

# Crass, corny, but still a Woodstock moment for a new generation

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**It's not all about the music. Idol was a rare showcase for the optimism of youth, writes Richard Neville.**

My reaction to *Australian Idol* took me by surprise. The show is crass, corny, manipulative and strangely uplifting. On Sunday night I was on the edge of the couch. Not even the ads could put me off; slotting in seamlessly with the mood - fast food for a fast culture.

How could you not be captivated by the spirit and gusto of the nurturing crowds, sprawling from the Opera House forecourt to distant schoolyards, their collective wish being nothing but the best for the brave finalists, Casey Donovan and Anthony Callea.

The pair swept up the Opera House stairway, fireworks bursting above the Harbour Bridge, the crowds roaring, my eyes watering. It seemed like a Woodstock moment for a new generation, their chance to put fun before slavery and to honour personal authenticity over the illusions of a supermodel heaven. Yes, it will turn these former unknowns into harassed celebrities, but the show goes deeper than that. It's not essentially about music. *Idol* is a melodrama; invoking guts, schmaltz, street democracy and the pop therapy of a nation having its attention diverted from the Iraqi elephant bleeding in its backyard.

Months ago, having chanced upon the auditions, a daggy teen in a tracktop blew me away: valiant, hefty and defiant. There stood Casey. Herself, above all else; no plastic Madonna, no trace of bubblegum. Her voice is the universal Sanskrit of soul, so highly esteemed, so very rare. Since then, the rumours of Casey's unlikely ascent kept me interested, though I was not a devoted viewer.

This show gave breath to lonely desires and boosted careers. It goaded people to seize the moment. I loved the way the contestants supported each other, and were supported in turn by the viewers. The

judges, too, were quirky and honest, the most compassionate being Marcia Hines, who first found fame in Australia as a cast member of *Hair*.

This musical was the signature tune of the '60s. I first stumbled upon *Hair* in New York in 1968, lured by a biographical note on one of the cast: "Sally is for acid, sex and peace". It seemed so simple then.

*Australian Idol* is not *Hair*.

And yet, there is something about the triumph of *Idol* that reaffirms the values of mateship, courage and mutual support that were at the core of *Hair*. Never mind the \$3000-a-second paid by McDonald's to tout its beefy wares; the idiocy of the adlibs, the gushing sentimentality. *Idol* showcases an under-recognised mood of optimism and confidence among our youth, perhaps emboldened by the rising tides of the urban tribes. It is the other side of anorexia and depression.

I recently picked up the free street zine, *STU*, with its microscopic editorial: "We are swimming in an ocean of creativity," it announced. "No longer held back by social conditioning forcing us into unsatisfying occupations and relationships, young adults are branching into the streams of creativity." *STU* claims that vocational degrees have been displaced by a range of popular courses with a focus on expanding the creative self in film, art, fashion, jewellery design, hospitality, even industrial aesthetics.

Educators are, according to the editorial, finally recognising the need for a new generation to get more out of life. And they are.

Women spanning the generation of my daughters, aged 15 and 21, are having a ball. It's not just the shopping, the plethora of extreme sport options, the cheap tickets to Shanghai, the brutal wit of *South Park* and the shiny array of mobile communication tools. It's the fun they have working together, even when they're working hard.

No more sitting in a lonely study staring at bookshelves. Today's "ocean of creativity" flows into cyberspace, where they learn together, often at the kitchen table, the networked speakerphones booming.

The blood family provides food, board and five-star room service, the tribe provides fun, adventure, secrets and mutual support.

These are the people who helped fuel the fever of *Australian Idol*.

Anthony Callea sang like he was in a cathedral and made me want to be there too. He accepted Casey's victory with a grin and the grace that would humble people thrice his age. However, it was Casey's night and I cheered along with 4 million others. "I've won," I said to myself, proposing a toast to the extended family of contestants, "I've won." How silly. All I had achieved was a feeling that for once I had voted for someone who didn't come second.

For all its faults, *Australian Idol* is a celebration of cultural democracy; a reminder that between the cracks of commerce and cant, the light can still shine through.