

Seattle has 'The X-Factor'

By Katherine Luck

Following the success of his hit TV singing competition, "American Idol," Simon Cowell was willing to bet that Seattle was the place to look when auditioning singers for his new show, "The X-Factor." Thousands lined up at Seattle Center as early as 4 a.m. on April 20 to try for the chance to win a \$5 million recording contract as well as reality TV fame.

Swathed in heavy coats and wrapped in blankets, the crowd waited patiently outside KeyArena with hand-made signs in a line that snaked around the fountain at Seattle Center. The auditioners represented a wide range of ages since, unlike "American Idol," there is no upper age limit on who can compete.

Instead of youth, Executive Producers Rob Wade and Andrew Llinares emphasized that what they were looking for was an indescribable something — an "x-factor" — that makes a singer a star.

"We'll feel it in our heart and in our stomach when that person comes into the room," said Wade.

"I think the exciting thing is we don't know what it is we're looking for," said Llinares. "You look at the big stars in the world now — who would have thought Lady Gaga would

be a star, or a schoolboy like Justin Bieber?"

Soloists weren't the only ones allowed to audition. "The X-Factor" will also showcase the talents of boy bands, girl bands, family groups and duos. Though no one is too old to be on "The X-Factor," singers age 11 and under were not allowed to audition.

"The X-Factor" debuted in 2004 in the UK. Since then, it has franchised into multiple iterations around the world, including Australia, Iceland and the Czech Republic. The executive producers were adamant that the U.S. is ready for its own version of the show.

"We feel that America probably has the greatest talent in the world. So there's no better place to be," said Wade. "Our mission is to find that talent."

They hadn't set any quotas on how many of the Seattle auditioners would move on to round two. "It's about finding the very best people," said Llinares. "We're looking for talent. Talent, talent, talent!"

One local hopeful was 17-year-old Shani Drake of Seattle. Her father, Will Spiritdancer, accompanied her to the audition, enduring the bone-chilling temperature and periodic blasts of cold water from the Seattle Center fountain.

"She's been singing since she was a toddler, since she was 3 years old," he said. "I thought it would be a cool experience. I feel like she has her path and we'll see if this is it."

During those early days as a toddler singer, Shani's repertoire consisted of Disney songs. Today she sings rock and pop music and feels she's ready for the big time. "I wanted to audition with real Hollywood producers," she said.

Might Shani have what it takes to be the big winner on "The X-Factor"? Though Cowell did not attend the Seattle auditions, earlier in the month he offered some thoughts on what he's looking for.

"I don't want people whose mums and dads chose their music, or someone who picks a safe song," he said. To him, stage presence

will be as important as vocal ability. "Nowadays, you've got to see both. The best pop and R&B artists in the world are not shy people. They reinvent themselves with every record. They're prepared to take risks; they're controversial."

Age really is not going to be a factor in this show, according to Cowell.

"Older artists have hit records and younger artists have hit records. We wanted the fewest rules possible," he said.

The last of the first-round auditions will be held in Dallas, Texas, on May 26. The next round of Seattle auditions will be filmed June 28 and 29 at KeyArena in front of a live audience.

"With 'American Idol' we did so many auditions at hotels. It was such an unnatural singing session. When you get 3,000 or 4,000 people in the audience and they're on the performer's side, you see this second gear kick in," said Cowell.

Two more judges besides Cowell and music producer L.A. Reid have yet to be announced. "The X-Factor" will debut on Fox in September. ■



PHOTO BY KATHERINE LUCK

Seventeen-year-old Seattle singer Shani Drake and her father, Will Spiritdancer, waiting to audition for "The X-Factor" on April 20.

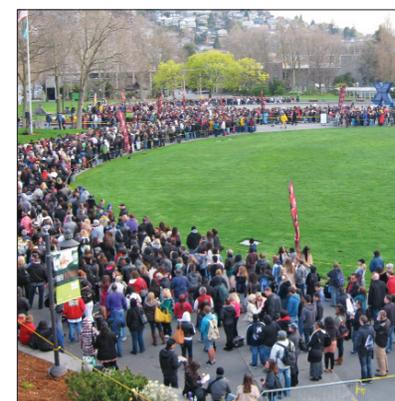


PHOTO BY KATHERINE LUCK

Thousands lined up outside Seattle Center's KeyArena to audition for Simon Cowell's new TV singing competition, "The X-Factor," on April 20.