

Top 10 raise "goosebumps" in Hoedown Showdown



By Brock Weir

The judges have spoken, and the Top 10 contestants in the 2016 Hoedown Showdown preparing to work with mentors to bring out the country star inside them.

20 of the top emerging country talents from across Ontario entertained crowds last Saturday at Ribfest, hosted by the Town of Aurora at Machell Park.

Offering a wide variety of country songs from the classic styles of George Jones and Dolly Parton to the more contemporary sounds of Blake Shelton and The Band Perry, the cream rose to the top and the Top 10 will be performing live before an audience of thousands on September 16, the first night of Magna's annual Wild, Wild West Hoedown.

Vying for the crown, which will be awarded that evening, are John Anderson of Barrie, Roy Borden, Jr., of Trenton, Sarah Campbell Mills of Burlington, Cameron von Criegern of Peterborough, Amber Crump of Stouffville, Jade Daniel Eagleson of Millbrook, Josh Ross of Dundas, Mac Shepherd of Keswick, Ryan Vanlieshout of Haliburton, and Patricia Villegas of Newmarket.

The Top 20, in which Melissa Suma represented Aurora with Roy Orbison's Crying, were judged by manager Tom Cross, philanthropist Joan Walker, and Magna for Community's Steve Hinder.

Ahead of the performance, they said they were looking for those performers that gave them goosebumps and had that extra dose of stardust.

"I got goosebumps when we were picking the Top 20 with two performers because it was something so unexpected," said Ms. Walker. "Their voices sounded different from what I expected. They got up there and just owned it. They totally controlled the stage and you were just mesmerized. You don't have to have the most technically perfect voice, but it is the whole package."

Quite simply, Mr. Cross said they were looking for a "star": "someone who needs a little bit of help to be a Canadian country music star."

"Stars give me goosebumps, stars deliver songs, stars are entertaining and that is what we're looking for today," he said.

"Uniqueness is important. So many people will come up here and sing a cover and there will probably be three people that sing Miranda Lambert songs today. Unless they really turn it into something totally different it is not that unique to me. I am looking for somebody who actually knows who they are and not who somebody else is."

That, he said, was the 'blurry' part. More straightforward, he added, was the 'technical stuff' of whether they belong on the stage, whether they are nervous before an audience and, of course, the quality of their voice.

'Singing is better than having a great voice,' he said. 'It is more important to be a great singer than to have a great voice. Bob Dylan? Great singer, bad voice. Deliver the song. A lot of people in these kinds of contests sing songs they like. They should pick songs they are good at singing. That is the whole deal. A lot of people say, 'Oh, man. I love that song on the radio. I'm going to sing that song,' but it sucks for their voice. The person we want is bright enough to see through that and think 'I'm going to sing things that are in my pocket that I believe in.'

One such star they cited is Brad Battle, the Ontario singer who came second in last year's Showdown. Each year, the competitors seem more serious than the last, they agreed, noting many of them had their eyes on the prize ' and that prize was the mentorship week about to begin, not necessarily the chance to perform at Hoedown. At the end of the day it is a talent contest and it gives potential stars the chance to be heard.

'The proof is in the pudding,' said Mr. Cross. 'Brad is on the radio right now and doing very well with a song called Hung Up, an original song written and recorded between Canada and Nashville. [Winner] Sarah McRae probably won't end up in the country genre, but that is okay because uniqueness found her. You'll hear her on the CBC coming up like a Sarah McLachlan kind of artist. That is what turns me on about this: watching people happen.'