

Judging the new 'Idol' judges: Are they cutting it?

J.Lo and Steven Tyler got off to a rough start, but they're getting good, experts say

By **Randee Dawn**

TODAY.com contributor
updated

Share | Print | Font: + -

When "American Idol" announced that Steven Tyler and Jennifer Lopez would be the new judges — joining Randy Jackson and replacing the iconic Simon Cowell, the cipher Kara DioGuardi and the funny but unlamented Ellen DeGeneres — the reception among critics, fans and those in the reality biz was somewhat ... well, pitchy.

"I had low expectations," said Jeffrey Hayzlett, who appeared for three seasons as a judge on "Celebrity Apprentice" when he was chief marketing officer for Kodak. "I thought Steven was going to be a bad judge."

But Hayzlett — like many other initial skeptics — has been pleasantly surprised since "Idol's" 10th season premiered. "It turns out (Tyler) has great substance and style, and he's not as checked out as people said he was going to be," he admitted.

Keys to success

Judges are the real stars of reality competition shows. Sure, contestants do the singing on "American Idol," the dancing on "Dancing With the Stars" and the cooking on "Top Chef," but season to season, judges are some of the only consistent faces fans see. And if those personalities don't fly, the series will crash and burn.

"You need judges to put things in perspective, no matter how skewed that perspective is," said Murtz Jaffer, host of the Canadian TV show "Reality Obsessed" and editor of Insidepulse.com. "Without judges to do that and deliver the one-liners, cut some contestants down and build some up, it's just going to be a bunch of kids singing, or whatever."

Judges are so key to a reality show's success that even top-rated "American Idol" looked to be on the ropes when Cowell departed at the end of last season. Without him to dish out his "just being honest" comments in a clipped British accent, "Idol" risked turning into another bland competition series.

But Robert Galinsky, founder of the New York Reality TV School, said Tyler and Lopez have "found their groove pretty quickly." To him, "Steven Tyler is the real deal. It's fun to see him make an adjustment from a coliseum audience to appealing to one camera and one person. And he and J.Lo are so culturally different from one another; they complement one another with those differences."

Rough start

Not that it's been easy sailing from day one. Initial audition episodes felt stiff: Tyler leered at the young, short-skirted girls, which made for awkward moments due to their obvious age differences — and also undercut his objectivity. When he did critique (following yelps or drumming on his desk) he offered stream-of-



Chris Pizzello / AP

New "Idol" judges Steven Tyler and Jennifer Lopez were big question marks at the beginning of the season, but are getting the hang of being on the panel.

Don't miss these Entertainment stories

Judging 'Idol's' new judges: Are they cutting it?

When the show announced that Steven Tyler and Jennifer Lopez would be the new judges, the reception among critics, fans and those in the reality biz was somewhat ... well, pitchy.



AP

['Dancing' changes the channel on another star](#)

['Mad Men' will be streamed on Netflix](#)

[One 'Loser' binges and stays, while two go home](#)

[Pregnant Mariah bares all in cover shoot](#)

conscious whimsy that was hard to parse.

Meanwhile, Lopez was quieter, absorbing worshipful comments of the wannabes (which also undercut her objectivity) and offered little in the way of constructive criticism. Mostly, she just appeared to want to be liked.

The result? Three hundred twenty-seven hopefuls went through to Hollywood, way up from the previous year's 181. The show also earned its lowest premiere ratings in the key 18-49 demographics since the series debut in 2002.

[Advertise](#) | [AdChoices](#)

Dave Broome, president of 25/7 Productions (home to such reality shows as "The Biggest Loser" and "Star Tomorrow"), said that was likely a bit of overzealous producing. "It's your job as a producer and a network to give expectations for your judges, including celebrity judges. If someone's not telling J.Lo what they expect from her or want her to be, that's their fault. You hope to have a celebrity who will deliver what your expectations are."

[Ousted 'Idol' has one regret](#)

But whatever a producer may or may not have told them to say or do, the appearance of hopeful Chris Medina (who has the paralyzed fiancée) in the auditions helped Tyler and Lopez deliver. Sure, it felt a little calculated and possibly even exploitative to bring the young woman on to the set for a visit with the judges. But when the Aerosmith frontman leaned over her and quietly offered words of support, it felt completely unscripted.

Later in the season, when Lopez had to tell Medina he was no longer going to be able to continue on "Idol," she broke down weeping. It was another apparently unplanned, unscripted moment. With the help of those two scenes, the judges were suddenly able to overcome their shortcomings.

"Those incidents were testaments to their humanity," said Galinsky. "In part, that's what we're tuning in for. That's what we tuned into when we watched Simon — he was someone who brought us back to humanity. So now that we don't have Simon, it's about two people finding their way together."

Even Jackson is getting some plaudits these days. Suddenly, he's the veteran of the group. Galinsky called him the "center square," referring to the "Hollywood Squares" lineup in which the middle celebrity usually made regular, reliable appearances. "He represents stability, the legacy of the show and is the institution of 'American Idol,'" he said.

The challenge

Love for the judging panel is not universal, however.

"Recent episodes have been just over-the-top nice," groused Jaffer. "Simon brought a degree of realism that is severely lacking. If I'm sitting at home, and a girl tanks on a song, I want to hear the judges saying so. And calling Randy 'the mean judge' now — that's coming off a little forced."

[Story: Which season is truly the most talented group ever on 'Idol'?](#)

Therein lies the challenge of turning celebrities into judges: A well-known person with a reputation they want to maintain doesn't want to become the big meanie who shot down a teenager's dreams. Cowell, on the other hand, built his reputation doing just that — offering pragmatic and businesslike advice among all of the squishy feel-good feedback that came from his fellow panelists.

But when "Idol" goes on hiatus, or after they leave the show entirely, Tyler and Lopez will want to return to their former personas. Protecting that image with fans means they may not be as honest with contestants as they might want to be.

That's the current danger on "Idol." A judge more focused on his or her reputation can become a show's dead weight, said Darrell Miller, co-chair of entertainment and sports practice at law firm Fox Rothschild, a veteran of reality show clients and productions.

"If you come in and you're not honest or funny — and are basically a rubber stamp, if you're not offering any meaningful criticism then you'll fade into the woodwork," he said. "I imagine Jennifer Lopez is more concerned with being helpful and honest than being mean for mean's sake."

Most popular

[Justified? Police use pepper spray to subdue 8-year-old](#)

[Glenn Beck leaving his Fox News show](#)

[Family faces two devastating cancer diagnoses](#)

[Judging 'Idol's' new judges: Are they cutting it?](#)

The truth is a judge has to first and foremost be entertaining, said Jaffer.

Extreme couponing! How to get \$1,100 of loot for \$40

Advertise | AdChoices

"Judges are responsible for making sure their show gets another season. So they do that by delivering great one-liners, possibly ones they've made up in advance," Jaffer explained. "It would be terrible if they went up there and had nothing to say. That's what happened to Ellen DeGeneres. If you don't have something to say, you're just not doing your job."

Randee Dawn is a freelance writer based in New York, and was born with a remote control in her hand. She is the co-author of "The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion."

Want to get the latest TV and reality TV news? Follow [The Clicker blog](#) on Twitter @[TODAY_Clicker](#) and "like" us on [Facebook](#).

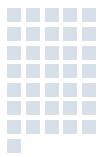
© 2011 MSNBC Interactive. [Reprints](#)

 **Vote:**

Photos: 'American Idol' final 9 - Top 13

[Open in new window](#)

previous
next



1 of 35

Related
slideshows



Nine alive

The final nine contestants on season 10 of "American Idol," clockwise from bottom right: Haley Reinhart, James Durbin, Pia Toscano, Casey Abrams, Jacob Lusk, Stefano Langone, Paul McDonald, Lauren Alaina and Scotty McCreery. (Fox) [Share](#)



Two not for the show

Naima Adedapo, left, and Thia Megia bid farewell after being eliminated on Thursday, March 21. The first four



Related: Reality TV

More on 'American Idol'

[Which season is truly most talented on 'Idol'?](#)

['Idol' delivers dramatic finish in epic episode](#)

['Idol' judges deliver a lovefest on Motown night](#)

[Watch 'Idol' shockers: Wonder, Hulk, more](#)

['Idol' hopefuls flee their 'haunted' house](#)

More on Reality TV

[Advertise](#) | [AdChoices](#)

['Dancing' changes the channel on another star](#)

[One 'Loser' binges and stays, while two go home](#)

[Judging 'Idol's' new judges: Are they cutting it?](#)

['16 and Pregnant' literally strikes again](#)

[C'mon, 'Losers'! Quit gaining and complaining](#)

Related videos & slideshows



Video

[Kirstie and Maks' dramatic 'Dancing' fall](#)



Video

[Macchio's romantic gesture on 'Dancing'](#)



Interactive

['Dancing' live chat on April 12!](#)



Video

[Scoop: Andy Cohen on 'Real Housewives'](#)



More TODAY with

[Ann Curry](#), [Matt Lauer](#), [Meredith Vieira](#), [Al Roker](#)

Search TODAY

Search

more sites: [allDAY blog](#) [Kathie Lee & Hoda](#) [TODAY Moms](#) [Concert Series](#) [Bites](#)

sites & shows: [TODAY](#) [Nightly News](#) [Meet the Press](#) [Dateline](#) [Morning Joe](#) [Hardball](#) [The Last Word](#) [Maddow](#) [Ed](#) [msnbc tv](#)

© 2011 msnbc.com [About us](#) [Help](#) [Advertise](#) [Careers](#) [Contact](#) [Alerts](#) [Feeds](#) [Podcasts](#) [Apps](#) [Widgets](#) [Stock data](#) [MSN Privacy](#) [Terms & conditions](#) [About our ads](#) [Site map](#)