats holds many ethical dilemmas about exploitation and privacy (Lumby & Probyn, 2003). Reality Television could be said to use human conflict and dilemmas by 'packaging' them up for the networks own commercial purposes, "pitting humans against each other and exposing their weaknesses for no higher purpose than entertainment" (Lumby & Probyn, 2003: 120).

But these ethical concerns are not solely about the participants in the formats but the viewers themselves. Paul Sheehan claims in the Australian Sunday Morning Herald that the reality genre "tricks viewers into believing that what they see on television is real" and that this perceived realness has, arguably, resulted in the blurring of the lines "between what is news and entertainment, what is real and what is manufactured" (Lumby & Probyn, 2003: 15).

Despite these concerns Reality Television continues to be a dominant source of programming with no signs of declining popularity. So what exactly is Reality Television?

Reality Television can be described as a genre of programming that portray its subjects in, allegedly, unscripted situations and places its focus on the 'real' or 'ordinary' person rather than on professional actors in artificial or scripted environments. Since the rise of Reality TV the 'ordinary' person has never before been more desired by programmers, nor more visible in the media itself, as society is continually fed stories about everyday people in everyday situations (Turner, 2006). However these 'real' situations frequently depict a highly contrived form of reality in which participants are placed in unusual or foreign situations. Moreover many are coached by off-screen mentors with on-screen events manipulated through editing processes and other postproduction techniques so the "reality" of such shows is questionable (Holmes, 2004).

Since the late 1990's Reality Television formats have moved away from a predominant focus on capturing the 'real' to shows emphasising notions of "display and performance" (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004: 5) which can cover a wide range of formats, from game or quiz shows to surveillance or voyeurism-focused productions such as *Big Brother*. It is through these television series' in particular that we are presented not with reality but with contrived and scripted events. A focus on ordinary people also ensures that network producers have a constant stream of 'diverse' programming in terms of the characters portrayed and the way in which 'real life' can be displayed.

"Performing ordinariness has become an end in itself, and thus a rich and (it seems) almost inexhaustible means of generating new content for familiar formats" (Turner, 2006: 158).

According to critics the use of ordinary people in supposed 'real' life events is fundamentally 'exploitative'. Producers can exploit participants through editorial control and manipulation while participants seek to exploit the format itself for personal gains through media exposure (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004). These tactics encourage a culture in which celebrity is merely a person known s for their 'well-known-ness' rather than for a specific talent or worthy endeavor (Holmes, 2004). The nature of modern celebrity will be discussed in more depth later. On the other hand some commentators have argued the use of ordinary people as subjects for Reality TV shows indicate "evidence of the

‘democratising’ ethos of Reality TV” (Dovey, 2000: 83) where normal, everyday people now are able to get their voice heard in a public arena when they may previously have not had the chance (Dovey, 2000).

Reality Television and its programming development can be traced back to the late 1980’s and early 1990’s in America with NBG’s *Unsolved Mysteries* in 1987 (Dovey, 2000) and the Cop shows that first premiered on the Fox Network (Lumby & Probyn, 2003). Shows such as *Candid Camera* have familiarised audiences with the “exhibition of domestic video recordings in the mass media TV context” (Dovey, 2000: 58). These shows introduced techniques and technological forms now commonly used today, specifically the feel of a home video with “grainy footage and jerky camera movements” (Lumby & Probyn, 2003:16) a technique used to suggest the ‘real’ or ‘rawness’ of the footage as though any of the audience at home could have been there filming it with their own video recorders.

Other production techniques, like that of the ‘whispering voiceover’, the ‘incessant to-camera close-up’ are all present in the *Pop Idol* or *NZ Idol* format and help to recreate the intimacy of the subjects and their experiences (Dovey, 2000) ensuring feelings of ‘authenticity’ or ‘liveness’ for the audience.

Talent Contest formats such as *NZ Idol* have exploited this idea of ‘liveness’, that what is currently being shown on screen is in fact spontaneously occurring adding to the supposed genuine or authentic feel. This liveness or spontaneity, however, is seen by many critics as contrived and they take the view that the programme, and people participating in the on screen activities, are characters that are staged and scripted purposefully for the camera (Turner, 2006).

The idea of a live broadcast is also crucial to the format as it adds to the feeling that the audiences have control of the outcome. This is especially the case during elimination nights where these events are occurring at the same time the audience is watching. Liveness gives the viewer a sense of importance and authority as well as a feeling of anticipation, being “in on the act” as events unfold. These techniques are used to “ensure that ‘reality’ is being successfully performed” (Turner, 2006: 158).

Popular Music and Television

Popular music and television have co-existed since Rock 'n' Roll was embraced by mainstream America in the 1940's and grew in popularity at a phenomenal rate through singers like Elvis Presley in the 1950's coinciding with the time when television sets became a permanent fixture in American homes around the world (Lim, 2005). Pop music began influencing different facets of people's lifestyles as viewers were surrounded by images of this new breed of 'Pop Star' both on stage and screen. Stars like Elvis Presley built their careers through the media of popular music and television as many groups, such as The Beatles and The Beach Boys, used television and film as promotional tools for their music as their film clips were played on pop music television shows.

Pop music, like television itself, is heavily focused on commercial gains. Thus the launch of MTV onto American screens on August 1st 1981 seemed like the marriage of already likeminded partners. MTV's intention was to broadcast music videos and its early format was based and modeled after Top 40 music programmes. Nowadays it is often the music video that holds the most importance in determining an artist's success or failure in the Music Industry. Television and popular music still work hand in hand in creating music celebrities. One reason popular music fits easily into TV formats, like Talent Contests, Wheelock Stahl suggests, is due to the idea that audience members associate this form of music with something pleasurable or with some sort of fantasy (2004). Not only is popular music and its associated stars seen to be something extremely glamorous it is also a field in which many people feel they can claim at least some expertise. "Millions considered themselves expert enough to render judgment upon Idol finalists" (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 225). Without this believed expertise this type of competition would not be successful and it is for that reason the format cannot crossover to other forms of occupation, "would a similar competition involving say, doctors be imaginable?" (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 225).

Before becoming the most famous face in the Pop Idol and American Idol series, Simon Cowell set out to test the importance of television exposure when it comes to launching debut artists. He believed that through television alone, without any radio play, he could sell a million copies of any new artists' single; and in 1999 he did just that, launching a single by the famous WWF (World Wrestling Federation) wrestlers throughout the United Kingdom. Their single went to number three in the pop charts and sold more than 1.5

million copies throughout Europe (Cowell, 2003). After the successes of the WWF records and the other television personalities Cowell went on to launch as pop stars, a new area of the market had been discovered, an area Cowell believed had not yet been capitalised on by other industry professionals. The link between television and music was now to have a very important future and the correlation of the two media forms ensured it wasn't long until television and popular music would combine to make their mark on network programming.

Popstars to Pop Idol

Before Pop Idol debuted in the UK the format from which it gained its inspiration was being developed in New Zealand, a format called 'PopStars' which premiered in New Zealand on state run TV2 over nine weeks. In 1999 auditions were posted on national television asking for female singers between the ages of 18 and 28 to register for an audition in a nationwide hunt to make the countries first all-girl pop band. This talent search was to be made into a documentary airing on New Zealand television in 2000, the first of its kind around the world. The show set out to showcase all the differing stages of developing a new band by taking the viewer through the audition stages to the final naming of the band and then a behind the scenes look at their national tour. The show began with hundreds of girls lining up for their shot at stardom and let the audience in on the selection process as the hundreds were narrowed down to just five who then formed the group 'TrueBliss'. This was first band ever to be formed under the PopStars banner before the concept was sold to Australia and then on to Europe and the UK (Turner, 2004)

TrueBliss, and other 'PopStars' made-for-television-bands, were made up of five female members, those members basically correlated with that of the Spice Girls images and personalities, a mixture of different cultures and ethnicity, one member typically filling the 'exotic' look category, one young, innocent looking girl (dubbed as Baby Spice), a young mother and in New Zealand a larger-than-life personality in both physical stature and character traits going against the following statement from Turner;

"Popstars offers the opportunity of fame and success within a narrow commercial frame work: this is a prefab band, after all, so no matter how well you sing you had better not be fat or homely" (Turner, 2004: 58).

In every other overseas version however his observation seems correct. TrueBliss was

managed by Jonathon Dowling yet on the television series the girls were portrayed as being managed by Peter Urlich who at that time was one of New Zealand's most prominent music figureheads. At the conclusion of the show Dowling went on to sell the concept to Australia where the format had major success with the Australian series forming the girl band 'Bardot':

“These programs culminate in the development of stars, singles and albums that have more of an autonomous existence outside of the televisual text itself – as products of the pop music industry and as a highly visible element of popular music culture” (Holmes, 2004: 150).

TrueBliss had national success with their number one single *Tonight* as well as three other single releases with Columbia records, an imprint of Sony Music. The second single *Number One* gained number 12 in the New Zealand charts and its video remains the most expensive New Zealand music video proving the extent of TrueBliss' success. The TrueBliss nationwide tour across 17 different towns in New Zealand proved so popular matinee performances were added in most venues. Columbia discussed a follow up album to the platinum 11-track debut album *Dream* in 1999, but it was never recorded and TrueBliss lost momentum after the television exposure ended. This lack of ongoing success was not limited to New Zealand but occurred in most other countries that bought the format clearly demonstrating the importance and value of television exposure for short-term impact not long-term success:

“While the initial success of some of these singles has been extraordinary (the first UK and Australian singles, in particular, went to number one immediately), none of the bands have been able to repeat that initial success nor to construct a continuing career. They break up or else find that they cant sustain audience interest in their work once they lose the publicity generated by appearing weekly on primetime TV” (Turner, 2004: 57)

Despite the declining success of TrueBliss once the show had reached its conclusion the series clearly helped to generate other opportunities for the band members including spin-off promotional activities, cameo television performances and in some cases concert appearances (Turner, 2004). In 2007 three of the five members remain working in the field of entertainment in some capacity, for example on radio, as a NZ Idol judge or in television presenting roles. One member in particular has gone on to have a somewhat successful solo music career.

Real and Authentic

The major premise of PopStars and like shows is that they take ordinary or 'real' people and turn them into stars. Like other forms of Reality Television programming song contests rely heavily on the claim that the events the audience is watching are 'real' and 'authentic'. The discovery of genuine talent can only be guaranteed if the means of discovering are in some sense objective. Moreover, the perception of "liveness" or unmediated connection is central to the development of a feeling of intimacy between those on screen and the audience at home (Holmes, 2004). Accordingly "the public persona of the celebrity needs to project an aura of 'authenticity'" (Tolson, 2001: 445).

As mentioned earlier, various production techniques are used by producers to ensure the perception of an unmediated encounter is witnessed by audiences, such as the use of blurred focus of TV cameras during filming. In order to be successful in such shows this perception of authenticity is more important than the skills the show is purportedly trying to highlight. The "authentic articulation of the self" (Holmes, 2004: 159) and notions of 'realness' have been a part of celebrity since the prominence of early film-stars with the audience continually being asked to seek questions about what the star is 'really' like both during on-screen performances as well as in their private lives (Tolson, 2001). This fascination has never been more important on television as it is today. Pop Idol is based on this familiar dichotomy of public/private or front stage/back stage representation and relies on the audience's fascination between these two worlds:

"We understand the mediated nature of the star sign, yet nevertheless encouraged to seek out the pursuit of intimate access to their 'real' selves" (Holmes 2004: 129)

Holmes suggests that even as the audience may recognise and understand Reality Television to be manufactured or contrived we, as an audience, are still encouraged to think in terms of, 'what is this contestant really like? Are they being real?' Tolson labels this "the 'professional ideology' of media presentation - or the imperative of "being yourself" (2001:446). A contestant must reveal that they are "being themselves" as the audience is searching for that "a moment of truth" (Annette Hill cited in Holmes, 2004: 160) that moment of authenticity, when somebody is "really" themselves despite participating in highly constructed media controlled environment. Authenticity is therefore perceived as the moment when the image of the self-constructed by the media breaks down and the "true"

self of the contestant shines through artifice. Such a dichotomy emphasises the tension between the performance, or public face, and the private self or authenticity of the person:

“The spectator may scrutinize the star’s performance for moments of sincerity – gestures which appear unpremeditated, uncontrolled – particularly as they are articulated through the ‘revelatory’ structure of the close up” (Holmes & Jermyn 2004:129).

Because of the pervasiveness of the media and the fact that much observation of others is indirect, modern society seems fascinated by the notions that ‘real emotion’ can be witnessed through public performance in these types of shows (Tolson, 2001). In the case of Pop Idol, this fascination is understood by the contestants themselves who know the importance of presenting a credible image of their private self. This awareness is evident in the observation of a Big Brother contestant who when asked who he wanted to evict from the show, responded that a fellow contestant should go because he “wasn’t being real yet” (Holmes 2004:129). But this idea of ‘being yourself’, Tolson argues, isn’t as simple as it sounds:

“If...the trick is to ‘come across as a normal person’ then there must be just enough performance of ‘being ordinary’ to give the script an apparently authored credibility and to make the presentation seem ‘authentic’ (Tolson, 2001: 455).

The notion of authenticity is even more central to the music world since the singer is perceived as expressing his or her own emotions through the performance of the song. This perception is re-enforced by the history of recording technology. A shift in public appreciation occurred in the 1930’s when the classically trained voice was superseded by the microphone based crooning voice of popular music, music that was electronically enhanced. The lower pitch singer was perceived as having more of a personal identification with the song or more emotionally connected with the music (Tolson, 2001). Notions of emotional connection or ‘singing from your soul’ often appear through judges and contestant comments on NZ Idol or Pop Idol shows.

Pop Idol relies on the promise of this authenticity with the audience encouraged to follow the process of discovery of the ‘star’. Throughout the series contestants are shown on the verge of being plucked from obscurity as they progress (or fail to progress) on their journey from an aspiring hopeful to becoming a celebrity and a Pop Idol. As witness to this process of discovery the audience is “left with a greater sense of knowing the star as a real person”

(Holmes, 2004: 159) and the viewer can rationalize that they knew them before the contestant became a celebrity. The process itself is emphasised as Pop Idol contestants arrive at the audition as their ordinary selves waiting to be ‘discovered’ and are “suddenly extracted from their everyday lives and processed for stardom” (Turner, 2006: 154):

“The first time we see the hopefuls they are normally dressed, in ordinary surroundings in which contestants are often de-glamourised and in the raw’ when filmed through the unflattering aesthetic of Reality TV, and this facilitates the programmes claim to realism” (Holmes 2004: 116).

The ordinariness or ‘realness’ of the hopefuls is then contrasted later in the series when contestants are purposely styled and made-up a certain way depending on particular contestants characters and images and are performing in the aesthetic surroundings of a professional performer (Holmes, 2004: 157). It is here that one can see how these contestants have been coached in projecting a star image and have been assisted in their rise to fame:

“No celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public. ‘Cultural intermediaries’ is the collective term for agents, publicists, market personnel, promoters, ... Their task is to concoct the public presentation of celebrity personalities that will result in an enduring appeal for the audience of fans” (Rojek, 2001: 10: 11).

Celebrity, Fame and Ordinariness

Reality Television has created new notions of fame, which have spread into the expectations of the wider public (Turner, 2006). We are now living in a society facing a major increase of what Daniel Boorstin (1963) describes as a celebrity culture where, as stated previously, people are known simply for being well-known (cited in Holmes, 2004). The fame of the celebrity for having a high profile is routinely contrasted with the fame of the star – a performer who possesses genuine talent in his or her chosen field of endeavor.

The term ‘Celebrity’ developed in the 19th Century, the Oxford dictionary defines as somebody who is “famous” or “well-known” or “the condition of being much extolled or talked about”. Marshall suggests that in these last examples there is a feeling that celebrity is inauthentic, unreal and manufactured - a view held by some in society today. Because of the dream of easy fame, gaining celebrity status remains a common aspiration and never before has its status seemed more attainable (Marshall, 1997). There are some reasons for

this that are related to the function of television itself. In particular in the world of Reality Television specialised talents or gifts are not absolutely necessary in ones bid for fame. Factors such as appearance, looks and social background can be just as important.

The celebrity has very little social or political power and yet their lives and ways of living generate an incredible amount of interest and those celebrities who gain their status through appearing on popular Reality TV shows are often at the centre of this debate due to the very nature of they way they gained their ‘fame’ (Marshall, 1997).

“Indeed, the modern celebrity may claim no special achievements other than the attraction of public attention; think, for instance, of the prominence gained for short intense periods by the contestants on Big Brother or Survivor. As a result, ...most media pundits would argue that celebrities in the 21st Century excite a level of public interest that seems, for one reason or another disproportionate” (Turner, 2004: 1)

In the case of Pop Idol the notion of “genuine” achievement on the basis of raw talent is inescapably implicated with the fame that comes from media exposure and with notions of media fabrication. Yet the format’s initial emphasis on singing talent means that Pop Idol is “relatively traditional in its construction of stardom” (Holmes, 2004). The contestants are portrayed as having something special and this greatness gives them the right to attain celebrity status, yet at the same time the process emphasises the way in which these talented few are manufactured to become celebrities. Pop Idol is continually walking the line between the “conception of stardom as “bestowed”, “predestined,” and based on a “indefinable internal quality of the self” (Gamson 1994: 32) with concepts of labor, production, and commercialism (Holmes, 2004). As Richard Dyer originally argued the image of the star is a compound of the exceptional and the ordinary in a state of tension. The contemporary celebrity seems to signify the triumph of the ordinary and for this reason the public, can identify with celebrities that seem to reflect part of our own selves (Marshall, 1997). The film star proper is, however, a sign of distance:

“Legitimate stardom...requires the development of a complex and paradoxical relationship with the target audience: aspiring idols must demonstrate both specialness and ordinariness, distance and closeness, similarity and difference, particularly regarding social position” (Gamson cited in Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 217).

The notion of a “lucky break” is talked about freely in the music and entertainment

industries and to a large extent the celebrity stands for the triumph of luck over hard work and real accomplishment. This seems particularly the case when individuals with no discernible talent are catapulted out of obscurity into the limelight virtually overnight. Chris Rojek has coined the term for this new breed of instant celebrity as ‘celetoid’, which he describes as, “accessories of cultures organised around mass communications and staged authenticity” (Rojek, 2001: 20-21). They include many types of ‘ordinary’ people such as lottery winners, one hit wonders, sports arena streakers, mistresses of public figures or any person who can become a focus of media attention one day and basically forgotten the next (Rojek, 2001). A Big Brother contestant or a Pop Idol finalist can make celebrity status within a very short amount of time. But those so abruptly elevated can lose their social visibility and currency with equal rapidity as with each new season a new batch of contestants take their place in the spotlight as previous participants fade into obscurity (Turner, 2006). The celetoid is that form of celebrity in which being a replaceable commodity “bound up with commodity culture” (Rojek, 2001:14) finds its starkest expression. The rapid circulation of celebrities and the arbitrary working of the lucky break is an essential element of Reality TV and this is not unrelated to the fact that reality shows target the key demographic group of people aged between 14 to 35 years where especially in its lower range the future is unpredictable and seemingly everything is possible (Turner, 2006: 155). Such a demographic have also to sell themselves in the job market and learn to please others who control their future. In this way as Rojek suggests the manufacture of celebrities can “humanise the process of commodity culture...in the sense that consumers desire to possess them” (Rojek, 2001: 14-15).

In the New Zealand context, an article in The Herald on Sunday names New Zealand’s top fifty celebrities with the winner being Marc Ellis, a sportsman turned television celebrity. Sean Redmond suggests the reason for Ellis being ranked number one is to do with the interplay of ordinary and extraordinary personality traits.

“There has to be a mix of the extraordinary and ordinary for people to be really potent symbols” (Redmond, 26/8/2007:26).

This idea of ordinariness is part of the reason shows such as Pop Idol are popular as the audiences see contestants as representations of their ordinary selves. A study of 200 Australian girls commissioned by the Australian Research Council Grant called ‘Girl

Cultures' studied young women between the ages of 12 – 18 about the ways in which the media has influenced them through such Reality Television formats. This study illustrates the girls love for the ordinary and blurs the lines between the 'Star' and the rest of society appealing to the fantasy that anyone has a chance to attain celebrity status and gain the attributed successes (Holmes, 2004):

“One of the primary pleasures of Big Brother for young women, then, is seeing people who look and act like ordinary people in the media. As one young woman put it: “It shows that if you go on a TV show and you have a nice personality, you'll shine through and that outside of beauty, what size you are doesn't really count” (Lumby & Probyn: 2003: 18)

The focus on ordinariness is found in the audition phase of the show with more importance placed on the professional performance and 'star' quality as the selected performers are coached and groomed. The notion of being special and having star potential is constantly used by the judges of those contestants who near the end of the competition. Moreover, the audience voters are urged to 'save' those contestants who have something that the judges label as talent, x-factor or star quality.

“Talent is understood to be a unique, ultimately inexplicable phenomenon. While it may be refined and polished through discipline and practice, its singularity is presented as a wonderful gift of nature” (Rojek, 2001: 29-30).

Although Pop Idol places an emphasis on being gifted or obtaining 'star quality' it also suggests that one needs to go through certain changes in order to graduate into 'stardom', that being gifted or special is not quite enough and one must learn or be taught star qualities. The format illustrates this process as the show not only places emphasis on a contestants singing and performing ability but also openly acknowledges on screen the styling and importance of packaging the contestant in the right way (Holmes, 2004: 155) balancing both elements of manufacturing a celebrity as well as acknowledging that persons specialness:

“Paradigmatic of the success myth in that although they certainly acknowledge elements of manufacture, they foreground the importance of 'specialness' or 'innate' talent (the stress on the elusive x-factor) combined with an emphasis on labour and 'hard work” (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, 119- 120).

The audience bears witness to the notion that becoming a Pop Idol is not something that is purely natural or inherent but through the guidance of industry professionals on the show

they are groomed into ‘stardom’ emphasising the external work needed before ‘star’ status is achieved. This outside help must be balanced with what is repeatedly referred to on the show,

“...as raw, natural talent and, of course, an acceptable physical appeal...which is then yoked to a deliberately ambiguous focus on specialness...” (Holmes, 2004: 155-156).

The Pop Idol shows seek to maintain the balance between the authenticity of a popular music ‘star’ as well as displaying the ordinariness of contestants with emphasis on the process drawing attention to the gap between the “real” person and the dream. In this manner the process talks much about stardom but in its outcomes seems to create celebrities of the celetooid variety, as we shall see in what follows.

Popularity versus Talent

The dominance of Reality Television, especially those based on a talent search such as ‘So you think you can dance?’ or ‘Pop Idol’ have, arguably, shaped people’s expectations of the importance of talent in achieving fame. The premise of talent contests that talent is distributed everywhere waiting to be discovered has reinforced public desires to become famous. Current research indicates that becoming a celebrity is talked about by young people as a realistic and attainable career option even though they may not possess any special talent or have decided on an area of public performance in which they can attain their fame (Turner, 2006). Paradoxically it is also assumed that talent in itself is not a necessary precondition for fame which opens the door to those whose talents are modest but whose determination to succeed is outstanding. This seems especially true of the pop music world, a world where hotel heiress Paris Hilton can become a pop star, with her self titled album Paris, David Hasslehoff, the Baywatch actor and many others have made more or less successful attempts to launch a singing career. The apparent opposition here between the possession of a demonstrable talent and a media profile can be said to constitute both the drama and the appeal of Pop Idol. NZ Idol is no exception and it poses once again a question often leveled at the music business in general: Is talent or popularity the main determinant of success in popular music? (Anderson, 2006). Prospero R. Coviar, in the Business world weekender (November 24, 2006) argued from his analysis of the Philippine Idol voting results that audiences watching these types of singing contests choose their winners based on the popularity of certain contestants rather than on talent. He

contended that audiences lack the expertise to judge what a “good” singer is therefore would choose to vote for their favourite either because of looks and/or personality.

A recent article about the American Idol Season 6 results suggests the same thing. ‘Sanjaya can’t sing but idolisers don’t care’ (NZ Herald 1/4/07) discusses the most controversial contestant of the season claiming that he clearly was the least ‘talented’ singer yet continually managed to “out last” many of the favorites prompting the debate about popularity and talent. If talent is not the strongest criteria needed to win does that mean America’s most watched TV show has lost credibility or without intention created another celebrity simply famous for his well-known-ness? The apparent conflict between popularity over talent and the tension between them is a primary dramatic driver of reality talent contests with many ‘shock exits’ of those contestants seen as the most talented and tipped to win. A recent article highlighted this idea of popularity winning over talent where in American Idol, Season Six, Melinda Doolittle, a contestant believed to be one of the most talented was voted off the show and that the finale instead featured “two better-looking, younger and more personable singers with a fraction of Doolittle’s musical talent” (<http://globemedia.com>).

A new trend has also developed in recent seasons of American Idol, an anti American Idol website votefortheworst.com has exploited the dramatic tension between popularity and talent to keep the least talented contestants in the competitions for as long as possible. The websites mantra is to embrace American Idols “suckiness by encouraging people to vote en masse for the worst contestants” thus making those contestants the most popular due to their lack of talent. This website has proved successful with over one million hits a week, the site boasting that their own ‘votefortheworst’ contestant remained in the competition for much longer than anybody anticipated. In modern culture popularity over ability can be seen in many other areas for example actors and other celebrities can even win political elections nowadays despite minimal governance skills (<http://votefortheworst.com>).

“So has Idol become more of a popularity contest than a singing contest?” an article in the New Zealand Sunday Star suggested that this struggle has surfaced in NZ Idol, with the article going on to quote one of the Idol judges who agreed that popularity is a major attribute needed in order to become a successful musician. But a singer could not rely on

popularity alone and the voting “public needs to think more about the whole package”. Other statements claim “scores of NZ Idol fans, unhappy their favourite Idols have been eliminated from the competition while so-called lesser performers have carried on to sing another day”. When a judge was asked which contestant he thought would win the final the answer was not based on talent rather “it could simply be the Idol with the most support in New Zealand” (Stevens, 2006: 8).

Originality versus Conformity

For most musicians whether in Rock, Pop or any other musical genre, the highest achievement is to be seen by ones peers as creative and original. Following the examples of British Rock bands such as The Beatles, musicians are now expected to both write and perform their own music. In New Zealand “cover bands” are seen as inferior to those who write and perform their own music. This expectation was previously unimportant in determining which performers or bands were ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but it is one that nowadays, almost the entire New Zealand music industry is based on. Creativity or originality and their associated meanings however can be debatable and disagreement arises on definition (Frith, 1996). In terms of popular music one could arguably define originality “both as a kind of free-floating expressive individuality and as a market distinction, a selling point” (Frith, 1996: 58). These values are not necessarily the same thing but Reality Television talent contests implicitly tend to equate them. This implicit equation is seen in many of the Pop Idol shows around the world, not the least because it is written into the format. With predictable regularity, judges questioning contestants about their individuality, “What have you got to offer that’s unique?” or “I’ve heard hundreds of girls sing that song exactly the same”. Comments like these encourage audiences (and by extension performers) to identify what is unique in each contestant outside of their performance of rock standards. There is emphasis, not only on being special, but also on performing as an individual and bringing ones’ self into a song,

“The project of making a song one’s own is repeatedly praised while, with respect to musical sound, familiarity and standardization are criticised” (Holmes, 2004: 155-156).

However the rationale of the format means that conformity is prioritised over originality or difference. Consequently there is a trend towards sameness in the Pop Idol or American Idol shows and this is also found in the contestants’ self-presentation where certain

stereotypes are nearly always evident. It is also the judges who decide on those they believe to be in the top group of singers and this judgment is by definition subjective, if not expressing personal taste, certainly drawing on their own experience in the music business. It remains a permanent possibility that many 'original' performers may not get far enough into the competition to be seen or 'chosen' by the viewers. Rather a pool of approximately fifty performers, depending on country and the season, are pre-screened by music executives and judges who decide on their commercial potential to sell records and more immediately boost ratings. The selection process is therefore complex with those contestants who may be perceived as the most interesting and original being eliminated in favour of those who can conform enough to meet commercial expectations. Apart from providing emotionally charged television, the rationale for screening auditions, especially by contestants whose skills are embarrassingly poor is to sustain the illusion that performance skills are the primary determinant of a successful audition.

There is a certain realism in this since in the Music world, market success tends to follow rather than arise from originality. An artist or band must pass through certain stages of acceptance until that level of success is acquired. As Frith (1996) suggests, being true to yourself and your music in the popular music world depends upon other people's approval and acceptance, it is only when acceptance is attained, in both recognition of talent and financial success, an artist is able to become completely independent and free to make their own decisions on music they release, their image and marketing campaigns. Many famous Pop singers illustrate this point via their comments usually about their third album claiming that it is the first album they have made that really reflects who they are as people and as musicians. Joss Stone, a young British soul singer, has now sold over 7 million albums worldwide over the last few years and in 2007 released her third album, claims this album to be the first record that is truly a reflection of her:

“Only now, on her third album, *Introducing Joss Stone* does the British soul singer and songwriter feels she is expressing her true musical vision. ‘This is the first album I’ve made that is truly me,’ she says. “That’s why I’m calling it *Introducing Joss Stone*. These are my words, and this is who I am as an artist” ([http: jossstone.com](http://jossstone.com)).

Pop Idol claims to deliver originality and diversity of talent from which the audience gets to choose the contestants they feel to be the 'best', however the contestants on the top 18 or 24 shows, the shows in which the public have their first chance to vote for their favourites,

are nearly always singers of mainstream, pop music styles and are in many ways fundamentally similar. There is very little diversity and any contestant that happens to be radically different often does not remain in the competition for any length of time. It seems that in order to be successful one must be willing, initially, to conform to the Pop Idol standards. However in recent seasons there has been one contestant that could be perceived as 'different' included in the Top 18 or 24 perhaps to give the illusion of originality and choice.

To conclude, Reality Television formats and the talent contest in particular have been a dominating force in the media over the last decade and show little sign of declining in popularity. The global success of the Pop Idol format has been a major contributor to this trend. Pop Idol poses questions about the nature of authenticity, stardom and popularity and the role of talent in media success. The following chapters, through focusing on NZ Idol, will provide the answers to these questions and these relationships as occurring in a New Zealand context. The next chapter will look more closely at the ways in which Pop Idol has developed both in terms of the format of the show on television and through television in society.

Chapter Two: Pop Idol as a Global Phenomenon

Television Talent shows in various formats have been a recurring source of entertainment over the years. But when Pop Idol debuted on the UK television network ITV in October 8th 2001 (Reijnders et. al, 2007), the phenomenon was taken to a whole new level. Pop Idol was produced by 19TV the production arm of the multimedia company 19Group, and Fremantle media (Holmes, 2004: 150). The Pop Idol format was developed by Simon Fuller, an English record producer famous for managing the Spice Girls who “exploded onto the scene” with their first single ‘Wannabe’ (Cowell, 2003: 83), and S-Club7 a children’s television show that launched the Pop band of the same name. Fuller extended the principle of discovery previously applied when launching The Spice Girls, a group of five young women who were plucked from their ordinary lives and propelled into stardom into the Pop Idol format. Drawing the audience into the process of selection and taking aspiring performers from the general audience for pop music helped ensure that “democratic promise of equal Idol opportunity” was offered to every singing person between the ages of 16 and 24. This essential ingredient was “ within the reach of viewers” (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 221). Given such a framing the audience members, even if not competing themselves, can believe that they possess the attributes or talents needed to become a star and can achieve celebrity status (Wheelock Stahl, 2004). This suggests that the appeal of such shows lies within a democratic philosophy signifying an “initially classless society” (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 225) and that any person willing to stand in line with thousands of other hopefuls is assured the equal opportunity to audition and potentially become a ‘star’.

Fuller originally intended Pop Idol for the internet where people could send in video audition tapes and the best of those singers would perform live ([http: blender.com](http://blender.com)). During the later half of the 1990’s the success of Reality TV suggested that a talent contest that combined “both the elements of the variety TV shows of the past and the modern reality TV twist of the future” (Cowell, 2003) could be highly successful so Fuller quickly sold the Pop Idol concept to Claudia Rosencrantz at ITV (Cowell, 2003). The massive success of the format meant that it has dominated many “discussions of pop culture and the entertainment media” (Cowell, 2003: 190) in America and around the world for the last six years and it seems for the foreseeable future.

Simon Cowell, long time friend of Fuller, also involved in the Music Industry as an A&R executive responsible for the famous boy band 'Five' and later 'Westlife' (Cowell, 2003), became involved in the development of Pop Idol in its early stages. He secured the recording rights of any Idol contestant around the world who sells singles or albums under the Idol banner. Cowell had previous interest in creating and selling pop music through the medium of television and as discussed in the previous chapter and had many successes within that field. He felt that major record labels in Britain had failed to capitalise on the important role television could play in creating an artist and launching them into the limelight. Something can be said for being able to reach the "largest number of people at the most opportune time. Legends are born that way" (Lim, 2005).

Prior to the conception of Pop Idol in August 2000 TV producer Nigel Lythgoe and his network London Weekend Television purchased the rights to the Pop Stars series from Australia. The series went on to have considerable global success not only in terms of single and album sales but also in regards to audience viewing statistics (Holmes, 2004: 149). The British series of PopStars formed the made-for-television-band 'Hearsay', who's first single 'Pure and Simple' achieved the record for the highest selling single for a debut artist in one week, selling approximately 500,000 copies. This was only beaten by UK's first Pop Idol winner Will Young with his single 'Evergreen', which sold 950,000 copies in his first week (Cowell, 2003). The PopStars format was then adapted and changed by Fuller to Pop Idol, a franchise that has continued to gain popularity throughout the world over the last 7 years.

In the transition from PopStars to Pop Idol a few format changes are worth noting. Pop Idol still maintained the idea of a nationwide talent search but added a new element pivotal to its success. It would now be up to the viewers to decide who they felt was the best or the most interesting talent and through voting they could ensure that their favorite remained in the competition. Pop Idols promotion focused on the slogan "But this time you choose!" (Holmes, 2004: 149) automatically distinguishing itself as different to PopStars by asking the audience to get involved. Audiences now had the ability to alter the course of events also giving Pop Idol the opportunity to make use of premium-priced viewer interactivity as viewers could vote by telephone, mobile phone texts, voting through the official website,

even through the red button on digital television sets. The interest from viewers to now be able to interact with their programmes was so great that the final show of Pop Idol Season One, aired in February 2002, and gained record voting numbers for one night making Pop Idol one of the most profitable shows for ITV1 (Cowell, 2003). Revenue was now also gathered through “the continuing exploitation of international talent, as well as the multimedia platforms of phone line, internet and sponsorship revenues” (Holmes, 2004: 150).

Another format change was seen through Pop Idols focus on the soloist. It was believed that the show would be more compelling to have a single winner since this would multiply the competition between the contestants and enhance the potential for greater conflict and drama if everyone was fighting it out for themselves (Cowell, 2003). This framing of the show as an individual competition also fitted the ideology of stardom. The major hook of the show lay in the anticipation of not knowing who was going to be selected and whether or not the viewers’ particular favorite would make it through. During the Pop Stars series the band members were chosen two thirds of the way through the series so the show lost the tension or anticipation early. Announcing the winner at the finale would then add that extra and most important element of suspense (Cowell, 2003).

As with PopStars the Pop Idol format began with four judges in the UK Peter Waterman, Simon Cowell, Nicki Chapman and Neil Fox, each judge representing different facets of the music business (Cowell, 2003). It was not until the American series that the fourth judge was dropped only because the producers were unable to find a fourth person they deemed suitable. The hosts of the show were another vital factor to the success and the first season featured the already famous UK television personalities Ant & Dec. The host’s role was essentially to chat with the contestants prior to and after their performance. In these sequences the audience were able to ‘get to know’ the contestants, who they ‘really’ were and what they stood for. This process facilitated audience identification with individual participants and had a profound affect on the overall voting as to which contestants would escape elimination or who would be sent home. Cowell discusses this aspect of the competition and how important it was to the survival of the contestant:

“The performances the viewers see on television take place in a radically different context

from the one they did while we were filming... The audience at home see a profile piece on video, then the singing and then the recap in the green room with Ant and Dec. In many ways that additional context can determine whether a singer gets through [to the next week]" (Cowell, 2003: 128).

During the first season of Pop Idol there were originally to be no judges after the first audition phase. This was because the producers felt that the judging was only appropriate for the initial audition stages and not during the performance phase when the performers themselves were supposedly the main focus of the show (Cowell, 2003). However when the first show aired without any judges it was seen to be less entertaining as producers, and audience members alike, felt that without the judges the "heart of the show" was lost. An immediate decision was made to bring back the judges the next week (Cowell, 2003). The actual role of the judges will be discussed further in this chapter.

Narratives of Humiliation

A major part of Pop Idol's appeal is the initial focus on "narratives of humiliation" which are specifically drawn from the first audition rounds and are shown during the beginning of the series "when official and unofficial rules are being set out, and then during its final weeks when the finalists' legitimacy is being fortified" (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 219). The unsuccessful contestants are blatantly and often cruelly told that they would not make it through to the next round and the judges' critique is then followed by camera shots of the contestants reaction breaking down in tears, staring in disbelief, or even, especially in America, shots of the contestant verbally attacking the judges (Wheelock Stahl, 2004).

"Early on, viewers were drawn to the auditioning process for the I-cant-believe-what-I'm seeing factor when a really bad singer was on stage. Likewise, once the bad ones were cut from the show, then the tide turns toward rooting – and voting- for the ultimate winners. Then it becomes like watching a favorite team (Huff, 2006: 124).

Such narratives of humiliation thus legitimised the ranking system and suggested the reality of show business as a tough world. As a result they were used in every season of Pop Idol around the world, including New Zealand. Because of Pop Idols growing popularity many people now enter such competitions in the hope that they might be 'bad' enough to make the final edit, for example in NZ Idol Season Three a contestant labeled 'Heavy metal Harry Potter' by one of the judges and in subsequent newspaper articles, states that he achieved his dream just by auditioning;

“No, I didn’t get through. I wore the wings to stand out. I went on there for the goal to make a fool of myself on national TV and I achieved that” (Stewart cited in Davies, 2006: 15).

He goes on to explain that last year he entered trying to get in but this year “did the exact opposite” and that he would recommend it to others as his “friends think its pretty funny and cool that I did it”. He went on to tell Sunday News that he didn’t believe NZ Idol to be “a launching pad for real talent” so he entered “partly for the fun and also partly for the piss-take”. These narratives of humiliation are not just out-takes or bloopers scattered throughout the show “for mere comic relief or pathos” (Wheelock Stahl 2004: 221) but rather are included in the initial stages of the show and as reference towards the end that only a select talented few have the right to become Pop Idol Stars:

“These narratives are instructive tableaux of punishment and vengeance that serve simultaneously as further legitimation and authentication of those in whom the desired talents inhere, and as a graphic warning to all those considering an attempt to breach a field for which their talents are not appropriate” (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 221).

The risk of humiliation or risk of failing is a part of the entertainment as David Lusted states,

“Part of the pleasure of game shows, quizzes and talent contests, is precisely that they foreground the risk of failure. A shared sense of risk is indeed a powerful “contact point” between fan and Idol, one that enables identification through literal social homology” (cited in Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 221).

The aspect of finding pleasure in the discomfort of others is drawn upon in the finale when a special segment is edited to include the worst performers of the season (Reijnders et al, 2007) seen in NZ Idol 2006 as well as many other national versions around the world.

The Pop Idol Process

Holmes suggests the format of Pop Idol can be broken down into four stages and these different stages each have their own function with different tools to ensure the audience receives the right messages about the show and about each contestant. The contest begins with the regional auditions where the television audiences are shown the endless lines of young hopefuls waiting for their time in the spotlight. In the UK an audition notice was posted on News of the World and dates for the different regions announced, these attracted

thousands of aspiring Idols (Cowell, 2003). The initial auditions were filmed in different locations across the country, for example in New Zealand those cities were Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch. The audition venue was always very bland, lacking in colour or sophistication and always with the large Pop Idol logo on the wall (Reijnders et al, 2007) and on the spot the contestant is told to stand on once he/ she enters the room, directly opposite the three or four judges. The primary objective of these first episodes and of the initial audition phase itself is to establish a form of ranking which is used throughout the entire process and is most clearly seen in the opening and the final episodes where the non-talented contestants are once again displayed on screen to contrast those who have ‘made-it’ to the end (Reijnders et al, 2007).

“Talent quests... establish a particular ranking. The entire quest centers on the notion that participants possess different singing abilities and therefore slot into a ‘natural’ place within a fixed ranking. Each contestant wants to reach the top, but to do so they first must compete” (Reijnders et al, 2007: 278).

Once the contestant is in the audition room in front of the judges they introduce themselves and the song they are about to sing. The song is performed acapella with usually a verse and a chorus unless interrupted by the judges. Eventually the judges give their verdict on whether the contestant will continue in the competition or not and for the majority of contestants the decision is not in their favour with comments ranging from the negative to the extremely negative. This harsh commentary has given the judges an identity:

“Such critical, even blunt, comments have given the...judges the reputation of being a kind of ‘hanging jury’. And the programme does all it can to live up to this reputation” (Reijnders et al, 2007: 279).

As the first auditions around the country come to a close the number of successful contestants is narrowed down to approximately 100, once again depending on the country and/or the particular season. In New Zealand this number is 50.

During the first season of Pop Idol in the UK issues emerged towards the end of the first stage of auditions as the judges were informed by the producers that they had put more females than males through to the next stage and so they needed to put more men through, they were told to put a male contestant through even if they felt he was borderline.

“The first season had many of these situations, we were learning as we went along”

(Cowell, 2003: 109).

The auditions on-screen appear to look unscripted however the producers of the show pre-screen thousands of contestants choosing only those who are clearly talented singers as well as those who are the least talented or most laughable to audition in front of the judges (Holmes, 2004). The successful singers are then aired on television along side many of the worst auditions adding a comic element that has, over the years, become increasingly more of a focus with the popularity of some of the “bad” contestants such as William Hung “famous for his off-key rendition of Ricky Martins – She Bangs in 2004” (<http://globalmedia.com>). These untalented singers face harsh, sometimes cruel criticisms from many of the judges, primarily from Simon Cowell. It was Cowell’s controversial ravings that also made him famous on American Idol cementing a personality trait associated with at least one of the judges in the different series around the world.

- Theatre Round & Audience Voting Stages

“The second stage of Pop Idol takes place in what is constructed as more of a professional setting” (Holmes, 2004: 153).

The judges are placed on a judge’s panel in the middle of darkened theatre with professional lighting and the use of microphones. The contestants perform on stage alone and then if successful, in small groups with their group skills closely monitored, even though this is the only time throughout the competition that being a ‘team player’ is required. The group of approximately 100 hopefuls is whittled down over a couple of days during what is known as the ‘Theatre Round’ and numbers are eventually narrowed to 50, in Holland as Reijnders states below the number is 30 and in New Zealand this number was 24 in Season One and Two and 18 in Season Three;

“After various eliminations rounds, 30 singers are left. The TV audience then phones a pay-per-call line or sends a text message to vote for their favorite contestant” (Reijnders et al 2007: 276).

In the UK the group was then divided into five groups of ten, these five groups became weekly heats where the viewer now had their first chance to choose their own favourites. At this point it was claimed that the fate of each contestant was in the hands of the viewer. Each singer would take their turn and at the end of the show the telephone voting lines would be opened for a few hours for the audience to decide who would get through into the

top 10 (this became the Top 12 in other seasons). Only two contestants out of each group would make the top 10. The result was announced the next day during a live broadcast.

“By this point, the singers have been carefully styled, and we are shown clips of them selecting their outfits with the stylists and practicing with voice coaches. They sing with a piano accompaniment and stand on a small brightly lit stage in the centre of the studio, with the four judges now placed on the right-hand side of the screen to give comments. It is clearly here that we begin to see a shift from the visual codes of reality TV to the aesthetic and technological form of light entertainment. The camera captures the performance through swift panning and aerial shots, and the contestants now directly address their performance to the viewer rather than judges” (Holmes 2004: 153-154).

In NZ Idol, however, the contestants were asked not to address the cameras during their performances until the Top 10 performance rounds began. It was only then that they were given a brief lesson about how to “work” the cameras to enable their performance to be better received by the audience.

- Top 10 Phase

After all ten finalists are chosen, and the less talented have been “ritually eliminated” (Reijnders et al, 2007: 280) the final stages begin as contestants perform week after week in themed performance shows followed by an elimination show occurring live the following evening. At this point, the contestant with the least amount of votes was sent home. This process continued for ten weeks until eventually an Idol is crowned. Following the coronation, the next stages of recording, touring, and marketing begin. The setting of the Top 10 shows are in stark contrast to the plain, dowdy rooms and empty theatres in which initial auditions took place. The top 10 shows are filmed in a studio setting with bright lights, a band, props and a studio audience, which promotes the idea that finalists are ‘stars-in-the-making’. The finale itself is an even bigger event with bigger staging and lighting effects as well as a larger audience to witness the stars in action.

“The finalists ... bear all the hallmarks of social success. Not only do they sing well, but also each one of them looks good. They have been restyled in line with the latest fashion and they thrive within a rich social milieu (Reijnders et al, 2007: 283).

The Judges Role

Like a good soap opera, Idol relies on a dramatic set of characters, the judges, the hosts, the contestants and of course the audience. The relationships between this cast of characters

especially the judges and hosts are central to the success or failure of the show. This is why one can often see the same character traits re-emerging in different Idol shows around the world, which in turn illustrates Fremantle's control over the format itself. The judges themselves are integral to the show as they determine the initial ranking within the group by setting the norms in the initial stages, which justify the unfolding selection process (Reijnders et al, 2007).

The three or four judges, depending on the country and/ or the Pop Idol season also have a specific role in the entertainment of the show as Simon Cowell suggests,

“giving the Pop Idol contestants a reality check is part of the entertainment. Without it, the show wouldn't be half as much fun, either for me or the viewers” (Cowell, 2003: 3).

Towards the end of the series, the judge's roles change somewhat from providing the harsh criticism needed to reinforce the ranking system to the positive praise and adoring comments placing them as fans of the contestants. They begin to help promote the festive and celebratory spirit needed in the finals when the contestant has beaten the competition and been re-born as ‘Star’:

“The role of the judges is adapted in the interest of promoting a party spirit. They too, appear in festive attire, and they have exchanged their acid remarks for words of high praise” (Reijnders et al, 2007: 281).

Another facet of the judges' role described by Cowell is to educate the viewers in what the music industry is all about. Auditioning and harsh criticism is part of trying to gain access into the industry:

“We set out to make a show that honestly reflects the music business. And trust me; the record industry is not particularly nice” (Cowell, 2003: 3).

Apart from the entertainment or humiliation factor, the judges main role is like that of other critics and fans where their first job is to get the audience or listener to like the “right” things about a performance or a performer. “Pop judgment is a double process: our critical task, as fans, is first to get people to listen to the right things” (Frith, 1996: 8) as it is only possible to persuade a person to like a particular piece of music or a performer once they understand the right things to listen to. If the judges do not succeed in doing this the “wrong” person, according to both music executives and television producers, may

continue to escape eviction. During the most recent American Idol in 2007, the judges were seen to be agitated by a specific performer and eventually after countless weeks of criticism Cowell refused to say anything as he felt it was pointless as the voters would still vote the contestant through to the next stages regardless.

Active Audience

There is little research available about a key element in Pop Idol, the audience vote, however the process follows a similar form to Big Brother where each week the participants or houseguests as they were known, nominated two fellow house mates to face the public vote of elimination. The audience was then urged to vote for one person, out of the two, who they wanted to be banished from the Big Brother House at \$0.99 cents per vote (Andrejevic, 2004). This process of elimination continued until the last three contestants were left in the house, out of the remaining three the audience decided who would claim the first prize of \$500,000 (in the U.S. version), second prize of \$100,000 and third prize of \$50,000 (Andrejevic, 2004). Pop Idol followed a similar process with an important difference. The audience were asked to vote for the contestant they most wanted to remain in the competition rather than the one they wanted to be eliminated, text voting as well as land-line phone votes were used. The audience was now asked to take an interactive role in television viewing, a change from the passive viewing usually associated with television audiences.

As Holmes suggests “there is no simple relationship between interactivity and the concept of the active audience” (Holmes, 2004: 164) and before discussing the active audience phenomenon applied to such shows one must look at the ways in which the audience has changed from passive viewing to becoming commodities with monetary value to the networks as well as a consumer.

Bolin suggests that when a viewer consumes a television programme for their own leisure, ideas about identities, cultures and the world itself are formed yet the outcome of that consumption is “very seldom a commodity” (2005: 291). Because of this, television programming is constantly developing other means of consumption “means that in themselves are commodities and most often material in kind” (Bolin, 2005: 293). An important distinction must be made when discussing the audience as a commodity. It is

necessary to look at the differences between commercial privately owned networks compared with public service systems. Commercial or privately owned networks organise themselves around capitalist principles, producing the largest amount of profit compared to public or state owned networks which arguably focus on the “principles of fun or pleasure [and] social values” (Bolin, 2005: 294).

It is also important to note differences between a passive viewer and the audience as a commodity. As marketing departments of profit driven networks concerns lie in the form of ratings, as they make their profits by selling other peoples product through the media and use the audience itself as the “raw material” to sell to advertisers in the form of ratings who in turn, buy advertising on their networks. Through this production-consumption circuit the audience is ‘consumed by the advertising industry (Bolin, 2005: 296). It is through this perspective that the viewer is distinguished between a passive listener who merely watch, read or listen, an abstract commodity that “has no will of its own, and cannot act” (Bolin, 2005: 297) to that of an active audience whose numbers depend greatly on the survival of any television network. The active audience is what much of Pop Idol is based on, the idea that the viewer is somewhat in control of the outcomes, going beyond the notion of simply responding to a media text but also having the possibility of being able to change it (Holmes, 2004: 162). The actual power of the audience in Pop Idols case, however, is limited.

During Pop Idol or NZ Idol we witness the moment when the audience vote for their favourite contestant “as the key point in the process, since it was by voting that the audience was heard” (Holmes, 2004: 164-165). Contestants themselves completely understand this concept and act out its importance through their own performances, performances where they not only base television audiences as their primary point of address during their performance but also view the audience as “the primary arbiter of its meaning” (Holmes, 2004: 166). This can be seen when contestants nullify judges’ criticisms after a performance, claiming only to care about the audience responses. But the audience is only given power of choice once the contestants are narrowed down to, in the case of NZ Idol Season Three, 18 which perhaps reflects Alberoni’s theory of the Star System.

“The star system never creates the star, but it proposes the candidate for election, and helps to retain the favor of the electors ...this is useful provided one remembers that organising an election is a way of defining and limiting choice” (cited in Holmes, 2004: 167)

The judges and/or producers of Pop Idol maintain firm control over the contestants chosen and the power of the audience is circumscribed by this choice (Holmes, 2004).

“The selection of participants is also contrived and done with an eye on choosing a spectrum of people who convincingly form a representation of ordinary people” (Lumby & Probyn, 2003: 15 – 16).

The control of the producers is not absolute. Audience power was demonstrated at the conclusion of Pop Idol UK Season One where runner-up Gareth Gates who had been tipped to win and was favored as the winner by the record companies as well as the judges, yet the title was won by the less popular Will Young.

Audience intervention into Reality Television, especially Pop Idol, “is carefully orchestrated, managed and curtailed” (Holmes, 2004: 165). Yet however limited the audiences actual power is, it does not stop participation exceeding the expectations of many. During Season Five of American Idol Taylor Hicks emerged as the shows winner, with the finale attracting 63 million audience votes, the biggest single voting night in the 5-Season history of the show. When compared to the voting rates of the general election in the United States where George W. Bush received just over 62 million votes the scale in which Americans viewers are getting involved and voting is evident (Reuters, 2006).

The audiences who are actively participating through the voting systems are also invited to witness a live media event on elimination nights (Holmes 2004) while having the opportunity to alter the outcome by their vote, the distinction here between the contestant and the audience is therefore blurred by the interactivity of the programme (Holmes, 2004). “While as Tincknell and Raghuram suggest, the actual range of opportunities available to the audience to influence ‘the story’ was fairly limited” (Holmes, 2004: 117) the audience voter is portrayed as being the one with the power in terms of influencing the outcome of the “contestants fate” (Holmes, 2004: 117).

Pop Idol shows differ somewhat to other similar Reality Television formats as it places the idea of stardom at the centre of the show as only those believed to possess such innate ‘star’

qualities are acknowledged as worthy contestants by the judges and eventually the audience. By placing this emphasis on the concept of stardom,

“...they self-consciously articulate ideologies surrounding the construction of stardom and increasingly – with an emphasis on interactivity – its relationship with the politics of audience response” (Holmes, 2004: 149).

This interactivity is offered to viewers not only through the means of voting but directly through participation in the many web-based forums (Turner, 2004).

Pop Idol Abroad

When Pop Idol began in 2001 it was received with such enthusiasm that 19Entertainment and Fremantle Media began to pitch the format to other parts of the world starting with America. Initially there was no American interest as each network sequentially declined the offer to purchase. It wasn't until the producers left America that Rupert Murdoch's daughter persuaded her father, the head executive of Fox TV to reconsider, thus American Idol was born (Cowell, 2003). Now Pop Idol is one of UK's top earning television format exports currently with over 50 versions in 110 countries. American Idol at the time of writing was into its 6th Season with no sign of decline. Other countries who have adopted the format include Australian Idol, Singapore Idol, Indian Idol, Philippine Idol, Nouvelle Star, Deutschland sucht den SuperStar and NZ Idol just to name a few.

American Idol: Search for a Superstar premiered on US television June 11th 2002 on the Fox network to a good audience reception with only one format change, scaling the four judges as seen in the UK down to three, Simon Cowell from Pop Idol UK, Paula Abdul, a former Pop Star herself and Randy Jackson, a top US record producer. Other than the loss of one judge the format was identical proving it to have international appeal and over the numerous international seasons Pop Idol has remained true to its original format apart from a few minor changes mainly during the six seasons of American Idol. According to Nielsen Media research American Idol was the highest rated show during the 2004-2005 with the series averaging more than 27 million viewers an episode, up 6 million from 2001-2003 averaging 21 million (Huff, 2006). These statistics are in direct contrast to most shows, which tend to lose viewers with each ongoing season (Huff, 2006).

Format Changes

Firstly the two hosts in American Idol Season One changed to just one, Ryan Seacrest, who has remained with the shows for every season since, becoming a major celebrity and household name around the world, as it is not only the contestants who enter into the world of celebrity but to a greater extent it's the judges and host(s) who capitalize on the exposure most prolifically.

American Idol introduced celebrity judge week where each week, during the Top Ten shows, a celebrity that correlated with the genre the contestants were performing or the theme for the week, would appear as a guest judge. Guest Judges were also used during a couple of episodes in the first two seasons of NZ Idol. Throughout the show the guest artist may work alongside the contestants and film a segment which is shown prior to their performance and these segments usually show the finalist star struck and emotional about the meeting. It is through the meetings (specifically in America) with stars such as Gwen Stephanie or Tony Bennett (seen in American Idol in 2007) that "they exhibit their ordinariness conceptualizing themselves as 'ordinary' people temporarily touching the media world" (Couldry, 2000 cited in Holmes 2004: 118) until they graduate into successful 'stars' of their own shown when fans meet them later on in the series.

Another feature which has continued in most Idol Seasons across the globe is the wildcard show, an episode where the judges bring back the contestants they felt to be the most deserving of being in the Top 10 but didn't quite make it giving them one last chance to secure a place in the finals. The wildcard aspect, Cowell suggested, was a great way in which to ensure the more interesting and unique contestants could be brought back into the competition (Cowell, 2003).

The changes in Season Two both in the UK and America were not only format related but also to do with the kind of contestant that was attracted to audition as during the first year no-one knew what to expect as the show was an entirely new concept whereas after Season One became such a national success the expectations of both the audience and contestants alike were far greater. As well as having higher expectations the contestants who entered Season Two were those that may not have normally auditioned for talent shows as many of those that turned up to audition for Season Two turned out to be very 'un-staged', had not

had the training or understanding of the industry as the previous year yet despite this “the kids we saw for the audition for the second series were significantly more driven and focused” (Cowell, 2003: 212). Season Two set out to become a battle between “image versus talent” it was to be the “good amateurs rather than bad professionals” (Cowell, 2003: 177). This did not only occur during the UK season but also in Australia as Brad Lyons states;

“We found that there was a lot more intensity with the second Popstars because people who auditioned realized there was something at stake – there really was a future out of the back of the TV show” (Lumby & Probyn, 2003: 21).

I would suggest that because both the first and second series of NZ Idol did not manage to launch and then sustain the winners career after the finale and instead received vast amounts of criticism from the music community and the public in general, many talented or aspiring singers did not enter Season Two or Three.

Other cultural factors affected certain aspects of the Idol Seasons for example during Season Two of American Idol the war in Iraq broke out, both judges and contestants were asked by Fox executives to be “slightly more stately [and] to tone down the comedy” (Cowell, 2003: 184). During NZ Idol after the death of the Kiwi icon Peter Brock, a ‘Doms Day Out’ segment that showed contestants race-car driving was dropped from that week’s show and included in the following week.

Not surprisingly, due to the major successes of the format, off-shoots of Pop Idol were created, shows with minor adaptations to the format were bought by networks. Simon Cowell went on to produce the first series of X-Factor for ITV, a concept the channel decided to focus on leaving Pop Idol on indefinite hiatus. Other off-shoots of Idol are continually appearing around the world, Pop Stars: The Rivals, “a variation of the show that pitted two bands against one another” (Cowell, 2003: 128), Fame Academy and even in New Zealand in 2007 TVNZ broadcast a show on TV2 called ‘Pops Ultimate Star’ a format in which producers brought back ten contestants from the NZ Idol Series’ One, Two and Three, one Australian Idol contestant, as well as former members of the girl band TrueBliss and one former actor who won a celebrity singing competition in 2005. A main feature still utilised in all Pop Idols spin-offs is the audience participation through different

means of voting, mostly reliant on text or phone votes. Pop Idol also served as a model for 'So You Think You Can Dance', a talent search show for dancers created by American Idol backer Nigel Lythgoe (Huff, 2006) with a local New Zealand series screened in 2005.

Ratings in New Zealand and Overseas

Television ratings for the networks producing Idol format shows have been high in most countries around the world, during the second season of American Idol the finale show on May 21st 2003 was seen by 38.1 million viewers. In Australia 3.3 million people tuned in to watch the first Australian Idol final ([http: smh.com.au](http://smh.com.au)).

In New Zealand the ratings have remained consistently high, even during Season Three the ratings for NZ Idol were steady, the theatre round episodes on July 30th and 31st 2006 achieved good ratings with the Sunday night show winning the timeslot with 29.9% of the 5+ audience share, 32% of the 18 to 29 year olds and 46.7% of females aged 15-29. The Monday night show had a 34.5% share in 5+, a 43.5% share of 18-39 and a 56.1% share of females aged 15-29 ([http: spp.co.nz](http://spp.co.nz)).

The popularity of this format has of course had a spin off effect in America, for the five months that Idol shows are broadcast, the hit talent show has boosted late-night local news ratings on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings in some cases by more than 300 percent. American Idol in 2007 gained an average nightly audience of 29.5 million and due to its popularity it has helped reshaped some of America's local Fox newscasts. The American Idol Final on the Fox network averaged 29.5 million viewers, a 17.2% share for the night that was down from the 2006 finale in which 36.4 million people watched. American Idol, in the 18-49 demographic, gained a rating of 11.1% higher than the combined total of the other four major networks, ABC, CBS, NBC and CW. All ratings information was taken from national data that includes live and same-day DVR viewing ([http: zap2it.com](http://zap2it.com)).

Development of NZ Idol

In 2004, three years after the original screening of Pop Idol UK in 2001, TVNZ announced that there was to be a New Zealand version fronted by host Dominic Bowden. Young aspiring New Zealanders were offered the chance to showcase their singing talent. The broad concept underlying New Zealand Idol was a talent search for a homegrown version

of Kelly Clarkson or Will Young. Contestants would have a chance to participate in NZ Idol in early 2004 but they would first have to impress a team of Kiwi judges. Frankie Stevens, long time national and international singer, Fiona McDonald, a former recording artist and singer for the Headless Chicken's, and Paul Ellis, former A&R executive for SonyBMG. NZ Idol was to be produced by South Pacific pictures in association with Grundy and Fremantle Media. TVNZ purchased the rights to the Idol format following the impressive ratings on national screens when Season Two of American Idol aired on TV2 followed by Australian Idol. So it was after the format was tested using overseas models that New Zealand ordered its first series. The focus on "local" or "homegrown" talent, despite the seemingly identical format, was evident right from the initial stages as New Zealander's of all ethnicities were encouraged to audition. As in overseas models, SonyBMG's New Zealand branch was the label offering a recording contract to the winner at the end of the series.

NZ Idol: Season One

In early 2004 New Zealand watched as thousands of hopefuls lined the streets waiting for their chance to become the first NZ Idol. Contestants had witnessed the global successes of previous Idol winners especially those in Australia and America and were keen to emulate that same success. Auditions were held across the country in the major cities Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch and eventually the many hundred hopefuls were whittled down by the panel of judges to ninety. There were two days of auditions in all three cities where contestants firstly performed in front of production personal, vocal coaches and so forth as per overseas formats. Those gaining access to the second day of auditions, both the 'good' and the 'bad' singers, then performed in front of the judging panel. The lucky few were then invited to Auckland where the second phase of auditions, 'The Theatre Round', began with the number of successful contestants dropping significantly from approximately 90 to 24. That 24 got the chance to face the public vote in a series of heats eventually ending with a Top 10. The contestants who were selected to compete in the third phase of auditions, the heats or 'The Piano Rounds' were divided into three groups of eight out of which only three contestants from each heat made it through. Once the nine contestants were chosen the judges were able to bring back the contestants they believed should have made the Top 10 to get a second chance in the wildcard show, a change to the initial format that had been well received overseas.

The NZ Idol format followed the exact overseas model only adding local influences such as a 'Kiwi Music Week' and after ten weeks Ben Lummis was crowned as New Zealand's first Idol. His pre-recorded single was released immediately on the night of the final and his album was not far behind. Lummis released the single *They cant take that away from me* which spent seven weeks in the New Zealand charts at number one and sold over 40,000 copies. His album *One Road* also debuted at number one on the New Zealand album charts, sold over 30,000 copies and remained there for two weeks where he was the first ever local act to achieve number one on both the single and album charts simultaneously for more than a week ([http: music.net.nz](http://music.net.nz)). This initial achievement suggested that NZ Idol had been a success both in terms of television ratings as well as single and album sales after the show had finished. However this success was fleeting. Lummis' second single *I love you love me* failed to make radio play lists and the single was shelved soon after its release.

Runner-up Michael Murphy also had success with his single debuting at number one and his album achieving Gold status however his further singles failed to make the charts. Unlike some American winners NZ Idol winner Ben Lummis did not jumpstart a recording career beyond the initial interest created by the series. This posed an implicit problem of validation for NZ Idol's future existence. It was a premise of the Pop Idol format that, as Cowell insisted, the series must meet the audience expectation that the winner would be catapulted into stardom otherwise the Idol format would be seen as just another transitory talent contest. A limited amount of success was seen through the ongoing careers of other Idol contestants but these successes were insignificant comparatively to overseas contestants, and in fact almost non-existent. While the Season One contestants struggled to maintain a musical career, speculation began to circulate about whether auditions would be held for Season Two.

Budget restraints meant in Season One that not every person wanting to enter NZ Idol was eligible as in order to get an audition one must complete a registration form prior and get confirmation of an audition time by South Pacific Pictures. This only occurred in Season One not in Seasons Two and Three due to the declining numbers of willing participants. Every person that filled out the application form and fit the age bracket was accepted and given an audition time, the Christchurch auditions were so lacking in contestant numbers

that they had an open call for any person regardless of registering or not. Economic limitations also meant NZ Idol was unable to take the 100 contestants to the Theatre Round that occurs in overseas models, instead only 50 are given the chance to get to this stage. More importantly the number of contestants able to get into the auditioning phase where the audience is first able to participate is much less than other Pop Idols around the world. For example the 2006 Season of American Idol had 24 contestants compared to NZ Idol which had only 18. This results in limited diversity of choice for the viewer in terms of the style of the performer, the genres represented as well as the differences in personality, ethnicity, age and any other factor that may influence the voter or may represent them on screen.

Music Industry representatives as well as many members of the public began to question NZ Idol's success or validity in terms of its value to the Music Industry. This lack of follow through would have affected both American and Australian Idol:

“If the single had stiffered after six months of hard work on the television series, we would have lost a tremendous amount of credibility for future seasons...we had to prove to the people who were watching that American Idol wasn't just a talent show, but a gateway to a real career” (Cowell, 2003: 173).

There were obvious limitations arising from the nature of the New Zealand market, which will be discussed in a later chapter. Despite failures of NZ Idol to produce durable stars its ratings were strong and the second series was commissioned. The search to find a new group of Idols began in June 2005.

Season Two

Season Two incurred slight changes, Fiona McDonald left the judging panel to be replaced by Jackie Clark a well-known singer/ entertainer throughout New Zealand. The audition process itself remained fairly consistent to that of Season One. The judges first selected 50 to attend the Theatre Round. From this group of 50 a smaller number was established forming a Top 24 who faced the public vote, which brought the final roster of contestants down to 9. A wild card show brought Teresa Bergman and others back for an elimination round and Bergman was voted by the public into the last place in the Top 10 finalists. The second series proved once again to be a massive ratings success. However the weak outcome from the previous season and 'bad' press from musicians and other persons in the

music scene caused Sony BMG to become reportedly unhappy with the format and their role in the programme (Travett, 2006). Despite these difficulties Rosita Vai was crowned Season Two's NZ Idol and her single *All I Ask* spent two weeks at number one going platinum and earning her a Tui award for the highest selling single at the 2006 New Zealand Music Awards. Her debut album *Golden* received significant acclaim from critics across the country, however it only reached number fifteen and spent only 3 weeks in the top 40-album chart.

Season Three

Since the rating of the first two seasons remained strong TVNZ announced in June 2006 that auditions were to begin for a third time. It is interesting to note that at least four contestants who eventually gained their place in Season Three's Top 18 had unsuccessfully auditioned for previous seasons. This suggested that NZ Idol had either exhausted its pool of talent or the perceived low standard and lack of musical respect had filtered through to local musical communities, ensuring that many talented musicians would not enter. The winner of Season Three had not managed to get through the first round in Season One yet went on to win in 2006. I am not suggesting that this indicates a drop in the standard of singers within the third season but shows how important the aspects of luck are in such a competition. NZ Idol Season One reached its maximum quota of 90 just after noon on the last day of auditions with approximately 50 contestants still waiting for their chance to sing, therefore it did not matter how well one auditioned the maximum number was already reached. In fact, external factors such as the balance between male and female contestants, a problem in the UK Idol franchise, indicated that success also depended on sociological factors

NZ Idol 3 began screening in July 2006 with a few changes, firstly both Jackie Clark and Paul Ellis were not returning to judge for a third season. They were replaced with Iain Stables, a "Shock Jock" radio DJ on the popular station ZM and Megan Alatini, a former Pop Princess, a member of the made for television band TrueBliss. Right from the onset the new judges faced challenges to their credibility. The press began to criticize the show and its value more extensively than in previous years. Part of the criticism related to TVNZ's role as public service broadcaster with responsibility for producing quality broadcasting. But it was further fuelled by the show's failure to energise the New Zealand pop scene with

a slew of new, homegrown talent. Appointing Megan Alatini, former member of the failed pop group, TrueBliss further damaged the shows creditability.

The Top 10 shows in Season Three followed the same model as previous seasons but with some minor adjustments. For example different genres were thematically linked to a particular episode. As follows:

10. Soul
9. Rock
8. Country
7. Elton John
6. In the Groove
5. Pop
4. Kiwi Music
3. Love Songs
2. Free choice - repeated songs throughout the season.
1. The final was with all eliminated contestants singing previously performed songs and the winner, once announced, sang his new single.

Each week contestants were given a list of songs they could chose from for each genre or they could select their own subject to the approval of the producers. The contestants were told the week prior to their performance date the genre or theme for the show. The week before the NZ Idol finale producers put on an extra show on the Monday night, instead of an elimination, called 'Head to Head' where both finalists were to sing four of the songs they had already performed throughout the season as a kind of 'face off'. Once again the audience voted for their favourite and these votes were added to the final tally revealed at the end of the Finale when the winner was announced. All other Top 10 contestants were invited back to be a part of the audience.

The addition to a recording contract, in Season Three, a cash prize of \$50,000 and a Daihatsu SUV was offered. The age limit was also extended from 28 to 30. It was hoped that these changes would overcome the reluctance of professionals already working in the industry to audition. Did these changes work? The amount of repeat contestants from

Season One and Two suggest not though one could argue that older, professionally experienced singers did not make it through the first round of judging. In fact the majority of contestants who were put through by the judges were all under the age of twenty-five with only two being twenty-five or older. This in itself might suggest some implicit judgment on the quality of singers willing to engage with the show.

Season Three also promised the inclusion of a live band performing in every Top 10 show. This had not been seen in the previous seasons as contestants had only a guitar and keyboard to perform with until the final show. In Season Three contestants were expected to perform without a live band in the Piano Rounds accompanied by pre-recorded piano and guitar tracks. The inclusion of a live band definitely added to the production values of Season Three. But the expense of hiring extra musicians meant that other areas such as the sound quality took a cut in the budget. As a result the quality of the sound was not to the same standard as was heard in Season One.

There were slight changes in the number of contestants competing in the Piano Round as well. Only 18 contestants compared with 24 in the first two seasons were put through to the first audience voting round thereby limiting the diversity of the performer offered to the public. The lowered numbers, I would suggest, also meant that the judges' decisions were more constrained than in previous seasons. As a result the more eccentric performers were less likely to make it through to the next stage compared to the "tried and true" contestants that the producers knew would create the high and consistent ratings needed for the show. Had the numbers been 24 as in the previous seasons, a few more "alternative" performers may have had the chance thus giving the audience a greater diversity of choice.

On the 29th of October Matt Saunoa won the Idol title for Season Three and his single *Hold Out*, written by James Reid from the well known New Zealand band 'The Feelers' was released and charted at number one in the first week but failed to reach Gold status (at least 5,000 copies sold) then dropped the following week to number three. *Hold Out* was written and recorded a week before the Grand Final, as it was only then that the record label that was to distribute the winner's single was finalised. In fact it was being mastered as the final show was being filmed live and was distributed the next day in order for the CD's to be in shops by the following Wednesday, three days after the final.

The winner's album was never recorded despite it being advertised as a major part of the winner's prize package, with only the single being released. This shift in policy encouraged the public's perception that Idol contestants lacked the requisite skills and work ethic to succeed. This further discredited NZ Idol because it demonstrated the lack of ongoing opportunities for Idols after the show and raised questions about their talent. At the conclusion of Season Three Frankie Stevens believed that it had been the best series to date yet without the addition of a live band it may not have been of any higher standard than previous years.

Despite the good television ratings NZ Idol gained and maintained over the Three Seasons the perception, particularly among professional musicians who have been openly critical about the show and have refused invitations to appear on it. Musicians have expressed distaste for Idol through press releases likening it to a televised karaoke contest as the performers and the performances have not been as musically strong as overseas models. However this somewhat begs the question of what NZ Idol can realistically achieve compared especially to American Idol. Extraneous factors such as the size of the New Zealand economy and of the home market supervene in the search for talent.

Society's expectations of a successful career after the show may also be founded on the advantages only afforded to overseas contestants such as a better marketing strategy, more avenues for promotion and the volume of sales that can underwrite multiple albums. An international scale of success is not achievable in New Zealand due to economic issues within the record companies and the lack of support from major and even small labels. A notable example of this to be explored later, is the first winner of NZ Idol being dropped by his record label Sony BMG just three months after winning the NZ Idol title due to poor sales.

One of the most significant differences is not seen during the show itself but rather with the success of the eventual winners once the series is over. Because New Zealand is such a small market there is very little opportunity for career advancement especially in an industry culture that doesn't appreciate made-for-television celebrities. The fact that after the NZ Idol seasons the winners virtually disappeared out of the media also created a sense

that the show lacked credibility as there was no major push from the record company to keep the winners profile strong and show the country that the Idol format actually can find lasting talent. Season Three epitomizes this credibility issue, as no record company was willing to sign a deal with the winner at all. This is in strict contrast to the American market as well as the American culture that celebrate such successes for example the first American Idol winner, Kelly Clarkson won two Grammy Awards in 2006, four years after winning her Idol crown.

On May 31st 2006 South Pacific Pictures announced that Sony BMG had discontinued their association with NZ Idol despite advertising a record contract as part of the winners prize package. Subsequently South Pacific was unable to secure a record deal with any major label until the last few weeks of filming. This last minute deal was in itself a retrenchment because it only guaranteed the release of a single through a small independent label with an album dependant on the sale of that single. Other changes illustrating the declining support from within the Music Industry itself included the cancellation of the 'Idolised Tour', which had been a feature of the first Two Seasons. Through the tour the majority of the Idol finalists benefitted from exposure in many towns and cities across the country. As well as the cancellation of the tour the Top Ten Idol hits CD was not recorded illustrating clearly that the music itself had become secondary to the television series which, according to the South Pacific Pictures website, was still managing to maintain good television ratings.

NZ Idol Voting System Changes

The voting system went through major changes in Season Three beginning with the wildcard night. On 21st the August 2007 the last three contestants were named to make up the top 9 and on that same show three wild cards chosen by the judges performed their song again to fight it out for the final spot in the top 10. Following the performance, the public had only a few hours to vote for their favourite and the final contestant in the top 10 was kept secret until the first show. This was a change from Season Two where a whole show was dedicated to finding the wild card contestant which gave more contestants a chance especially because they could chose another song to sing if the judges felt that their song choice had let them down during their Piano Round.

Other voting system changes occurred in Season Three that, arguably, may have altered the

outcome of the competition. These affected contestants who continually evaded eviction and those who were eliminated early. The voting lines for the previous seasons had been closed at the beginning of the elimination show. But, in Season Three producers kept the voting lines open until five minutes before the eliminated contestant was announced. On one specific occasion NZ Idol had what was described as 'sing off' and this meant the format was altered even more. On the 4th September 2006 it was announced that the elimination show, which was to take the number of contestants down to eight, would name its bottom two for that week, then the voting lines would be reverted back to zero and a sing off would occur. The two contestants with the least amount of votes would sing their song from the previous night and voters would decide out of those two which contestant they wanted to keep and which one would be eliminated. After this show aired TVNZ was contacted and fined by Fremantle media for breaching the format conditions.

In the final week of NZ Idol producers informed contestants about how the voting systems affected them, claiming that every week the person going home at the start of the night, after the performance show, was different to the person who did eventually get eliminated. Perhaps the most dramatic change for Season Three was that survival of each contestant depended more on what each of them said and how they related to the at home audience through the camera on elimination night than on their singing. In other words a good performance and singing talent was a necessary but not sufficient condition for being selected. For example it was a widely believed that one of the Top 10 contestants was actually the person with the least amount of votes after each performance show but the elimination show secured her a place until the fifth show. The actual veracity of this belief is of less consequence than the fact that the elimination mechanism interfered with the supposedly objective decisions made on the basis of talent.

Regional support and the influence it had on the overall voting outcomes was widely understood by contestants as well as producers and other members of the staff as another factor that interfered with the operation of a standard of talent. But with no statistical data available indicating voting patterns by region the importance of regional loyalty can only be speculation.

Throughout Season Three the judges' thoughts on the voting system and whether they felt

the audience had voted the ‘right’ way or not according to their views and comments received press coverage. This coverage will be examined in the next chapter. It was not only the judges but members of the public too who voiced their opinions via chat rooms and specifically NZ Idol websites such as Idolblog.com. ‘Idoblog’ was,

“flooded with messages of disbelief from angry fans upset about the shock elimination of highly rated performers ... who were among the bookies favorites to challenge for the title” ([http: Idolblog.com](http://Idolblog.com)).

These members were claiming superior knowledge in terms of being able to advise less-knowledgeable persons, sometimes including the judges, as to the best or most talented contestants and the way in which the public should place their vote. “Frankie is and idiot. That was the best performance in the history of NZ Idol” ([http: idolblog.com](http://idolblog.com)).

Season Three seemed to have a stronger focus on the ‘reality’ aspect of the show rather than the singing, causing it to seem more like a soap opera than a talent show. This was apparent in the increased focus on the reality or the behind-the-scenes aspects, perhaps a new angle to reverse the decline in NZ Idol ratings since the first season. Ratings in Season Three suggested that this focus did not increase the number of viewers however since it did not achieve better ratings than the first NZ Idol season in 2004. In Season Three there was an increase in the amount of background stories of the contestants in the first episode than in previous series and less of the actual auditions. Very few of the successful auditions were shown except if a back-story had been filmed. Of a total of 26 of the Auckland contestants filmed only about 10 were shown in the final edit. The first episode did however follow those usual narratives of humiliation and, of course, those of success.

This focus on the reality side of the programme continued throughout the Season as ‘Dom’s Day Out’ was a feature on almost every episode, where contestants had to leave the studios for a day to be filmed participating in some sort of activity, an activity that usually had some element of danger and fear, for example climbing the harbour bridge, going on a trapeze, or something the contestants would never have been able to do before like racing-car driving. These segments in the show would feature sound-bites of each contestant saying or doing something humorous thus giving the producers further control on how their personalities would come across.

The drama or reality aspect was accentuated in the Theatre Round episode screened 31st July 2007 with many contestants breaking down in tears telling the host that “it’s all over”. Another contestant walked off the stage after forgetting the words, like most other singers who had performed previously, and judges call him back on to finish his performance (<http://Idolblog.co.nz>). Also during the first Piano Round episode, screened August 6th 2006, background stories became the emphasis. For example the first contestant introduces himself in Maori first and then in English saying “he wants to show the world who we [Maori people] are... Most of our Maori people can sing there’s so much talent out there” (<http://Idolblog.com>). Each background story is different, however many stories over the course of the shows focus on either the death of a loved one or the love of a child or family, and the love of ones culture or heritage, only a few focus on particular hobbies or sporting activities of the Idol.

A change that can be seen in the NZ Idol format compared to overseas models is the temperament of the contestants themselves. The excessive crying and anger that can be seen in American Idol when contestants are not selected by the judges was not evident in NZ Idol. Instead contestants would thank the judges and TVNZ whether they are told negative or positive comments and whether they got through to the next round or not. Thus illustrating the cultural differences evident within local adaptations of the format.

Another major difference and one that has incurred many criticisms is the fact that there was never a full live band available for contestants on NZ Idol until Season Three and even then only at the Top 10 stage. The band consisted of electric guitar, bass guitar, keyboard and drums, for a special genre another instrument may have been brought in, for example saxophone for the soul themed night. This is in contrast to the American Idol house band which consisted of a full orchestra, on some occasions specialised percussionists and so forth depending on the theme of the night. The NZ Idol budget could never compete with such grandiose stage, sound and lighting expense.

At the conclusion of Season Three another series was not announced by TVNZ and a fourth series did not occur in 2007. American Idol was instead added to TV2’s play list in a primetime position in 2007, something that had not happened since the premiere of NZ Idol.

TVNZ in 2007 also created with Touch Down Productions, a production company in competition with South Pacific Pictures the producers of NZ Idol, a spin off show called 'Pops Ultimate Star' based on the same principles as NZ Idol with only slight format changes. Pop's Ultimate Star began screening in June 2007 with two episodes a week, the performance show on Sunday nights (primetime 7pm) and the elimination show filmed straight after the performance show on the Sunday but not screened until Wednesday evening. The follow-up elimination episode was pulled off air four weeks into the series and eliminations were announced during the Sunday night show. The major difference with this series was its connection to the 'Rockstar' formats where the judges have the final decision between the two contestants with the lowest audience votes, these two contestants then have a 'sing-off' and one is sent home by the panel of judges. It is not until the final two are left that the audience has complete control to pick their winner. The 2007 Pops Ultimate Star winner Joe Cotton was reported to have had a decisive victory over the runner-up and was the clear front-runner from the start of the competition. Another difference in the structure of the format was that contestants did not get to choose their own song, song choice was left up to the judges, or more correctly the producers, however contestants that received the lowest votes had to sing for their survival in front of the judges and at this point were able to pick their own songs.

From the initial successes of Popstars on New Zealand and subsequently Australian screens, the worldwide phenomenon Pop Idol was born and has remained a dominant source of television programming not only on New Zealand screens but in many countries around the globe.

Chapter Three: Media Content Analysis

“Series three of Idol...and it is still as hectic and popular as ever with the New Zealand public. If you don’t love it, you love to hate it, and three years on it’s still a talking point for the nation, whether it is to champion the show or bag it” (Bonner, Issue 18: 9).

The media coverage of NZ Idol, as with overseas formats, is found in a wide range of different media texts. These include local and national newspaper, magazines typically those described as ‘women’s magazines’, radio, as well as the Internet with both official and unofficial sites. As Holmes suggests “this ongoing stream of comments contributes to the ‘liveness’ of the event” (Holmes, 2004: 120-121). It also creates a particular image of the show that will be discussed in more depth through the following content analysis.

As well as contributing to the ‘live’ feel of NZ Idol the media widely make known the contestants, hosts and judges, ensuring, for a while at least, they become household names for the duration of the series or perhaps more durable celebrity. Participants in these shows are consistently photographed and NZ Idol gained massive amounts of media exposure through gossip magazines such as *The Woman’s Day*, *Woman’s Weekly* and *New Idea*. The stories mostly follow that of overseas models about love and relationships, shattered or realized dreams as well as “where to now?” stories. The following analysis of the media coverage of NZ Idol is taken from Season Three in 2006 and continuing coverage in early 2007 and for the purposes of this study content analysis will be based on magazines and newspaper articles.

Content analysis is a research technique that measures a “representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular art form” (Berger, 1991: 25) such as the following magazine and newspaper articles. Analysts of such content,

“...assume that behavioral patterns, values and attitudes found in this material reflect people who create this material” (Berger, 1991: 25).

All meaning in these articles can be seen as relational as “nothing means anything in itself”. Rather meaning is only generated because of the relationship in which it is set and the most important relationship is that of opposition (Berger, 1984). The oppositions underlying a text or body of texts can be termed the “paradigmatic” structure. This relationship can be either obvious or implied and helps to illustrate the hidden meanings of the text, thus “rich”

only has meaning if there is “poor” (Berger, 1984: 173). It is through these hidden meanings that we can determine what the text is “really” about (Berger, 1984).

When analysing the content of such articles one must identify the theme or themes present, “the sociological political, economic or cultural attitudes” (Berger, 1984: 150) that are both directly and indirectly explicit and reflect such notions. The oppositional structures in the case of NZ Idol are articulated around infidelity compared to fidelity, amateurism versus professionalism, talent versus popularity, authenticity versus inauthenticity, individual versus family or community and so on.

The body of texts to be analysed form a network of signs that constitute what can be called NZ Idol discourse. Since a sign can be defined as “anything that can be made to stand in for something else” (Berger 1984: 1) the signs used to represent NZ Idol to the general public can be said to impose a particular range of meanings. These meanings can be seen as constructing a community centered on the show just as national identity is evoked through the use of national flags and/ or other commonly used markers (Berger, 1984: 99). What is evoked also implicitly defines what is absent or not signified and the absence of a sign can also be a sign in itself by communicating that which is not seen (Berger, 1984: 122).

Since signs can both stand for the truth of the product or text as well as mislead or “lie”, audiences and readers are faced with the problem of correctly interpreting the contestant’s “signs of identity”. The contestants as well if they are to succeed in winning audience favour must work to ensure that their “identity (is) ... correctly understood and validated” (Berger, 1984: 96). The magazine texts therefore function to “tutor” the audience and readers in how to interpret the meaning (or public significance) of NZ Idol.

Generally the language used in writing is designed to provide essential information but often in journalistic writing about popular culture the techniques used are meant to elicit some form of emotional response from the reader rather than just relaying information. The fact that in NZ Idol much of this writing is located in “women’s” magazines or life style features means that there is already strong emphasis on human interest stories about the contestants. The contest is also placed in a gender framework of romance and family relationships. But it was not only the gossip magazines that published articles on the NZ

Idol participants with these kinds of themes but also the mainstream press, notably the Sunday Star Times, which every week published 'Frankie's Column', written by one of the judges about the previous week, covering his thoughts on the contestants performances and the audiences decision on who survived the latest round and who was eliminated. The themes seen in the magazine reporting of NZ Idol are present here and reach a broader and presumably less gender specific audience. Discussion ranges over matters of authenticity, often implicit rather than explicit, as well as the differences between New Zealand and America. Another major area of reporting was the conflict between the NZ Idol supporters, or production crews and the views of the local Music Industry dealing with themes about the emergent or amateur contestant compared with the views of established or already professional musicians.

Fidelity versus Infidelity

Romantic relationship stories have always been a major focus for woman's magazines. When it comes to stories on Idol contestants the focus is no different. Countless articles over the years have featured Idol contestant's love lives and during Season Three love stories featured seven of the top Ten Idols. These stories included three contestant relationships during the process of the show, and three engagement stories after its completion as well as the newly formed relationships between the contestants themselves. This focus on romantic relationships suggests the ever present theme fidelity versus infidelity, whether gaining so-called celebrity status and the temptations that presumably follow will affect the choices and commitments made prior to the newly found public attention:

"You'd be naïve to think there are no temptations there, and there are so many people who are ready to be a destructive force" (Alatini cited in Tailor, 2006: 24).

Such stories have a dual focus; dealing with relationships that are seen to be successful.

"He knows he doesn't have to worry about what his wife's getting up to without him on nights like her birthday" (Alatini cited in Tailor, 2006: 24).

"She's everything I want...I can't be without her" (Saunoa cited in Tailor, 2006: 19)

As well as those dealing with romantic breakdown:

“Bobby and I broke up...I was on the road a lot and we both felt like we were separating” (Vai cited in Milne, 2006: 24).

The potential temptations of success are also seen as a trial of the strength of attachment, leading to assertions such as,

“...The couple’s strong bond overcame any hurdles” (Baird, cited in Tailor, 2006: 23)

“My plan is to be with her and stay with her forever” (Paiva cited in Tyler, 2006: 25)

The following are articles that play on this theme, fidelity versus infidelity

Woman’s Day

	Date
Clinton Saved from a big Idol proposal	25/9/06
Engaged: Matt’s double Idol celebration	13/11/06
Toni’s Idol Trials	9/10/06
How we keep our Romance Alive	23/10/06

Woman’s Weekly

Matt’s Greatest Prize	13/11/06
Rosita’s Broken Heart	28/8/06
Dominic and Claire’s rocky road to romance	27/3/06
Indira’s Idol engagement	16/4/07

New Idea

Exit Idol, enter Love	28/10/06
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Individual versus Family

If there was no love story to report, as some contestants were still in school and were not in serious relationships, the next preferred theme was about family. These articles depicted the contestants as being surrounded by their loved ones who supported them through the process never doubting that their child or sibling was going to be a star. Through these articles by implication the actual NZ Idol contest itself was seen as a source of threat and danger calling on the emotional support of family, even as it promised individual success.

The potential conflict between the individual as individual versus the individual as a family member is a theme played on throughout the entire process and led regularly to the reassuring observation that the individual would not have become the ‘star’ they are today without the input of such family members;

“Aisea, who is often shown in the audience of the hit TV2 show with his trade mark sideburns, has been campaigning for his beloved daughter” (Tannahill, 2006: 26).

Such articles suggest the pull between individual successes, as it is an individual title, compared to the collective success of that family. But they also attempt a reconciliation of the contradiction they have constructed. They suggest that those who honour their own families are, perhaps, more entitled to individual success:

“...The 21 year old was determined to honour the commitment he had made to his girlfriend of almost 4 years to move and help care for her older sister ... who had fallen ill with cancer” (Tannahill, 2006: 27).

Other articles released at the beginning of Season Three offered the same resolution by having the contestant claiming that they want to become an Idol because they want to make a family member, often one who had recently passed away, proud of them:

“I’ve just got to keep reminding myself why I’m here...I’m here for them and I ‘m walking out of this competition with so much more than I walked in with. I’ve already made our futures brighter” (Saunaoa, cited in Milne, 2006: 19).

“My dad’s a musician and that’s why I wanted to compete” (Isaac cited in Milne, 2006: 18).

“Now it’s time for the Top 18 contender to honour her biggest fan’s memory the best way she knows how” (Graham, 2006: 30).

Other family aspects which remained equally important was that of a contestant making their children proud, contestants also claimed their children helped shape their goals and their ability to succeed:

“Having a child changed my frame of mind” (Saunaoa, cited in Tannahill, 2006: 27).

One contestant who had children was interviewed and quoted four times in various articles about leaving her children behind and how difficult that must be for her and her family. This underscored the fact that no amount of public success or publicity changes the importance of family:

“She says the time apart from the kids was the hardest thing about being away” (Baird, cited by Tailor, 2006: 22).

“For me, it was really important for the whole of NZ Idol crew to see me in my parental role because it is such an important part of who I am” (Alatini cited in Tailor, 2006: 18).

“...They keep you so real. It’s easy to get thrown into the whole entertainment realm, but at the end of the day when you go home to your children and know you’re just ‘Mum’ to them, it brings a beautiful balance to your life” (Alatini cited in Tailor, 2006: 19).

In contrast the other contestant, male, who had a child was not reported in such articles thus implying the commonly held assumption that the female role is to be that of a caregiver and can only aspire to pop stardom as long as she notes the difficulty it enforces on the family.

“I found it very difficult at the beginning when people were saying to me, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re a mum! How can you do this?’ I feel like society puts pressure on women, especially mums. I don’t remember hearing anyone say to my husband, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re a dad! You’re going on a rugby tour!’” (Alatini cited in Milne, 2006: 27)

Towards the end of NZ Idol Season Three magazine articles were printed about the relationships forming in the house:

“...The friendships and relationships in the Idol house have matured me” (Moala cited in Milne, 2006: 18).

Prior to the grand finale, a relationship story about how close the final two contestants had become was printed, once again illustrating the conflict between loyalty to interpersonal relations and individual success. In the post-season commentary, contestants that failed are consoled by the fact that whatever the larger world thinks they are still loved by their families and significant other:

“Indira Moala is still number one in the eyes of her family and friends despite coming second to Matt Saunoa in NZ Idol” (Milne, 2006: 19).

Some contestants even commented on how privileged they were with their own families and upbringings compared to others in the NZ Idol competition:

“Seeing the other Idols, and how some of their values aren’t as strong made me appreciate everything my family’s done for me” (Hazelwood cited in Tailor, 2006: 26).

This article also depicts the family as an insurance against failure, re-enforcing by implication the fiercely competitive nature of NZ Idol and reminding the readers that only one of the remaining Idols will be crowned the winner.

The following article headlines indicate the conflict between individual versus family

Women's Day	Date
Indira and Matt's hard road to Idol Fame	30/10/06
Megan's Family Reunion	4/9/06
Kali's Healing Hand	16/10/06
Toni's Idol Trials: I was so worried about my kids	9/10/06
Bens Secret Idol Prize	23/10/06
Beck's Stage Fright: I lost my lucky charm	2/10/06

Women's Weekly	
Matt's Greatest Prize	13/11/06
Party Time for Indira	13/11/06
Lenkon Isaac: I'll do it for Dad"	21/8/06
The Yummy Mummy Blues	25/9/06
Matt and Indira's secret pact	6/11/06

New Idea	
Doing it for Dad	19/8/06

Sunday News	
Home Boy	5/11/06

Success versus Failure

Another prominent theme concerned the impact of success versus failure. Since most contestants by definition would fail, the failure dimension was strong. Once a contestant had been eliminated from the competition, an article appeared in at least one magazine. This article was dubbed the "elimination article" identifying those who fail and celebrating those still remaining in the competition.

“Toni was booted off Idol after being knocked for singing the Guns ‘n’ Roses classic sweet child of mine” (Tailor, 2006: 22).

The idea that the entire group of Idol hopefuls, bar one, will eventually fail is also evident with language depicting ideas of “15 minutes of fame” or “one hit wonders”.

“For some, these photographs will be a reminder of when their stellar career took off. For others, it’s a record of their 15 minutes of fame” (Milne, 2006: 18).

Even the runner up in Season Three is deemed a ‘failure’.

“Indira, who was crowned runner-up in the 2006 Idol competition, was relieved to get back to normal life after her whirlwind pop star attempt” (Milne, 2006: 17) as her “attempt” is considered unsuccessful.

Articles about past contestants were also published throughout the season; these stories were about what they are doing now, how NZ Idol has helped in their career or musical success and so forth, for example *‘Frankie’s Idol Protégé’* (Milne, 2006). These articles both re-affirm the idea of those who are successful and those who are not, those that have used the experience to their own benefit and those that have wasted an opportunity. Those contestants that are therefore not involved in articles illustrate their failures through their lack of publicity or absence from the magazines themselves.

One contestant, who made it through the Theatre Round to compete in the Top 18, was withdrawn from the competition by TVNZ because she was pregnant. This story made the newspaper, various magazines as well and the news. The ex-contestant appeared on Campbell Live TV3 and was given the chance to perform live. A magazine article *‘Dumped Georgina’s Shattered Dreams’* (Fraser, 2006) reported about how unfair she believed the decision to be. Emphasising the damage of failure, the article probed the question of what qualities were necessary to even have the chance to become an Idol. Talent versus other factors such as looks and or personality were played off against each other and the conclusion was that other factors are perhaps more important than original talent. Another issue also arises here about that fact that outside influences such as that of the producers or executives in TVNZ contributed to the contestant’s failure.

Success versus failure was a theme extensively explored in newspaper reporting, especially

in the Sunday Star Times which reported every week on the show and did at least one small article about the eliminated contestant. These articles had both the reporter's point of view as well as quotes from the contestant for example,

"I was really gutted...I'm gutted because I felt I had a lot more to do in the competition – especially based on my performance" (Hawkins-Sulfa, cited in Davies, 2006:28).

"I'm gutted, I think I still deserve to be in the competition and I had a lot more to give...I thought I had a really good chance of winning. It wasn't about the money or the car, it was because I really love the music" (Baird cited in Davies, 2006: 8).

The "failure" of previous winners was often reported on once again discrediting the entire production and its musical or cultural worth:

"Both Vai and Lummis are now playing at public events and in church halls, and Michael Murphy is back to the more traditional musicians journey of touring pubs and clubs with his band" (Trevett, 2006).

"NZ Idol is extremely costly to produce and is facing major credibility issues, with none of the previous winners going on to have any sort of meaningful career in the music industry" (Cook, 2006:28).

"Although the two haven't made huge careers out of their Idol fame, it is hoped the \$50,000 prize this year will attract more promising talent" (Trevett, 2006)

The initial auditions, as discussed in previous chapters, help set up an intense contrast between success and failure. The fact that thousands of hopefuls with arguably very little talent were humiliated by the judges had a strong melodramatic value. This meant that there was a parallel expectation on successful contestants to exemplify the qualities that were taken to go with success:

"No I didn't get through. I wore the wings to stand out. I went on there for the goal to make a fool of myself on national TV and I achieved that...Last year I went on trying to get in, this year I did the exact opposite" (Stewart cited in Davies 2006: 15).

Included in the issues of success versus failure is that of longevity compared to merely '15 minutes or fame'. This contrast with momentary fame and durable accomplishment was apparent in many of the same articles. An interesting dynamic was established between conforming to the rules of a talent contest to gain immediate success and the qualities held to be essential for a successful career after the competition. Woman's Day interviewed the runner-up in Season One after his appearance on another reality television show 'Celebrity

Treasure Island’ about his new endeavours and asked whether or not he had been successful. He concludes that the reason his career has not been thriving was due to the Idol process itself:

“That has been the biggest challenge –trying to get away from it...just to be accepted as ‘Michael from 5StarFallout’ as opposed to ‘Michael Murphy’. We always knew that we had to distance ourselves from [NZ Idol] – I never wanted to be successful because of a TV Show... Insisting he doesn’t regret the Idol experience, Michael is quick to add that he wouldn’t do it again...” (Tailor, 2006: 24)

The following article headlines indicate the conflict between success versus failure

Woman’s Day	Date
Toni’s Idol Trials: I was so worried about my kids	9/10/06
Bens Secret Idol Prize	23/10/06
Beck’s Stage Fright: I lost my lucky charm	2/10/06
Indira and Matt’s hard road to Idol Fame	30/10/06
Aroha’s Idol Attitude Overhaul	30/10/06
Clinton saved from big Idol proposal	25/9/06
Engaged: Matt’s double Idol celebration	13/11/06
Victor admits it all too stressful	11/9/06
Idol transformation, she’s not the same Ashlee	18/9/06
Vicki’s an Idol bride	21/8/06
Jesse’s Faith in the Idol God’s of Rock	14/8/06
Michael’s Idol Trials	5/2/07
Woman’s weekly	
Indira’s Idol engagement	16/4/07
Up close with our Idol Top 10	11/9/06
No regrets for sing star Becks	2/10/06
Matt and Indira’s secret pact	6/11/06
Matt’s greatest prize	13/11/06
Dumped Georgina’s shattered Dreams	14/8/06
Ashlee takes a bow	18/9/06
Aroha’s butterfly effect	30/10/06

Frankie's Idol Protégé	9/10/06
Up Close with our Idol Top 10	11/79/06

New Idea

Exit Idol, enter Love	28/10/06
Battle of the Idols	28/10/06

Sunday News

'Movin' on Up'	8/10/06
I am Guttled	3/9/06
'Becks is my Idol'	10/9/06
No Going Beck	24/9/06
Who Knows who will be the next Victor	Frankie's Column 3/9/06
Five Alive	Frankie's Column 1/10/06
Ideal Idol Final seals great show	5/11/06
We'll miss Kali and her talent	Frankie's Column 8/10/06
My choices backed by public vote	Frankie's Column 27/8/06
'Aroha's Idol House of Pain'	22/10/06
Beck to Reality	24/10/06
Show us the love	10/9/06
Indira Eyes the World	22/10/06
Nightie of Shame	10/9/06
Home Boy	5/11/06
From Seedy Karaoke Bar to Idol Star	29/10/06
Matt's Levin it up	29/10/06
Big Kali Call	8/10/06
Heavy Metal Harry's a real bum note	16/7/06
Idol Boast	16/7/06
Fame and fortune is a new Idol promise	17/4/06
Last dance for Idol and Stars?	22/10/06
Idol Finalists put it all on the line in tonight's big climax	29/10/06

Herald on Sunday

Bye Bye Becks	24/10/06
Fat Lady Sings for Idol Tour	5/11/06
Wannabe's Pop until they Drop	1/9/06
Idol Wildcard names	27/8/06
Return of the Mummy	30/10/06
Ashlee's Idol Speculation	10/9/06
Back to normality for Indira	2/11/06

Herald

Record Giant Scratches NZ Idol	1/6/06
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Weekend Herald

Idol Ordeal too tough for mum – midwife	5/8/06
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The Daily Post – Rotorua

NZ Idol hopefuls come home empty handed	5/6/06
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Western Leader

Wannabes pop until they drop	1/9/06
Glen Eden girl – GO!	27/10/06

Talent versus Personality

Pop Idol competitions are fundamentally about the relationship between notions of talent and personality. There is considerable debate both on-show and in the media about which facet is the more dominant or important factor in ensuring success. Both the press and participants in such shows understood the connections between the two and continuously 'walk the line' between them. A Woman's Weekly article clearly illustrates this point as it is because of outside issues that a contestant was withdrawn from the competition and nothing to do with talent.

"I can understand that Idol needs to keep a clean image, but I was honest with them about my convictions and my pregnancy" (Patea cited in Fraser, 2006: 21).

This comment shows that the contestant herself clearly understands that other factors are

more influential in the invention of a new Idol. Underlying this focus is the idea that this type of record made her unsuitable for the series.

“South Pacific Pictures said it did not know if there were other contestants with criminal convictions on the show but said the screening processes in place were “robust” (Cook, 2006).

The Talent versus personality contrast is seen through various magazine quotes, both from contestants and reporters alike,

“I’ve said from the beginning that it’s not the best singer that will win the competition. It’s not about singing. I know how New Zealander’s think – they like to see the underdog grow and get better and better” (Wright cited in Milne, 2006: 17).

“None of us really criticised her singing because she was always strong in that area. But we criticised her attitude and her performance because we know she wasn’t taking any notice of anybody” (Stevens cited in Milne, 2006: 16).

Here personal attitude is taken to be more important than singing talent as well as performance, often referred to as ‘emotional connection’ to the song. One contestant when asked which performance she was most proud of saw this as about emotional connection, rather than excellent vocal performance.

“Neil Finn’s *Better Be Home Soon* I sang that song from my heart” (Moala cited in Milne, 2006: 17).

Questions like these and ‘why should people vote for you?’ were consistently focused on by reporters and contestants understood the underlying tensions between talent and personality or other factors such as looks. They generally tried to answer in a way that used personal qualities as a reason for success rather than just singing ability. The winner of NZ Idol Season Three was particularly good at this as the examples illustrate below.

Why should people vote for you?

“I’m genuine and I think I’ll use the opportunity of winning to really make something of myself. You have to give so much during the Idol experience but I still have so much more to give” (Saunoa cited in Tannahill, 2006: 27).

Terms such as genuine, making the most of the opportunities and having so much more to give suggest that those innate qualities are the most important ingredient for success. A huge majority of the Season Three winners’ interviews reflected these qualities when

compared to those of the runner-up who used language that mostly reflected her singing talent or abilities.

“I really do believe that I have the talent and what it takes to become an Idol and an artist in the music industry. The one thing I’m really strong about is longevity. I wouldn’t be into just making one record and that’s it. I’m very ambitious. Its something I can see in 15 years time that whether I have a family or not, I’ll still be doing it” (Moala cited in Tannahill, 2006: 17)

Perhaps it was this distinction of importance that eventually determined the overall winner.

Newspaper coverage also dealt with these same issues:

“He is the weakest singer with the best hair and cutest smile. He is mocked by late-night chat shows and the target of anti-American Idol forces...prompting a passionate debate over whether America’s most watched TV show has lost its credibility or unwittingly created another media superstar...I don’t think he injures its credibility at all. American Idol has never been about a scientific way of producing the very best vocalist of our time. It has been a silly, fun, really well-produced talent competition and you never quite know what’s going to happen” (Reuters, 2006).

Talent versus other factors such as looks and/ or personality are a topic of debate not only in NZ Idol but also across the world as this quote illustrates. It is the contestants, judges and reporters alike that understand the importance of the other factors as opposed to talent if one is to be successful in such a competition.

“There were some people with talent but I think they’ll get booted off. The public vote for good looking people” (Stewart cited in Davies, 2006: 15).

“People realise it’s a game – it’s not about talent in the end. I wish it was but there is a lot more going on” (Wright cited in Davies, 2006: 15).

“I want the best performer to win, and the best performer is not necessarily the best singer... For me, if I was watching TV (I would want) someone who can put emotion into a song, and make a song their own. I don’t think there’s really anyone in the competition who is doing that” (Baird cited in Davies, 2006: 8).

Through the press the judges try to put the focus back on talent, thus trying to create more credibility by urging the voters to stop treating the competition like a popularity show.

“You need to stop voting like it’s a popularity contest and judge and vote for superior talent” (Stevens, 2006: 16)

“It’s like they are trying to save the underdog, which often creates a wave of sympathy votes sometimes altering the whole competition” (Rayner cited in Cook, 2006: 19).

The press also reinforce the type of person that is suitable for Idol Stardom and notions of talent are rarely spoken of, rather it is the contestant's personal attributes that seem to be most important.

“New Zealand, what were you thinking? Kali wasn't my favourite NZ Idol singer but she certainly didn't deserve to go home! Aroha on the other hand is sullen. Doesn't take heed to the judges advice and when she's singing she looks like she'd rather be anywhere else but on that stage” (Fraser, 2006).

The following article headlines indicate the conflict between talent and personality

Woman's Day	Date
Aroha's Idol Attitude Overhaul	30/10/06
Indira and Matt's Hard Road to Idol Fame	30/10/06
Woman's weekly	
Indira's search for love	23/10/06
No Regrets for Sing Star Beck's	24/9/06
Dumped Georgina's Shattered Dreams	14/7/06
Aroha's Butterfly Effect	30/10/06
A chat with Indira and Matt	30/10/06
Sunday News	
'Becks is my Idol'	10/9/06
Return of the Mummy	1/10/06
No Going Beck	24/9/06
Beck to Reality	24/9/06
Movin' on Up	8/10/06
Matt's Levin it up	29/10/06
Big Kali Call	8/10/06
Heavy Metal Harry's A Real Bum Note	16/7/06
Love Song	29/10/06
Wow Factor will win it	Frankie's Column 29/10/06
We'll Miss Kali and her Talent	Frankie's Column 8/10/06

Idol hopeful under fire 15/10/06

Herald

Sanjaya can't sing but Idolisers don't care 1/4/07

Idol Ordeal too tough for Mum - Midwife 5/8/06

Herald on Sunday

Idol judges vs. Public 8/10/06

Idol Mum on New Charges 6/8/06

Professional versus Amateur

The potential conflict between professionalism and amateurism is another theme foregrounded in the reporting of NZ Idol. Prior to the launch of Season Three one of the judges had many articles that reintroduced her to the spotlight. She was asked what she has been doing since her time in the girl band TrueBliss and what she hopes to bring to the Idol judging panel. Her TrueBliss experience was seen as providing her with expertise that she can pass onto those trying to gain her already achieved stardom.

Magazine articles also sought to put contestants 'back in their place' if it was felt that they were not acting correctly or not taking the advice of those that were more established and knowledgeable, namely the judges. A Woman's Weekly article '*Aroha's Butterfly Effect*' (Milne, 2006: 16) discussed one contestant who the judges' felt was not 'paying her dues' and because she did not employ their advice she was eliminated:

"Aroha was demanding... I think she has been spoilt and isn't used to people demanding things of her. If I was her employer, I would have fired her at the beginning because of her attitude" (Stevens cited in Milne, 2006: 16).

Two other articles were published, '*Frankie's Idol Protégé*' (Milne, 2006: 25) and '*The Yummy Mummy Blues*' (Milne, 2006: 26) which were directly establishing the difference between the emergent Idol and the established judge;

"Teresa needs people like me... I owe it to the music industry to assist with bringing on new talent" (Stevens cited in Milne, 2006: 26).

Established artists, or at least those that had been through the process before were

photographed with particular contestants, and seen to be giving them advice as to how to succeed or encouraging them to enter:

“When Rebecca was talking about auditioning for NZ idol, I told her if she could get her foot in the door it could lead to many opportunities” (Cotton cited in Milne, 2006: 16).

“When times got tough for this years youngest contestant NZ Idol finalist Ashlee Fisher thought back to her mentor Ashley Cooper’s advice not to take the criticism to heart” (Milne, 2006:18).

“Over coffee, the two 29 year olds chat about motherhood and *Idol* judge Megan gives Toni tips to cope with homesickness” (Milne, 2006: 26)

The conflict between the judges and public opinion, as reflected in the votes given to different performers, turned on the question of who had “the right” to make musical judgments. In this sense the audience and voting public were seen as a source of amateurism, to be respected but also to be compared to professional opinion. When the voting had gone the way the judges had hoped headlines like the following were printed and when things went the other way it was noted that a mistake had been made:

“The results last week were bang on the money. 100%. Way to go voters” (Stevens, 2006).

“She didn’t deserve to be there! I put it down to South Island lethargy. But they got behind her when it counted” (Stevens, 2006: 48).

Frankie Stevens was in a unique position to establish his professional standing through his own column every weekend in the Sunday News. He took the opportunity to critique the contestants as well as the public in terms of the way they were voting and pronouncing from a position of authority when the public vote conflicted with the judges’ own evaluation:

“NZ Idol judge Frankie Stevens is urging fans of the show to think carefully before voting after the shock elimination of favourite” (NZ Herald Staff, 2006).

“Voters are making their choice on the ‘one strike, you’re out theory’... People need to think hard before they make their choice. The voters should have taken her track record into account and allowed her another chance because the ‘one strike and you’re out’ style of voting won’t deliver the best Idol” (Stevens, 2006: 16).

At different points during the season it was also mentioned by the judges that they believed the audience were deliberately voting against the judges opinions:

“We make our statements and critiques based on the calibre of each performance ...while we don’t expect everyone to agree with us, it is unfortunate that at quite pivotal times the public sway in an opposite direction to the comments made and turn it into a contestants versus judges competition” (Cook, 2006: 16)

The judges also marked their authority over the emerging artists when it was felt they were not listening or were not ‘paying their dues’ appropriately.

“He said on Sunday night, he doesn’t want to compromise the integrity of his singing and music. Well, I’ve got news for him. In all walks of life everyone compromises somewhere along the way, to a certain degree. This allows them to get to a position where they don’t have to compromise and Victor ain’t there yet” (Stevens, 2006).

“Aroha didn’t take the judges comments very well – she showed a lot of arrogance, both on and off camera. She hasn’t done the years to show that kind of arrogance yet and hasn’t earned the right to act like a prima donna”(Stevens, 2006: 48).

The following article headlines indicate the conflict between professional and amateur

Woman’s Weekly

Date

No regrets for Sing Star Beck’s	2/10/06
Memoirs of Megan	7/8/06
Frankie’s Idol Protégé	9/10/06
Ashlee takes a bow	18/9/06
Aroha’s Butterfly Effect	30/10/06
The Yummy Mummy Blues	25/9/06

Woman’s Day

Megan and Stables regular column about the previous weeks show	
Idol Stars Dish the Dirt	17/7/06
Suzanne’s Rocker Son puts her on Track	11/9/06

New Idea

US Winner Helps Final Nine	9/9/06
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Other

Idol Chitchat (Sunday Star Times Magazine)	20/8/06
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Sunday News

Who knows who will be the next Victor	Frankie's Column	3/9/06
Contest goes down to the wire	Frankie's Column	22/10/06
Ideal Idol Final Seals Great Show	Frankie's Column	5/11/06
Show us the Love	Frankie's Column	10/9/06
My choice backed by the public vote	Frankie's Column	27/8/06
No Going Beck		24/9/06
Joe Cotton's verdict		29/10/06
Idol judges vs. public vote		8/10/06
Idol Boast		16/7/06

Herald on Sunday

Idol Judge Urges voting caution		24/9/06
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NZ Idol versus Musicians and the Music Industry

During Season Three there was ongoing conflict in the press between local musicians and the producers as well as the judges on the show, specifically Frankie Stevens who was constantly defending NZ Idol's integrity.

"It's got huge credibility. The people who turn around and say its crap, what are they doing?" (Stevens cited in Davies, 2006: 15)

Musicians such as Dave Dobbyn, the Finn Brothers and Graham Brazier were described in one article from the judges as "musical snobs" (Cook, 2006: 3) after a Split Enz tribute was removed from the NZ Idol programme when the Finn brothers would not front the episode. Stevens rightly pointed out that major celebrities in America not only support the competition but also appear on it as a guest judge or performer. Why can't New Zealand musicians get behind and support local talent?

"...I still hope that Dave and the Finns will support this. Some of the biggest names in the music industry regularly appear on American Idol and support the use of their music on the show. We're not American Idol, but we are NZ-made, featuring NZ talent and I'd love to have our homegrown songs represented with the blessing of the songwriters" (Stevens, 2006: 48).

Musicians' replies to the accusation of "musical snobbery" ranged from indifference;

"Dave Dobbyn claimed Idol was a "television game show", "I'm just not a fan of it. That doesn't make me a snob. I'm just not interested in it" (Cook, 2006: 3).

To major contempt of the series;

"I'd rather lick the inside of a toilet bowl that appear on Idol" (Cook, 2006:3).

"Brazier did not believe Idol was the true path to musical success. While he did not dislike the show, generally talent quests did not lead to any sort of lasting career. That's just not the way things work in New Zealand" (Cook, 2006: 23).

These exchanges underscore issues about the ways in which musical stardom should and should not be achieved and underlying these issues are notions of cultural and musical value. The notion of instant stardom is not seen as legitimate within the musical community in New Zealand, doing the 'hard-yards' is the only way to ensure longevity in musical careers. A lot of press coverage noted that Sony BMG had pulled out of the series by no longer awarding the winner with a recording contract after "lacklustre sales" from the previous two winners. Even when the competition was underway no record deal had been established.

"The winner of NZ Idol has been promised a recording contract but just 10 days from the final a label is yet to jump on board. (NZ Herald 2006).

This battle between the musicians and much of the press against the judges and producers of the series went on throughout the entire series, even once the winner was named.

"This is a kid who has won a major television talent quest and already people are trying to destroy his future even before he gets going. It's terrible. Why do we always look for reasons to criticise? Criticise him in a year's time if he has done nothing" (Stevens, cited in Cook, 2006: 28).

The press also reported on the successes, or lack there of, of the previous Idols sometimes questioning the lack of support given from the Music Industry. A previous judge from Series One and Two, Paul Ellis, spoke to the press about the first NZ Idol winner, and his subsequent album claiming that,

"Time restraints meant Lummis' album was 'crap' and the 'worst-sounding album of my career'" (Ellis, 2006).

“Ben had good intentions from the people who care. TVNZ cares, I care. BMG doesn’t care” (Ellis, 2006).

Thus the album was not an overwhelming success. Mostly, however, the press has supported the viewpoint of the Music Industry claiming that,

“NZ Idol is so lame that if it was a horse you would need to shoot it” (TV Guide 2006).

The following article headlines indicate the conflict between the Music Industry and NZ Idol

Herald on Sunday	Date
I would rather lick the inside of a toilet bowl than appear on Idol	3/9/06
Fat Lady Sings for Idol Tour	5/11/06
Abuse angers Brazier	10/9/06

Herald		
Record Giant Scratches NZ Idol		1/5/06
Wanted one Recording Label	timeout section	19/10/06
He will have his say	timeout section	10/5/06

Western Leader	
Glen Eden Girl – Go!	24/10/06

America Compared to New Zealand

Another theme focused on the differences between the New Zealand treatment of the contestants and winners compared to American Idol and other overseas versions. In other countries contestants are given major marketing campaigns along with their recording contract. So why doesn’t a multi-national company such a Sony BMG back up the huge amounts of exposure received by Idol winners with some sort of marketing campaign?

“It’s only in New Zealand, look at the sales for Shannon Noll, and Guy Sebastian in Australia where the companies put the work in and they’re superstars in the market” (Trevett, 2006)

“In the United States, Idol has been a commercial and cultural phenomenon, steamrolling virtually every show in its path.” (Cook, 2006: 3).

The press questions the reasons as to why this commercial success is not replicated in New Zealand:

“Music all around the world is based on talent shows. Idol around the world is supported by record companies, and while the show is not considered highly legitimate in the music industry, it is a commercial tool they should be using” (Stevens cited in Cook, 2006: 3).

The distinctions between America and New Zealand are also discussed in articles about the differences in Music Industry support in terms of appearing on or openly supporting the series. In America major international celebrities either perform on the show or become guest judges whereas New Zealand musicians are openly critical and often damning of the entire production:

“International superstars line up to appear on the show, so why is NZ Idol such a dirty word with kiwi musicians?” (Cook, 2006: 3)

“Despite the worldwide popularity of Idol and the hundreds of millions of dollars it has generated internationally, the New Zealand version of the popular reality show has failed to attract top kiwi acts like Dave Dobbyn, Boh Runga and the Finn brothers.” (Cook, 2006: 3).

Such qualitative comparisons were often made in the social media such as the NZ Idol chat rooms, between NZ Idol and American Idol in terms of their quality, production quality as well as the quality of talent. These types of comparisons have caused people to view American Idol as far superior to New Zealand’s poor imitation. This also prompted debate especially from the judges:

“The problem with Idol in New Zealand is they have shown too many other Idols. Dancing with the Stars had nothing to go up against. We didn’t play Dancing with the Stars England or America. It’s hard to compete with those kinds of productions. They spend more budget on one episode than we probably do on the whole series” (Stevens, cited in Davies, 2006: 15).

Cultural Differences were also discussed throughout the press, the ways in which Kiwi contestants differ to American Idol hopefuls.

“Unlike the wannabe’s on American Idol, the kiwis aren’t always eager to blow their own trumpet or defend themselves. Our contestants are a lot more subdued and they underplay it” (Bowden, 2006: 31)

“Its much more rewarding to hear them say ‘I think I did OK’ rather than someone saying, ‘I’m the best thing that ever happened’ (Bowden, 2006: 31).

The following article headlines indicate the conflict between America compared to New Zealand

Sunday Star	Date
Show us the Love	10/9/06
Sunday News	
Idol	29/10/06
Idol Boast	16/7/06
Herald on Sunday	
‘I would rather lick the inside of a toilet bowl than appear on Idol’	3/9/06
Step this way Mr President	30/5/06
Herald	
Record Giant Scratches NZ Idol	1/6/06

Authentic versus Inauthentic

“The audience is obsessively and incessantly searching the star persona for the real and the authentic” (Holmes, 2004: 126).

Press coverage stressed that authenticity was vital to the success of the individual contestants as well as enabling the show to resonate with the general public. In his column Frankie Steven’s was constantly defending NZ Idols authenticity and those of the contestants. Once again this was not unrelated to his own claims of authority as a professional with the right to make judgments. In the case of NZ Idol those who doubted the authenticity of the show were lambasted by the judges:

“Stables blamed ‘rock snobs’ like Graham Brazier who he said were hung up on “bullshit ideas” of musical authenticity... For me, I have a problem with the Graham Braziers of the world who say you can’t win Idol status, you have to earn it” (Stables cited in Cook, 2006: 23).

The contestants' views about the importance of authenticity were also explored and why it was a factor that should be considered when one was deciding on qualities that were befitting for a winner,

"I really hope Beck's wins. I reckon she's got what it takes to go all the way. She's a genuine person, she's not one these people whose cool to your face and then goes behind your back. She's got a really kind heart" (Fisher cited in Davies, 2006: 48).

"The thing about Aroha is what you see on TV is what she is. People can be grateful they know what Aroha is like, whereas there have been other contestants who are totally different on camera to what they are in real life... Aroha is straight up" (Moala cited in Hudson, 2006: 16).

"I started to feel self-conscious and had to stop and remind myself what I've been through, who I am and that I need to feel comfortable with myself" (Baird cited in Milne, 2006: 27)

"I have my own style and I wanted people to know me for who I was, not for who someone else was trying to make me out to be but when you work in television that's what you have to work with" (Robinson cited in Tyler, 2006: 25).

The following article headlines indicate the conflict between authentic and inauthentic

Woman's Weekly

The Yummy Mummy Blues

Date

25/9/06

New Idea

Exit Idol, Enter Love

28/10/06

Sunday News

Wow Factor will Win it

Frankie's Column

9/10/06

We'll Miss Kali and Her Talent

Frankie's Column

8/10/06

Beck's is my Idol

10/9/06

Indira Eyes the world

22/10/06

Herald on Sunday

I would rather lick the inside of a toilet bowl than appear on Idol 3/9/06

Throughout Season Three of NZ Idol the media coverage discussed specific themes such

as success versus failure, individual versus family, America versus New Zealand, infidelity versus fidelity and others already identified. These themes explicitly or inexplicitly illustrate the attributes that are seen as acceptable and good and which are not, for example fidelity and commitment to one's partner and family is good and infidelity of course is not. The themes around success and failure had the most media interest with 59 articles as seen below.

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Number of Articles</u>	<u>Women's Magazines</u>	<u>Newspapers</u>
Fidelity vs. Infidelity	9	9	0
Individual vs. Family	13	12	1
Success vs. Failure	59	24	35
Talent vs. Personality	22	7	15
Professional vs. Amateur	21	10	11
NZ Idol vs. Music Industry	7	0	7
America vs. New Zealand	6	0	6
Authentic vs. Inauthentic	7	2	5

It is interesting to note the differences in the coverage of the newspapers compared to that of the woman's magazines, while the magazines focus on personalities and relationships of the contestants the newspapers, focal point is on the contest as a form. With many articles discussing the Music Industries view and the authenticity of the show as well as professional views and opinions versus that of the amateur thus making distinctions about who has the "right" to make judgment. A major theme present in both media forms with equal interest are the notions of success versus failure and this helps to ensure that the audience participating in the NZ Idol experience, either through voting or just watching the show, begin to rally around their favourite contestant in order to ensure they do not fail in their quest to secure the Idol crown.

The presence of these themes in media coverage created a particular image for the show itself as well as for the contestants, judges and hosts.

Chapter Four: Music Industry and Musicians

This chapter will look at the ways in which the Music Industry is structured in New Zealand and the attitudes of a sample of musicians who completed my research questionnaire on attitudes to popular music. It will also discuss the cultural implications associated with being a New Zealander on the popular music scene.

In society today pop music has very little to do with the “rotating discs” of the past as pop is now “more to do with screens and software” (Bollinger, 2004: 121). Over the last two decades the importance of Top 40 radio has diminished as the music video has become “the chief vehicle for selling a pop song” (Bollinger, 2004: 121). An artist is now able to sell millions of singles and/or albums without having any radio play whatsoever. It is now the image of the artist that is first seen and bought by the consumer long before the tune or lyrics have even been heard (Bollinger, 2004). In this way television has become the perfect medium for selling a pop artist or song. Music has shifted its focus on the physical purchase of a CD or DVD to the importance of on-screen access and computer software causing massive changes within the Music Industry itself. It is understood within Music Industries across the globe that pop music is a musical form,

“...which is recorded in single versions mainly for a teenage market and forms part of what is generally known as the ‘Top of the Pops’ table” (Frith, 1996: 82-83).

Since it developed in the 1950’s the teenage market has been the main target for popular music. This market, with an increasingly younger lower end, remains dominant and along with the accompanying culture could perhaps be the key expressive outlet for some young people today (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003). The sale of singles also helps tap into the teenage market, as it is cheaper to buy a single than a full album.

The General Features of the Music Industry

The Music Industry itself is made up of different components and personnel, A & R, Artists and Repertoire, these are the people who have the responsibility of signing artists, initially passing judgment on which of the demos sent in are ‘good’ enough or show signs of an artist having enough potential to be signed and eventually groomed into fitness by their labels. It is at this stage in the recording process that decisions about song choice, image,

releases and promotions are made and it is here that the Music Industry's own values are often put onto the musicians they choose to sign, through their initial choice of artist and then the grooming of them.

These values are, as Bourdieu suggests, created around commercial principles, which prioritise the means whereby sounds and music can be turned into saleable commodities so that “musical value and monetary value are therefore equated” (cited in Frith, 1996: 41). Once the artist is signed and branded by the A&R executives according to the requirements of that artist's genre market, they are then handed over to the producers whose job is to then take these ‘molded’ artists and turn their music into a marketable and profitable commodity. The molding process places certain requirements on the musicians themselves who, “once signed, once labeled...will there after be expected to act and play and look in certain ways” (Frith, 1996: 76).

Producers also like to create and maintain the idea that it is within the studio walls where the most original and influential decisions about music are made (Frith, 1996). Yet many people, particularly musicians themselves, see this as a stage of interference, where the producer can disrupt the musicians' communications with their audiences (Frith, 1996). As the final product is completed distributors take over and records are sent to deejays, music critics, promoters and retailers, each of whom decide whether or not the band or group or the music itself is ‘good’ enough and worth playing “as consumers tune in, turn up and make their own market choices” (Frith, 1996: 59). Yet it is the record companies role prior to the release of their artists to ensure that they have adequately defined to the market, “the evaluative grounds”, or ways of understanding what is good “thus ensuring that we [the market] make the right judgment” (Frith, 1996: 61).

Pop is a style of music that is relatively formulaic and not primarily about musical innovation – this is, especially the case when compared to other genres such Jazz and Opera. The focus on commercialisation and profit maximisation has caused musicians and fans alike to believe that the consistent format of pop music correlates with it being ‘bad’ or of having no real musical value. Frith suggests

“...a piece of music is bad because it uses musical clichés; because its development is

easily predictable; because nothing happens” (1996: 70).

Because creating maximum profit is the real, and perhaps only goal of pop music, it relies on a vast audience or market to continually consume it which can also cause some sectors of society to shun the genre following the principles of Schonburg, “If it is art it is not for all and if it is for all it is not art” (cited in Frith, 1996: 65). Frith also suggests that the status of the groups consuming pop music, young teenagers or the ‘tweens’ (those generally between the ages of 8 and 12) and especially young girls adds to its low social value.

“The value of cultural goods could therefore be equated with the value of the groups consuming them – youth, the working class, women” (Frith, 1996: 13).

The audience for Idol shows in New Zealand follow this general demographic which may, perhaps, be part of the reason that the music and the contestants are not valued by the industry and /or other sectors of society. It may also go on to explain why particular contestants who are loved by young girls, for example, are seen as especially bad or lacking in talent. One contestant in Season Three was consistently asked in interviews what he thought about the ‘young girls’ who were voting for him and keeping him in the competition, and whether that was fair ([http: Idolblog.com](http://Idolblog.com), Breakfast interview TVNZ). This suggested that if a contestant is a particular favorite with young girls or other ‘low status’ groups then his or her talent and musical value is devalued.

Frith suggests that arguments about popular culture, and in this context Pop Idol, are not solely about what music people like or dislike but have more to do with the way in which people listen, about ways of hearing and ways of being (Frith, 1996). Frith maintains popular cultural practices are more about making moral judgments and assessing social differences, then Pop Idol shows enshrine this practice and stage situations in which all judgments of artistic value must be publicly justified. “To examine the question of value in popular culture is to examine the terms of such justifications” (Frith, 1996: 16 – 17). It is the judges’ role to distinguish this ranking system, which contestants are good and which are not as in the Pop Idol format it is judges that evaluate musical quality. If the NZ Idol judges had been musicians in the community who had a larger following or a higher level of respect as singers’ and/ or musicians the perception of the show may have been different. But from the start the credibility of the judges were harshly scrutinized especially during Season Three. Perhaps compounded by the failure of the first two seasons to produce

winners with durability, the Season Three judges were seen to have very little expertise in the music field. This issue of credibility wasn't really an issue of "value but authority". The question was not about whether or not NZ Idol is "any good or not, but who has the authority to say so" (Frith, 1996: 9) and apparently the chosen judges did not. Moreover:

"One could define popular culture as that cultural sector in which all participants claim the authority to pass judgment" (Frith, 1996: 9).

This is seen directly through Pop Idol website chat rooms around the world, Idolblog.com where many members claim to have superior knowledge to that of the judges which "give their judgments a particular weight" (Frith, 1996: 9) as they try to impose their views on others through the 'blogging' website. Straight after the first show the idolblog.com chat rooms were filled with opinions on both contestants and judges and during NZ Idol 3 comments were especially harsh on the new female judge complaining of her callous and arrogant comments coupled with the fact that many believe she had no credibility for being on the judgment panel in the first place. Interestingly she had already been through a process similar to NZ Idol and therefore has some knowledge of the format yet the new male judge, a radio DJ who claimed to have no musical expertise in terms of what it takes to be a singer and dubbed as the mean one for Season Three, seemed to get a way with far less criticism.

Pop Music in New Zealand

New Zealand is a small market with only a few major record companies and players and even these are comparatively small when compared to global standards. Labels such as SonyBMG and Columbia are two of New Zealand's bigger record labels and both can only successfully have two or three "big" named New Zealand artists under them due to economical restraints, making it extremely hard for emerging artists to get signed unless on a small independent labels with very little distributing power (Bollinger, 2004). However, in 2004 the Music Industry commissioned a report with Michael Chunn, 'Creating Heat' on the future of New Zealand music, claiming New Zealand music as a valuable export. The New Zealand Music Industry was thriving as domestic sales were at an all time high (though still a very small piece of global sales) valued at \$146 million and growing at \$5 million dollars annually (Creating Heat, 2004).

Locally the Music Industry can be seen as a tool through which New Zealand's reputation overseas may be enhanced through exports. Currently New Zealand music has an artist achieving some form of international success once every five or six years, however the 'Creating Heat' document aims to increase this "by a factor of ten" intending to plug artists of "all genres, styles and niches into the Music Industry's existing global infrastructures greatly increasing their chances of success" (2004: 5) Yet the proposed increase seems to exclude pop music. Of all artists currently signed to top music labels it can be argued that not one falls under the pop music banner as the focus on singer/songwriter, and guitar based music is still evident.

The success of the album released by the winner of the first NZ Idol series Ben Lummis could be seen as bucking this trend. But arguably, this was not a typical pop record as the album was largely focused on R 'n' B styles. Yet although this album went platinum his contract was terminated. The same occurred with the Season Two winner Rosita Vai, and after Series Two SonyBMG pulled out altogether leaving independent record label 'Shock' records to produce the Season Three winner Matt Saunoa's single *Hold Out*. Very little promotion occurred on any of these albums despite the huge amount of nationwide publicity.

As has been suggested in the past little or no pop music has come out of New Zealand's local music scene, as a focus on rock has been dominant. Currently the emergence of a strong Polynesian influence has perhaps shifted the focus to hip-hop or other forms of alternative music. The lack of material from the pop genre recorded in New Zealand could perhaps be due to the strong focus on authenticity or the insistence that New Zealand musicians must have done 'the hard-yards'. The successful local acts tend to write their own music and play their own instruments, features that are not important for the overseas pop artist. Pop princesses such as Britney Spears or Jessica Simpson are not marketed for their song-writing ability nor do they play their own instruments. Instead it is their collateral performing skills like their dancing ability and the willingness to 'play the part' of a pop star that sells their records.

By contrast homegrown pop singers in the Spears mold make little headway in the New Zealand market. Overseas pop stars continue to book sell out concerts in this country as

well as sell thousands of pop based CD's. This demonstrates that a market for pop music definitely exists in New Zealand yet local fans seem to strongly prefer international acts. Economic factors are clearly important since pop music is a lavishly produced musical form that is marketed through extensive videos, publicity and promotional campaigns. The huge budgets entailed cannot be met by New Zealand record companies and even the local branches of major international record labels cannot justify the expense for such a small and fickle market that has a reputation for not supporting local pop acts. Part of this local preference relates to matters of style:

“Since quality is most often a matter of style, which eludes objective appraisal. The meaning, the ultimate value of pop emerges out of the meeting between music and listener, an interaction that changes over time” (Frith, 1996: 84).

Currently in New Zealand pop music is seen as ‘teenybopper’ music and because of this it is not perceived as ‘cool’ or ‘trendy’. By claiming to listen to rock and other alternative musical forms the listener can demonstrate their musical superiority and subsequent ‘coolness’ associated with these genres. This process can be seen in different music magazines over time, for example ‘Spin’ an 80’s magazine that claimed to cater for the musical consumers who defined themselves as being against the mainstream of commercial taste (Frith, 1996). It is through magazines such as these that music becomes classified as ‘good’ simply “because it’s different from the run of ‘mainstream pop’” (Frith, 1996: 69) and that ‘bad’ music is the ‘standardised’ ‘formulaic’ music that is pop, seen merely as a commodity to meet market demands rather than a musical form with its own artistic merit.

“Good music is implicitly ‘original’ or ‘autonomous’ and the explanation built into the judgment depends on the familiar Marxist/Romantic distinction between serial production, production to commercial order, to meet a market and artistic creativity, production determined only by individual intention, by format and technical rules and possibilities” (Frith, 1996: 69).

Criticisms on musical form Frith suggests can be extremely “genre-centric” differing substantially depending on how the genre itself is valued in terms of musical worth, for example, the small differences evident in pop music or what Frith terms as “teenybop music” such as the various and differing “vocal registers of artists are taken to be quite insignificant” compared to “minor variations in rural blues guitar phrasings [which] are taken to be of great aesthetic importance” (Frith, 1996: 69) as this form of music is deemed to be of greater cultural value.

Mystique

Another factor important to pop music and successful pop stars is the notion of ‘mystique’. Like the film stars of the past many pop stars are seen to have a mystique attached to them, something unattainable by the general public. This mystique or charisma is an important ingredient in maintaining that degree of fantasy desired by audiences. The scale of communities in New Zealand, where ‘everybody knows everybody’, may be important as it does not afford pop stars or more specifically NZ Idol winners any mystique. The smallness of the New Zealand media market helps to enforce a feeling of familiarity that conflicts with the perception of distance necessary to generate notions of celebrity and stardom. In larger markets, such as the American market with its global ramifications, the aura of mystery and the perception of a fantasy world of glamour can be supported by the scale of the market for music and of media coverage. American audiences seem to demand all the trappings of show business stardom. New Zealand audiences tend to view NZ Idol contestants as their peers, perhaps deserving of support regardless of their talent.

Musician’s Attitudes Towards Pop Music

“New Zealanders are much tougher on themselves when it comes to matters of identity. Our pop, I’m told is imitative” (Bollinger, 2004: 104).

The reason we as a nation are so critical, Bollinger suggests, is to do with the fact that our music does not have the opportunity to pass through the many filters that pop music overseas encounters (Bollinger, 2004). International music that reaches our airwaves have already been through the tests of success, whereas

“New Zealand music comes to us raw and unpurified...Its easy to get the feeling that New Zealand music is rough, uneven and unoriginal. The truth is though that the ratio of excrement to excellence is the same as anywhere in the world” (Bollinger, 2004: 107).

As already emphasised ‘bad music’ is music that is seen to be imitative and unoriginal; ‘good’ music is music that is ‘original’ or creative. A person singing a cover song, according to these values, is therefore not seen as a credible artist compared to the musician who sings their own music. Thus shows like NZ Idol are looked down upon by the majority of the Music Industry despite the fact that many contestants were in reality ‘legitimate’ singer-songwriters. The idea of a cover singer goes back many decades and has many cultural implications. Frith suggests the “cover version” is usually associated with white

people “singing black songs” as opposed to someone singing another “version” of a song which is equal to a,

“black [person] doing cover of white song... imitation in short, is as much an ideological as a musical matter; the critical response depends on an account of who is imitating whom and for what attributed reasons” (Frith, 1996: 10).

These ideological issues also contribute to the notion that music consumers need to know who the artist is before they can evaluate its musical worth (Frith, 1996). The importance of being a songwriter, as opposed to a covers performer, is pronounced in New Zealand and it is clearly understood by musicians as well as fans that cover singers are inferior to an original performer. Despite this, it is interesting to note that the musicians that participated in this survey, claimed to earn the majority of their income, if not all of it, from working in various covers bands, whether that be covering jazz standards or pop music. But this points to an underlying tension between craft and commercial values. Howard Becker, through a participant observation study of the subculture of jazz musicians uncovered a similar tension. The musicians he studied experienced conflict between playing and creating the experimental music they love and the need to conform to “commercial” styles in order to make a living (Becker, 1963):

“This was not simply an assertion of musical taste but also a statement of larger social differences between “hip” musicians and their ‘square’ audiences. Squares were seen as the embodiment of all that is ignorant, intolerant and conformist in American culture, whereas hip musicians took pride in violating conventional norms and behaviour. Their opposition to commercial music went hand in hand with a rejection of institutions such as marriage, organised religion, and the government... Yet they could never completely escape commercialism and square audiences... because musicians depended on their economic patronage for survival (Moore, 2007: 441).

Despite this need to conform, many groups during the 1970’s, after rejecting the commercialisation of rock music, formed Punk bands, which helped the underground music scene gain momentum (Moore, 2007). The punk community was formed and gave young people a place to “express dissenting viewpoints about critical social issues” (Moore, 2007: 439) without having to conform to commercial pressures:

“In exalting amateurism, they laid the foundation for a populist medium of cultural production in which passion, energy, and having something to say are more important than technical proficiency” (Moore, 2007: 446).

These principles are fuelled by the do-it-yourself culture, particularly evident in the New Zealand music scene and suggest that people should not just be spectators and consumers but also participants and performers “regardless of their ability, experience or commercial viability” (Moore, 2007: 448). This culture could be seen to be in opposition to the ethos that success is measured purely by commercial sales and critics acceptance (Moore, 2007), instead the principle “art for arts sake” is a philosophy of the underground scene and of punk musicians who condemn the work of artists who create their music solely for the pursuit of profits. This ethos stresses the importance of being self-reliant and putting out your own records without having any outside influences taint your own creativity. Taken ever further it is suggested that only “the truly great are doomed to failure in their own time” (Moore, 2007: 441) in terms of commercial success.

Due to a pervasive dislike of commercialised music many bands gain their status and popularity via the ‘underground’ scene, constantly playing live gigs and having virtually no advertising or marketing campaigns. The types of musicians are usually those averse to popular music, playing alternative forms that appeal to a shared community that encompasses fans and fellow musicians. The “do-it-yourself ethic,” (Moore, 2007: 439) creates an environment where consumers and spectators are encouraged to form their own bands and independent record labels (Moore, 2007). This impetus tends to blur the line between the practiced professional and the enthusiastic amateur favouring engagement regardless of talent or musical prowess.

The community aspect is extremely important to participants within different musical groups as musicians often live, work and play together and such a way of life is in stark contrast to the “romantic mythology of the lone artist genius” (Moore, 2007: 451). Howard Becker suggests any form of artistic work always involves a large number of people (Becker, 1982) and Frith also talks about this notion of community claiming that it is more about creating a knowing community of musicians and audiences that are superior in opinion to the “ordinary, indiscriminating pop consumer” (Frith, 1996: 68). It is then within this community that aesthetic judgments become ethical judgments, when someone claims something to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ they are not just stating a matter of personal taste but also of their own moral values:

“Good and Bad are key words because they suggest that aesthetic and ethical judgments are tied together: not to like a record is not just a matter of taste; it is also a matter of morality” (Frith, 1996: 72).

The rejection of commercial culture by many alternative musicians and their followers and the “do-it-yourself” ethos set them apart from other forms of music, especially commercial culture. But the process does not stop there because the alternative music scene can be a source for developing popular artists. So as alternative forms are exploited the prospect of cooptation or “selling out” challenges the ideology of independence (Moore, 2007). The values associated with alternative music can be co-opted by mainstream pop music for product development. When this happens the original fans or musicians may reject the music itself because of its newly found commercial popularity:

“Whenever a metal genre gets really popular in terms of mainstream culture, for example the ‘glam metal’ scene of the late Eighties, then the original fans reject it because of its popularity and search for other genres which reflect the ideas they are into.” (Rigby cited in Forgan, 2005).

The do-it-yourself ethos also applies to the record labels themselves as musicians begin to form their own labels in order to remain completely autonomous. These independent labels, like independent films, usually produce music of a more experimental nature which the more commercialised or corporate labels are not, at least initially, interested in, preferring to stick with those formulas that have already proven successful. These independent labels in the past have usually been associated with music on the peripheries, for example folk, jazz or the blues, as these musical forms usually served small niche markets and were not mass produced for commercial success. Although these independent labels were not seen as producing commercially viable music they were able to remain solvent due to their loyal markets and low promotional marketing costs (Moore, 2007: 458).

Tall Poppy

Tall poppy is a pejorative term used mainly in Australia and New Zealand to describe what is seen as a leveling social attitude and may have arisen through immigrants rejecting the British class system and adopting an egalitarian attitude, viewing people as admirable for what they themselves could do, rejecting the notion that some people are “naturally” superior to their peers by right of birth. Tall Poppy syndrome can be seen when ones higher economic, social or political position attracts criticism, being perceived as presumptuous,

attention seeking or without merit. Others can easily interpret this as a form of resentment of another's success. However those who adhere to such an egalitarian viewpoint see themselves merely criticising those people who flaunt their successes without any humility and explain this criticism not as resentment of success but a rejection of arrogance and snobbery.

Many critics of the tall poppy syndrome compare Australia and New Zealand unfavourably to other nations, especially the United States, as it is believed that Americans are generally much more supportive and appreciative of the successful and use their examples as someone to admire and attempt to emulate. Some credence for this belief can be seen in the Pop Idol craze as the hype and success of the American Idol finalists compared to that of New Zealand winners is vast, seen through the massive voting numbers in America as well as continual support of the contestants after the conclusion of the show.

Throughout the survey process it became clear that musicians identified the public at large of being too 'tall poppy'. It was also suggested that it may be the musicians themselves that influence societies 'tall poppy' views:

“It would be nice if the ‘industry’ could stop being such elitist bastards – In reality it’s the muso’s themselves sometimes that create the Tall Poppy; the record exec’s, the promoters, the reviewers, the media, they tell the public what to think a lot of the time and they can be snobby bitches. I think we [the industry] just need to take our heads out of our asses long enough to realise we’re hurting ourselves in the long run...” (Participant quote)

Economic Limitations

Quite apart from the complex question of the intrinsic New Zealand character and the earned respect of musicians as well as the matter of tall poppy, egalitarianism and homegrown issues that arise from our national character and its acceptance (or not) of the Idol format and its concept, is the issue of straight business economics. It is impossible to talk about the impact, or lack thereof, of Idol winning contestants in the New Zealand Music Industry without discussing the economic factors that drive the entire business structure.

In the 1970's the worldwide sales of recorded music were \$2 billion US dollars, which has

risen to over \$32 billion dollars today. In recent years the industry has contracted due to piracy, the advent of the Internet, and subsequent downloads and now the music business has become nervous and are taking fewer risks (Creating Heat 2004). In a small market like New Zealand these risks are even greater as production runs are smaller, increasing price per disc, along with retail costs, distribution, marketing and royalty costs. Consequently the profit margin is significantly lower. A specific feature of Idol shows is that an artist signed up after winning is less likely to be a songwriter. This adds extra royalty costs as well as royalties to the Idol franchise. These constraints go a good way to explain why major record labels operating in the New Zealand market are not interested in signing such artists since their profit margins are squeezed. The NZ Idol winner is more likely (which has happened for the winner of NZ Idol Series Three) to be given a single, in which a smaller label (in this case Shock Records) can quickly produce a single, and distribute immediately after the Idol final increasing the chance to make a profit while the buzz of NZ Idol still has the public's attention.

The obvious difference, when comparing the American Idol with NZ Idol and judging the post-Idol success of the contestants is of course the size of the market. The market size will have a material impact on the "perceived" success of Idol finalists whether in the United States or in New Zealand. Given that once Idol contestants have left the show, their chances for success rapidly lose the boost given by show publicity, the quality of their performance is central to market success. Recording companies will assess the commercial risk of producing a CD/single/tour accordingly. Obviously in the USA the fame created by Idol exposure has a greater social reach than is possible in New Zealand. Releasing a CD or a single may be perceived as worth the risk on a higher volume market. In New Zealand a record company must sell 5,000 units to make an acceptable return on capital from a low budget album release. The same threshold would apply in the United States but given that they have approximately 90 times the population the risk is diminished.

The marketing department can send these Idol finalists out on tour capitalising on the perception to the US public that these contestants have achieved "stardom". However the real test of stardom is in the longevity of an artist's career. Where the market is large and populated with niches of sufficient size as is the case in the USA, then a certain level of public recognition may translate into, if not stardom, then a long lasting career with a loyal

fan following. Given the limitations of the New Zealand market there is little chance that international recording companies will be prepared to risk considerable investment on developing home grown talent, especially since they already have a portfolio of international stars. The ideal form of star promotion in New Zealand is a single tied to the publicity generated by an ongoing or just concluded series. This short-term strategy is ill suited to overcome the fickleness of the New Zealand fan base.

Employment of Musicians

As stated in the government website careers.govt.nz, published 17th January 2005, “the outlook for professional musicians is average” and the reason for this, they suggest, is due to New Zealand’s small population as it is very difficult to sustain a full-time career as a musician. In some ways this is an optimistic assessment. Rather than full time or even semi-full time employment most musicians track from one engagement to another satisfying a specific contract. This pattern of portfolio employment is also common in the richest market, the US. Contract work is the norm for most musicians and “while a musician may make \$100,000 a year, he/she does so in spite of being fired every three hours” (Peterson & White, 1979: 412). The irregular pattern of working, driven by specific gigs or projects results in intense competition for the work that is most desired and difficult to secure. This is evident in the case of orchestral employment where positions become available very infrequently and when they do they are not only highly sought after by New Zealand instrumentalists but also by overseas musician’s ([http: careers.govt.nz](http://careers.govt.nz)).

Other musicians such as pop or jazz players also face elevated competition because of the limited amount of performance opportunities and the scarcity of full time work opportunities. In the New Zealand case, there are very few residences and the few that exist are only available in major cities like Auckland. Outside of residences, employment opportunities are mainly confined to bar work or the corporate market. ([http: careers.govt.nz](http://careers.govt.nz)). In order to supplement income in a restricted employment market, many musicians in New Zealand teach music or move permanently overseas to pursue their careers and gain valuable working experience ([http: careers.govt.nz](http://careers.govt.nz)).

The level of government funding within the Music Industry has increased over the last couple of years and has contributed to the growth of opportunities for musicians, such as

that available from Creative New Zealand, New Zealand on Air and the New Zealand Music Industry Commission (<http://careers.govt.nz>). However this only creates work for a select group of musicians, which arguably, are members of New Zealand's 'elite simplex', which I will discuss later.

Another factor that affects New Zealand musicians and I would suggest particularly those involved in the covers band scene, whether it be pop, jazz, or rock, is that of over-exposure. There are very few bands or soloists that dominate the high profile and well-paid work and these musicians walk a thin line of maintaining that work and risking over growing audience disinterest. Over exposure is only an issue in live performance and not with studio recording, jingle and television advertising, where employment opportunities are dominated by a small handful of singers.

The increased use and development of technology has created opportunities for some and at the same time diminished opportunity for others. Now live musicians can also gain employment through the use of musical software and the art of sequencing, and singers can now use sequenced tracks instead of live instrumentalists. As a result instrumentalists especially in the rhythm section, drums and bass, are in less demand and therefore have fewer employment opportunities. New Zealand is such a small market that accepting any kind of work becomes the norm and musicians here echo the international experience that "performance inevitably comes to feel like a compromise, a compromise which is blamed on the audience" (Frith, 1996: 53) or client the musician must cater for. The use of backing tracks for singers has further enabled those employing musicians to cut costs as a singer can now work alone. This further reduces employment opportunities even as it increases the importance of the self-presentational skills in performance. As Frith observes, "musicianship plays only a 50 percent role – the rest is knowing how to control your audience" (Frith, 1996: 53) and therefore maintain work.

These developments place a premium on being versatile and flexible rather than specialised. The most successful musicians from the point of view of employment are those who can be "Jack of all trades". But the normal connecting phrase "master of none" also echoes through the music community with many performers lacking the opportunity or the incentive to develop the highest levels of musicianship. Although there are a few

exceptions, musicians who are masters of their craft are likely to experience difficulties in finding challenging work. As my survey of professional musicians revealed most participants claimed that in order to be a working musician in New Zealand one must be willing to pay the price financially and even have another source of income during those down periods.

Networking

The role of networking in most careers is important but for musicians, in any country, it is vital. Many of the New Zealand Idol contestants from all three seasons acknowledged in press interviews that the most beneficial part of appearing on the show was name exposure. Through participating in the contest they were introduced to highly influential people in the music industry as well as other forms of media. The idea of ‘who you know’ and being a member of a musical group or clique is an important resource to success and to the more modest goal of steady employment. The development of a simplex structure is an important element in professional life.

In the Music Industry (though it is prevalent elsewhere) the simplex is an informal network that operates to control the flow of work to its members (Peterson & White, 1979). The forms of control adopted by simplex members “include ranking, a taboo against raiding, the exchange of favors, shared social activities, diverse patterns of exclusion, the manipulation of rookie newcomers, and the isolation of rivals” (Peterson & White, 1979: 433). The simplex is an important informal element in any art world along with more formal elements such as ‘The School’ which is linked to an Academy and ‘The Circle’, which links to a market for the avant-garde work (Peterson & White, 1979). In the case of popular music it is the simplex that is the most important sociological element.

As an informal system of job control, the simplex ensures that a small group of elite musicians secure the most desired and well-paid work. In order to join the simplex group one must adhere to the informal rules of membership and the main pre-requisite is that a musician must have the skills required to fit into the world of the studio musician. A musician must be able to maintain a good relationship with hiring agents and other people that may help them secure work in order to remain in the simplex (Peterson & White, 1979). Musical ability is paramount and a basic criterion for entry, but is only the first of

several qualities needed. Musicians must demonstrate technical competence and “craftsman like bearing” through their ability to play many differing styles on demand and be able to blend in with other musicians. Along with being “willing to take and give musical suggestions without appearing egotistical or overbearing they must be able to fit into the simplex, “accept all calls for work demonstrating their social reliability” (Peterson & White, 1979: 419-420). Although some simplex members can earn an income in the six figure range “they do not take extended vacations, but remain available to take all recording sessions” in order to protect their position in the simplex. A study of professional trumpet players in Nashville looked at 112 trumpet players out of 257 other instrumentalists in the American Federation of Musicians and out of that 112 approximately a dozen of them were deemed competent enough to be studio musicians capable of the highly paid work. Yet out of these dozen only four players secured the majority of work available earning over 100,000 dollars annually and none outside the top five earned over 15,000 from their playing. This idea was also found to be not unique to trumpet players alone but all other studio musician groups who “develop a form of self-protective interpersonal association” (Peterson & White, 1979: 412-413).

Despite the smaller scale and volume of work, the earnings tabled below shows a ‘simplex’ structure operating within the New Zealand Music Industry. Most of the work is divided among a small minority of musicians and of all the musicians I surveyed only one claimed to earn annually over \$60,000, the majority of participants placed themselves in the \$20,000 - \$40,000 category. What is interesting to note however is that no participant claimed to earn under \$10,000 which is in contrast to the 2001 Cultural Sector Employment survey which stated:

	<u>Singer</u>	<u>Instrumentalist</u>
Median income per annum	13,800	17,500
\$50,001 and over	2%	12%
\$20,000 and under	68%	57%

This 2001 survey clearly shows that the majority of musicians fell under the \$20,000 annual income. The majority of musicians who participated in my survey in 2006 were based in Auckland, where most of the work is. They were for the most part reliant on

performance for their income. Some of the musicians sampled were effectively semi-professional holding down full time 'day jobs'. These people were not as likely to be able to undertake extra work and this is probably reflected in the income differentials. Though at the same time the amount of work available can only support a small minority with a living wage.

The above table and my own personal survey also reflect the issue discussed in Peterson & White's *Simplex* study where "a few workers receive disproportionately high rewards" (Peterson & White, 1979: 412). Through membership in the simplex musicians can help each other guarantee that only they can earn "the high and stable income" by reducing competition. It is said that most people working in the arts "tend to be more productive when they participate in a network of associations" (Peterson & White, 1979:413, 418). Since the simplex is based on a high level of musicianship and craft skills it requires a relatively vigorous local employment market. Since New Zealand lacks this, the business side of music is most important, as musicians must stay on good terms with hiring agents and producers, sometimes doing what could be described as technically illegal work through the manipulation of sounds. Finally musicians must deliver exactly what is asked of them and this occupational ethos can be seen through Paul Yandell, a leading Nashville guitarist who explained in an interview "I've got to work, and we all have a boss to please. Sure I'm commercial, but that means I'm a professional" (Hensley 1976; 62 cited in Peterson & White, 1979: 421). Here creativity is defined "not in terms of the egotistic self-expression of genius but as the ability to understand and deliver on demand exactly what is required" (Peterson & White, 1979: 421).

"Without job tenure, without craft protection, without a star system, and without clearly being better than their rivals, how do a few trumpet players monopolize all the desirable work? (Peterson & White, 1979: 412)

Talent versus Connections

The operation of the simplex as a coping mechanism regulating employment has an impact on the way different musicians view the music business. Aspiring musicians claim that those who get all the work are part of a self-serving 'clique'. In defense of their selection policy, hiring agents emphasise that they are hesitant to risk hiring musicians that they have

not worked with previously. But this is something of a self-replicating spiral since the simplex tends to control the very possibility of gaining experience. Members of the simplex also work in ways that would help each other get work, convincing agents that they alone were competent enough musically or best able to fit into the recording situation. Such tactics ensure that competition is restricted to simplex members. But the effect of controlled access by no means guarantees that only the best musicians get the job. Since within the simplex an absolute taboo against criticising other musicians or engaging in a strong self-promotion is necessary to maintain solidarity (Peterson & White, 1979).

Getting and giving favors is another major part of the simplex as members recommend each other for work:

“the excellent new comer who has little to give may still receive favors on the condition that he acts in ways that reinforce the established hierarchy of players” (Peterson & White, 1979: 424 -425).

The simplex uses social activities to help maintain the camaraderie between members (Peterson & White, 1979) as well as being able to maintain exclusivity through other means of exclusion and “while simplex members try to exclude the outsider, they do so behind the façade of helpfulness” (Peterson & White, 1979: 426).

In line with the American findings, the ranking of musicians is an important feature of the Music Industry in New Zealand. This is apparent in the local music scene where an informal system of ranking identifies who the best musicians are. As Peterson and White found, the fit between these informal rankings and the actual distribution of work is close. But the weighing of talent has both a “public and a private face”. From the perspective of the public, the best musicians must be those who get regular work (Peterson & White, 1979).

A Do-It-Yourself Culture

There is a major distinction in the music scene between those that have had formal training and those that have not as many of the self – taught musicians tend to claim that one may be able to play an instrument technically however may be unable to “feel it emotionally or instinctively” (Frith, 1996: 54). This is something that musicians claim cannot be taught

and singers are at that heart of this as “it seems, [singers] have a natural instrument” (Frith, 1996: 54) which is perhaps why singers triumphantly claim to have never been taught believing the most talented singers to be completely natural.

Out of all the musicians who participated in my survey only four claimed to have been formally taught some form of music at a University, Polytechnic or Performing Arts School. However the importance of distinction between practical or theoretical music training was not stressed. Most said ‘learning by doing’, or being self-taught was the primary way the craft was learnt. Some participants did claim to have had private tuition such as singing lessons.

Amount of Days Worked

Participants in the survey were asked to state how many days a year they worked. This would give some indication as to the type of work they were undertaking as well as the rate of payment. Those who claimed that teaching music was a big part of their income also claimed to work more days than those whose earnings only came from performance work. This division of effort was also reflected in earnings. Teaching is low paid compared to performing. It also became clear that the more versatile a musician was in terms of skills, the greater the amount of work he or she would do. One singer was prepared to do celebrity endorsements, magazine articles and so forth and worked 49 weeks of the year compared to another musician who worked only 30 days. The average amount of days worked was 96 and the amount worked did not necessarily correlate with high income, for example one respondent claimed to work 75 days of the year earning \$10,000 – \$20,000 annually. This could be compared to a couple of musicians working 65 days a year but still earning between \$20,000 and \$40,000. This does indicate as the simplex suggests that there is preferred, better paid work that only a select few get to access.

As pointed out earlier, in New Zealand popular music is arguably not as valued as alternative music. Cultural values associated with ‘kiwi culture’ emphasise egalitarian notions and ‘doing-the-hard-yards’ as opposed to gaining instant stardom through popular music. But it is not only the musicians’ and general publics’ attitudes that have shaped the local music scene but also, perhaps more importantly, economic restraints that have had a major influence on the quality of music and the reason that very few artists have emerged

in the popular music field in this country. The next chapter will look into the attitudes of musicians specifically toward NZ Idol and the contribution of the show, as well as the contestants, to New Zealand's Music Industry and community.

Chapter Five: Attitudes towards NZ Idol

The popularity of Talent Contests with audiences cannot be denied. They are a testament to the fact that contemporary society has a “public addiction to celebrity” (Rojek, 2001:10). Many young people see media fame, under any terms, as a viable career path and the entire premise of such shows relies on the idea that anyone can attain it.

“In many ways the appeal of reality television has been that it could be the viewer or the viewer’s neighbor, right there on the small screen” (Huff, 2006: viii).

One would think that musicians would recognise some value in celebrity generators like Pop Idol because they celebrate the world of popular music and offer opportunities to the musicians themselves in terms of reaching a wider audience. But the attitudes of New Zealand musicians toward such shows as NZ Idol whilst not uniformly disapproving are not usually those of admiration or respect. Instead the entire process is seen as counterfeit contributing nothing of any real value. Perhaps the idea that “anyone can do it” and becoming an overnight ‘star’ is part of the reason local musicians are not supporters of NZ Idol as it negates the idea that in order to perfect your craft musicians must tirelessly rehearse and perform they must go through the ‘hard-yards’ with little reward compared to the instant stardom assigned to those contestants with arguably lesser talent. The very premise of NZ Idol as discovering natural talent poses a threat to the efforts of musicians to control work through the informal network of the simplex.

As previously mentioned, when musicians are discussing the value of music and what makes music ‘good’ or ‘bad’ they are, as Frith suggests, actually revealing “an aesthetic as strongly rooted in ethical values and a sense of responsibility” (1996: 58). This shared sense of responsibility is not only to the listener but also to all those belonging in the musical community and those musicians justify their right to make value judgments because of their own superior abilities, “technical values, the ability to make sounds that other people can’t” (Frith, 1996: 58).

Giving the listeners what they want is a commonly used rationale for television or any mass media organisation. Frith argues that what listeners want to hear is determined by who they are, where they come from and their cultural influences and this forms the “connection

between peoples social and aesthetic values”. He adds that if the consumers “value music for the function it fills, then that ‘function’ must be defined both socially and psychologically” (Frith 1996: 63). This process however “was based on the assumption that the common denominator of all audiences is the lowest intelligence prevailing among them” (Frith, 1996: 66).

During its three-year history of NZ Idol the press and the music-making community have not been favorable of the format. Season Three in 2006 was arguably the most ridiculed series. The distaste for Idol music is rooted in two central arguments; firstly critics argue that the music that features on the show and the genres chosen throughout the process, are ‘bland and derivative’ and second that the singers’ arrangements and accompanying music “are trite, full of wannabe Whitney Houston and Stevie Wonder wails. Originality is a losing strategy” (Caryn James of the New York Times cited in Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 217).

Neva Chonin of the San Francisco Chronicle describes Kelly Clarkson’s single ‘*A Moment Like This*’ and its B-side ‘*Before Your Love*’ as “a pair of faux Whitney, wannabe-Celine power ballads so inoffensively generic they could carpet an elevator” (cited in Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 223). Yet despite the contempt for the music on the show as well as for singles and/ or albums released after its conclusion, critics cannot dispute its impact on the American market. Singles like ‘*A Moment Like This*’, written principally for the climactic Grande Final to capture and dramatise the achievement and emotion of the winner “entered the Billboard Pop Charts at #52, and within a week it had leapt to #1, the closest rival for this sort of chart movement was the Beatles’ 1964 hit ‘*Cant Buy Me Love*’ which advanced from #27 to #1 in a single week” (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 214). The relative lack of success for NZ Idol inspired releases, as pointed out, failed to shelter the show from these well-worn criticisms.

New Zealand Musicians’ Attitudes Toward NZ Idol

Although some of those who participated in the survey did not watch NZ Idol consistently, most of the musicians had watched a few episodes or had been involved as a musician in at least one of the seasons. One section asked participants if they felt the winner of each season was who they believed to be the ‘right’ singer and the majority said no, indicating many of the arguably more talented musicians were voted out early or did not get through

the initial judging rounds. The judge's comments were also felt by some as detrimental to the success of some of the 'better' contestants:

"I think the judges comments are very important to the public, who often don't understand some of the subtleties about 'don't get comfortable' to a contestant who clearly sang the best – next week they are voted off. It's Bizarre!" (Participant Quote)

"They react to the judges negative comments and vote with emotions that the judges evoke by their stupid comments" (Participant Quote).

"Majority rules so what the majority vote for on the night is the 'right' person. However, whether they take into account the ability of the person overall is another question?" (Participant Quote)

Most musicians however were nonchalant about the outcome claiming,

"Most people who would vote for the best person probably aren't wasting their time watching" (Participant Quote)

"It doesn't matter who wins as they don't have much chance anyway... winners [are] less likely to maintain commercial careers... [As they] can't crack the commercial market" (Participant Quote).

It was evident to the musicians surveyed that NZ Idol contestants, whether they win or lose, are very unlikely to be able to maintain a long lasting or even short term commercially viable career. The reasons for this, participants agree, is the lack of talent in the winning artist because the country had voted for the wrong person to take out of the contest, or that the contestants "were crap in the first place". A stronger theme also focused on the fickleness of the public.

"The New Zealand public finds it hard to allow people to do well especially via the Idol shows – they find it easier to criticise than encourage" (Participant quote).

Comments were also made about the lack of support from the music industry itself.

"Lack of support from the industry infrastructure – infrastructure for this does not really currently exist in New Zealand. New Zealand does not make non-songwriters into stars except via reality TV shows" (Participant quote).

"Because the record companies want to make money from the 'initial stardom' and then drop them to start the new show. This is not a long-term thing otherwise they'd have five year contracts" (Participant quote).

A few participants believed that contestants did not succeed because they were unable to

cope with the aspects of celebrity that come along with the increased profile.

“Because they can’t handle the pitfalls of the industry, the attention, the criticism. Easier to let themselves fall off the radar” (Participant quote).

Others suggested reasons were; having too little experience and training; suffering from tall poppy within the community, or because they are not song-writers with their own material. According to some participants the reason Idol contestants were unable to succeed was;

“Because the industry doesn’t take them seriously. Because they haven’t been given enough training on how to deal with their career after the show has finished” and that “expectations of the world need to be adjusted to reality straight after TV exposure ends. They need a plan and management that doesn’t merely exploit. Management usually deserts Pop Idol winners as soon as ‘the ride’ is over”(Participant quote).

Most of these reasons given for the limited success of Idol participants cited the lack of industry support and musical community support. Indeed, very few of the respondents, even those involved in such communities, were willing to help or give work to any of the Idol participants. This lack of engagement was most likely due to the fact that employment in New Zealand for working musicians is scarce and no one wants to risk losing work to new entrants.

Another question asked professional musicians across the country to comment on their feelings about Pop Idol as an international phenomenon. Many answers were typical in terms of the way in which the media has reflected on NZ Idol over the past three years with participants claiming that this national talent quest is more like,

“...Glorified Karaoke competitions...reach a young audience who want a ‘star’ but forget about them when the next one starts” (Participant quote).

“NZ Idol is an embarrassment to NZ to be frank. The judges are pathetic as are the selection panel of producers and the staging and filming make it look like a B grade talent quest with crappy sound mixing” (Participant quote).

“It’s a joke, it’s not about good talent it’s about scandal and TV ratings the best talent gets missed” (Participant quote).

It was surprising however that several musicians had a more laissez -faire attitude and were not as forthcoming about their disdain for the show.

“Ultimately a singing competition – not a guarantee for ongoing success” (Participant quote)

“This is a televised, interactive talent quest which has little impact to musical culture but some contributions to the music scene” (Participant quote).

“The chance to make something of themselves in the public eye – not necessarily in music” (Participant quote).

However, still the overriding assumption of most musicians is that NZ Idol,

“In some ways [NZ Idol] cheapens the music scene. Not because of the concept but the way it is produced i.e. some of the contestants, production values and the credibility of the judges” (Participant quote).

“Overseas Idols – more entertaining, better talent because (1) Idol here is looked upon as a hideously embarrassing thing, if you consider yourself a “real musician” you would never “sell out” and fast track your way to success – thus they don’t audition (2) you get nothing out of it – no real or lasting benefits for going through what can be a really harsh and traumatising ordeal (3) production and musical aspects shit comparatively - US massive live band. Often in NZ Idol its some dude on a Casio as the backing – CHEAP” (Participant quote).

Despite these kinds of deprecating remarks, the musicians were not as critical of NZ Idol as was expected. The reasons for this I believe are firstly that the market of work is so small that being involved as a musician in the NZ Idol competition for over 10 weeks is something most musicians would love to do for the exposure, stable employment and pay. Secondly the community of musicians is extremely small so therefore one cannot say negative things about the business in other areas (simplex values seen here). A third reason may have been my own involvement in NZ Idol, for although the respondents remained anonymous, my direct involvement in the series was public knowledge. This knowledge may have tempered the tone of the responses. Another factor was that at least two participants, and possibly more, were involved in reality television series (PopStars) which helped them in their musical and or professional ambitions therefore they did not view talent contests as completely negative. Though having said that, the general tenor of the responses were critical of the series.

Characterising NZ Music

A common response to questions about the state of New Zealand music is that it is a work in progress, a small but developing industry of a very high standard. But this evolving

process cannot cope with the pressures introduced by a show like NZ Idol or accommodate winners. Once again the fact that New Zealand prides itself on the alternative music it produces adds an extra tension. As a general point musical taste remains a matter of interpretation. A music scene is, as Frith puts it:

“A matter of taste, that it involves a judgment which depends on the particular (changing, irrational) social and psychological circumstance of the person making it” (Frith, 1996: 72).

New Zealand music has developed its own distinctive sound with a focus on acoustic, guitar based and perhaps male dominated sounds, the opposite of the processed female dominant style of pop music. In the past popular music has tended to be more ‘rock’ based. However as one participant suggested over the last decade, with the introduction of radio play quotas, we are becoming more and more diverse as we are no longer solely a rock nation however the extent to which we have changed, I would suggest, is still relatively low.

Through documents such as *Creating Heat 2004*, audiences are assured that the New Zealand music scene is developing at an exceptional rate yet as Bollinger insists:

“This prediction seems to have less to do with music, and more to do with the industry surrounding it. Commercial radio is at last devoting a portion of its format to homespun discs, giving them a chance to become hits. Taskforces are being established to promote the economic potential of Kiwi Pop” (Bollinger, 2004: 107).

Mitchell claims that in 1957 imported American music comprised 97 percent of the New Zealand top twenty singles chart yet the strong cultural ties and connections with Britain shows a major influence in the “less commercially oriented sectors of the local music scene” (Mitchell, 1996: 215). One participant described New Zealand music as merely a copy of British music with its own idiosyncrasies and Mitchell looked extensively at the way in which local music borrows sounds from abroad (Mitchell, 1996: 215). For example Split Enz, one of the first New Zealand bands to gain international success had a real “Englishness” to their sound, especially on their early albums (Mitchell, 1996). Mitchell suggests that the lack of a distinct local or national musical product can be seen as “the multinational record companies continue to supply approximately 90 percent of the domestic market” (Roy Shuker cited in Mitchell, 1996: 217). Mitchell argues that the cultural identity or identifiable characteristics of New Zealand music are not easily

recognised, apart from the distinctive features of Maori and Polynesian music, which have not in the past crossed over into the popular music scene to a great extent. In today's market I would suggest that the cross over or influence of Polynesian and Maori sounds are at the forefront of music with the success of OMC's international hit 'How Bizarre' and through recent artist such as Nesian Mystic, Sara Jane Auva and Scribe just to name a few, whose ethnicity has greatly influenced their sounds. However any overseas successes, apart from the one-hit-wonder 'How Bizarre', have been from bands such as Split Enz or Crowded House who "have few identifiably Aoeteroa /New Zealand features" (Mitchell, 1996: 218). As unlike Australia and other countries New Zealand does not have an overtly indigenous musical instrument such as a didgeridoo (Mitchell, 1996).

Another local belief is that in order to be seen as a successful musician one must leave the country and pursue international fame. This belief is evident within the general public and the musical community and can be seen through such importance placed on Neil Finn's receipt of an OBE. The break-up of Split Enz was reported in a New Zealand Herald as identifying a typical dilemma that, national recognition depended on having "to leave the country to achieve it" (Mitchell, 1996: 220-221). Even the musicians themselves understand this importance and give as their reason for staying away from their homelands, problems within the New Zealand music scene. For example Neil Finn in the monthly music magazine 'Rip it up' (no longer in print) described the New Zealand scene as stuck in a 'garage mentality' where essential industry support for struggling bands was unforthcoming and that there was an urgent need for a 'centralising figure' as 'musical minorities' were unable to survive (Mitchell, 1996: 221-222).

Describing Kiwi Audience Tastes

Professional musicians across the country felt that the Tall Poppy syndrome affected their chances as local audiences are likely to be more critical, more particular and more reserved in their musical tastes when it comes to homegrown music and are more inclined to attend overseas acts or concerts rather than support anything homegrown. This lack of support for local New Zealand material could also be said about audience reactions to the PopStars or the NZ Idol series and the support for the musicians that appear on such shows:

"I think New Zealander's have a real problem embracing certain aspects of our

industry... Americans love anything on TV, whatever it is, whoever it is, whatever they're doing they eat it up- a monkey juggling a piano could be the next big thing in the States. We [New Zealanders] are totally different. We see through all the TV schmaltz, all the set up, we're a lot more jaded about reality, but sometimes too much to the point that we find it hard to celebrate some of the truly awesome performers this country has to offer" (Participant quote).

The tall poppy ethos of New Zealanders was also constantly discussed in reference to audiences.

"They don't seem to be as willing to let NZ musicians succeed (Tally Poppy Syndrome) especially those who try the instant stardom path... They are not passionate or supportive of new talent" (Participant quote).

The 'Hard Yards'

The Kiwi culture of 'doing it yourself' is also important in the Music Industry especially in today's technological era where a band can record its own album relatively simply in its garage or promote themselves through using 'my-space' and other internet forums. The notion of 'doing the hard yards' obviously connects with the idea of developing a deserved success through hard work and diffuses the tall poppy syndrome. The instant stardom path, through shows such as Pop Idol, is discouraged. Even within the show itself references to doing those hard yards can be seen in the quote below from one of the judges,

"...Didn't take the judges comments well – she showed a lot of arrogance both on and off camera! She hasn't done the years to show that kind of arrogance yet and hasn't earned the right to act like a Prima Donna...in other words; you can't act like a diva until you become a diva" (Stevens, 2006: 16)

This statement emphasises the importance of 'paying your dues' even when participating in a format that prides itself on creating instant stars. The belief that musicians must 'do the hard yards' is one that has been historically prominent as there has always been "the belief that musicians must serve an apprenticeship, must progress through fixed stages" (Frith, 1996: 36) before they are eligible or competent enough to play.

The ideas of instant stardom invoked a differing mix of responses from the musicians surveyed. Many dismissed the idea saying that there is no such thing, as every musician or performer must do a vast amount of work "before the camera's roll" and that it is ok or necessary to use any means to attain success. One participant stated that a lucky opportunity or "instant stardom must go hand in hand with talent and hard work" otherwise

they will eventually be unsuccessful:

“Ok if they have the goods to make it last.” (Participant quote)

“Only works if the star is ready professionally for the opportunity.” (Participant quote)

“I have no problem with it; if it helps you achieve your goals then go for it” (Participant quote)

One musician participant, whose initial claim to fame came through Reality Television over seven years ago, attacked the prominent anti-instant stardom mentality:

“How many people who have ‘done the hard yards’ would’ve jumped at the opportunity to get there a bit faster...I wish people would just stop whining about it and if someone has talent- enjoy, respect, regardless of how many R.S.A’s they’ve played in their time” (Participant quote).

Many participants maintained that the instant stardom route was acceptable so long as it was based on talent, a factor very unlikely in today’s reality television phenomenon.

“Depends on how the instant stardom is achieved, if it is purely based on talent then it’s an opportunity not to be looked over. We’re all looking for a break... sometimes if you’re worth it; it’s not as hard as you think.” (Participant quote)

There was definitely a strong trend amongst my sample for instant stardom to be seen in predominantly negative terms.

“Instant stardom is not respected among people 30 plus...It seems somewhat inconsequential in the long run as finding sustained sources of work is more important and do not necessarily result from instant stardom”. (Participant quote)

“I think you fall as fast as you rise with instant stardom. But then that’s not to say you haven’t done the hard work to be there in the first place.” (Participant quote)

Since instant stardom would undercut the notion of the hard yards, it was not surprising that this was viewed with antipathy or suspicion.

Defining the Attributes for a Successful Career

Apart from all the attributes you would find in a classic text on how to be successful – attitude, dedication, determination, things that would be important in any career and in any country, there were a few other things described as being unique to New Zealand in the participant questionnaire. Firstly versatility was stated as an important feature of survival in

the New Zealand Music Industry, something that would not be so important overseas where a country artist would solely put their dedication into country music for example. Of course this happens in New Zealand but in very few cases one would be able to sustain a career in one style of music therefore many musicians tend to focus on being versatile. Even if a musician has dedicated himself to mastering one style or one specific part of music this does not necessarily mean that he will be the first choice in terms of studio work, TV gigs and so forth. This is one effect of networking as mentioned above. Having to be versatile in the sense of not specialising is another reason why a depth of musicianship is hard to develop in New Zealand.

Song writing talent is another important skill to have in the New Zealand music scene. Throughout the survey it became clear that singer/songwriters are respected as the only 'real' artists by the industry. This attitude prevails in the community. Song writing as OMC proves can make for commercial viability both through building an unique appeal and lowering costs on royalty payments. This coincides with the do-it-yourself musical culture and the rejection of commercialised pop music. A comment made by an Idol judge about a contestant reinforces this:

“Ben is another who I think will stay in music, because he genuinely loves it. As an added bonus he writes his own music, which is what it's all about long term” (Stevens, 2006: 12).

He goes on to suggest that at the conclusion of the show is when contestants must begin their hard-yards.

“But this is where the real test starts... Now it's down to how much they want to make a career in the music industry” (Stevens, 2006: 9).

Other attributes needed to succeed in the New Zealand Music Industry that were mentioned by musicians was to do with having the ability to manage rejection by having a “thick skin”:

“A thick skin, talent and the ability to earn the respect of the New Zealand public” (Participant quote).

“A thick skin, being industry savvy, talent and a belief in what you are doing” (Participant quote).

Reasons for Craft Commitment

As was expected, when musicians were asked why they initially decided to pursue music, the most common answer was nearly always to do with ‘passion’. Musicians claimed to have a love for music that went beyond being a spectator and that it was what they were “born to do”. Dependant on the type of musician, for example a singer, often answered differently to an instrumentalist. Answers also included the emotional needs that were met through music, the adoration and attention that came with it was also a draw card. Taking a punt was another response as was falling into the profession accidentally:

“From a musical family I always wanted to as a teenager and the decision to become a freelancer was based on the financial reality of securing enough work to be secure.”
(Participant quote)

“The desire to sing and emulate singers I admired...emotional needs met by performing.”
(Participant quote)

“It was something I had done from a very early age. It felt like the natural path to take but I literally fell into it. This is what I was born to do.” (Participant quote)

“It excited me and I sung all the time anyway by myself, so it was natural.” (Participant quote)

Defining Success

The word success originates from the Latin word ‘successus’, which comes from the word ‘succedere’, to ‘come close after’. The definitions of success according to The Concise Oxford Dictionary are, firstly the accomplishment of an aim or purpose, and/ or the attainment of fame, wealth, or social status. When musicians were asked to provide their definition of success the most common answer was that to be successful one must be notable or have ones reputation validated by others.

“Primarily – a sane evaluation of your own work as being the best you could do at the time, secondary – the acceptance of that work by others and becoming popular, important and significant in the genre of music you have chosen” (Participant quote)

This response replicates Frith’s finding that in order to be successful or musically talented one must make the correct decisions about musical quality. But it is only by other people or other musicians that these decisions can be legitimised and affirmed (Frith, 1996: 52). It was also important to many musicians to be a part of a community of musicians and that those in that community had already attained a certain amount of success through the

validation of their peers.

Personal Goals: A couple of contestants claimed that reaching their own goals was one of the most important factors in determining their success as well as enjoying the development of their craft.

“Achieving all the goals you set for yourself whether that be fame/ fortune or just releasing an album or just playing gigs.” (Participants quote)

“Giving joy to others and being honest to your gift.” (Participant quote)

Fame

The idea of fame or becoming famous was never claimed as a primary objective by any musician in the sample. They were more comfortable with the notions of “honouring [your] own gift” or “touching people” which are essentially craft values related to performance and musicianship. As observed before the New Zealand cultural emphasis on being ordinary and self-effacing may be a factor conditioning these responses.

“Fame is bullshit...money might be considered success, I’ll let you know when I make enough” (Participant quote).

An aspect of fame is financial security. This is important in an occupation world where job tenure is fleeting and musicians are continually on the hunt for work. As discussed earlier it is also noted that those who earn the most money are not necessarily the most talented or ‘successful’ in the eyes of the musicians as they are often just the lucky few intertwined in New Zealand’s version of the simplex.

With the prominence of instant stardom in today’s culture, where fame is fleeting, longevity or staying power is another marker of success. A number of respondents made explicit reference to longevity as a personal objective:

“I think to have people respect you for your talent, your skill, and to be able to touch people with that is true success – if your voice and music can last past your time and still be referred to as classic!” (Participant quote)

“To have longevity, to be part of a culture and in the memories of people in a meaningful way. To be recognised as important to culture i.e. iconic and valuable.” (Participant quote)

“The number of years they have been around and record sales, ABBA would be the best example.” (Participant quote)

As the mention of ABBA suggests the artists or bands that were considered the ‘best’ did not necessarily correlate with those regarded as the most commercially successful. Negus illustrates this point in his work *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, 1999:

“The most interesting bands musically (at least for me) were the strange, unpredictable mixtures... These were not necessarily the most successful, either in commercial terms, or according to their ability to communicate with large numbers of people” (Negus, 1999: 6).

But Negus added that the musicians that became the most successful were the bands that understood exactly what genre they were playing thus they “recognized its musical and social boundaries and understood what their audiences wanted to hear, see and be told” (Negus, 1999: 6). This is particularly the case for all musicians operating in a small market. But I would also suggest that this is directly important for NZ Idol contestants who are asked to tackle a different genre each week yet needed to display in each performance their own particular style. They needed to know and construct through their performance exactly what their target audience wanted to see and hear.

The question ‘What kind of music do you play’ is one a musician is continually asked to answer (Negus, 1999: 4), even in this survey. This expectation of genre specialisation can be seen directly throughout the NZ Idol series. Despite the fact most musicians would claim “we don’t like to classify ourselves” (Negus, 1999: 4) a working musician must be able to answer this question as any refusal to do so would be deterrent in securing work. In order to be successful as a musician one must also be able to know when the genre lines could be crossed and when they must be adhered to:

“We got to know venues in which we could be ‘a bit poppy’, where we could get away with extended jams (improvisation); where we had to be a bit heavy (the rows of motorbikes parked outside the pub or club were usually a clue); and where we could – or more importantly could not – inflict on the audience attempts at funk workouts or introduce reggae rhythms into rock ‘n’ roll standards” (Negus, 1999: 4-5).

Intrinsic Star Quality

As the NZ Idol series progresses, the surviving contestants all seem to be in possession of the required singing ability, therefore the issue of ‘charisma’ becomes increasingly

important. The judges discuss in detail the contestants' physical presentation – their clothing, their posture and their facial expressions (Reijnders et al, 2007). The idea or importance of intrinsic star quality or x-factor is especially evident in overseas Pop Idol shows but can also be seen, although perhaps not as overtly, though the judges comments in NZ Idol also. One judge commented that right from the beginning he knew who had “the goods” to win the entire competition:

“Right from the beginning I felt these two had it in them” (Stevens. 2006).

The judge's comments from the Theatre Round (screened 31/7/06) also reflected these ideas as they began to distinguish between ‘natural’ talent and experience and this natural talent was deemed ‘better’.

“You have real energy which is natural”, “you’re a breath of fresh air” (Theatre Round episode 31/7/06)

This idea of intrinsic star quality is mostly focused on in the final stages of the competition as initially the judges use far more measurable criteria for their selection of contestants yet in the final stages this selection or ranking becomes a choice governed “by more intuitive signals” (Reijnders et al, 2007: 283).

“In fact, a term like the ‘X factor’ demonstrates the judges’ inability or reluctance to give logical reasons for their choices. By using the term ‘X factor’, the judges attribute seemingly natural, charismatic powers to the selected candidates” (Reijnders et al, 2007: 283).

The elusive ‘x-factor’ or ‘star quality’ so often focused on in Pop Idol competitions is a label that is sometimes hard to determine or explain and throughout the surveys many of the musician's answers illustrated its indefinable quality:

“X-factor is different to peoples taste” (Participant quote).

“X-factor comes from within” (Participant quote).

“I know it when I see it” (Participant quote).

None of these statements from participating musicians explain its meaning and yet all agree on its importance. Some of the musicians who took part in the questionnaire associated star quality with originality and the ability to connect with your audience, other suggested that it

was to do with having the whole package and being able to intrigue their audience and gain their respect. Others just claimed x-factor to be the “magic” in one’s performance.

“This is someone who has the package. The combination of all three but can also intrigue their audiences and gain their respect” (Participant quote).

“X-factor is difficult to describe. You have it or you don’t. It’s obvious if its there. It does differ. You can be the most talented musician in the world but lack x-factor” (Participant quote).

One thing that was agreed was the idea that star quality only works if the performer is talent and/or their musicianship is outstanding, as one can be talented without having x-factor but cannot have the x-factor without the talent:

“Star Quality” converges with talent. There can be talent and no ‘star quality’ but ‘star quality’ cannot exist without musicianship i.e. total command of instrument or performance as well” (Participant quote).

“The X factor draws people to you and translates into real star power” (Cowell, 2003: 4).

No matter how one defines X-factor or star quality, its importance within the Music Industry and more specifically within the Pop Idol shows, is evident and is seen to enhance a contestant’s success.

The popularity of music is fundamentally determined by the tastes of the listener, which depends in turn on his or her identity, social background and the cultural influences that have helped shape their views and expectations. There is therefore a strong connection between social or cultural values and musical tastes (Frith, 1996). In New Zealand the cultural influences can be seen to be very strong, particularly with regard to the notions of natural talent and a corresponding emphasis on fitting in (tall poppy syndrome).

Accordingly, instant stardom through shows such as NZ Idol is difficult for local musicians to accept and this seems to be true of many audiences. Throughout the survey it became evident that NZ Idol was not deemed to be of great musical importance however what was interesting was the fact that most of the musicians surveyed were more indifferent or ambivalent than opposing and they did not harbor a major distaste for the show. This result perhaps reflected the fact that in a lean labour market, any work, even appearing on such shows can be seen to be advantageous to musicians struggling for employment. I would suggest that those musicians, or original artists, who are in the public consciousness and are

not competing for the work, are perhaps more forthcoming about their disdain for such shows.

Chapter Six: The Meanings of Contestant Experience

“Particularly as Reality TV formats have continued to appear, their audiences but crucially their participants have become increasingly familiar with and well versed in the forms and conventions of these show – it is now routine, for example, for participants to talk explicitly about the politics of how they are being ‘represented’ at the level of the text itself” (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004:11-12).

The impact of the Big Brother phenomenon has created common knowledge of how the process of performing on television works and what the expectations surrounding the format are. The rewards are equally understood and television is no longer regarded as a ‘quasi-mystical phenomenon’, but rather something that if worked in the right way, can help people to reach the status they desire (Lumby, 2003: 12).

An understanding of the way in which contestants are used and manipulated throughout the medium of Reality Television formats, and specifically Pop Idol shows, is clear from participant comments, media commentary and from the narratives of the show itself. As discussed the concept of the “real” and the authentic are important values promulgated and repetitiously interrogated by the shows and the surrounding commentary. These values are explicitly understood by the Idol contestants who are constantly competing for airtime and more importantly for public votes. For example, the winning contestant from Season Three understood that the singing aspect came secondary to the “moments of truth” or authenticity he could give to his audiences:

“I think for me to do my best I had to completely be myself and wear my heart on my sleeve” (Saunoo cited in Davies, 2006:8).

A quote offered by the runner up about another contestant who continually received bad press not only from the judges but also from the media itself illustrated the implicit need for authenticity:

“The thing about Aroha is that what you see on TV is what she is. People can be grateful they know what Aroha is like, whereas there have been other contestants who are totally different on camera to what they are in real life” (Moala cited in Hudson, U. 2006: 16).

It is important that the contestants themselves understand the importance of being ‘authentic’ despite their awareness of the contrived nature of a Talent Contest. In other words, the contestants engage in authentication work. Since the focus of such shows is

primarily on creating dramatically appealing television rather than accurate representation, it follows that it is not authenticity but the authentication of performance that is the key issue. Contestants are expected to appear natural or 'real' under conditions, which are highly constructed and mediated. (Moore, 2002). But in any performance however, is anyone ever actually real? Even if one accepts that there is an authentic or 'real' self is it reasonable to expect people to be 'real' in the context of a Talent Contest? Not only are the contestants placed in a strange and artificial environment, they have to cope with challenges from rivals, meet the expectations of the contest judges and answer to the quite different demands of being popular with audiences. Yet authenticity is expected and the contestants strive to outdo each other in the revelation of their 'inner' feelings.

Managing Performance

During the NZ Idol process producers constantly stressed the fact that NZ Idol is not just a singing contest, contestants will be judged on every aspect of their self-presentation:

“The judges critique the auditioners’ gestures, clothing, facial expression and manner along with her/his voice” (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 219).

The process of evaluation is not just undertaken by the judges but by the audience so the way a contestant performs when they are not singing can help determine particular voting results:

“Kelly [Clarkson] also knew that singing was only part of the competition, and the way she acted when she wasn’t singing was just as important. Whenever the contestant would say goodbye to a departed singer and start crying, she would be right there in the middle of it. When one of us complimented her onstage, she has this little trick of looking humble” (Cowell, 2003: 171-172).

The contestants in a sense undergo rites of passage on the way to success. Commentators have observed that there are three stages to be negotiated. Firstly, after being plucked from their normal lives, where they display their ordinary selves a period of transformation begins where contestants are tested and guided through this change. Once the changes and transformations have occurred the transformed 'stars' are readmitted into the community with their newfound status and we see the end result:

“The 'ordinary boy' is transformed into 'the Dutch Idol'. The journey ends with a final chorus, amid family, friends and those who did not make it to the finish line” (Reijnders et

al, 2007: 285).

The contestant journey imposes an additional set of demands that must be met if an actual singing performance is to translate into success. It is at this stage that the projection of the self as likeable and ordinary becomes an expectation that contestants must address. To accomplish this process a number of ‘real-time’ activities or challenges are organised by the producers. (Reijnders et al, 2007: 287). Such activities provide in turn useable ‘live’ footage consistent with the conventions of Reality Television.

‘Dom’s Day Out’

Contestants not only are expected to focus on their own singing performances which can be in new and unfamiliar styles or musical genres, they are also required to engage in publicity stunts and activities aimed to popularise the show and enhance their own popularity. This involved, on a weekly basis, magazine and radio interviews as well as spending one day each week filming a different outing for the ‘Dom’s Day Out’ segment which after editing became an interlude within the show on a Sunday night. These outings would usually take half to a full day to film and would be edited into a minute slot with small sound bites of each person saying something funny, endearingly revealing or just plain embarrassing. This practice recalls Wheelock Stahl’s observation that the appeal of reality shows rests on two narratives or story lines. The first concerns stories of authentication involving those “autobiographical vignettes” and the second stories of humiliation, mostly seen in the first audition phase of the show but also brought about by some of the contestants’ reactions to particular tasks or outings (Wheelock Stahl, 2004).

In the case of NZ Idol, every week a task was designed to provide some good Reality TV footage. Such ‘Dom’s Day Out’ activities were not confirmed from the onset on the show but changed throughout the process, which meant contestant’s had no opportunity to prepare for the ensuing challenges. As a result contestants were put into situations that were strange and not of their own choosing. Given the omnipresent camera and Dominic Bowden’s running commentary questioning the possibility of refusal was limited because it would create an impression of aloofness and an unwillingness to join in the “fun”. The importance of these activities was emphasised by the fact that one contestant who gained a place in the Top 18 in Season Three was informed before her first solo appearance that she

could no longer participate in the show as she was pregnant and the activities involved were such things as bungee-jumping (Trevett, 2006: 6). Ironically bungee jumping was cut from the list of activities to be filmed mainly due to budgeting issues.

During the Top 10 round the first event was walking the Harbour Bridge, the segment used as the opening shot to introduce New Zealand to its new Top 10. Any phobia a contestant may have, such as a fear of heights, must now be instantly overcome so as not to draw attention to themselves and risk appearing foolish on the 'Dom's Day Out' segment. An America's Cup Yacht outing was next on the agenda for the Top 9 week. Each contestant had to have a turn driving the yacht and was asked to say something funny for a sound bite. Both the director and producer were on this outing to make sure they had enough useable footage. Contestants were prompted to say something more, or something funny with the implicit understanding that a "dull" or unusable interview or sound bite would affect the popularity of their image. Again stressing the importance of the 'reality behind the reality' (Holmes, 2004) as discussed in chapter two, as contestants must show themselves as real on and off stage even when the off stage activities are highly scripted.

Other 'Dom's Day Out activities included visits to schools to show the contestants as newly made celebrities, documenting their reactions as they progress from being ordinary people to stars in the making. All contestant comments reflect this understanding. Contestants were also filmed on outings that had a 'helping' the community theme such as visits to Starship hospital, with contestant responses like the following:

"We had all these beautiful kids. They were bald because they were cancer kids. They were running up to us... You couldn't stay in that place and not cry" (Moala cited in Hudson, 2006: 16).

These activities focused on contestants as "moral individuals" doing service to the community or their family and friends. Episodes included hospital visits and teaching school choirs (seen in episode 2 of the Piano Round) and so forth. These segments permitted the contestants to display their ordinariness despite their increasing celebrity status (Wheelock Stahl, 2004).

Other segments in Season Three included learning the trapeze, going to a "haunted

mansion” called ‘Spookers’ both placing the Idols out of their comfort zones, being frightened or excited and how they handle certain situations, thus revealing another layer of their ‘true selves’. During the semi finals each contestant had a family member or spouse who was the proud recipient of a makeover, once again another way to get to know the Idol by meeting their family who in turn spoke of their Idol as being both down to earth (ordinary and real) but always knowing they were going to be a ‘star’ suggesting that their star quality was also innate (Wheelock Stahl, 2004).

“I always expected her to be in the limelight... Indira is my best friend. I have always known she is going to be famous” (Moala, cited in Hudson, 2006: 16).

Finally, as is the case with the format around the globe, the Top 2 contestants leave the Idol house and head back to their hometowns to thank those that have supported them. This typifies the progression of the contestant from ‘ordinary hopeful’ to a full grown ‘star’. The reactions of family members and of the contestants themselves continue to suggest the intrinsic nature of star quality as they maintain that they always knew they were going to be famous. The interviewing of family members and camera shots of them in the front row lovingly watching their son/ daughter/ partner sing with “proud looks and the odd tear confirm the love that encircles the finalists” (Reijnders et al, 2007: 283). Such activities,

“Serve as a symbolic bridge to the infatuated studio audience, with the finalists at the heart of an apparently rich social network... thus the singing ... is a metaphor for something else: social success” (Reijnders et al, 2007).

Such activities underscored the importance of displaying the ‘ordinary’ attributes or staying ‘grounded’ or avoiding ‘social distance’ from the audience despite celebrity status. Any comment or attitude seen as arrogant was quickly attacked by the press and/ or the judges during the following show, for example one contestants attitude was frowned upon in ‘Frankie’s Column’ (Stevens, 2006) claiming that she had no right to act in such a way until she had worked her way up proving she deserved a “diva status”. New Zealand’s Tall Poppy syndrome is active in comments such as these as well as the efforts of the producers to represent the contestants as ‘authentically’ ordinary.

The Wheels of Publicity

Publicity played an extremely important part in ensuring a contestant's success because regardless of his or her talent or star qualities, without publicity the audience cannot be reached. "Hype" must be generated and the media is the tool through which this occurs. In the press the more interesting the articles the more beneficial to the contestant who is constantly vying for votes. The interaction between the Idol contestants and the magazine media was negotiated through the two Idol publicists. A publicist contacts contestants when a story comes up that a publication is interested in running prior to the first round of performance shows. The publicist then preps contestants and suggests topics or angles that would be appropriate to talk about or focus on. The normal procedure, once an interview and photo shoot is organized, is that the contestant then meets the magazine reporter and photographer and, most often, the photos are taken before the interview begins. The interview is recorded onto a dictaphone with open-ended questions, for example "tell me how you met". Notions of objectivity are replaced by a "free indirect" reporting style where direct quotes from the interviewees are replaced by the reporter's interpretation of what is said, how it should be interpreted and the reporters own reactions to the interview subject. This style at best claims to capture the essence of the interview but it also provides the reporter with great interpretative latitude in deciding which angles are most important. This can be seen through one of my interviews where one small statement I had made became the headline for the entire piece *Doing it for Dad*. This article was in print the week before my Piano Round (Graham, 2006) and during the competition it became clear that some contestants were given a lot more publicity opportunities than others, which resulted in some underlying tension.

As a participant my experience of publicity took the following form:

On July 31st 2006 before I had entered the Idol house I was asked to do an unpaid New Idea photo shoot and article. A photographer and reporter came to my home to shoot the photos and conduct the interview, which focused mainly on my late father and my current band. For this particular interview, a publicist did not accompany me. This was in contrast to interviews after my elimination when both publicists were present and, especially in the newspaper interviews, both tried to drive the direction of the interview.

During the first week of the Top 10 a woman's magazine shoot for the whole group was

organised and each contestant had their own publicity shots taken at the same time, these photos were used on official websites and in publicity articles. The theme for the Season Three finalists was 'rock' with every contestant dressed in the way of a rock star (Milne, 2006). During this shoot no questions were asked by the reporter however the reporter was observing everybody's behavior, of which contestants were unaware, and wrote an article, without naming names, about some of the bad manners or attitudes displayed by a few of the Idols.

A few weeks into the competition another shoot for a woman's magazine was organized for the female contestants only and this time only photos were taken, no story, and each contestant were dressed in clothes from a specific era like the 50's or 60's (George, 2006). This idea was directly taken from a shoot used by Australian Idol the previous year.

Whilst participating in NZ Idol and living in the Idol House I was asked to do another woman's magazine article, this time with a fellow band member and was basically about the advice she had given me as she had already been through a similar process on another Reality Television show 'PopStars'. Photos were taken and the magazine was set to be released the week after however due to my elimination the article had to be altered and came out two weeks later and changed to become an article about getting advice on how to further my career.

After my elimination I was asked to be in another woman's magazine. The focus of the article was basically on love and relationships - any article about relationships and love are generally highly paid depending on the quality of the story and the look of the applicant. Each Idol that left the house got a paid article (except two contestants). These articles were basically human-interest stories, which focused the emotional dimensions of the topic and a contestant's emotional reactions for the purposes of bonding.

After a contestants elimination from NZ Idol s/he must appear on both 'Breakfast' and 'Studio 2', both TVNZ shows, as an interviewee where questions, dependant on which programme, were asked 'live' (these appearances are a part of the contract). Also live interviews on various radio stations were conducted via telephone and questions were very different depending on which demographic the radio was pitching to, these interviews only

ever lasted a couple of minutes. An interview for the Herald and Sunday Star was also organised for most contestants and one or both of the publicists would sit in on the interview. In my particular interview the publicists were there to ensure I was not saying anything out of line, for example on 'Breakfast' I said that "I felt like I was in prison", which was not appreciated by the publicist. In the newspaper interviews a focus on the gossip behind the scenes was evident.

Contestant Motives

It is interesting to question contestant motives in a situation where there is no obvious or established career path and continuing success is not guaranteed to winners. This precarious situation, which the contestants to some extent appreciated, raises the question, what do contestants think they will get from competing? In NZ Idol the chances of winning are extremely remote and there is perhaps more to lose than gain in terms of singing career prospects once the show is over. One contestant admitted in a newspaper article that "she used to think NZ Idol was a joke" yet decided to enter anyway. Others in Season Three were perhaps oblivious to the perceived failure of previous winners or possibly felt they had more talent or potential to succeed:

"It's been a little bit of a disappointment to see where Rosita (Vai) and Ben Lummis have gone in previous years and I'm definitely someone who wants to take it all the way" (Moala cited in Hudson, 2006: 16).

This contestant felt entering NZ Idol would actually immensely help her recording or performing careers:

"I plan to build a trusting relationship with a record company and record an album in the next year or 18 months" (Moala cited in Hudson, 2006: 16).

This contestant therefore claims that she is more ambitious than past winners and their lack of drive was the reason why they did not succeed:

"I'm ambitious enough to make something of myself. That's totally where my passion, where my vision is for my life" (Moala cited in Hudson, 2006: 7).

During the same article the runner-up goes on to say that even success in New Zealand is not enough and that she would plan to take her music overseas, claiming to be that much more talented or ambitious than other contestants:

“One of my goals is to go further than this country. It wouldn’t be enough for me just to be big in New Zealand” (Moala cited in Hudson, 2006: 7).

One must note however that these statements were made during the lead up to the finals and that contestants were vying for \$50,000. These expectations changed dramatically when the season finished as the same runner-up in a later article, about five months after the series finale, claimed that NZ Idol had ruined her career.

Many contestants enter NZ Idol obviously to gain profile as a few of the Top 10 participants simply entered to help their, already existing, covers bands to secure work and perhaps charge greater fees or wanted to use the profile and television experience gained from entering to further a television career, not a musical one. Yet some contestants did believe the exposure would contribute to their musical careers.

“Next week I will be full-on meeting people in the industry to talk about my future in music” (Moala cited in Laurent, 2006: 3).

The Season Three winner was perhaps in a worse position compared to both Season One and Two as an album contract was not guaranteed despite the fact that this was advertised as a major part of the prize. Even where an album contract was offered this was dependent on, so to speak, winning again as the production of an album depended on the success of a single.

It is perhaps not surprising given the limited opportunities to jump start a singing career, that the prize money was a major factor for many of the contestants. One of the judges claimed that the,

“Winner of this year’s reality TV singing show could be richer by \$200,000” and that previous winners “Ben Lummis and Rosita Vai made ‘good money’ from their success, despite being dismissed in some quarters as one-hit wonders” (Steven’s cited in Davies, 2006: 15).

He went on, in the same article, to say that the combined value of the cash and the car was about 80 grand and that they would also make money out of the album and the single.

However the winner received no money for the single nor was an album recorded.

Arguably the most accurate statement made by Frankie Stevens was,

“NZ Idol is changing somebody’s life for a period of time...it will give them a bloody good start if they are smart enough. They’ll network it; make their connections with the media” (Steven’s cited in Davies 2006:15).

Yet as already observed networking is no guarantee of success in a music business that consistently rejects made-for-television singers. This is most apparent in the fact that not one of the Idols has had any long-lasting musical success beyond appearing on other Reality Television shows such as Pops Ultimate Star and other forms of the Reality Television format. Perhaps as Reijnders et al. (2007) suggests the prizes offered can tell us more about the underlying value systems and in NZ Idols case were perhaps used as a ploy to try and secure more legitimate talent. Certainly the apparent popularity with audiences as registered by SMS voting did not translate into record sales.

Winning the prize money was, undoubtedly, a major factor for many contestants, however the prize money itself was very rarely mentioned on screen during the competition and when it was it was always to do with helping others within their families for example,

“For a young family trying to make it you need security and for me that comes in the form of a house. So I’m going to put a deposit on a house” (Saunoa cited in Davies, 2006: 8).

Yet contestants freely talked about the money off screen as their main motivation for entering both at the initial stages as well as near the end of the competition. A contract was even drawn up by the final two contestants who both agreed to give a small cut of the prize money to the eventual runner-up so they both walked away with something.

It is not only the contestants who had specific reasons for entering NZ Idol but also the judges however their motivations are slightly different but, like the contestants, are to do with the increased profile and exposure but with the result ending in financial gains:

“It increases profile. It’s a great youth profile, because kids who watch it are the new audience... My original audiences are dying and my new audience is just being born. It’s nice” (Stevens cited in Davies, 2006:15).

How Motivations Changed

There were differences in the motivations of contestants before, during and after the show. The talk between the surviving contestants in the final week were most often about money,

about how much money each contestant made from their magazine interviews and how you could sell stories to the women's magazines for more money. It was openly discussed by one contestant that his plan was to sell a personal relationship story for publication during the finale. This subsequently happened.

There was an evident shift in terms of the focus on the grand prize money as the number of contestants got smaller and the chances of receiving the money increased. More emphasis was placed on strategy and song choice as well as other aspects of the competition especially at the Top 4.

Contestants were continually thanking, on screen, the vocal coaches and musical director for their expertise and input into their performances. I would suggest that the likely motive for this was to emphasise that their participation in the contest was to learn from and establish a name with those high up in the musical community. This may be true for some of the younger contestants who actually did gain more from their input. However I would suggest this was more of a politically correct answer from some of the older contestants who were already in the industry in some way and even competing with the "experts" for work.

Throughout press interviews contestants were asked to say what they had learnt whilst competing on Idol and many claimed to have learnt more about the craft of singing and performing. Other beneficial cultural lessons were cited: for example the notion that in New Zealand in order to become successful you must become a songwriter:

"One thing I've learnt from this competition is that if you're going to make it in the New Zealand Industry- because its such a small industry – you've got to get into songwriting. So that's definitely something that's on my agenda" (Saunoa cited in South, 2006).

Season Three had a major focus on the behind the scenes reality aspects of the competition and, as mentioned before, one of the motives producers seemed to concentrate on was contestants entering the competition to make someone else proud especially focusing on someone close to them who had passed away, like a family member or friend. The motivation of entering for someone else was spoken of so often it became ridiculed with a judge claiming that soon contestants would say they were "doing it for the yellow eyed

penguin” (Stables, 2006: 24). Other motivations were centered on making people proud, especially close family members and particularly one’s children:

“That’s when I had to remind myself why I was doing the competition – I was there on behalf of my family” (Saunooa cited in Davies, 2006: 8).

“It’s given chills up my spine that my son has all these tapes to watch when he’s older. I feel proud” (Saunooa cited in Davies, 2006: 8).

Another factor that gave NZ Idol a particular dynamic was the nature of New Zealand as a multi-cultural society located at the periphery of the global media. Contestants were encouraged to perceive their own success as a contribution to their ethnic group or region. This was most apparent in the emphasis placed on locality and the desire to make their hometown proud. Ideas such as these are illustrated both on the show itself as well as in other media texts such as the press and in radio and television programmes dedicated to smaller regions or minority cultures. The contestants were often portrayed in a manner that represented their ethnicity or their region, for example one contestant was continually referred to as ‘Miss Tonga’ and another as the ‘Te Puke Princess’. The host would emphasise regionalism by appealing to audience members from the South Island to “save their only Idol representative” (Host comment episode 18) through SMS voting. This regionalism is not only something seen in NZ Idol but also seen in overseas formats, specifically in American Idol when contestants in the final stages are taken “home” and honored by the town mayors, given a “key to the city” and/ or receiving a day which will be named in honor of them and their achievements on the American Idol stage (American Idol Season 5). Although this is much more extreme than in NZ Idol, small towns, especially in Season Three, did place billboards, run fundraising activities and so on, in order to keep their towns representative in the competition.

Perceived Benefits

The actual motivations of the contestants represent the subjective reality of the show. Just as, if not more, important are the actual opportunities for personal growth as well as career advancement that the show provides. It is widely understood that the career opportunities for Idol contestants once the show is over are limited, if not by the contestants’ ability, then by the small scale of the Music Industry in general. Given these circumstances, how did the participants perceive the benefits of participation?

The contestants themselves had various ideas about the ways in which NZ Idol has helped them. This is apparent in their interviews on camera and with other forms of media. Nearly everything suggested is about personal growth in terms of their own attitudes, confidence and musical ability:

“I’ve learnt a lot about how to handle pressure while on Idol...Not just the pressure of performing and working so hard but things like peer pressure and manipulation. It’s really been an eye opener” (Laurent, 2006: 3).

“My confidence levels have gone up, my performance has improved, but I definitely tested myself. I’ve never sung anything like this before, any pop or rock or soul. It was cool” (Kopae cited in Davies, 2006).

One of the judges believes contestants on NZ Idol have the advantage of gaining contacts within the industry, “what it did for her as make her a bloody good network” (Stevens cited in Davies, 2006: 15). In contrast most contestants said little about their networking opportunities especially if their desired contacts were within the musical community. In fact a post-NZ Idol interview with the runner-up of Season Three suggests that the show was more damaging to her career than helpful as the title of the story “Idol ruined my career” made clear. As discussed in previous chapters, most executives within the Music Industry, record labels and so forth, were not open to helping or to mentoring Idol contestants.

Regarding overseas formats, such as Pop Idol in the UK and American Idol, Simon Cowell claims that the key to the success of the contestants is the fact that after the show producers are,

“...able to take these talented singers and pair them with material that even established artists would kill to record” (Cowell, 2003: 215).

But this kind of success is not possible in a small country such as New Zealand. Even talented songwriters do not receive the guaranteed sales of huge numbers of records and enjoy little benefit from selling their material.

Although NZ Idol is unable to offer contestants the same career opportunities as those seen in overseas models it could be argued that learning about facets of the music business and

acquiring the ability to overcome nerves and other problems associated with performance makes entering worthwhile. Also it is important to note that contestants do get the added benefits of income through magazine interviews, corporate functions and other areas of the media work. These benefits would not have been available to them without the profile provided by appearing on NZ Idol. If contestants are more interested in gaining access to the other forms of media employment outside the music business, for example becoming a children's television presenter, the benefits of NZ Idol are positive. One contestant from Season Three was, in 2007 on TV 2 presenting a television show, an opportunity that was only given through his appearance on NZ Idol and the contacts he pursued after its conclusion.

Regional Support

The ideas of what makes a contestant successful in the NZ Idol competition and what qualities are believed to be necessary are varied. Throughout the interview process both on screen and in the press, contestants voiced opinions that conflicted with what audiences and directors and producers thought were the essential ingredients for success.

Although there is no statistical data to prove that regional support for certain contestants exists, it was cited by contestants. The production team also felt contestants whose hometowns were mentioned after performances were less likely to be eliminated. This can be seen by the only South Island contestant who managed to escape eviction three times in the bottom two after the South Island vote was asked for by the host. The press also discussed regional support especially about the winning contestant whose community had raised funds to fly the contestant's family over for the final.

“Horowhenua raised cash to fly his parents from Australia to support him in the final” (South, 2006: 7).

During the final stages of the show the two remaining contestants went back to their hometowns. It was clear that the levels of support between the contestant from Auckland and the other from Levin were vastly different, as the smaller towns showed huge amounts of loyalty and support compared to the bigger city of Auckland. This is apparent in the actual NZ Idol footage shown during the two final shows and was reported both in the press and in woman's magazines. These articles focused mainly on the contestant from Levin

who reported his amazement at the levels of support.

“Today was awesome. That was exactly what I needed before the finals. It lifted me up to a level I’ve never known. I was more nervous here than getting on the Idol stage” (South, 2006: 7).

Regional support for the contestants from small towns was beneficial in other ways as the small towns created more publicity or hype than those from bigger cities. One contestant, for example, was gifted a years lease on a car from one of the local dealerships and was then asked to talk on local radio about such deals gaining increased publicity.

Something particular to NZ Idol, I believe, is that talent resides less in the individual and more in the collective. Ethnicity seems especially salient with contestants receiving the strongest support because of the audience’s perceptions that they represent a particular ethnic community. This local patriotism seemed to have no direct relationship to singing talent. Of course this may be an expression of the fairly weak levels of talent in the contestants anyway. For although contestants face competitive selection this selection is not based on musical talent alone but on strictly non-musical factors of self-presentation skills and looks. Even that elusive quality, x-factor, was filtered through the desirability, from an audience demographics point of view, of providing a cross-section of ethnicities. This can be seen through selection of the Final 18 which included contestants of Maori, European, Tongan, Samoan, Middle Eastern and Fijian descent.

Song Choice and Arrangement Controls

As is common in the Idol format, the importance of song choice is stressed at the beginning of every Idol Season and throughout the series. Song choice was also blamed many times for the eliminations of certain contestants who were criticised by the judges for their choice. However, the process of choosing a particular song is not a simple one. At the beginning of each week, during the contestants stay in the competition, contestants were given a list of songs that they can choose from which are compiled by staff members. Every week there is a different theme or genre. The song list is a just guideline and some arrangements can be made for other choices if they are covered by APRA so the rights can be attained. Many of the contestant’s first choices, including my own, were often declined either by Idol producers or APRA and if more than one contestant wanted the same songs

then straws were drawn and the winner got the song of their choice.

On the Tuesday of each week contestants got one hour to arrange and record their song for the producer and director to hear. In this process as the number of contestants got smaller more time is allocated which meant that the surviving contestants enjoyed a time advantage. After the audition, the musical director and another musician produced a guide-backing track which has drums, guitar, piano and bass and a key was also established. During the Piano Round this was the track that was used for the contestant's actual performance. In most cases contestants are not allowed to alter the song too dramatically for both copyright and time issues; however there were a few isolated cases where slight changes were made with keys. This caused some problems for people, as many of the genres chosen by producers were unfamiliar to the contestants and once their song had been chosen it was often discovered that that particular song or key did not suit the performer.

Voting Influence on Contestants

Throughout the process of NZ Idol contestants become increasingly aware of the importance of audience votes – after all an audience vote could redeem a less than optimal performance. Producers continually emphasised their importance claiming that it is the audience alone that controls the contestant's fate. Contestants came to understand that they needed to focus their attention on performing in a way that will please the audience. In developing a relationship with an audience, a song choice was important but just as important was the contestant's personal image and what they said on screen. The audience influence was intensified when contestants were able to view online chat forums, forums that gave advice for individual contestants on song choice, clothing, storylines (to which the contestant has very little control anyway) as well as tips to make individuals, apparently, more appealing. Many contestants took this advice on board with adverse effects resulting in elimination and/ or criticism from the judges. The conflicting standards of evaluation may have led some contestants to over-emphasise popularity at the expense of performance and to some extent the structure of the format meant that this conflict was not readily resolved.

Audience Coaching

The fabricated nature of the 'live' studio audience was apparent throughout the show.

Audiences were asked to act for the camera much like the contestants themselves. Thus when the audience members arrive they are seated in areas depending on which contestant they are there to support, all family and friends are put in allocated seating near the front of the studio and each contestant is given tickets to give away, as well as any VIP's producers had invited. When these "special" guests are in place, everyone else was then seated. Once everyone is seated the floor manager, in Season Three Nigel Godfrey, took over command and began to entertain (or prep) the crowd through jokes and singing. In this process the audience was made completely aware of what is expected of them and were shown the signals that will tell them what to do throughout the show, signals for when they need to clap or boo at the judge's comments and so forth. If an audience is seen to be too quiet the stage manager steps in and tries to force them to respond 'better' or moves particular people who are in the camera shots that are not living up to the "vibe" that was needed to create the desired atmosphere.

Before the start of the show a cabaret styled song was sung which introduced each contestant as well as the three judges. Once everyone was introduced and placed in the right positions, the audience was encouraged further to clap for the Idol they are there to support. The host then took over from the stage manager and did a run down on what he might do or say and what he expects the audience to do in response. He also encouraged audiences not only to support their favorite Idol but all of them especially those from out of Auckland. Everything is rehearsed for the audiences as well as the contestants illustrating the widely believed notion that the 'reality' in Reality Television is an organisational myth.

It might be claimed that the studio audience was a more immediate source of influence on performers. Yet the first time the contestant saw the audience was during the actual filming of show and this does not permit the kind of response anticipation possible with an audience at home. The studio audience is in any case is a coached audience and therefore likely overall to be supportive. In my opinion, apart from adding that extra bit of adrenalin, the studio audience is likely to be approving and is less important to the performer than voters at home. The contestants were made aware of this as camera angles became more important than singing to the audience. Some contestants were much better at this than others and it seemed that those with the most experience in live performance found it the most difficult to disregard the audience in favor of concentrating on the cameras.

Interaction between Contestants and the Audience

Before the NZ Idol filming of the performance shows contestants had little, or no contact with the audience and could not see family members or friends. However, once the performance and elimination shows had finished contestants were able to go outside into a barricaded area where they signed autographs and talked to their families for approximately 15 minutes. This was the most direct form of interaction.

A less direct form of interaction between contestants and their audience, was provided through the Idol websites, not the official TVNZ site but other chat forums, most specifically Idolblog.com, where contestants can be found defending themselves and/ or other contestants from the criticism of website members. The creator of the website was also given permission to interview contestants during the Piano rounds and put the interviews onto this site as 'podcasts' however permission was revoked after contestants complained about having to be interviewed by someone who would later blatantly criticise them after the interviews went online. Whilst living inside the house, however this is one of the only means of communications apart from phone calls and emails.

The press could be seen as the most important communication tool between the contestants and their audiences. Unlike the social media the Press already carried the weight of collective or public prominence. Some contestants had more exposure than others through magazines, newspaper and radio interviews, which was often a form of underlying conflict between them. It was argued that contestants who received magazine articles prior to their first performance in the Piano Rounds had an advantage in terms of getting into the Top 10. However out of the four contestants who had stories before their first performance only two got through into the Top 10.

Taking Risks versus Consistency

It was always stressed to contestants that they must take risks with both their song choices and their performances otherwise they would face the risk of elimination.

“...I think she can count herself very lucky because I don't believe she has taken any chances at all with her song choices and her performance hasn't improved as much as it should have” (Stevens, 2006: 12).

Despite this it could be said that “playing it safe” was actually more advantageous especially when it came to song choice. Most contestants, especially in the early stages of the process, who did not conform to the typical “pop singer” stereotype did not make it past the first judging round or were not rewarded with audience votes.

Consistent performance with steady but slight improvements during the competition was perceived to be a key factor in success. The idea of consistency was often spoken of frequently.

“If I was voting for a consistent performer I would vote for Matt. He hasn’t made a mistake yet...He’s shown improvement and consistency. Matt deserves to be in the grand final” (Stevens, 2006:12).

Both the judges and the audiences, as seen through Idolblog comments, seemed to believe in the importance of both consistency and growth, as did the contestants themselves. The judges made a point of congratulating contestants who listen to their advice, perhaps to show the contestant is working hard but also to justify the judges and reinforce their status as experts. For example, one contestant underscored his own commitment by declaring that he had taken sage advice to heart:

“Victor says before his performance that he is not going to close his eyes, look down, slouch, over-sing and he’ll listen to the music” ([http: Idolblog.com](http://Idolblog.com))

The response from one of the judges when he finished performing was nearly self-congratulatory:

“Now you’re talking man” ([http: idolblog.com](http://idolblog.com)).

Yet at the same time there was little evidence that the contestants thought professionalism was the most important attribute. Personal attributes like sincerity being ‘real’ or just being regarded as a nice person were seen as equally important and perhaps defined those deserving of success. For example one contestant, after her elimination, felt the winner should be a contestant that was kind hearted:

“I reckon she’s got what it takes to go all the way. She’s a genuine person. She’s not one of those people who is cool to your face and then goes behind your back. She’s got a really kind heart” (Fisher, 2006: 48).

The importance of emotional connection with the audience was discussed constantly by the judges and the contestants as well as fans participating in NZ Idol chat rooms. Emotional connection could be found in the performance of a song, in asking the audience for their vote or in performing in other activities such as ‘Dom’s Day Out’. The judges confirmed the importance of this emotional connection within the song claiming that those with that type of connection were more likely to win.

“I think people recognised a genuinely emotional performance from Matt” (Stevens, 2006: 16).

Public Scrutiny

Along with the benefits that come with appearing on such television shows as NZ Idol, and gaining profile within the media, there are of course possible dangers that arise from the public scrutiny of ones talent, performance skills and looks:

“There no question that reality television requires participants to submit themselves to a high level of public scrutiny and that one of the central appeals of the genre lies in the opportunity it affords viewers to scrutinise the ordinarily private behaviours and responses of others” (Lumby & Probyn, 2003: 19).

In New Zealand, the criticism generated by the public and, notably by the Music Industry, centered on the choice to enter NZ Idol in the first place no matter how talented a performer may be. This public criticism, however, is a major part of the shows appeal as many delight and take pleasure in the discomfort of others. Fully aware of this, producers are focused throughout the competition on generating interest be it by burnishing the contestant’s image or by finding “an ideal target of abuse” (Reijnders et al, 2007: 288).

Lumby and Probyn suggest that contestants face an unequal power balance with their knowledge of the media. The contestants are effectively media amateurs who are struggling with the media professionals who produce, direct and run the show (2003). A quote from one of the Big Brother contestants, in the UK series illustrates this idea:

She “complained bitterly about the way her image had been edited, resulting in her being stereotyped as a predatory female by the viewing audience. A fellow housemate, who was also one of the least popular contestants on the show, opined that they had all been ‘pawns in a game’ (Lumby & Probyn: 2003: 20).

Despite this public scrutiny eager participants wait in line for their chance to be involved in New Zealand each year and around the world.

Branding of Idols

The format of Pop Idol is a highly branded environment. For example, the Idol logo appears on every Pop Idol show and the format itself is a kind of branding following well-known stereotypes. There are nearly always three judges, two male one female with one of the men being particularly nasty representing the Simon Cowell character. It could be argued that the contestants themselves within Idol shows around the globe also fall under the brandings specific to the Idol format as a cross section of cultures, ethnicities and genders. Musical styles as well as specific looks are chosen within the Top 10 or 12, a mix which seems to be replicated across the world. In each Pop Idol show contestants have their own roles and a mixture of roles must be included, for example Cowell commented on one of the contestants that,

“...From the start we knew what his role was in the competition: the Patriot” (Cowell, 2003:178),

Throughout the three seasons of NZ Idol there has been a mixture of both genders and all major ethnic groups in New Zealand have been included except for Asian nationals as no Asian contestant has made it through to the Top Ten. The different roles of the Idols in all seasons typically fit into the following groups, the ‘pop princess’, the ‘rocker’, the ‘dedicated church goer’, the ‘joker’ and the ‘serious musician’. Other personality types, of course, appear however no one strays to far from the accepted main stream. The extent of influence to which personality plays is huge in determining how successful a contestant is and becomes increasingly prominent throughout the contest. The process of judging performances can be seen in itself as an induction into a particular stereotype with survival depending on the particular contestant’s ability to adapt.

Contracts

Signing contracts is another part of the Idol experience. All contestants are required to sign different contracts as (and if) they progress through successive selection processes. The first contract is signed alongside the application form right at the initial stage of the process and gives the producers the right to use and edit any footage a contestant may be seen in,

this footage can also be used in advertisements or other avenues associated with NZ Idol, for example footage can be seen via official websites and downloaded onto mobile phones and so forth. It also states that the judge's decisions are final. The second contract is called the Contestant Contributor Release Form and expands on the first contract and is signed before a contestant can enter the next stage, the 'Theatre Round'.

The Final 18 Contestants Contributor's Release Form was signed prior to a contestant's arrival at the Idol house for their first performance in the 'Piano Round'. This contract is the exact contract that contestants throughout the world must sign when they enter any Idol show. It informs contestants that they cannot, under any circumstance, trade under the Idol name for three months after their last Idol episode is screened. This included any television appearance, public singing performance or any media activity whatsoever. This point was argued by many participants whose livelihood depended on public performance with their bands and the NZ Idol lawyers agreed to send out a letter excusing them from that part of the contract once they were eliminated. However a contestant could still not appear on any television show or radio programme until the three months had ended.

The Final 10 Contestants Contributor's Release Form added to the Final 18 contract that eliminated contestants must return for the final episode and must take part in any media activity after their elimination that was required of them by TVNZ and the NZ Idol production team.

The Final 2 Contestants Contract added the duties of the winner, the percentage of income they may receive from single and album sales as well as the prize money awarded to them. The same three-month clause applied however the record company could hold them to a separate contract, which kept them locked into an album agreement for seven years. A three-album deal was signed but was not guaranteed by the record company, as an album would only be recorded if single sales were high. Despite the fact that single sales reached number one on the NZ charts, the winner received no royalties.

To conclude the performance given by contestants in NZ Idol had several aspects. Each aspect involving a slight shift in the framing so that the same performance can be geared to quite different audiences. Further it might be argued that there is not one performance but a

range of performances that are in competition with each other. This is apparent in the macro contrast between talent and popularity and in the related notions of being authentic and “keeping it real”. As well as singing, contestants must act as their own publicist, act the ‘role’ of being their authentic selves as well as emotionally connect with the audience, thus displaying their intrinsic star quality as well as their ‘ordinariness’.

In the next chapter I will discuss my own personal experiences during NZ Idol in 2006.

Chapter Seven: Personal Account of My Own Idol Experience

This chapter is dedicated to my own personal experience of being involved in NZ Idol Season Three. I recorded field notes of my own experiences during the time I was involved in the show. I believe the following quote identifies the dynamics of the process rather well:

“Auditions are useful settings in which to observe musical judgments at work because they are here made explicit: musicians are being judged, discussed, against each other. In the pop world everyone has always been clear that this is not an entirely “musical” judgment...the right sort of person: someone who fits into a band’s image and ethos and ambition, someone whose playing suggests a shared world view” (Frith 1998: 56).

The process of recording my own experiences went as follows, every day at the same time I would write an hours worth of notes of the day’s events. I was lucky enough for the first week to have a room to myself each night where I could reflect on the day. This changed during the second week when I had to share a room with a fellow contestant and therefore my reflection time of an hour was often cut short or interrupted. I did however manage every night to write most of what the day had entailed and when time ran short I found extra time during the following day to catch up on my note taking. I had a special NZ Idol diary, which I kept private and was in the form of basic notes and “memory prompts” (Hansen, Cottle et al., 1998: 55) and where possible I tried to write “good description of settings, scenes, people, events and interaction” (Hansen, Cottle et al., 1998:55).

Audition Process

A person wanting to audition for NZ Idol had to first fill in an application form available via the TVNZ website or in the Woman’s Weekly magazine and send it to South Pacific Pictures where administration staff replied to each applicant with a letter and audition number. The application form included questions about the contestant such as age, experience and so forth; it asked applicants to rate their singing ability out of five as well as their acting, dancing and songwriting ability. After filling out the required information and attaching a passport sized photo, a contract must be signed and within a couple of weeks a confirmation letter congratulating the contestant on being accepted to audition for Idol 2006 was sent out. The conformation letter informed contestants that the auditions, in

Auckland, were to be held on June 3rd at 8.30am on a first come first serve basis and that successful applicants needed to be available on Sunday 4th for a further audition and must wear the same clothes and sing the same song as in the first audition. The message “dress to impress” was emphasised, as it would be the “only chance to shine in front of the judges”. This emphasises the belief that appearance is a major issue for all performers particularly in the pop music world (Frith, 1998). Negus further points to this idea connecting the visual and the aural claiming, “visual images denote particular sounds” (Negus 199: 66) and quotes David Howells, managing director of Peter Waterman Ltd:

“99 per cent of people give answers that relate to the visual. The extraordinary thing is you see what you hear. So if you accept that the two go together that’s fine. But there are still a lot of people who say; ‘the music speaks for itself’. It doesn’t. There is a relationship that the public identify with” (Negus, 1999: 66).

Contestants were informed that the first round of auditions in front of the producers had no song choice restrictions, any song could be chosen, however that song must be sung a capella, without microphone amplification and each contestant would be seen individually. The second day contestants were to follow the same guidelines with the added specification that the same song must be sung and the same clothes worn due to editing issues, as the audience is made to believe that there is only one audition straight in front of the judges and not a producer round. Although this is now widely understood.

First Audition

TAPAC Performing Arts School in central Auckland on Saturday 3rd June was filled with approximately 200 hopeful contestants who seemed to ignore the “dress to impress” message as most looked like they were more suited to be at a rugby match than a Pop Idol audition. Perhaps this was the first indication of cultural difference between NZ Idol and Pop Idol across the world. It was relatively difficult to find a typical Pop Idol contestant amongst the group of people assembled. Seeing that Auckland had the most contestants auditioning this was not a good sign for Season Three.

The production crew itself seemed highly disorganised despite it being the third season. There were surprisingly few cameras around with only a few contestants asked to sing or speak to camera, which seemed to work out well as most of the hopefuls were not keen to be involved with the camera at all. A quote from the New Zealand Herald who had sent one

of their own to audition states:

“The photographer asks people to pose for a photo. Most won’t: they don’t like cameras, they say. Are you aware this is going to be on a television show, I ask? They giggle and shuffle away” (Spratt 2006:20).

This type of reaction, perhaps, shows another major cultural difference, a reflection of the tall poppy syndrome discussed previously where one must not be seen to overtly seek attention. This ideology is not particularly helpful when creating a Reality Television programme and one that the director and producers of NZ Idol continually try to change during auditions and interviews as they encourage contestants to give bigger emotional reactions and “not to be too damn humble” (director quote).

Slowly throughout the day contestant’s numbers were called (mine: 2212). They formed a line outside the audition room and waited to be called. After a four-hour wait it was my turn to audition. Even in the audition room there were no cameras, no interviews just a panel of four people; one person making the final decision, two others holding a small microphone, a dictaphone and one extra person. I was ushered in and asked to sing straight away. My song choice, *Honeysuckle Rose* by Fats Waller, was not received well by the judges. Even though originality was said to be one of the keys to being successful in such a competition, apparently straying too far away from the true pop music genre was not appreciated as the judge for this round explained that this was called ‘Pop Idol’ and therefore only contestants singing contemporary songs would be accepted. Despite the judges initial dislike I was told to sing 30 seconds of another song to prove I could sing pop. I chose *Because of You*, a Kelly Clarkson song (the first winner of American Idol) and was told I should have sung that song from the beginning. I was then given the green light to move forward to the next stage. Since I still sang with the same voice this suggested even in the initial round that song choice is probably the most important factor in order to be successful

The word ‘pop’ was used a lot during the auditions which is interesting as previously in New Zealand the show had an R ‘n’ B focus. However the emphasis on sounding ‘pop’ was reinforced throughout the competition as shown by judges’ comments of various performers especially if a singer sounded theatrical.

“...I think he found it hard to take the theatre out of his performance, not what we are looking for in NZ Idol” (Steven, 2006).

“If I was casting a role in musical theatre I would give you the part but this is a pop competition” (Stevens, 2006).

A few participants commented that the show was called “NZ Idol” not “Pop Idol” for a reason and therefore a cross section of singers should get through which, as has previously been seen in overseas models, is not usually the case.

This stage of the audition process also sparked general concern about the calibre or expertise of the judging panels because only one person in the audition room seemed to have any decision-making rights. Top 10 contestants later found out that the different panels consisted of producers, backing singers and even the publicists. This illustrates the fact that luck played a major role in the selection of contestants, I’m sure many talented people were overlooked at this initial stage.

After the judge told me I was through to the next round I was given a sheet of paper that had my name and audition number, a box for *yes*, a box for *maybe* and alongside that box there was another with an *asterisks*, then a box for *no*. I took this to the registration desk and register for the next day. I would assume the box with the asterisks was for the ‘bad’ singers or the singers with some sort of gimmick, as they were not filming these first auditions so would need to get both the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ contestants back again in order to get some entertaining footage for the first few episodes.

Judges Round: Second Audition

Day two of auditions once again seemed to follow the old television motto ‘hurry-up-and-wait’. Many people commented on the differences between a normal audition (professional or amateur) and the NZ Idol auditions. The latter it became apparent was not a normal audition process but artificially constructed one, made purely for television. The rumor mill was circulating that apparently 900 people had auditioned in Auckland and they called 110 back to see the judges. Yet it seemed more like 300 as entire families were there supporting their Idol hopeful. There was a lot more noise and lot more willingness to appear on camera, whether it be singing or doing something else that was asked of them. A group of

us sat near the exit door and watched countless tear filled faces leave the building trying to escape the cameras, trying to understand what they had done wrong in their audition. Every now and then someone would emerge from the judging room and get their photo taken, which meant they were one of the successful few. It was understood that the judges were looking for 30 people from Auckland so contestants sat there counting how many people were getting through and weighing up the odds for their success, 16 people had been chosen in Christchurch and the Wellington auditions were still to come.

Halfway through the day the judges came out of the audition room for a staged “rev up” to give all the wannabes left some advice; “blow us away” they said “be confident”, “No-one has given the ultimate performance as of yet”. After they had filmed and re-filmed the inspirational talk the auditions resumed. At 4pm my number was called and I was given my prep talk from the director asking me to give him some good television and that if the judges said anything I didn’t like I was to stand up for myself and when I came out of the audition room I was told to give a good reaction; scream, yell or cry! Don’t let the judges try to tell you anything you don’t agree with! I gave my audition sheet to a runner who then told me when I was allowed to enter the room. “Walk in confidently” she said!

The room itself was a typical set up seen on all Idol shows around the world with the Idol logo on the back wall and on a spot on the floor where each contestant was told to stand. The three judges all sat along the front in a darkened room. The judges were lit very brightly as was the spot where I was to sing, with a couple of cameras on both sides of them. Other members of the crew were sitting to the side but were mostly out of view. Firstly the judges asked a couple of questions about how I was feeling, what I was going to sing then I began. I sang a verse and then a chorus of the song I had sung yesterday as was requested.

The judge’s comments were relatively positive. But I think these comments may have been influenced by the fact that I had had some contact with one of them prior to the audition in other musical settings, however the comments were as follows:

“For the first time today I can say an absolute yes”

“You’re the first person to walk into the room with some conviction so yes from all three”

“I’m not sure, I think you overcooked the song but you have potential, so I say yes”

The word potential seems to be another word constantly used by the judges as well as contestants and one that is focused on right up until the final, perhaps illustrating the importance of the audience being able to witness some sort of growth in each individual along the entire process, despite the fact that professionalism has been spoken about even during this first round and that contestants must already be of a very professional standard in order to even make it past this round.

After the audition every contestant must face a multitude of interviews and these initial interviews already illustrate how producers have the ability to manipulate or construct a character by the questions they ask. They were constantly searching for some kind of story and asking questions about all facets of the contestant's lives, be it love, life, occupation, family yet very little about ones singing talent was discussed.

After registering for the next round I received another "congratulation" letter with a form to fill in and send to South Pacific Pictures proving that I had no criminal record. Very little information on round three was provided but successful contestants were told to expect a phone call and more information in the next week. The information that was given however was that round three or the 'Theatre Round' would begin on Thursday 29th June and will be held at Sky City Theatre until July 2nd. Each day of auditions would result in a series of eliminations until the Top 18 was found.

During the first phase of auditions it became apparent that most people who looked over the age of 25 seemed to be unsuccessful. Of course I cannot be sure if it was a decision based on talent, but my feeling was that age was a factor. This was interesting because it was announced that Season Three was lowering and extending the age limit in order to attract a more professional performer. Putting it up to 30 years was, so publicity reports said, to get a higher standard of performer, preferably those with professional experience. So why then did so many teenagers get through and very few over the age of 25? Perhaps it had to do with the idea that popular music culture equates to youth culture and as Frith suggests ones appearance is an issue for any performer in the public eye with an increasing emphasis on appearing young. Frith goes on to suggest that entertainment is all about consumers or in this case the viewer wanting to watch a performer who can portray feelings of youth and

vitality (Frith 1998: 56).

After the first stage of auditions a small amount of communication occurred between contestants and South Pacific Pictures, communication via phone calls and an information package about the 'Theatre Round', which included a CD containing two songs one of which must be learnt to perform if one got through the first morning of auditions. The songs were: *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* and *Sunday Morning*. The choice of *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* was interesting given the emphasis placed on the importance of youth and singing pop music of today. This song is not a modern pop song but it has cross-generational appeal. theglobeandthedia.com suggests this disparity is part of the reason the Pop Idol format is successful as it is one television show that parents and their children can watch together.

"The judges occasionally chafe against the teen' nostalgia for music recorded before they were born, but the producers feed these choices by featuring the likes of Tony Bennett, Barry Gibb and Jon Bon Jovi on the show" ([http: globedia.com](http://globedia.com), 2007).

The contestants' information pack includes a programme outlining proceedings for the 'Theatre Round'. On the first day of the auditions contestants from outside of Auckland met at the Sky City hotel where they were to reside until eliminated. The Auckland based contestants travelled in each morning from their own homes. On the Thursday night contestants and some of the Idol crew, including a small camera team, directors and producers met for dinner, briefing and registration. The registration pack explained how the auditions and eliminations work. On the first day of auditions (Friday 30th June) the group was to be cut from 60 to 36 in the morning and then from 36 to 27 in the afternoon. On the Friday night successful contestants were given a list of songs to choose from. Their choice was then performed on Saturday morning, with the number of contestants being reduced from 27 to 18. The remaining 18 attended a briefing on the Sunday Morning.

The Theatre Round

On day one the contestants met for the first time. There were 58 contestants and by the end of the first day less than half remained. More release forms were filled out, which were the same as the one each contestant had already sent back. When the new forms were signed – many of the original forms being lost - name badges were distributed. These administration

activities lasted about an hour. Once again the dress code did not seem to be synonymous with the producers' advice "dress to impress".

The dominant ethnicity seen at this stage of the auditions seemed to be contestants of Pacific Island and Maori descent reflecting the majority of both Season One and Two Top 24 finalists. There were a handful of Europeans, one Asian woman and no one of Indian descent. There also seemed to be an instant informal segregation between the Auckland contestants and those from other parts of the country.

All 58 contestants, a camera crew and other members of staff gathered together for dinner where it was explained how the next round of auditions would work. Frankie Stevens made an appearance for an on-camera talk with the previously used advice "You have to really want it", "It will change your life", and "You can't be average" encouraging the hopefuls to do their best. Contestants were told to ask questions. "How do you define the x-factor" which received some very vague answers. These responses illustrated a belief, discussed earlier, that 'specialness' was inherent and could not be learnt "you've either got or you don't". Frankie talked about his career and answered such questions, then it was the executive producers who talked about why Kiwis don't give good enough reactions for television; "tell the truth" he said, "in order to get votes you must relate to the audience... they have to like you so they need to see the real you". This was the first time the overarching concept of "being real" and giving the audience moments of authenticity was mentioned. During this speech a young male contestant fainted, subsequently cameras swooped. He was eventually helped up and taken away for an on-camera talk with Stevens; and the director said New Zealanders don't make good TV! Contestants were expected back at Sky City by 7am for a photo-shoot at 8.45am before auditions were to begin.

The first auditions were in groups of seven. Each person had one minute, thirty seconds to sing a song of his or her choice. This choice depended on the prior approval of Idol personnel for copyright reasons.

A 7am start is the first major difference between a normal audition setting and NZ Idol audition. Early mornings are extremely difficult for a singer, seeing as it takes six hours before the voice is fully warmed up. But we didn't need to worry, as the auditions did not

get underway until the late morning. The order of auditions was determined alphabetically and the last contestants, of whom I was one, didn't go into the audition room until after 2pm. Once in the audition room each contestant, in their line of seven, stepped out in front to sing one at a time and then stepped back into line for the next persons turn until the whole line had finished. No comments were given by the judges at this stage and once again the song was sung acapella but with overhanging microphones which were amplified by a speaker next to the judges table for them to make a more informed choice.

Before the first audition people were rehearsing everywhere, in the hallways, the bathroom or in the middle of a room full of people. By 2pm the room became quiet as most people had finished their first audition. When the final group, group 9, was called we went onto the stage in the audition room and we were asked to step forward when our name was called and say what song we are singing. We had a minute and a half to impress and would be asked to stop when that minute and a half was up. We then left the stage and awaited the verdict with the other 58 hopefuls.

After lunch contestants were called into the audition room in different groups and within each group certain numbers were called to step forward and others to stay back, contestants were unaware of which line would stay or go and were left there for an extended moment before receiving the verdict. In my particular group of seven five contestants were asked to step forward with two of us still standing in the back row and the back row was told the good news that we would be able to carry on in the competition. 36 contestants were through to round two, began straight away with contestants joining up for duets.

Contestants had approximately 20 minutes with Suzanne Lynch (Vocal Coach) and Eddie Rayner (Musical Director) and in that time had to decide on the key of the music, which depended on range and voice placement. For this round contestants had the added luxury of a live piano and guitar backing as well as hand-held radio microphones. I had chosen the Maroon 5 song *Sunday Morning* as I felt that this song was much more contemporary and therefore more appropriate and found another contestant who had chosen it to be my partner. The majority of contestants chose *Don't go breaking my heart*.

Contestants had approximately two hours to rehearse before the duet audition in front of the

judges. Two by two groups went into the audition room and then returned either ecstatic or disappointed in their performances. When it was time for my partner and I to audition we went in and sang our duet receiving relatively good comments from the judges:

“You are a good performer but you also didn’t overshadow your partner” and “you are like Puha and Pakeha”, the first racial term I had heard thus far in the competition.

We performed our duet quite early on in the process so we had another long wait before we would hear the results from the judges. By this time it was clear that the majority of the contestants were exhausted and the stress was taking its toll. An extremely small dinner was served, which didn’t help with the energy and stress levels of the remaining contestants, then it was judgment time. Couples were called in the same order and both my partner and I were sent through to the next round, which was to take place the next morning. During the judgment I was asked if I was actually serious about the competition, which was interesting as I felt I had never given the impression that I wasn’t. I was also told I had to “step it up vocally” a phrase used often in Pop Idol shows and one that offers little constructive criticism.

After a thirteen hour day, as it wasn’t until about 10.30pm that the Top 27 had been announced, we were briefed about the next day and told contestants had until 8.45am the next morning to have learned a new song out of a list that they gave us. Contestants were provided with a disc-man and a CD with three songs for men and three songs for women, and backing tracks for each song with three different keys:

Female songs

Fallin’	Alicia Keys
Torn	Natalie Imbruglia
Say a Little Prayer	Aretha Franklin

Male songs

More than words	Extreme
Don’t wanna miss a thing	Aerosmith
For once in my life	Stevie Wonder

Along with the majority of the female contestants, I chose the song *Torn*. This next audition was to be in front of both the judges as well as all other contestants and we would be singing with microphones with the edited versions of the songs on backing track, as the

songs had been cut down so they were only about a minute and a half long.

With the first day of auditions finishing about 11.30pm and having to arrive the next day at the theatre by 8.30am, this tight turn around, along with the stress and adrenaline that accompanies auditioning, meant that most contestants were completely exhausted.

Everyone was busy rehearsing their songs wherever they could. Some chose far away corners whereas others stood in the middle of the room attracting as much attention as they could. Already personalities were shining through and producers were making sure that those contestants making the most noise were always close to the camera crew. If those same contestants could have channeled that confidence when they had to sing in front of the judges they would have more than likely succeeded. Most contestants however, were relatively withdrawn and unwilling to speak on camera. These contestants were constantly pushed and prodded by producers as well as the host to say something interesting.

The remaining contestants were called into the theatre at about 10.45am where it was said that auditions would be in reverse first name order. So being a Rebecca I was in the first half, an advantage I think, as everybody had to sit in the theatre the entire morning and into the afternoon unable to warm up their bodies or their voices before having to sing. This round was definitely the most interesting for the contestants, as it was the first time anyone was able to watch and listen to each other sing. The song *Torn* was the main choice for the female contestants as well as a couple of males yet it proved to be a fairly tricky as one contestant after another forgot the lyrics, the tune and even the structure of the song or more generally just performed it badly as would be seen in the coming weeks when the Theatre Round was screened. I along with other contestants felt that this group of singers were not a good or fair representation of New Zealand talent.

This was also the first day that everybody got to hear what the judges thought of each contestant. This was revealing since it was already clear which way each judge leaned in terms of performers they like and the vocal styles. Each judge was different in their preferences and each showed strong connections to particular performers even at this early stage. This process, as the quotation from Frith at the beginning of this chapter shows, indicates how such audition settings and processes are crucial. For it is in such settings that observations about musical judgments are made and are directly compared. It was here that

the judges argue and disagree about personal tastes and standards. It is also clear that these judgments are not necessarily a judgment on the music or musician:

“In the pop world everyone has been clear that this is not an entirely “musical” judgment...the right sort of person: someone who fits into a bands image and ethos and ambition, someone whose playing suggests a shared world view” (Frith, 1998: 56).

For example “you are the entire package” (Stevens, 2006) was often said meaning that the aspects of image and personality are as equally important in this setting as the singing.

As the day progressed things didn't improve vocally, singer after singer failed to impress and very few managed to make a lasting impression. After everyone had finished there was another long wait until eliminations began at approximately 5.30pm. Consistent with staging a visual spectacle, contestants were placed in a semi-circle and then called to step forward into a line at the front of the stage into groups of seven. We stood in the semi-circle for a very long time with the camera sweeping across our faces constantly and with the producers ordering us to look scared or nervous or serious, threatening that this could affect the result of the elimination if we didn't look like we cared enough. This emphasised the commonly understood notion that in Reality TV everything is staged and shot and then re-shot. After what seemed like hours, the first group of seven was called which included me. We all stood in a line on the front of the stage for a few minutes and then were told that we had made it through. We then left the stage, went to talk to camera and then we were led back into the theatre to watch the rest of the process. Next, five people were called up and told they were going home. Apparently their reactions were not strong enough so they had to re-shoot the line and be re-told that they were going home in order to get them to show more emotion. The judge used exactly the same line again and the contestants tried to be a little more dramatic. The next seven were then called and told that they had made it through which left five contestants with only four spots available. The judges then explained that they couldn't decide between them based on their last performances and they were told they had five minutes to prepare a song of their choice to perform acapella. It was interesting to see how they reacted as each contestant was so different as was seen in the Theatre Round episode. There were a few tears with one contestant finding it very hard to control herself and one of the young guys looked terrified. One of the five looked like she had given up or didn't care, a very Kiwi response and she was, I thought, the best singer of

that group. This noncommittal display completely went to her disadvantage and I believe affected the end result. After five minutes they all lined up and sang their songs and each person did a good job although no one was outstanding. As I thought the contestant who looked like she cared the least got eliminated and the other four got through, one of the male contestants only got to sing a few seconds – much less than the other contestants – which I believe was because he was not doing a good job and the outcome of this impromptu audition had already been decided.

The Top 18 was decided, 9 girls and 9 guys, a supposed coincidence, and those contestants went straight into filming some shots with Dominic about the Final 18 before being dismissed for the night and returning the next morning, a 9am start for a lawyers and publicity meeting.

Lawyers and Publicity

Three different lawyers came to a meeting, the day after the final Theatre Round auditions, to pitch themselves and their services to the Top 18 contestants as it was explained to us that by law we had to have a lawyer representing us who had no association with TVNZ or NZ Idol. Most contestants had no interest talking through the entire process but in the end a decision was reached, the majority vote won. We later learnt that this lawyer was only to represent the Top 2 when negotiating the recording contract and other eight contestants would actually have no legal representation.

The NZ Idol publicity team then briefed us on the dos and don'ts of being an Idol contestant and what to do if the media approached us directly. This advice was entirely common sense and once again no-one was particularly interested. After the meeting was finished we were asked to inform the staff if there were any issues about the next round in terms of availability. Basically contestants must be available 24hours a day during one of three weeks beginning on 31st July 2006 and ending 22nd August 2006 with the first performance show being held in Christchurch and subsequent shows in Auckland and Wellington.

Piano Round

The Piano Round was the next step in the audition process. In this phase contestants must sing a song of their choice, any genre or style, dependent on copyright clearance and the settling of the arrangement. This song was to be performed live before the judges and a live audience, which was said to consist of about 400-500 people, depending on the size of the venue as well as the public interest. The Top 18 Idols were to perform in Auckland, Wellington or Christchurch, depending on the contestants' background. There was a technical rehearsal and a dress rehearsal with the latter occurring in front of the judges who took notes on each singer's performance.

The filming was planned to be in real time. But instead the show was filmed at 3pm on a Sunday and broadcast at 7pm that same night as producers felt this would be less stressful for contestants and gave more time for editing. During the filming of the Piano Round all 6 contestants sat on chairs placed on the stage throughout the entire show and contestants moved onto different seats when it was their turn to sing or have an interview with the host. The piano round singers performed to backing tracks consisting of piano and guitar with microphones on a very empty stage with only the Idol logo. Each round was different depending on venue, the Wellington group, of which I was a part, performed at The St James Theatre to approximately 1200 people, far in excess of the 400- 500 that was expected by producers.

As a part of this show, a group song was also performed, a feature seen every week until the winner was announced at the Finale. These group songs were very well known and were specifically choreographed both in terms of dance moves as well as camera shots. More time was spent rehearsing the group song than any contestant's individual performance.

Top 10 Phase

The Top 10 performance shows were filmed on a Friday night and screened on Sunday nights. It is on this day that contestants had their first chance to rehearse with the band and backing singers. Contestants were also shown their marks - the places each person must stand in order for the camera to get the shot the directors wanted. This was the most time consuming part of the day and for the directors and producers the most important.

Consequently little time was left to sing with the band. The contestant may only get one or two rehearsals, depending on how the director feels about the camera work. The group song was rehearsed the same way, the choreography is taught at this time, and then each contestant, in a specified order has his or her turn on stage. Camera notes are given to each individual and/or to the group. After this technical rehearsal, the dress rehearsal began.

Dress Rehearsal

The dress rehearsal was just prior to the actual show and it was run as though it was the actual performance - only stopping to fix camera shots and technical faults. It is at this stage that the contestants' overall look is approved or changed by producers. Changes usually occurred if the garment caused the cameras to strobe or the colors were too dark. Black was not encouraged by producers, as they wanted colour. During the dress rehearsal the judges watched the performances and wrote down comments they would later use in the real show. During the rehearsal the comments of the judges were primarily banter between the judges, contestants and host. Once the entire show had been rehearsed it was basically time for the real show.

Performance Show

The Top 10 round was the final phase in the NZ Idol audition process and each show began with a group number in the style of the chosen theme for the week. There was the added element of a 'Dom's Day Out' segment. The show itself was filmed in front of a studio audience were often given banners and signs. These were mostly made by each contestant although towards the end of the series some people did bring signs they made themselves. All Idols were on stage and were introduced to the audience. This sequence was not seen on the actual show, and more often than not the Idols performed their group number two or three more times before the actual filming began. This gave the directors options if the 'real' take was not good as they could 'cut-and-paste' shots from this footage. The same process guided the dress rehearsal and many times contestants were surprised when the line they forgot in the show was miraculously in the final cut. Sometimes producers did not show the same courtesy to other contestants. After the first run-through of the group number the host went straight into what he was going to say so the audience had an idea of what would happen. Often he reinforced that more enthusiasm is needed.

During the week, Idol contestants are told the order in which they would be performing. The stage managers/ assistants were in charge of getting Idols to the stage in time for his/ her performance. Much speculation about performance order occurred amongst the contestants. This involved, amongst other things, which spot was the best position to be in and the impact of what the producers are doing on the chances of elimination. The singing order, as decided by the producers, was felt to have a strong impact on the contestants' chances of success. It was suggested that going first or last were the best positions and anywhere in the middle was less desirable. This may hold some weight as even during the Piano Rounds every contestant that went last got through to the Top Ten.

The show was divided into sections, the first part consisting of the group song and one performer, the second is most often performers two and three (this of course changed as cast numbers decreased) and during the second or third part of the show a "Dom's Day Out" clip was shown. After every performance the stage manager or host will encourage the audience to boo the judges or clap harder and so forth. As the night went on more and more encouragement is given to keep the audience active and energised as the recordings of the performance show can last for up to three or more hours. During this phase it was very unlikely that an Idol contestant would have to re-sing their song or stop halfway through unless there was a technical fault. For the duration of my time on the show it only happened twice and was due to camera issues.

Once the performance show was finished and the audience released, certain contestants were asked to stay back to film 'pick ups', a shot of the contestant either waiting anxiously on the side of the stage awaiting their turn to perform or in the make-up room getting the finishing touches conveniently displaying the make-up sponsor's logo.

The Final

"The grand final will be the biggest in Idols three-year history with about 2,500 people in the audience" (Stevens, 2006: 16)

The Final of NZ Idol 3 was slightly different to other shows as it included all eliminated contestants as well as some of the 'bad' auditions. In previous years the judges would also sing, however in Season Three this did not occur. The final was performed at St James Theatre in Auckland to a full house and was broadcast live. In Season Three there were

various hitches due of a lack of rehearsal because of TVNZ camera crew strikes.

The final began with the host announcing the Top 10 in order of elimination, each Top 10 contestant came out singing one of their previously performed songs, ending with the two finalists. Group songs were performed and the two finalists did three songs each including the Idol single *Hold Out*. There was also a set of awards for two of the 'bad' auditions as well as a sponsor's award given for the best dancer. The voting lines closed during the show and the 2006 winner was announced.

Performance Controls

Throughout the week prior, to the performance day, the choreographer prepped contestants and the basic choreography for their song was written down for the director. On the day contestants were told whether or not their movements work in terms of camera shots. Usually most things were altered on the day. This was difficult for the performers given the amount of information they must retain; moreover very few contestants had performance experience, let alone knowing how to 'work a camera'. Because of this contestants were told on the performance day which cameras to look at either straight down the barrel or slightly above it and when to do it. There were four cameras situated around the studio, two of which were roaming and two straight in front. There was a sweeping camera which contestants were told to ignore. These cameras gave the wide sweeping shots that usually start and finish the show and are used a few times during any performance.

Prior to the performance day, all props were noted and approved by producers, props such as stools, microphone stands and so forth. Costumes were also organised a few days before the show. This was sometimes changed on the day by producers if, as mentioned prior, there was not enough colour on stage or if the colours flair on camera.

After the first few weeks of the competition, producers began to stress the importance of what contestants say during their question time with the Host, especially during the elimination show. Many contestants began to prepare their own questions and answers that were then given to the host in the hope of receiving more audience vote.

NZ Idol Communication

The communication between the Idol team and myself was very consistent, almost daily in the weeks after the Theatre Round and leading up to my Piano Round where questions were asked about my family life, hobbies and so forth as they were preparing to film background stories on each contestant. The questions covered a range of things and any aspect of one's life could end up being the focus of these interviews.

During the first weeks after the Theatre Round the Idol personnel, who look after the participants, directly informed contestants about groupings and when they would be expected to arrive at the Idol House for their own performance week. I was allocated week three, the week I had asked for. At this stage contestants were also told that a lot of time would be given to rehearse with musicians and a vocal coach. However, this was not to be the case. The Idol staff also stressed song choice as they hurried the contestants into making their selection.

The Interview Process

“Taped narrative segments: careers of contestants as they leave their prosaic pasts behind and confront representations of the music business and the judgments of audience... These stories weave together material concerning contestants ‘moral’ and professional trajectories as aspirants struggle to demonstrate their qualifications to the on-camera judges and to the voting audience at home” (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 218).

On 27th June, the week of the Theatre Round, I received a phone call about participating in some background filming with two other contestants. On the first day of auditions earlier in the month a friend of mine who also entered and got through made a passing comment on-camera that she had sung with me and another male contestant. The Idol producers picked up on this story and decided to follow through with it and make us into a band although we had never all sung together in a band situation. In fact I had never met the other man. I was told to turn up at this band rehearsal where we would be filmed singing, followed by both group and individual on-camera interviews. With the understanding, given to me by NZ Idol staff, that I would be able to talk about the band I was actually a part of, rather than this made up group, I went along to the filming and was introduced to the band members, a couple of songs that we all knew were chosen and about half an hour worth of footage was filmed. The three of us were then asked very vague questions about why we were going to do well in this competition and what would happen if we were all in the top three. After

that we were asked to do individual interviews during which they tried to ascertain some sort of rivalry or conflict between the females. Neither of us participated in this story line but overall the process took about an hour and a half.

At this particular interview neither producer nor director were present and later decided they didn't like the footage due to lighting and technical issues, as well as not being happy with the background, being in someone's garage. As a result another day was lined up to re-shoot this made-for-TV band. By this time, however, the Theatre Round had already passed and one of the people involved had not been selected into the Top 18 and did not turn up to the interview. Instead of another garage, the more typical setting for a young Kiwi band, a professional studio was hired as well as all instruments and sound equipment. We had to pretend the Theatre Round auditions had not already happened and we were still unsure of our fate. This type of re-shot happened extensively throughout the programme whether it was to change the lighting or sound or whether to make the day seem sunnier like during the first audition stage:

“Outside, the crew we re-shooting some opening shots: they don't want it to look as cold and wet as it did earlier” (Spratt, 2006: 20).

On this shoot there was a camera operator, sound operator, one of the directors and the contestant liaison present. We were asked to sing two songs approximately five times each and then we started the interview process. The director conducted the interviews and began with both my fellow contestant and I together. It was obvious he was trying to hide his frustration when neither of us delivered the ‘goods’ in terms of our answers to the questions put forward. We learnt that one must always answer the question using that question in the response. Once enough footage was taken we had individual interviews one at a time.

I found the interview process particularly interesting as I was told straight away to be myself. But then I discovered that being myself meant that, according to the director, I wasn't emotive enough and steps were taken by him to draw out some of that emotion. Very little was discussed about my singing rather the focus on my late father who was a singer/songwriter and how he would react to the NZ Idol opportunity. It was apparent from the beginning that my ‘story’ would revolve around my father and that I needed to show emotion because otherwise “I would look like I don't care” and the viewers need to “see the

real me”. Once the interviews were finished and enough tears were shed the director moved onto the next interview. When this segment aired it was interesting to see that an hour-long interview was cut down to approximately one minute, which basically only consisted of my tears.

Prior to contestants heading into the Idol house for the Top 18 Piano Round, a day was put aside for a camera crew to spend time interviewing each contestant and film them doing something specific to them. On my background filming day, a camera operator and a sound man/ interviewer followed me around taking different camera shots. At a fake band practice they especially wanted to interview a member of the band who had previous Reality TV experience on PopStars and ask her questions about me and about her experiences with a show similar to NZ Idol. They filmed the band singing and talking together, the camera crew then headed to my home where they did an extensive interview with my mum and then filmed my family and friends eating and socialising for a couple of hours before filming my Salsa class to get lots of dancing shots. Due to timing issues another interview with me was scheduled for the next day. The next day the on-camera interview only lasted approximately 45mins and was not focused on getting specific emotions perhaps because the producer or directors were not at this interview. This process was obviously one that contestants needed to do well almost immediately if they are to succeed in this competition. These two interviews were cut into small segments and segments were screened throughout the competition and added to other interviews, slowly developing the contestant’s character. As Wheelock Stahl suggests the Idol process,

“Constructs ordinariness, like other reality TV programs, through its surveillance and narrative installment/ chapter logic, it allows and compels contestants’ characters to develop over the course of a television season” (Wheelock Stahl, 2004: 220).

During the interview process obvious questions such as “why did you enter NZ Idol”, “what experience have you had in your singing to date” were asked. Once these answers were established, other questions were asked, questions about family and upbringing, love life, inspirations, were especially popular in Season Three due to the focus on contestants entering the competition for particular members of their family.

The particular theme that my personal interview was based on, or that producers were most

interested in, as mentioned before was “making a late parent proud”. The focus of my initial interviews all revolved around this. Even when other family members were interviewed the focus still remained on my late father.

Through the interview process, initially, my story like many others was one about overcoming the tragic nature of death to succeed in a public forum, producers used such stories, not only to portray me but also my fellow contestants, as introduction pieces. This is especially the case early on in the competition but it became less of a focus later on once my particular persona was established.

Once eliminated from NZ Idol, the only contact came in the form of a letter reminding me of prohibited activity such as trading off the Idol name, making a partnership between a manager and an agent as well as appearing on television. A final letter was sent containing information about what contestants were expected to do for the final show as all Top 10 participants were expected back into the Idol house to stay for the week leading up to that show and had to decide which song they would perform out of their previous Top 10 performances.

Idol House

During the Piano Round the assigned group of six met on their respective first days at the South Pacific Studio’s offices ready to start the week. A briefing about the schedule for the week was given informing us about what to expect. We were then taken to a “secret location” where we would be living for the next week and potentially longer if we were to make the Top 10. We were assigned our own rooms and the house rules were detailed; no drinking, no bringing any other persons over to the house and we were not allowed to disclose the location. Living with the Idol contestants was another family: a “house mum and dad” with their two small children. They prepared all of the meals and did all necessary chores. Contestants however spent little time in the house as the days in the studio usually lasted 12 hours, sometimes longer. The facilities in the house included a small gym with a treadmill and rowing machine as well as a computer and a television.

Once the Top 10 was established rooms were shared with two females together in three separate rooms and all the male contestants together in a big room downstairs as there were

only 4 of them.

Another aspect of life in the NZ Idol house was 'life coaching' which was a compulsory activity on a given night where a specialist life coach came into the house to hold workshops. These workshops were about how to cope with newly found celebrity status and the criticisms that come with being involved in such shows. These meetings became yet another chore the Idols were forced to do and eventually were dropped because the contestants were exhausted from the continual expectation to participate in every activity.

Every week a day was allocated to contestants where they could visit friends and family, if any lived in Auckland, or could do something alone. At first this day was a Sunday which started with being picked up by someone at the Idol studios at 7am and dropped off again at 6pm., However contestants became upset with this arrangement and bargained for more time so as to have a night away from the house. Reluctantly producers agreed so long as the contestants were not seen in public, engaged in a disorderly manner such as drunkenness.

'Family' meetings were called in the Idol house when feuds between contestants developed mainly due to feelings of claustrophobia or homesickness especially from those contestants in the house who had children.

"There definitely was (friction) all the time. The house was a hotwire every single day"
(Moala, cited in Hudson, 2006: 16)

During the final week, the remaining two contestants were moved to an apartment complex in the city and the eliminated Idols were sent back into the house.

Overall my experience in NZ Idol Season Three seemed to reflect the experiences of those in other seasons. My experience illustrates the idea that what happens behind the scenes does not necessarily correlate with the actual show or media portrayal of the events. This background activity to a certain extent added to the stress of performing and competing.

Conclusion

Notions of talent and popularity and the stronger importance of the latter is evident in such shows as NZ Idol where the successful contestants during the show are those who were able to become a part of the public consciousness through their popularity, whether to do with their race, region or other personality factors. The importance of popularity was freely acknowledged not only by the press but also by the contestants themselves who frequently recognised and commented on its importance in ensuring that one would be successful in such a competition. The professional musicians who participated in this survey also understood the impact that popularity played on the overall outcome of each NZ Idol distinguishing the fact that although popularity plays a major part in the success of Reality Television talent quest formats and their participants it is also a part of the Music Industry in general with many celebrities first gaining their profile through the media before becoming a musician/ singer.

So does NZ Idol then actually uncover talent or does it, rather, intend to create minor celebrities that could be recognised as celestoids with their quick rise to fame and even quicker fall into obscurity? I would suggest that although some of the contestants are musically talented the majority of those that continue far enough into the show to become what is perceived as successful are those that have become popular and through popularity they gain their temporary celebrity status. The initial attribute, singing talent, may have been of importance at the beginning of the show yet very quickly loses that importance toward the end when popularity takes over.

The lack of importance attached to musical success at the completion of the show is perhaps best indicated by the fact that the winners' singles have not sold well and by the decision of SonyBMG to withdraw its support from the final NZ Idol season, with the Season Three winner unable to secure a recording deal at all. Having an album released would have been an important indicator of the shift from a local to a national celebrity status. Because long-term national success has not been seen with any of the Idol winners the entire process takes on the character of a local Talent Contest and the typical outcome is the creation of celestoids with fleeting national popularity that rapidly declines into the status of a 'has been'. In a show where media professionalism and slick presentation skills

seem to be of more importance than singing ability, especially in the final stages, this outcome is predictable. Indeed the generation of a personality profile seems to be the main benefit for those involved. The contestants that seek careers in the media in television presenting have been, in a profile sense, a lot more successful than those who have tried to secure record deals or autonomously release singles or albums.

At the outset of this study, the following broad research questions were identified:

- (a) What is the influence of Television Talent Contests, particularly Song Contests on the creation of pop music stars and celebrities in the New Zealand Television and Music Industry?
- (b) What are the attitudes of the New Zealand media towards the Television Talent Contests, in general and NZ Idol as a Song Contest in particular?
- (c) How do professional musicians evaluate the impact of NZ idol on the Music Industry and what are their views on the meaning of these shows in terms of the relationship between craft values and commercial success?
- (d) How do the contestants in such shows view the experience, particularly in the case of NZ Idol 2006, in which I was a contestant?
- (e) What do the answers to the forgoing questions suggest about the social meanings accorded to notions such as talent, authenticity and fame in New Zealand popular culture?

The study of the various aspects of NZ Idol has provided at least a provisional answer to these questions. So for example, the cultural influences present in New Zealand communities make the acceptance of shows such as NZ Idol difficult for local musicians. So it became evident that musicians did not deem NZ Idol to be of great musical importance. However what was interesting and unexpected was that most of the musicians surveyed were rather more indifferent than critical of the process especially compared to the attitudes of those musicians quoted within the media. I would suggest that the reason for this is the fact that many of these musicians are included in what I have described as New Zealand's version of the simplex. By American standards this is a rather loose and deregulated informal organisation functioning on a scarcity of work. Therefore many musicians are reliant on shows like NZ Idol to earn a living.

A distinction must also be made here between singers and instrumentalists as many of the instrumentalists rely on the singers that may have gained some profile by appearing on NZ Idol shows and perhaps even encourage it in order to promote their own covers bands or original groups. The difference in attitudes seems apparent between the members of the simplex and those that are not with the group, as those outside of the simplex were far more critical of the entire process of the show and the contestants themselves. These musicians have no need to protect a position within the simplex, as they are not gaining the benefits of employment within them. These musicians are more closely aligned to what Frith points out about the fact that it's the musicians themselves who are often quick to accuse each other of "prostituting themselves" by trying to please employers, commercial markets and the audiences themselves (Frith, 1996: 54). A contestant entering NZ Idol can therefore be seen as committing the ultimate sin as the show is based solely on market conditions and not on musical creativity.

There is another difference in attitude between those who are members of the simplex and those who are not. Nationally and Internationally recognised musicians or celebrities who were damning of the format were at the forefront of this issue. Those musicians, often more specifically those singers, were much more forthright about the absolute lack of talent displayed in these forms of Reality Television shows which was seen through comments within the media. The status and security of these musicians are much greater than those who are merely members of the simplex thus they can easily criticise without fear of retribution in terms of their career. Also by being overly critical they, perhaps, solidify their own positions within the media and Music Industry circles as superior. The attitudes towards NZ Idol of those musicians were closest to those of the media representations, which were uniformly negative.

Tabloid publications, such as the Women's magazines, tended to focus on the personalities and relationships of the contestants. These articles neglected in most cases to even mention the singing or talent aspect of the competition and made no comment on whether or not NZ Idol was of any musical or cultural worth. The message here was that a celebrity profile was important in itself without reference to talent.

This is in stark contrast to the press, which focused on the competition aspect of the format

as well as many articles discussing the Music Industries view and the authenticity of the show. As well as this, professional views and opinions were compared to that of the amateur thus making distinctions about who has the “right” to make judgment. The press also claimed this superior knowledge over other forms of media as well as the general public when the voting results or eliminations went against what the press had deemed appropriate. However the press still remained non-committal even when the voters got it “wrong”.

The attitudes of the contestants themselves are interesting as most of those involved in Season Three generally agreed with the press claiming NZ Idol to be of little musical value. Yet they were still convinced that their own involvement would be a force for change demonstrating that musical ability could overcome the limitations of NZ Idol seen in previous seasons. A prevalent belief seen through many comments, specifically in Season Three is that the apparent lack of success of previous winners should be attributed to their own personal lack of drive and dedication. Truly talented individuals, many believed, would create their own opportunities and use NZ Idol as a major stepping-stone in their musical careers. When this did not occur, three contestants involved claimed that it was due to the lack of Industry support and public scrutiny that meant none of the Top 10 were commercially successful within the Music Industry.

So what are the tangible benefits for the young singers in entering NZ Idol? As mentioned I would suggest those people interested in gaining media profile and sustaining themselves as a minor celebrity, one known for being well known, can use the NZ Idol experience to their advantage (Boorstin). The ongoing benefits to someone in this way are the continued women’s magazine coverage and other Reality Television opportunities, but this has its own criteria which often has more to do with looks than anything else. Apart from cameo television performances and magazine articles contestants also appeared in local concerts like Coco-cola Christmas in the Park.

Because of the negative view of Talent Contests, the actual musical opportunity in terms of recording contracts provided by the show is limited. Entering such a competition can severely damage a persons chance to gain recording contracts with any major label in New Zealand. What will be interesting is to see whether any of the previous Idols will appear

back on New Zealand screens or within the commercial Music Industry in the future. With the small media profile gained by contestants it is possible that some may in fact have comeback careers in the next few years.

The phenomenal successes of the Pop Idol formats across the globe have created a wave of musical celebrities, some achieving long term successful careers, especially those succeeding in the American and, to lesser extent the British version such as Kelly Clarkson who won the first season of American Idol and who continues to be an award winning artist. But for most contestants, especially in New Zealand, the Idol experience is a brief introduction to national fame before fading back into relative obscurity, perhaps maintaining low-key casual careers as club performers or celebrities fronting minor events at a local level. This outcome suggests that NZ Idol is more about the popularity bestowed by media exposure than about the search for genuine talent.

Throughout the discourse analysis of the show there was a constant referral to the concept of authenticity. This might refer to the emotional qualities of the performance, in itself related to the choice of song, the performance and the look of the contestant, or it might relate to the idea of being a representative of the ethnic sub-culture from which the contestant came, to the manifestation of pride in the family. It might also refer to ideas of professionalism, the ability to take and respond to criticism from the judges as supposedly seasoned professionals and to benefit from the support offered by the professional musicians. The term authenticity is perhaps too static to describe this process because it is clear that contestants were required to negotiate the demands of quite competing standards. The contestants were in effect required to authenticate themselves as being the possessors of a particular kind of authenticity and were judged by the audience and the judges accordingly (Moore, 2002). In other words in reviewing the materials I was led to conclude that NZ Idol was about rituals of authentication advanced by a disparate collection of interests. What the public wanted, what experts wanted and what media producers wanted were often at odds and as I have detailed in many cases worked against the ability of contestants to control their own performance.

So although the contrast between Talent and Popularity was central to the public image of the show, the organisation of the show and its attendant discourses had a powerful impact

on the ability of the contestants to succeed depending on how they responded to the pressures of performing. In this general sense NZ Idol must be seen as process for the production of intimate fame (Redmond). A ritual process that because of its internal contradictions and demands upon it, developed as a process of normalising the view that what one is rather than what one can do is central to “fame”. This process as I have shown was not uncontested but even the terms of the contestation – around talent, authenticity, localism and professionalism – led to a view of fame as a unique individual accomplishment.

Appendix 1

2006 Musician Survey

During this dissertation research a questionnaire was designed and distributed to working musicians in New Zealand along with a covering letter. This letter explained my research and stressed the fact that this was not a commercial venture but rather an academic enquiry designed to advance public understanding of the attitudes of musicians to their craft and to talent shows, specifically NZ Idol. The survey was completely anonymous and was sent to each musician that was willing to participate and those musicians then posted their completed form back. The questionnaire asked about the musicians' own particular experiences within the Music Industry as well as reasons why they chose such a career path, their own musical tastes and most importantly their views on the NZ Idol process. It also asked whether or not they believed such shows, and contestants that appear on them, contributed any musical or cultural worth to the musical community. Approximately 50 surveys were distributed with 31 completed and returned. The following appendix is a copy of both letters and the questionnaire sent out to participants.

25 March, 2007

School of Communication Studies

Faculty of Arts



To whom it may concern,

The attached survey is part of my research for MA dissertation entitled: Talent Contests and Talent: A Survey of the Attitudes of Professional Musicians in New Zealand. It is worth stressing that my research is not a commercial venture but an academic enquiry designed to advance public understanding of the attitudes of musicians to their craft and to talent shows.

In making your contribution to this research, you will be making a vital contribution to our understanding of the issues that professional musicians face in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The information you provide will have an important role in informing public perceptions and policy-making in the performing arts.

All information supplied by you will also be kept strictly confidential and anonymous.

Any concerns you may have about the conduct of the research or its basic purpose should be addressed to my dissertation supervisor, Professor Barry King – see the contact details given below.

Dr Barry King

Barry.king@aut.ac.nz

Tel: 64 9 9179626

Fax: 64 9 917 9987

In conclusion, I thank you once again for your willingness to make a contribution to my research.

Yours faithfully,

Rebecca Wright

25 March, 2007



School of Communication Studies

Faculty of Arts

To whom it may concern,

Thank you very much for your willingness to participate in this survey as your input will contribute greatly to my MA dissertation entitled: Talent Contests and Talent: A Survey of the Attitudes of Professional Musicians in New Zealand. It is worth stressing, once again, that my research is not a commercial venture but an academic enquiry designed to advance public understanding of the attitudes of musicians to their craft and to talent shows.

In making your contribution to this research, you will be making a vital contribution to our understanding of the issues that professional musicians face in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The information you provide will have an important role in informing public perceptions and policy-making in the performing arts and all information supplied by you will remain anonymous and strictly confidential.

Any concerns you may have about the conduct of the research or its basic purpose should be addressed to my dissertation supervisor, Professor Barry King – see the contact details given below.

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In conclusion, I thank you once again for your willingness to make a contribution to my research.

Yours faithfully,

Rebecca Wright



Survey of musicians' attitudes to the profession today

The following survey is designed to provide an accurate picture of professional musicians and performers thoughts about the New Zealand music scene today. It seeks information on how professional musicians and performers feel about various aspects music industry, namely the NZ Idol phenomenon. Your co-operation in completing the survey accurately is vitally important. The survey is anonymous so please do not add your name to the questionnaire.

In completing this questionnaire it is understood that you consent to have the data made available in the final report. As already emphasised the survey is anonymous and the publication of the results will ensure that anonymity is maintained.

Thank you for your willingness to make a contribution to our understanding of how the profession works today.

PART ONE: *About you*

1. Gender M F

2 How would you describe your ethnic origin?

Pakeha -European Maori Pasifika Asian Other (please specify)

3 How old are you?

Under 20 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 over 60

4 What kind of formal training did you receive before entering the profession?

Performing Arts School University or polytechnic Apprenticeship

Other (Please state):

5 If you did not have formal training before entering the profession, did you mainly Acquire music and or performance skills through:

Learning by doing private tuition Other Please state:

6 How much did you earn from professional work in the last twelve months?

Nothing under \$5K \$5-\$10K \$10-\$20K \$20-\$40K \$40 -50 K over \$ 50K

7a Please indicate your main source of income from the music business;

Performing music Teaching producing other (please specify)

7b In a perfect world which one of these would you do exclusively?

Performing music Teaching producing other (please specify)

7 How many days of professional work did you undertake in the last twelve months?

(Please state): days

8 What kind of music do you mainly play?

Pop Jazz R &B Folk Country Other

PART TWO: *About you and your music*

1 What made you first decide to pursue music as a profession?

2 Can you give me a bit of a background as to your music career to date?

3 Who do you think are the top 5 Musicians/ bands in recent history?

4 What makes them so special?

5 Are these same musicians/ bands also the most successful?

6 How would you define success?

7 How do you feel about the idea of “instant stardom” compared to the kiwi ethos of “doing the hard yards”?

8 How would you describe New Zealand music?

9 Do you believe New Zealand audiences are different to other countries, if so what makes this difference?

10 What attributes do you think are vital to create and maintain a successful music career in New Zealand?

PART THREE: *About Pop Idol/ NZ Idol*

11 Have you followed any of the Pop Idol shows? If so, what are your feelings towards the artistic merit or contribution to the music scene?

12 Overseas what do you believe are the 3 most important characteristics to embody in order to be successful on such shows?

13 Are these qualities the same or different in order to be successful in New Zealand?

14 What do you believe star quality or x-factor entails – does this differ to notions of talent and/or musicianship?

15 Why do you believe our previous idol winners have not been able to achieve an enduring commercially successful career after the show ended?

16 Do New Zealand audiences pick the “right” people to win?

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