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'Idol' fever's in full bloom at Rose Bowl

Thousands of exuberant hopefuls turn out to audition for the star-making show's sixth season.

By JAY A. FERNANDEZ
Special to The Times

In an enormous empty parking lot under a full moon at 4 o'clock in the morning, a pretty blond is practicing a few dance steps in front of a bank of cruddy blue portajohns that look like a panel of inscrutable judges.

This can only mean one thing: "American Idol" has returned to Los Angeles.

And in a glorious testament to inexhaustible self-belief or equally limitless self-delusion, thousands of hopefuls have gathered at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena to audition for the hugely popular show's sixth season.

There hasn't been an L.A. audition since Season 3, and apparently no one wants to miss his or her shot at being humiliated by Simon Cowell in front of 30 million people. Potential idols began lining up just before 4 a.m. Tuesday to wait for their turn to belt out just one verse and chorus in front of a dozen "Idol" producers and music experts. Some will get 30 seconds. Some will get a tenth of that.

But as "Idol" producer Patrick Lynn reminds everyone, Kelly, Ruben, Fantasia, Carrie and Taylor — the winners of the first five seasons — all stood anonymously in a crowd

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ANNIE WELLS *Los Angeles Times*

IN LINE, IN TUNE: *Tamara Harris, 16, of Corona warms up her pipes amid a throng of other potential Season 6 "American Idol" contestants in Pasadena early Tuesday.*



Photographs by ANNIE WELLS *Los Angeles Times*

PUTTING ON A GOOD FACE: Lucy Hart, 22, of Montebello applies makeup to Sacha White, also 22, of Bakersfield.

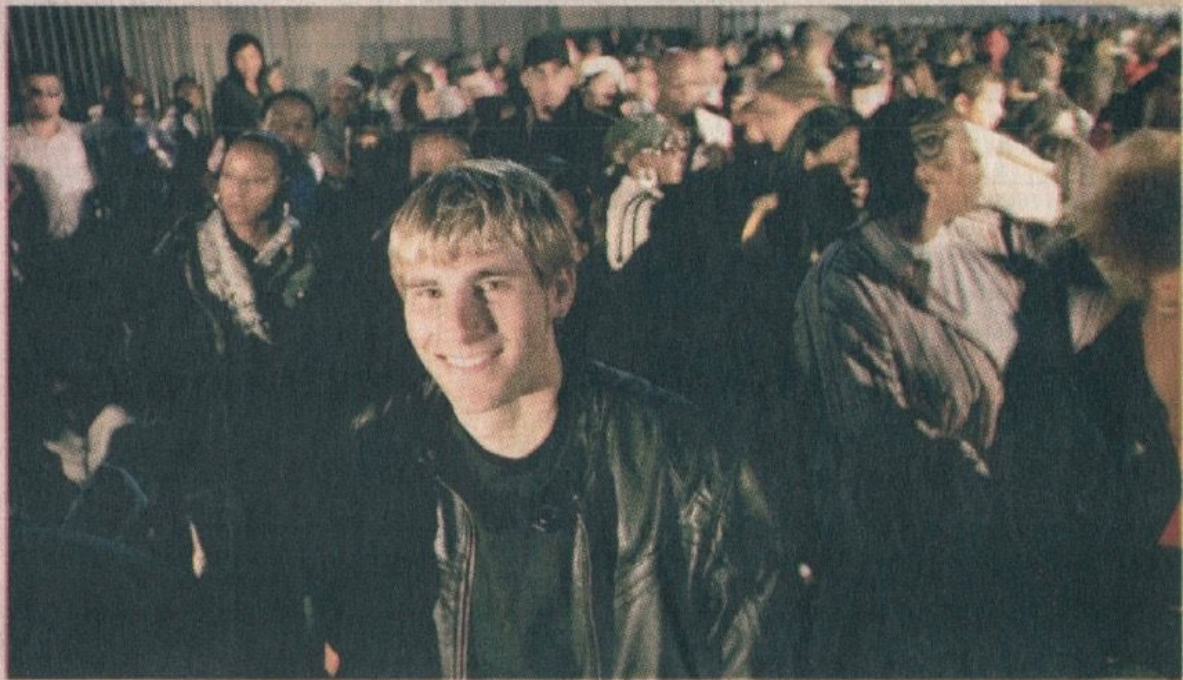
'American Idol' in L.A.

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just like this long before they were crowned the next American Idol by 63 million home voters.

Singers of all races, though not all ages, as "Idol's" window is 16 to 28, stand (or sleep) in a thick line half a mile long on a surprisingly crisp L.A. morning. They wrap themselves in SpongeBob SquarePants blankets, riffle through folders that hold their registration paperwork and lyric sheets, and clutch hand-drawn banners and signs that read "AMERICAN IDOL HEAR ME SING!" and "JILLIAN WILL ROCK AMERICAN IDOL."

Ken Fitzgerald is a good-looking 27-year-old from Cupertino who managed to snag the first place in line (which he admits gains him no advantage in the competition, just pole position for being the subject of articles like this one). He's auditioned in San Francisco, Hawaii and L.A. for previous "Idol" seasons, and even made it onto the Season 3 show. Though he owns his own home-restoration company, he spends most of his free time singing in the car, trying to form a band and going to concerts.



EARLY BIRD: Ken Fitzgerald, a 27-year-old home restorer from Cupertino who's tried out for "Idol" before, managed to snag the first spot in line at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

"I see a lead singer of a band and I go, 'That definitely could be me,'" he says. "I think I got the look, I think I got the moves."

Today he's mulling whether to sing Jimmy Eat World's "Sweetness," or "Camera One" by the Josh Joplin Group.

Like many of the auditioners, Fitzgerald is a karaoke fanatic, and he actually met his German wife in a San Jose bar when she was crooning Nena's "99 Luftballons" in her native language. (Fitzgerald had opted for Eminem's "Lose Yourself.") Their wedding in Germany last year was the only reason he missed Season 5 auditions, though his wife nearly kept him home this year too.

"She wants me to be more adult and responsible and not chase my childhood dream of being a singer," Fitzgerald says with a shrug.

Tracy Johnson, 21, from San Bernardino is a pretty, slight woman in a red dress who jumped on the freeway at 1:30 a.m. to drive here and sing Monica's "U Should've Known Better" for her first "Idol" audition. A church choir soloist since age 3, Johnson sings at San Manuel Indian Bingo & Casino every Monday night in front of hundreds of listeners. She's already in the process of recording an album but thinks she's got a pretty good shot at winning "Idol" and its grand-prize recording contract.

"I get the opportunity to be in front of someone that's been through what I've been through, as far as music goes," she says about Tuesday's audition. "Even if I don't make it, it gives me an opportunity to get noticed on TV."

A friend who came just to support Johnson says, "I believe in her enough to get up at 5:30 in the morning and stand outside. She is the next American Idol."

"This darkness isn't going to last forever," Johnson says, sounding like a gospel song. "Pretty soon the sun's gonna shine and everything's gonna blossom and bloom."

And sure enough it does. Amid the nervous buoyancy of thousands of brimming wannabe stars willing to sing for anybody — or nobody — a kind of manic beauty emerges in the gathering sunlight. As TV cameras filming for the actual show sweep the crowd along with those of various news organiza-



NAP TIME: Lindsay Grimes, 21, of Sacramento catches up on her rest while standing in line early Tuesday morning.

On the Web

See a video report and photo gallery from Tuesday's "American Idol" auditions at latimes.com/idol.

tions, one contestant after another steps forward to seize a minute in the spotlight and show his or her stuff.

One girl does a shaky version of Aretha Franklin's "Respect." A moment later, a guy steps out of line and does a sweet version of "Over the Rainbow" while accompanying himself on ukulele. Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" makes a few appearances. What's remarkable is the sense of camaraderie among the competitors. Whenever someone finishes a performance, everyone within hearing distance bursts into applause, encouraging the glowing contender.

Diane Jones, 23, who lives in Playa del Rey, is a second lieutenant in the Air Force who does personnel readiness at Los Angeles Air Force Base in El Segundo. She often performs at weddings, funerals and base events such as promotion and retirement ceremonies. A friend with her produces a Pentagon Channel show that is profiling her.

Jones has decided to sing Faith Hill's "When the Lights Go Down" for the audition panel. Although she may be nervous about her performance, as she stands cloaked in a Department of the Air Force blanket her stepmother made, she has no trepidation about potentially facing one of "Idol's" most insufferable obstacles.

"You always think he's going to say something very rude," Jones says of the show's blunt curmudgeon, Simon Cowell. "I've been through boot camp, so I think I can handle a little Simon."

Every few seconds a new voice will float up out of the crowd, and almost all of them prove that these singers are talented enough to deserve this audience. Solo renditions of "Daydream Believer" or "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" end with a dozen others joining in. One middle-aged bald man points at his daughter and yells, "This is my retirement plan!" Over against the fence, along the Arroyo Seco, a girl sits alone on a rock, swaying as she bellows a ballad to the hills above her.

Swarmed in the middle of the line, Lucas Smith, 23, from Orange County jokes around with his friend Sal Alaimo, 22, from Northridge. Smith, who has spina bifida and sits in a sleek black wheelchair, wears a blue Dodgers cap and has a relaxed, go-along-for-the-crazy-ride smile on his face. "I think I have a fairly good voice, and if nothing else, I've got a gimmick going," Smith says and laughs. He's going to sing Billy Joel's doo-wop throwback, "The Longest Time."

Alaimo, who has a muscle disorder and is in a sporty-looking red electric wheelchair with detailing on the side, frequents the karaoke nights at the Matador Bowl, a Northridge bowling alley. Smith had to talk him into coming today, but Alaimo claims he's "pumped" to give Frankie Avalon's "Venus" a try.

"We're trying to make a change," Alaimo says thoughtfully. "We're physically disabled and there's not many people in

our situation who are in the entertainment industry, so we're just trying to create a ripple in the pond."

Suddenly, a section of the crowd nearby cheers. "Yeaaaaah!" Smith yells back. "You can't see me but you will hear me!"

Nearby, Joe Weidenbach, 26, of Las Vegas; Justin Waggoner, 21, of Jackson, Calif.; Katie Quigley, 21, of Buena Park; and Josi Goodman, 19, of Yorba Linda lead a singalong of "Killing Me Softly."

Quigley is a McDonald's manager who impressed her boss enough with her constant singing to herself at work that he gave her the day off to audition. She complains that people always ask to hear her voice at the worst times, but "it's the life of a superstar," she says. "You gotta be ready for anything."

Goodman just returned from a month in Jerusalem doing charity work for Israelis displaced by the war with Lebanon. When asked how things are over there, Goodman replies, "It's actually really nice. It's cooler there than it is here."

Waggoner plans to dip into classic country for his audition. "My belief is, if you're trying to stand out, you don't want to come in trying to be the next Garth Brooks or the next Dixie Chicks," he says. "You wanna be yourself."

Weidenbach, a tall guy with a friendly face beneath a black cowboy hat, clearly relishes all this energy. Though he's never auditioned for "Idol" before, the video game designer has taken runs at "Nashville Star" and "Rent." In preparation for today, he's been taking voice lessons three hours a week for the last six months to knock out Gavin DeGraw's "I Don't Want to Be."

"Get out there and just wall on it," Weidenbach says of his technique for overcoming anxiety. But visualization exercises don't hurt either: "For the last two weeks, every night I've been dreaming about being on 'Idol' and winning."

"I'm as good as I am and everyone else is as good as they are — either I make it or I don't," Goodman says to a chorus of agreement from his friends. "All I can hope is that what I am is good enough."

"Which it is," Quigley says quickly.

"Yes, of course," Goodman says. "Because I am the next American Idol, thank you very much."

"Exactly," Weidenbach says. "As am I."