

American Idol: May 4, 2026 The Top Five

This season has been anti-climactic for me with respect to the winner. I figured both Keyla and Hannah would be in the finale for some months now but I didn't know who would join them there. Over time that too became a bit of a non-mystery as Jordan and Braden kept rising quickly up the chart. So I figured either Jordan or Braden would join Keyla and Hannah in the finale. And that is exactly what happened.

1. Hannah Harper. Vocally, Jordan won the night, but the winner of American Idol 24 will not be determined solely by singing excellence on this one night. Rather it will be decided by a contestant's body of work over the entire season and by a variety of tangential factors. Jordan rose through the ranks swiftly to become one of the season's best singers but I think that both Hannah and Keyla have amassed a better body of work and a more extensive body of work than Jordan has. Poor Hannah. She is surrounded by two natural born R&B singers that can bring down a house with their powerful pipes and with their unique brands of rhythm, blues, elongated intricate runs, vocal improvisation, and even transposition. Hannah's pipe is weaker, she does not do melisma at all, and she prefers to stick to the original song structure, melody, key, etc. Keyla and Jordan are explosive singers with booming pipes (via thick, long, folded vocal chords) whereas Hannah's singing voice lacks both thickness and volume (weaker, shorter, thinner vocal chords with less folding). Keyla and Jordan sing with power. Hannah is a honey-voiced angel with very little power. But it is that very contrast that makes Hannah's sweet angelic voice such a listening pleasure. Songs like Kelly Pickler's ***The Woman I Am***, Aaron's Neville's ***Don't Take Away My Heaven***, Christina Perri's ***A Thousand Years***, Mariah Carey's ***Through The Rain*** and ***My All***, even Idol's own soft sweet melodies like Emmy Russell's ***Like That***, Kyndal Innskeep's ***Woman Of Me***, and even Lucas Leon's cover of Miranda Lambert's ***The House That Built Me***; every one of these soft sweet melodies is a listening pleasure. We tend to think louder is better but it's not. We sometimes think (and I don't agree with this logic) that runs (melisma) make a song better, but that's not always true either. Art is a matter of connecting heart-to-heart and soul-to-soul and it happens across all genres of music. There is not one definitive genre of music that is inherently better than the others. It is our own unique artistic preference and individual taste that makes one song better than the others.

My point is this. I love, genuinely love, what Hannah Harper brings to the Idol stage. I connect easily with her sweet soft ultra-feminine approach to music. I love it. And I won't apologize for that. It gets to me. So it will come as no surprise that I enjoyed her cover of Peggy Lee's **Fever**. I didn't enjoy the duet with Kellie Pickler much because I don't think either of them did justice to this absolutely beautiful Martina McBride classic, **A Broken Wing**. But there's one thing all five contestants had in common. All five Idol contestants were badly out-sung by their Idol alum partners tonight. Hannah is still my pick to win the title with Keyla hot on her heels.

2. Keyla Richardson. Keyla's Cover of Ike & Tina Turner's **River Deep, Mountain High** was, in my opinion, a bit lazy and needed more energy. The performance brought back bad memories of Pia Toscano singing this song while moving slowly and cautiously across the Idol stage like a woman twice her age, and because of that lazy effort, Pia was promptly eliminated from the competition. But I, like all Idol viewers at this point in the competition, have already made up my mind based on the contestant's body of work, and nothing that happened tonight is going to change my mind. Keyla is a wonderful singer and I still think, despite Jordan's desperate attempts to break them up, that the title will go to one of these two phenomenal young singers, Hannah Harper or Keyla Richardson. Jordan sang very well tonight in solo (Leona Lewis' **Footprints In The Sand**) and in duet (with Elliott Yamin on Leon Russell's **A Song For You** via Donny Hathaway) but he will need to change a lot of minds and convince a lot of people to come over to his side if he wants to win this competition. There are very few new and or undecided viewers and voters at this point in the competition, so I don't think Jordan can stop these two women no matter how well he sings next week. But America will make that decision. Not me. I really enjoyed Keyla's and The Ultimate Showman, lovable Taylor Hicks' hard driving cover of Stevie Wonder's **Livin For The City**. Both Taylor and Keyla were born to entertain.

3. Jordan McCullough. Vocally, this night belongs to Jordan. He out-sung both Hannah and Keyla via Leona Lewis' **Footprints In The Sand**. I also think his duet with song stylist Elliott Yamin on Leon Russell's **A Song For You** via Donny Hathaway was the best contestant-alum pairing of the night. I could entertain you with reasons why he should win, and he absolutely has a non-zero chance of winning, but I don't think he will beat out both Hannah

and Keyla. But anything is possible and the voting public is fickle. But if Hannah pulls out a reprise of ***String Cheese*** again next week, its "Good night Irene". That thing is a tear jerker of the first magnitude and guaranteed to galvanize her already rabid fan base and attract the relatively few new and undecided voters.

Note: Braden sang Teddy Swims ***Lose Control*** and sang well despite his failure to embody the spirit of the song. He then partnered with Idol alum Paris Bennett to sing Queen's ***The Show Must Go On***. I was disappointed because Paris is an excellent dancer but even she can't dance to that song. I love Paris but this was not a good pairing for Braden (their voices definitely did not blend). Nor was there any professional or personal chemistry between the two singers. It rarely happens but I think this pairing was a miss by the judges (in my untrained opinion anyway).

Note: Chris sang Noah Kahan's musically esoteric ***Northern Attitude***, a wonderful song by a truly gifted singer but it is definitely not a competition song. He then paired with Bucky Covington for a cover of Garth Brooks' ***The Thunder Rolls***. Bucky is one of my favorite contestants of all time. I included Bucky's ***The Bible and the Belt*** on my list of the 100 Greatest Records Released by American Idol Alumni. My favorite Idol is Bo Bice because he is an authentic rocker, born with a rock and roll heart, but mostly because Bo is the only Idol who has ever contacted me to thank me for the nice things I said about him. Bo is also listed on my 100 Greatest Live Performances on The American Idol Stage for his cover of The Allman brothers' ***Whipping Post***, and, he has three songs on my list of the 100 Greatest Records Released by American Idol Alumni: ***Lonely, Broke, and Busted***, ***Wild Roses***, and ***You Take Yourself With You***, all from his third album, ***3***. Kellie Pickler is also on the list of the 100 Greatest Records Released By American Idol Alumni for ***I Wonder***. And Elliott Yamin is also on that list for his R & B flavored cover of Procol Harum's ***Whiter Shade Of Pale***. Elliott also appears on my list of the 100 Greatest Live Stage Performances By American Idol Contestants for his cover of Leon Russell's ***A Song For You***. One more week to go.....It's a shame the producers couldn't get Donald Lawrence & Company to sing ***Let The Word Do The Work*** in the finale next week. That would have been a real treat.