

What's Wrong with *American Idol*?

A Special Report from TheBuzzFactor.com

Four Music Business Experts Say the Popular Talent Show Is Misleading Tens of Thousands of Aspiring Musicians

American Idol is no doubt one of the most popular TV shows of recent years, drawing millions of viewers every week. But, according to four music business experts, the program is doing a disservice to aspiring musicians and distorting perceptions of how the music industry really works.

"The show may be fun to watch, but it's the last place I'd recommend anyone go to learn how to succeed with a music career," says Bob Baker, author of *Guerrilla Music Marketing Handbook* and *Unleash the Artist Within*. Baker compared notes with three other music business pros: Derek Sivers, Peter Spellman and Danica Mathes. All four agreed the show has created widespread misconceptions about what it takes to succeed as a musical artist. They have identified five myths perpetuated by *American Idol* and are on a mission to set the record straight.

Myth #1
Industry talent scouts actively look for artists to develop

"Shows like *American Idol* lead viewers to believe that there are hundreds of people like Simon, Paula and Randy out there searching for talent they can mold into the next big pop star. That's an Old World view that simply doesn't reflect reality these days," Baker says.

Danica Mathes, a St. Louis, MO-based

entertainment attorney, who has worked with artists such as Nelly and Anthony Cosmo (of the band Boston), admits that record companies employ A&R people whose job it is to sign and nurture new artists. "But as major labels consolidate, cut staffs and get nervous about the bottom line, they no longer have the time or money to develop new acts," she says. "Instead, they look for artists who are already developing themselves, attracting fans and selling CDs on their own.

"It's easy to forget that a record company's investment in a newly signed act can mean the end of several careers — not just the artist's — if it doesn't work. So a label is much more likely to sign someone with a track record."

Myth #2
Most aspiring musicians lack talent and are delusional, struggling and starving

The *American Idol* auditions, in particular, create this illusion. "That's a huge misconception," says Derek Sivers, founder and president of Portland, OR-based CD Baby, a web site that in 2003 sold \$4.6 million worth of CDs (more than 400,000 units) by unsigned acts. "I'm blown away by the tremendous amount of quality music being produced outside the mainstream. Many amazing musicians have decided they're happier selling 10,000 CDs on their own and making a hundred thousand dollars, than selling a million CDs and being broke on a major label. That's the reality of today's music business."

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Myth #3 You need the approval of industry insiders to make it in music

Sorry, you don't need Simon's or anyone else's permission to be worthy of a career in music. If you wait for someone to give you the green light to create and perform music, you may wait a long time.

Another misguided notion is that getting an industry big shot's approval will make or break your career. "Sorry, you don't need Simon's or anyone else's permission to be worthy of a career in music," Baker says. "If you wait for someone to give you the green light to create and perform music, you may wait a long time. Artists should use their inner conviction and the response they get from fans to fuel their progress."

"Every major label in the U.K. passed on both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in their day," says Peter Spellman, director of career development at Berklee College of Music in Boston, and author of *Indie Power* and *The Self-Promoting Musician*. "That gives you a sense of what label gatekeepers know about an artist's potential. Who knows what talent they're passing on today?"

Myth #4 Landing a major recording contract is the ultimate sign of success

"While major label deals have a purpose in the industry for some musicians, I definitely preach the independent gospel," Mathes says. "I've heard countless stories of bands that got signed and never went anywhere, or bands that had record deals and ended up falling far short of their expectations. Unfortunately, Kelly Clarkson, Clay Aiken and Ruben Studdard are the exceptions, not the rule"

According to Mathes, only about one in 30 signed acts reach significant enough sales levels to warrant a second CD release, which means nearly 97% of artists with recording contracts fail. "Getting signed often means the kiss of

death," she says. "Yet, I talk to aspiring artists every day who still believe they need a major label deal. The smartest musicians understand that there are other options that give them much more control over their careers, and they aren't afraid to put their all into making it happen. Artists who realize success does not happen when you get signed to a major label are the ones who will make it in this industry."

Myth #5 Without widespread nationwide exposure, you're doomed to failure

Most musicians would love to get the high-impact TV exposure that *American Idol* finalists receive. But nationwide media coverage is not a requirement for ultimate success in music. "When most people think of successful artists, they mainly think of who they've heard on the radio or seen on MTV," Baker explains. "However, there are thousands of lesser-known artists who actively write, record and perform great music under the radar. And, contrary to popular belief, many of them make decent money, have large numbers of devoted fans and are quietly, but steadily, building careers."

Baker adds, "It's misguided for artists to think they need the massive exposure and approval of music industry honchos a la *American Idol* in order to succeed. The musicians with the best odds of success take their careers into their own hands, promote themselves relentlessly and create their own lucky breaks."

For more information on:

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Bob Baker is the author of *Guerrilla Music Marketing Handbook*, *Unleash the Artist Within* and *Branding Yourself Online*. He also publishes *The Buzz Factor*, a web site and e-zine that deliver marketing tips and self-promotion ideas to music people of all kinds.

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