

The American Idol Experience: Disney's Hollywood Studios

by Erin Conrad, PassPorter Guest Contributor

□ Would you love to be onstage and hear these words - "This... is YOUR American Idol!" Walt Disney World gives you -- and other fabulous performers -- the opportunity to show off at Hollywood Studios, through the American Idol Experience.

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□ My son Greg did this twice, once four years ago when he was 15, and once this past October. In both cases, he made it on stage, and had a blast. If you've been thinking about it, here's what you need to know.

□ The American Idol Experience is a guest-entertaining-guest attraction. Basically, park guests audition and may be selected to perform at one of five or six performances held every day. Three singers perform for a large audience, are "critiqued" by a friendly panel of "judges," and then the audience votes for the winner. The 1st place performer of each daily show then competes in the day's final show, and the winner of that show gets a "golden ticket" for the real American Idol contest, which allows the holder to skip the first level of screening at an upcoming American Idol audition (performers at Disney must be over 14, but there's no upper age limit; American Idol has age limits of 15-28 -- winners who don't fall in that age bracket can either hold onto the "golden ticket" and use it once they're old enough, or give it to someone else).

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□ First, you'll need to audition. This is a several-step process. During busier times of the year, you may find Disney cast members looking for potential performers near the front of Disney's Hollywood Studios, but if not, you'll find them at the audition entrance across from the ABC Commissary -- go early in the morning, because auditions end when three performers for each of the day's scheduled shows have been signed up. If you're under 18, a parent or guardian will have to stay with you the whole way -- when my son Greg did this four years ago, I stayed with him throughout the process, and got to sit backstage while he performed. Even if you're older than 18, you may have one family member accompany you through the auditions, if you'd like. I sat in the audition office while Greg went through his meetings.

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□ During the auditions you'll sing anything you choose for a "producer,"

a cappella (without accompaniment). Sing whatever you think you do best, whether it's a rock song, a Disney song, or God Bless America. If the producer is interested, you'll go on. If not, you'll be thanked for taking the time, and given a button that says "I auditioned for The American Idol Experience" -- a cool souvenir!

□ The next step is where nerves start to kick in. There is a fairly limited list of songs -- country, rock, Disney, and gospel, slow and fast songs -- that you may sing in the hourly shows, and you'll be given this list and an iPod with the songs on them. (If you think ahead of time that you might like to do this, you can find the song list here:

<http://www.studioscentral.com/american-idol-experience-song-list>.

Pick two or three, and practice them at home.) Only one performer can sing any one song each day, so there will be a list posted of songs that have already been selected for the day and unavailable to you (they don't want to have multiple singers doing the same song in the finale show). You'll be given a chance to listen to the songs on the iPod, sing through them, and decide on the couple to try for the next audition. The cast member working with you may also have some suggestions.

□ Then you'll be called into the producer's office. He or she will ask questions about your musical background, where you live, etc., and enter your info into the computer (and if you go back to do this in the future, the info will be pulled up and verified). He'll ask who your favorite American Idol has been. He'll ask you to sing your top choice -- in 2009, Greg did Bob Seger's Old Time Rock and Roll, and this October, he sang Stevie Wonder's Superstition (which was the song he did during the performance) and Use Somebody by Kings of Leon. The producer made some suggestions, Greg sang again. And then, David Cook -- the American Idol Greg said he liked best -- popped up on a videotaped segment -- and Greg was in! If you're in, the process goes on. If not, you're done for the day -- go enjoy the rest of the park's attractions.

□ We'll assume you made it. Congratulations! You'll be scheduled for a performance time, and you may be the one selected for that hour's promotional package (one performer per show is selected). You'll meet with a cameraman and director, be filmed doing all kinds of crazy things, and you'll see your tape during the actual performance. You'll get a lanyard that says "Vote for Me!" to wear around the park, and told when to return to the stage door for hair and makeup, a performance coaching session (which Greg thought was extremely helpful), and rehearsal. Your family and friends will get a pass for preferred seating during your show.

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□ At rehearsal, you'll meet the show's host and the other performers. You'll warm up on the stage, you'll see all the lights (it's very professional, and really resembles the TV show set -- really cool!), and the seats. You'll walk through the entire performance, and then it's show time! More than once, they'll say that there is no photography or videotaping, but a PhotoPass photographer will take nearly a hundred pictures -- no video -- of your rehearsal and performance, and you'll get a special PhotoPass card. When you look at the photos online, there will be American Idol borders and characters available to use. You didn't hear this from me, but enterprising audience members may be able to take their own pictures.

□ With your family in the audience, you'll sing your heart out. The judges -- the "mean one," the "cool one," and the "Coke judge" (the attraction is sponsored by Coke, and that shows up in a big way) -- will give funny and sometimes on-point critiques. The audience will vote -- there are voting buttons on the arms of the seats -- and the results will be announced. While Greg didn't win either of his two shows, he had a blast!

□ In all, the entire procedure -- especially if you win your hourly show and get to return for the finale -- takes quite a while. Be sure you're willing to take this much time from your park visit. The initial audition can take more than an hour, and the prep, rehearsal and performance can take up to two hours more.

□ A couple of tips:

□ - If you're at all considering auditioning, look through the song list at home and sing through several songs to start choosing some that work well for you.

□ - Consider bringing some clothes in a backpack that you might want to wear on stage -- nothing fancy, but you may not want to wear your shorts and flip flops to perform. You can leave them in one of the park lockers.

□ - This is just my observation, nothing scientific about it, but if you're a professional or aspiring professional musician, think about downplaying this. Remember that it's not necessarily the best performer who wins, it's often the one who connects best with the audience, and that includes what they learn about you through your introduction or your videotaped package. Audiences may like to give the "cutest" singer or the good-but-not-great-amateur performer their votes. Professional musicians can be seen as "not needing" the break -- we saw this more than once.

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□Break a leg!

About The Author:

□Erin Conrad is the mother of two performers, and enjoys searching out live music and theatre at Disney World. She works for a commercial real estate company, and runs a website for parents of performing kids, www.PerformersParent.com.

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