

April 14, 2024: The Top Twenty

1. Jack Blocker: I love Jim Croce's music, especially **I Got A Name**, which I consider a masterpiece of music-making. It's a wonderful two-way conversation between the singer (Jim) and his other self (his alter ego) about pride associated with a namesake, his father's unfulfilled dreams, and living that dream when advised not to. That song is a ballad with deep meaning but a little too structured for Jack to break apart and reconstruct in his own image. But Jim Croce's tale of a pool shark (Big Jim Walker), **Don't Mess Around With Jim**, is low hanging fruit for Jack. There wasn't time to finish the story (Jack sang the 1st and 2nd verses) because of time limitations. If you are unfamiliar with the song, you don't know Big Jim Walker hustled Willie McCoy aka Slim and took all his money. Slim returned to get back his money and beat the hell out of Big Jim; i.e., "cut him up in a hundred places, shot him in a couple more, until he hit the floor"). And the lyric changes from Don't Mess Around With Jim to Don't Mess Around With Slim. I have no idea what Jack was doing in the last few bars – I swear it sounded like old time vaudeville and had nothing to do with the original. It was typical Jack Blocker deconstruction and I loved it. P.S. Anybody else wonder what Tyler Childers' goofy but country cute **All Your'n** would sound like after a Jack Blocker deconstruction?

2. Nya: Georgia On My Mind? Oh yes! How can any contestant go wrong with this song? Ray Charles is a legendary Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductee, and, a multi Grammy winner with ten songs in the Grammy Hall of Fame. This song (now the State Song of Georgia) is unquestionably the most popular of the ten. And Nya's presentation of this wonderful song was the best performance of the night. Does she really have three-octave range? I was speechless by what she did here. A magnificent performance.

3. Will Moseley: I really love Drake White's version of **Make Me Look Good Again**. It stayed in my head for days. I couldn't help but compare what was done here with the original and it didn't measure up. Will's vocal, usually resonant and pure, was raspy tonight. Perhaps that was the difference. The song is about a man in love; a man beat down by life and credits the woman he loves for making him look good again. Will was definitely invested in his performance. I was thinking he should have picked another Chris Stapleton song (you can't go wrong with **Tennessee Whiskey** and **What Are You Listening To** is tailor made for American Idol) but Drake White is in the same lane as Chris Stapleton (so is Luke Bryan for that matter), so song choice was not a problem. It's just that Will was out-sung tonight and I was

looking for a reason. But he did nothing wrong. He was simply out-sung. It happens. He lost a battle but I still think he will win the war. He checks every box but one. If he were handsome, I'd bet the house on him.

4. Jayna Elise: This was an emotional and energetic rendition of Mariah Carey wonderful R&B ballad, **My All**. It's a song about her extramarital affair with Yankee baseballer Derek Jeter while still married to Tony Mottola. Mariah says "**My All** is the realest, boldest, most passionate love song I have ever written" and she continues "When I sing this song, I sing it like my life depends on it". I guess Jayna Elise did her homework because that's exactly how she sang it tonight, as if her life depended on it. This too, was a magnificent performance.

5. Emmy Russell: Her rendition of the self-penned **Want You** should send her through to Top Fourteen. It's a simple melody with simple lyrics and a stripped own track. It's Emmy passionate and tender vocal that brings it to life and touches our hearts. She says the song is about being in love with someone who didn't love her back. If that's true, then what does the lyric "I'm breaking your heart and you're breaking mine" mean? Doesn't that imply that the two of them are/were in love? Also, if he doesn't love her any more, then what does the lyric "I say I need space; You say you need time" mean? If she knows that he doesn't love her, she doesn't need space between them. She needs a permanent separation. Why would anyone still want to be with someone who does not want them back? That's asking for more heartache and misery.

6: Abi Carter: Yet another wonderful acoustic performance with the singer out front and center stage. It was sometimes hard to follow because Abi's version of the insanely popular **Welcome To The Black Parade** is different than the original. Hers is a slowed down acoustic ballad which is not usually associated with My Chemical Romance. Also, the lyrics were picked through and rearranged to fit within the Idol imposed time requirement. But the message of this song was clear. It's about death and remembrance, a theme that still resonates and permeates this emo punk band. Clearly one of the best vocals of the evening and should easily propel her into the Top Fourteen.

7. Kennedy Reid: Naomi Judd's tearful good bye song, **Love Can Build A Bridge**, is about staying together during adversity. It was dedicated to her family and fans when she was told that she had only three years left to live. The song is quiet in the verses but powerful

and defiant in the chorus. Kennedy did it justice. I liked her from the start because she checks so many boxes. Whether it's enough to carry her deep into this competition, only time will tell. But in my opinion this was one of the Top Fourteen performances of the evening. By the way, although Kennedy does, I don't think Idol viewers care so much about weight. Iam Tongi won.

8: Mia Matthews: *"I'm five generations of blazing a trail. Through barbed wire valleys and overgrown dells. I'm barefoot and bareback and born tough as nails. I'm four-fifths of restless and one-fifth of Jack. I push like a daisy through old sidewalk cracks."* Another lyric: *"In the eye of a hurricane when I got one foot in the grave, I'll dig my boots into the dirt and face the rolling thunder"*. The message of Lainey Wilson's **Wildflowers and Wild Horses** is clear. She's no pushover. Lainey's said: "I come from five generations of hardheaded and tough people and we blazed our own trails." Mia Matthews is from Alabama and Lainey is from Louisiana. Country music is second nature to both of them. Mia is indeed getting better. Last week was a good week for her. I think this week will be even better because, in my opinion, this too was a Top Fourteen performance.

9. Ajii: I'm baffled by this contestant. He has an affinity for R&B and Afrobeats (Tems) as well as Hard Rock/Alternative Rock (Audioslave, which is made up of former members of Rage Against The Machine and Soundgarden). But anybody who brings a Chris Cornell (the best rock singer ever) song to the Idol Stage is alright with me. Chris says **Like A Stone** is about a dying man waiting to join his family and friends on the other side who have passed away. So it's a song about finding God, Heaven and the Afterlife. But there's also this paradox: *"You spend all that time trying to be a good person and lead a moral life, be fair and generous and then you go to hell anyway"* Chris Cornell. Ajii is a wonderful singer with a booming pipe and he knows how to use it. But again, this is an esoteric song and Idol's young viewers (the bulk of voters) might not be familiar with it. But I think there are enough Baby Boomers in the Idol demographic who remember Chris Cornell, Rage Against The Machine, Soundgarden, and Audioslave fondly and will vote accordingly. Whether Ajii gets enough votes to advance or not, there's no doubt in my mind that this was a Top Fourteen performance.

10. Roman Collins: Marvin Sapp's wonderful gospel crossover megahit, **Never Would Have Made It**, was badly over-cooked. The less is more lecture from last week didn't filter through this performance. Music has to breathe to translate meaning. Too much

shouting doesn't make music better. It simply robs it of melody and chokes it to death. I'm not sure this is a Top Fourteen performance but it was certainly given Top Fourteen effort. So I hope that valiant effort was enough to send him through. But he's basking in the glow of last week's wonderful performance and I sincerely hope Idol viewers are still basking in the glow as well and remember him fondly. But he's no shoe-in.

11: Kaibrienne: I love her voice. And I loved this song, at least what I heard of it. The problem with original songs is we don't know the lyrics so when a singer forgets the lyric or has to cope with an emotional event, we don't get the message behind the song so it devalues our listening experience. I always respect the judges. They've been there in the trenches. They know this business better than I ever could. They know what they are talking about. But from the cheap seats, from the point of view of a paying customer who had to work hard for fifty hours each week to save up enough money for a concert ticket to see his favorite singer, I don't feel that it is okay for a singer to forget lyrics or have an emotional break-down on stage. Life is unpredictable and such things happen all the time to singers but if we pay for a full performance and only get half of it for whatever reason, then those in attendance should have half their money refunded. That's neither selfish nor callous. That's just good business by a good promoter who wants to stay in your good graces. We don't pay to watch American Idol but the principle is the same. There is or will be a price to pay for forgetting a lyric. Maybe not in the Top Twenty (I think Kaibrienne will get through to The Top fourteen) but in the semi-final and final rounds, where the differences in talent and likability are razor thin, forgetting a lyric or having an emotional break-down on stage is a mistake that will get you sent home. In my opinion, contestants shouldn't be advised that forgetting a lyric is okay. Doing so may not cost them a thing. On the other hand, it could cost them everything.

12: McKenna Faith Brienholt: This was a unique and never heard before stylized arrangement of Joni Mitchell's wonderful folk classic, **Both Sides Now**. McKenna did a good job with it but I don't like this slowed down uptown arrangement because it contradicts everything Joni Mitchell stood for. I prefer the original arrangement, the original melody, and the original tempo. As to the meaning of this song: "The three verses of Both Sides Now reflect the protagonist (Mitchell) looking at clouds, love, and life from both sides; e.g. up and down for the clouds, give and take for love, and win or lose in life". Taken from the americansongwriter.com, December 29, 2002".

13: Julia Gagnon: This was an excellent rendition of Fantasia's **I Believe** but I am not sure it will get her through to Top Fourteen. She still has not consolidated a fan base and she still is not endearing herself to the audience. For me, this was easily Top Fourteen singing, even Top Ten, but Idol is not based solely on talent. You need votes to advance and she hasn't employed a strategy (that I can see) to get them.

14: Jennifer Jeffries: Jennifer was wonderful last week but I don't think **Grave Digger** did her any favors at all. Matt says he wrote it in a moment of frustration and that we should look for the deeper meaning behind the lyric but the deeper meaning is even more morbid as the lyrics describe a man digging his own grave with his current lifestyle. I think I understand why Jennifer would pick this song. Matt is a terrific singer with a beautiful voice. But there's dark matter in all his lyrics and Grave Digger is one of them. That song is not a competition song because it conflicts with the values of the Idol demographic. Jennifer will need to rely on the good will of viewers and loyal fans to send her through to Top Fourteen. She's got a beautiful instrument to work with, is quite likable, and relates easily to the audience so I think she's done enough to make it through to Top Fourteen.

15: Tristan Harper: I have him as The First Man Out but there are a couple contestants listed above him who are vulnerable. If one or more of them doesn't make Top Fourteen, Tristan will. **H-O-P-E** was a good performance tonight. He checks every single box needed to win this competition. It's just that, except for likability, he's not exceptional in any of them and in my opinion; it's not enough to ward off the R&B belters, song stylists, and the bevy of country music singers in this competition.

16: Mackenzie Sol: He serves more than one purpose in this competition so it's good for the show if he can advance. I'm just not sure he will. Lady Gaga's **I'll Never Love Again** was a pleasant listening experience. He can sing. It's just that so many others do it better. As 2nd man out, he absolutely has a chance to advance should one or more of my placements prove inaccurate (which is a real possibility). Mackenzie is a proven survivor and his fanbase, most of which are female, seem to have his back. These things matter in a competition. A contestant must do whatever he/she can to live another day because you never know what will happen in the next round.

17: Odell Buton Jr. Teddy Swims **The Door** was a good performance tonight, certainly competitive, but there are two obstacles in his way on the path to Top Fourteen: 1) The song is uptempo R&B. That's not what you want to do if you are desperate to advance. That requires a ballad. 2) He doesn't seem to understand how the game is played and has not built a loyal fan base. But as the third man out, he has a fair chance of advancing. That's really all you can ask for.

18: Kayko: In my my opinion, **Over You** was not a good vocal but the judges loved it and the judges have influence and what they say matters. Whether it's enough to affect large numbers of votes, I don't know (we will find out in a few hours), but it certainly changes our perception of contestants.

19: Jordan Anthony: Billie Eilish's **When The Party Over** is rapidly running out of welcome on this show. And, it's not a song that is easily altered or rearranged to something better so it's likely to remain a fixture (if the show continues). Jordan's version was not one of the better versions I have heard on Idol.

20: Quintavious: This was a much better outing than his previous one but not Top Fourteen better. The judges loved his interpretation of Tori Kelly's **Hollow** but I don't view him the same way. In my eyes, he's a raw and unfinished talent that needs guidance to become a good singer.