

I Want to Change My Life

I Want to Change My Life:
Can Reality TV Competition Shows Trigger
Lasting Career Success?

By

Barrie Gunter

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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CHAPTER ONE

CAREER CAPITAL OF REALITY TV TALENT COMPETITIONS

This book is about televised talent shows in which applicants submit themselves to a highly public auditioning process with the aim of launching into a new career and even a new lifestyle. Although often grouped with the much broader category of “reality” programmes, this is not a book about reality television in general. “Reality” television includes a wide range of sub-genres that include a variety of fly-on-the-wall style filming of situations that are either naturally occurring in locations such as hotels, airports, holiday resorts, retail outlets, and so on, or are contrived by television producers and confined to fixed location indoor and outdoor sets.

Another critical feature of the shows being put under the spotlight here is their competitive element. People enter them in the hope of winning a prize. The prize might be money, a job or new career opportunity, or, for many contestants, simply the exposure they get. Even so, the book will not look at all reality competition-based programmes. Instead, its analysis will centre on how these shows enable participants to demonstrate a specific type or range of abilities, and on who survives the different kinds of endurance tests these shows represent and comes to be liked best by viewers at home. From this review of contestants’ performance, we will also look at what kind of legacy they take away from the show. Did their lives change? Or did they return to their normal lives (whatever “normality” may have been for them)?

The notion of “talent” is also a critical concept here in the selection of the shows for examination. It defines a specific type of reality show that features “real” people, but which also requires them to demonstrate an ability, aptitude or skill of a particular kind that is relevant to a specific end-goal. That end-goal, within the context of the programme, is to win the competition. The talent in question might entail some kind of performance art, physical appearance, practical skill or entrepreneurship. After the show, contestants might then go on to pursue a new life. This

type of outcome can be true of other “reality” shows—such as *The Big Brother* franchise—in which participants have to simply endure without showing any special talent. These shows will not feature as part of the analysis presented here because they are not primarily defined by a “talent contest” element.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, talent shows have come to dominate the mainstream (and many minor) television schedules. Many of these shows have centred on finding new entertainers, especially in popular music. The shows themselves have often grown into internationally traded franchises that are televised all round the world. The best known, and most talked about, include the *Popstars*, *Pop Idol*, *X Factor* and *The Voice* franchises. Other competition formats have also become highly popular that have involved finding new talent for the fashion industry (*Next Top Model*), cooking (*MasterChef*), and the business world (*The Apprentice*).

The Value of Reality TV Shows

The growth of reality television programming has created a new stock of non-unionised and cheaply employed performers that has diversified the pool of “talent” for the medium and resulted in economies to employment costs.¹ Reality television has brought about some radical restructuring of the traditional media entertainment businesses. This effect has been felt around the world where the old unionised agreements in American and other film and television industries have evolved to accommodate more flexible employment practices.² There are some performers who appear in reality TV shows and who entered because they saw it as a pathway to fame and traditional forms of “celebrity”. Some of these contestants actually achieved their ambitions—although the longevity of their new career has varied. The focus of this book is on those contestants who entered competitions leading to a specific career path. The career tracks focused on here are popular music, general entertainment, fashion modelling, professional cookery and the world of business.

These shows have transformed the face of popular television and challenged the dominance of soap operas and major sports events in the audience ratings. They have attracted widespread media coverage and

1 Collins, S. (2008) Making the most out of 15 minutes: reality TV’s dispensable celebrity. *Television & New Media*, 9(2), 87-110.

2 Carter, B. (2003) Reality shows alter the way to do business. *New York Times*, January 24th. A1, C14.

become not only highly popular sources of entertainment but also sources of stories in the mainstream news media that have further served to boost the public profile of each show and many of its contestants. The emergence of modern formats of competition shows, featuring established celebrities and celebrity wannabes in which the progress of contestants through the contest is largely determined by public vote, has created an impression of increased audience involvement in programming and, more especially, of an empowerment of viewers to determine televised competition outcomes.³ Although this observation may have some resonance with what is taking place, it would be naïve to presume that producers have relinquished all control over their cultural commodities. The popular trend of reality television is driven by conventional economic imperatives.⁴

The illusion of audience empowerment has been driven by the interactive nature of some of the competition talent shows, which has allowed viewers to take part in determining the outcomes for performers. In the popular music and entertainment franchises such as *Pop Idol*, *The X Factor*, *The Voice* and (*America's/Britain's*) *Got Talent*, for instance, it is the viewers' votes that ultimately determine who wins. Of course, the producers do not relinquish all their control over how the competition unfolds. They can determine the power that expert judging panels are given to decide certain outcomes. The judges make the initial selections before the contest is thrown open to the public vote. The producers can also influence public feelings about contestants through the kind of back-story they have; the ways they are filmed and through the nature of spin-off publicity that is released to the news media about them. How much the audience at home likes specific contestants can, therefore, be subtly manipulated by television producers.⁵

Although ultimately reality TV shows benefit the producers in relevant economic terms, they can hand over to the public a degree of power that viewers would not normally be able to exert with other television genres. The fact that these shows feature apparently "ordinary" people invites

3 Enli, G. S. (2009) Mass communication tapping into participatory culture: Exploring Strictly Come Dancing and Britain's Got Talent. *European Journal of Communication*, 24(4), 481-493.

4 Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

5 Holmes, S. (2004) "Reality goes pop!" Reality TV, popular music and narratives of stardom in *Pop Idol*. *Television & New Media*, 5(2), 147-172; Murray, S. 2004. I think we need a new name for it: The meeting of documentary and reality TV. In S. Murray & L. Ouellette (Eds.) *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

stronger identification with them from viewers at home. This can be a powerful factor, and did not originate with televised reality talent competitions. Traditional television quiz and game shows featured members of the public as contestants and their degree of success in the show would depend upon their own performance. People at home might identify with them because they were ordinary people like themselves. With these shows, however, the viewers could not generally influence the outcome. This last point has also applied to many televised competition talent contests where the winners were selected by an “expert” judging panel. The empowerment of the viewers’ vote, however, can mean that competitors might survive longer than their performances warranted if they are very popular with the audience.

In this context, it is interesting to recall the progress of news correspondent John Sergeant in the BBC’s popular *Strictly Come Dancing* contest. Even to an unseasoned eye, Sergeant was clearly one of the worst dancers in the competition, and yet he lasted longer than competitors who received higher scores in the studio from the expert judging panel because viewers at home voted for him in sufficiently large numbers. When it became clear that some judges felt he should be ejected from the competition and cast doubt on the viewers’ judgements, this created a setting in which the public engaged in a campaign to keep Sergeant in the competition, regardless of the quality of his dancing. Although this outcome worked against the show’s ethos of discovering the best natural dancing talent from amongst previously untrained celebrities, it also benefited the value of the show by attracting a huge amount of spin-off publicity in the media more generally.⁶

Reality talent contests have also been found to have further, though limited, spin-off economic benefits for other worlds of performance, such as the theatre, with some of these televised competitions finding new performers to star in re-runs of tired music theatre shows. One report by the Society of London Theatre found that although television talent contest shows such as *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?*, *I’d Do Anything*, and *Any Dream Will Do*, that auditioned contestants for theatre productions managed by Lord (Andrew) Lloyd Webber and televised by the BBC had been criticised by the theatre elite, they had been instrumental in bringing new audiences into the theatre. New London West End shows such as “The Sound of Music”, “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” and “Oliver”, which had been cast through television talent shows, had drawn in newer, younger audiences; but there

⁶ See Enli, G. (2009) *op.cit.*

was less positive evidence that these audiences subsequently went to see more traditional theatre performances.⁷

Despite the hopes of their contestants, the main beneficiaries of television talent shows overall are their producers and the networks that transmit them. Some of these shows have been proven to attract large audiences for their networks which, in turn, are translated into healthy advertising revenues or market shares that justify public funding. As we will see, however, many of these shows tend to have a limited shelf life and some lose audiences quickly and dramatically once their novelty with viewers at home has worn off. These shows need to be constantly refreshed and, ultimately, they must consistently recruit talented and interesting contestants who are likeable.

The contemporary versions of reality talent shows in the twenty-first century have also proven to be profitable for their production companies through widespread international sales of their formats. In this book, we will examine eight franchises. All eight have been sold around the world. At the time of writing this book, in 2013, the most successful franchise so far in terms of the number of television markets in which it is shown has been *Next Top Model* (52 markets); followed by *Got Talent* (51), *Pop Idol* (47), *The Voice* (45), *The X Factor* (41), *Popstars* (37), *MasterChef* (35) and *The Apprentice* (28).⁸

The popularity of these shows means that the eventual winners, and often many of those contestants who reach the final stages, receive a great deal of personal publicity and attain instant celebrity status. For some, this dramatic rise to fame can prove difficult to handle. These shows have been criticised for not preparing contestants properly for the attention that is to come. This outcome can be especially problematic for very young contestants.

In the popular music- and entertainment-themed franchises such as *Pop Idol*, entrants can be as young as 16, while in others such as *The X Factor*

7 Smith, A. (2008, 8th July) TV talent shows' impact on repeat West End business 'not encouraging', claims SOLT. *The Stage News*.

www.thestage.co.uk/news/2008/07/tv-talent-shows-impact-on-repeat-west-end-business-not-encouraging-claims-solt/. Accessed 8th April 2013.

8 www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popstars;

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Idol_Winners;

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Got_Talent; www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Voice;

"Top Model around the world. www.tyrabanks.com/view/ANTM_AROUND_THE_WORLD;

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MasterChef_Australia;

[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Apprentice_\(TV_Series\)](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Apprentice_(TV_Series)). Accessed 3rd March 2013.

and *Got Talent*, even lower minimum ages have been adopted. Viewers of the first season of *The X Factor* in the United States in 2011 will have seen 13-year-old Rachel Crow break down in hysterics after the judges voted her off the show. Despite finishing in a respectable fifth place, in a competition that featured some very talented adult competitors, she had been led to believe by those close to her that she would win and was desperately upset when she found out she would not.

Another episode occurred during the semi-finals of variety talent show, *Britain's Got Talent*, when 10-year-old singer Hollie Steel was reduced to tears when she forgot the words of her song. She was initially told she could not perform again, but this decision was later reversed by the show's creator and panel judge, Simon Cowell. The incident, however, led to widespread calls, including from the UK government's Secretary of State for Culture Andy Burnham, for a minimum age restriction to be introduced for such shows.⁹

Established artists have also criticised these talent show formats for putting children under excessive pressure and providing short-cuts to success that some believe ought to be earned over a longer period.¹⁰ Careers of this kind need to be nurtured over time, and there is a view among some purists that true artists commit themselves to hard work with little or no reward because of their passion for the craft. Critics claim that television talent shows circumvent this type of apprenticeship and, in turn, undermine the kind of commitment needed to develop and then sustain a successful career in the entertainment business.

In one report, Elton John was quoted as saying, "I'm not a fan of talent shows. I probably wouldn't have lasted if I'd gone on one." He argued that shows such as *The X Factor* had little to do with cultivating musical talent. "I like Simon Cowell, but what he does is entertainment. TV vaults you to superstardom and then you have to back it up, which is hard."¹¹

9 Singh, Anita. (2009, 5th June) Britain's Got Talent: Government launches review into child performers. *The Telegraph*. Available at:

www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/britains-got-talent5446488. Accessed 11th July 2013.

10 Fletcher, Alex. (2013, 28th May) Bruce Forsyth: Britain's Got Talent could be disastrous for a child. *Digital Spy*. Available at:

www.digitalspy.co.uk/tv/s107/britains-got-talent/news/a485108. Accessed 11th July 2013.

11 Martin, D. (2010, 19th October) "Elton John lashes out at 'boring' TV talent shows". *The Guardian*. www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/oct-19/elton-john-tv-talent-shows. Accessed 9th April 2013.

In response to criticisms about “instant stardom” some of the contestants—especially the older ones—have argued that they have served their time with low-level careers and equally low earnings, and that their commitment to music, for instance, was often subsidised by doing other menial work.¹² What the *Got Talent*, *Idol*, *X Factor* franchises provide are new platforms to help such artists break through when traditional routes have drawn a blank. The big question, perhaps, is whether these shows do actually deliver what the contestants hope for. For sure, celebrity status is there for the taking. But even the talentless can achieve a few moments of fame, if they are quirky enough when they appear on these shows, simply by virtue of the size of the audiences that are watching. However, does lasting career success follow for many contestants?

This is the question that lies at the heart of this book. It presents an analysis of outcomes for contestants of selected, contemporary television talent shows. The auditioning themes we will focus on are those for entry into careers in popular music as recording artists, in wider forms of entertainment (and not just in music), in fashion as models, in cooking as professional cooks or chefs, and in business as entrepreneurs. The popular music shows placed under the microscope here are *Popstars*, *Pop Idol*, *The X Factor* and *The Voice*. The entertainment shows are from the *Got Talent* franchise. The fashion industry shows comprise the *Next Top Model* franchise. The cookery theme focuses on the *MasterChef* franchise, with some references to other shows in this area. The business theme focuses on *The Apprentice* franchise. Versions of these shows have been selected for close analysis from the United States and United Kingdom, and, in the case of popular music and cooking, also from Australia.

History of Television Talent Shows—America

Most of the contemporary talent programmes have featured among the most watched shows on television. Despite claims often made by their founders that they represent fresh departures in televised entertainment, talent contests had formed part of mainstream television schedules for many decades before the *Got Talents*, *Pop Idols*, *X Factors* and *Apprentices* had even been conceived. In fact, many of these earlier shows sowed the seeds of the formats used by the productions that populate our television screens in the twenty-first century.

12 Thompson, Gayle. (2013, 19th March) Jake Owen defends “American Idol” and “The Voice”. *The Boot*. Available at: www.theboot.com/jake-owen-american-idol-the-voice. Accessed 11th July 2013.

In America, a number of talent competitions were televised from the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s and 1960s. These programmes were highly popular with the audiences of the time and discovered and nurtured new and emergent talent. Arthur Godfrey's *Talent Scouts* ran for ten years from 1948 to 1958 on the CBS TV network. It had previously been broadcast on radio. The show ran to a simple formula: talent scouts discovered new artists and brought them to New York, from where the show was televised. Here, they went through off-air auditions, with a few being chosen to appear on the show. Each act was rated by a studio audience applause meter, and the contestant whose performance moved the dial the highest won the show. The show was successful in discovering a number of singers who went on to become major performing and recording artists, including Tony Bennett, Pat Boone, Lenny Bruce, Patsy Cline, Rosemary Clooney, and Steve Lawrence.¹³

Another radio talent show that migrated across to television, and ran for even longer, from 1948 to 1970, was *The Original Amateur Hour*. It had started on radio in 1934. Once established on television, with its presenter, Ted Mack; it became known as *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour*. In terms of diversity of its performers, this show was similar to the contemporary *Got Talent* contests: while singers could compete in this show, they were featured alongside acrobats and jugglers, comedians, dancers, instrumental musicians, magicians and others. The best-known discoveries from this show included Ann-Marget, Irene Cara, Gladys Knight and Jim Stafford.

A cluster of other early talent shows appeared during this same era that had short life spans of only a season or two. These included *Talent Jackpot* in 1949, *Henry Morgan's Great Talent Hunt* in 1951, and *The Talent Shop* in 1951–1952. *Talent Jackpot* was shown on the DuMont TV network, and aired for just five weeks. There was also a one-off summer show. Contestants competed for a money prize and the outcome was decided by studio audience applause. *Henry Morgan's Great Talent Hunt* appeared on NBC and featured people who had unusual abilities. Henry Morgan was well known to American TV audiences in the early 1950s as a regular panellist on TV game shows such as *What's My Line?* *The Talent Show* was another DuMont network production that aired for just less than six months. It was co-hosted by Fred Robbins and Pat Adair who auditioned young people in a New York drugstore.¹⁴

13 David Weinstein. (2004) *The Forgotten Network: DuMont and the Birth of American Television*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

14 Tom Brooks and Earle Marsh. (1964) *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows*. 3rd. ed. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

One of the best-known early talent shows was *The Gong Show*, which ran on NBC from 1976 to 1980. The show is well known for its notoriety involving its run-ins with censors, as much as for the audiences it attracted. The decision to transmit it in the middle of the day meant that its ratings would always be modest compared with those of peak-time shows. The show is also interesting because its judging format bears a striking resemblance to those used by a number of contemporary television talent shows.

The Gong Show was hosted by Chuck Barris and also—in line with the format of most contemporary talent shows—used a judging panel of three celebrity judges. Resident judges, at various times, on this show were Phyllis Diller, Artie Johnson, Jaye P. Morgan, Rex Reed, and Rip Taylor, who were joined by other celebrity panellists.

Amateur performers would walk out on stage and perform their particular act, which might comprise a singing, dancing, comedic or other such performance, or something very odd and unusual. If any of the judges took a dislike to an act, they could strike a gong, at which point the act was over. If the act survived for a minimum time-duration (which varied across series from 20 seconds to 45 seconds) without being gonged, the judges would then each award the performer points between zero and ten.

The entertainment value of the show was enhanced by judges signalling to the studio audience (and audience at home) their intentions “to gong” a performance by standing up and raising their mallet as if to strike their gong, but then delaying actually doing so. The act that achieved the highest score at the end of *The Gong Show* received a cash prize. It is not difficult to see similarities between the judging format of *The Gong Show* and the buzzing of judges on disliked acts in shows such as *America’s/Britain’s Got Talent*. The reverse of this can be seen in the contemporary competition show *The Voice* in which judges signal to the audience in the studio and at home that they are about to hit their button to turn their chair around to see the contestant who is singing, thus preserving the competitor’s future in the show for a little while longer. *The Gong Show* franchise was trialled in a number of other countries, including Australia, Germany, India, Indonesia and the United Kingdom, but enjoyed only limited runs outside the Far East.

One of the longest running talent shows on American television was *Star Search*, which ran from 1983 to 1995. It was hosted by Ed McMahon, who had been a sidekick of American TV icon, Johnny Carson. It began life being televised in the Earl Carroll Theatre in Hollywood and then later moved to the Disney Hollywood Studios in Orlando, Florida. It resurfaced briefly in 2003–2004, with Arsenio Hall as host. Acts were

auditioned from ten categories: Male Vocalist, Female Vocalist, Junior Vocalist (second half of the season), Teen Vocalist (first half of the season), Junior Dance (first half of the season), Teen Dance (second half of the season), Vocal Group, Comedy, Dance, and Spokesmodel.¹⁵ The presence of a model category alongside entertainment performer auditions made for an unusual combination but, in this respect, *Star Search* was a forerunner, not only of contemporary variety talent shows such as the *Got Talent* franchise, but also of the *Next Top Model* franchise.

Eight categories took part in each show. Acts had to audition off-camera to gain entry to the show. Two acts competed, per category, in each show. These were differentiated into champion (winner from previous week) and challenger. In the reprise series, which ran over two seasons in 2003–2004, the performance categories were Junior and Adult Singer, Comedy and Modelling in the first season, with Modelling replaced by Dance in the second season.

In this format, all acts were assessed by a panel of four judges. Each judge could award an act a score, ranging from one to four (and later five) stars. The act within each category that achieved the highest average score from the judges was declared that week's winner and competed again the next week. If there was a tie in the judges' scores, a studio audience vote was used to decide which contender in each category would move forward in the competition.

Each performer was required to win a number of shows in a row to earn entry into the next round. This generally comprised three or four wins in succession. As the show evolved, eventually, once three winners had been found for each category, two new performers were found, and the cycle started over again. The winners moved forward to a semi-final round in which acts were assessed by five judges. At this stage, the judges' scores were not revealed, but the winning acts moved into the final. In the last show, the winners of Male Vocalist, Female Vocalist, Vocal Group, Comedy and Dance were awarded a first prize, each worth US\$100,000. No recording or other performance contracts were awarded as part of the prize in any of these categories, but a number of category champions secured contracts later. This was true in the case of the first two male vocalist champions, Sam Harris and Durell Coleman; female vocalist champion in series three, Linda Eder, and early vocal group winners, Sawyer Brown and Limited Warranty. The winner of the Spokesmodel

15 Gordon, William A. (2002) *The Ultimate Hollywood Tour Book*. Toluca Lake, CA: North Ridge Books.

category, however, did receive a modelling contract with a well-known agency, as well as the cash prize.¹⁶

The *Star Search* alumni include some of the top entertainers in show business in later years. These include such luminaries as Beyonce Knowles (female vocalist), Destiny's Child (vocal group), Alanis Morissette (female vocalist), Rosie O'Donnell (comedy), LeAnne Rimes (junior female vocalist), Ray Romano (comedy), Adam Sandler (comedy), Jessica Simpson (female vocalist), Sharon Stone (model), Jim Tavaré (comedy), and Justin Timberlake (male vocalist, who performed as Justin Randall).

A number of young contestants used *Star Search* as experience before moving on as adults to more contemporary talent shows. Several young contenders in the 2003–2004 reprise *Star Search* shows also appeared within the next year or two as contestants in *American Idol* and *America's Got Talent*, where they generally performed well. David Archuleta, who won Junior Vocalist on *Star Search* in 2003, subsequently finished as runner-up in *American Idol*, Season Seven, in 2007. Another junior competitor in the 2003 season of *Star Search*, Diana DeGarmo, finished as runner-up in *American Idol* in 2004. Kimberly Caldwell, who performed as a female vocalist in the 2003 season, finished seventh in the second series of *American Idol*, in 2004. Another young female vocalist in 2004, Bianca Ryan, went on to become the first winner of *America's Got Talent*, in 2006.

History of Television Talent Shows—Britain

Talent shows have been a constant feature of television in Britain since the earliest days of popular broadcasting. It was, however, commercial broadcasting rather than the BBC that championed these shows. The first televised talent show was *Carroll Levis Discoveries*, which was produced in 1957 by ATV London for the new Independent Television (ITV) channel. Carroll Levis was a Canadian impresario and talent scout. At the time, it became the most-watched programme on television alongside that other stalwart of early television entertainment (and another non-competitive platform of talent discovery), *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*.

As with many of the shows of this era, initial auditions took place beforehand, and the acts that appeared on the show were judged by studio or theatre audience applause. The *Discoveries* show found a number of

¹⁶ Gordon, William A. (2002) *op.cit.*

acts that went on to enjoy successful careers in show business, such as comedian and long-time radio panel show and TV quiz show host, Nicholas Parsons. There is also on record a performance on Sunday 15th February 1959 of three familiar sounding teenage singers/musicians from Liverpool in a group called *The Quarrymen*—John Lennon, Paul McCartney and George Harrison.¹⁷

The second major television talent show in Britain was transmitted over a number of seasons, spanning a period of more than 20 years from 1956 to 1978, and was called *Opportunity Knocks*. The original show began life on BBC Radio in 1949 and then moved to Radio Luxembourg in the 1950s. It was taken up by ITV for a two-month run during the summer of 1956. It then re-appeared in 1964 and was shown every year until 1978. Throughout this long run, it was hosted by Canadian Hughie Green. The show was then brought back to the screen by the BBC in spring 1987, and ran through to the summer of 1990. It was hosted for the first two of these seasons by comedian Bob Monkhouse and then for the final year by another comedian, Les Dawson.¹⁸

Opportunity Knocks was known for showcasing, not just standard forms of entertainment such as singers, musicians, dancers, comedians, impressionists, and ventriloquists, but also a range of novelty acts, including acrobats, jugglers, animal acts, and other strange performances. The show's best-known alumni are not dominated by traditional acts, although it is fair to say that *Opportunity Knocks* was successful in discovering a number of these, and especially comedians. The last ever presenter of the show, Les Dawson, was a former winner. However, among the best-remembered acts, perhaps, are Pam Ayres, a poet who read amusing, self-penned observations on life in verse, and Tony Holland, the body builder who could twitch his muscles to music.

The winning acts each week were decided by the viewing public. In the early ITV version of the show, the public voted by post and the winner was announced at the beginning of the next week's show. In the later BBC version of the show, a telephone voting system replaced the postal vote. Many of the format features of *Opportunity Knocks* can be found in contemporary television talent shows such as the *Pop Idol*, *Got Talent* and *X Factor* franchises, and most especially in the use of telephone voting to decide the winners.

17 See: www.whirligigtv.yuku.com/topic/9299/Carroll-Levis-Discoveries#.UWK_7KI3vbM. Accessed 8th April 2013.

18 Press Your Buttons Now!—We look back at talent shows of yesteryear. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/whenwillibefamous/funstuff/trivia. Accessed 26th July 2013.

During the 1970s, a competitor emerged for *Opportunity Knocks* in the form of a show called *New Faces*. The show had two runs on ITV, first between 1973 and 1978 and then later between 1986 and 1988. In *New Faces*, the fate of the performers rested entirely in the hands of the judging panel. The panel comprised four judges drawn from the worlds of entertainment, journalism, music, and television, and included Clifford Davis, Noel Edmonds, Alan Freeman, Tony Hatch, Mickie Most, Ted Ray, Ed Stewart, and Muriel Young. Each act received marks out of ten across three aspects of their performance: presentation, content and star quality. This meant that an act could potentially receive a maximum score of 120 points: only one act ever achieved this score, and that was singer, Patti Boulaye, in her winning finale performance. The act with the highest score each week passed through to the next round.

The show discovered and provided useful career development platforms for many talented and successful entertainers, the best known of which are Michael Barrymore, Patti Boulaye, Marti Caine, Jim Davidson, Les Dennis, Lenny Henry, Joe Pasquale, and Victoria Wood. Other contestants enjoyed mixed fortunes after the show. The pop group *Showaddywaddy*, who won in 1973, enjoyed a successful recording and performing career after winning with ten Top Ten singles, and was still touring 40 years later, while pop-soul duo, *Sheer Elegance* had just two chart-making singles after appearing in 1975 before folding.¹⁹

Once again, there are aspects of *New Faces* that are represented in the contemporary talent shows on television. When he first appeared as a member of the judging panel in *American Idol*, Simon Cowell attracted a great deal of negative publicity about his tough, uncompromising style of evaluation and the straight-talking way in which he was prepared to tell talentless acts that they were wasting their time. This style not only contrasted sharply with that of his fellow judges, Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson, but was also seen as a departure from the American way of always finding positives even when an act has performed poorly. Yet Cowell was not the creator of this style of judging—even though he built a successful and highly lucrative career out of it. *New Faces* is probably best remembered for the acerbic judging of Tony Hatch and Mickie Most, who were—in talent show judging terms—the Simon Cowells of their day. On one occasion, for instance, Hatch, upon finding an instrumental music act particularly tedious, gave it a score of zero.

19 Roberts, David. (2006) *British Hit Singles and Albums*, 13th Edition. London, UK: Guinness World Records Limited.

In between the early and later runs of *New Faces*, the ITV network brought another talent show to the screen between 1980 and 1982, called *Search for a Star*. This show replaced an expert judging panel with a viewers' panel. The viewers' panel actually comprised a number of regional panels that represented different ITV regions across the UK. The regional panellists gave votes to each act, with the camera switching to each regional spokesperson to allow the presenter to collect their scores for the acts. The eventual winner was promised a one-off "TV special" networked across the country on ITV, with the winner being top of the bill. The show failed to catch on with the viewers and did not discover any major acts with longevity.²⁰

A more successful television talent show, at least in terms of its popularity with the audience at home, was *Stars in Their Eyes*. In this show, contestants were given the opportunity to dress up as one of their favourite celebrity singers and impersonate them as closely as possible. Later on, celebrity versions of the show were also televised. Contestants competed in initial heats, with the winner of each heat being invited back to take part in a grand finale from which an outright winner would emerge. Each act would be introduced through a brief film, *voxpop*, in which they talked about their lives and gave clues about the famous performer they were going to impersonate. The show ran for 16 series between August 1990 and March 2005. Because the contestants were performing as much as a tribute to their favourites singers as to find a platform for their own talents, and given that they were not appearing as themselves anyway, *Stars in Their Eyes* served more as a piece of stand-alone entertainment than as a format for the discovery and nurturing of new singing talent. Having said that, one of the winners from Series 11 in 2000, Gary Mullen, who appeared as Freddie Mercury, subsequently went on to become one of the UK's leading Queen tribute acts.

A further talent show that appeared before the modern era of televised talent contests was *The Big, Big Talent Show*. This short-lived series ran from 1996 to 1997 on ITV and failed to become established as a ratings winner. Despite its short shelf life, it did produce a small number of alumni who have enjoyed career success since—most notably comedians Omid Djalili and Ed Byrne, and singer Charlotte Church. The first winner of *The X Factor*, Steve Brookstein, also appeared on this show. *The Big, Big Talent Show* is worth mentioning because of its historical precedent of offering to the eventual winner the prize of an appearance at the *Royal*

20 BBC. (2011, 12th December) "The precarious path of talent show fame". Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16119375

Variety Performance. As a talent contest for variety acts, this show can be seen as the precursor of the *Got Talent* franchise that enjoyed much more success, both in terms of audience popularity and discovery of talent, ten years later.

Career Legacies of TV Talent Shows

Television talent shows have been popular sources of entertainment with audiences at home, and their value to the networks that transmit them is founded upon their ability to draw large audiences and, in turn, on commercial networks, large advertising revenues. For the contestants, though, these shows represent platforms on which they can raise their public profile. This is vitally important to those seeking to develop careers as entertainers and for those seeking entry into the world of business or a profession, because they provide exposure of a more selective kind to potential future employers who can provide contestants with these desired career paths. These two features can work together. The success of a show in television audience terms will determine its longevity. Without the show, the career opportunities that draw in contestants disappear. Without interesting contestants, the television audiences will disappear. This book is concerned with the legacy of television's talent shows for contestants. To what extent can contestants in these shows expect to develop a successful career in the field for which they have auditioned? Does winning one of these shows bring career success? Can simply being a participant be career enhancing?

We will track down what happens to contestants across a range of television talent shows of the twenty-first century in the fields of music and variety entertainment, fashion modelling, professional cookery, and commercial business. It will become apparent that for some participants, and especially for some winners, being in these shows brought life-changing career opportunities that they might not otherwise have got. For other participants, including some eventual winners, the careers for which they auditioned were either short-lived or never happened. Some found career fulfilment and success, but not in the field for which they auditioned on television. Many returned to their former lives and obscurity. Some contestants nevertheless enjoyed occupational success, albeit out of the limelight. Billy Pearce was a finalist in the 1986 season of *New Faces* and went on to enjoy a short-lived and well-paid career as a comedian with his own driver to take him to and from venues. As he said in one interview, "Suddenly I'm earning £3,000 to £4,000 a night turning over half a million

a year plus.” A few years later, after bookings dried up, Pearce lost all his money and was reduced to making pantomime appearances.²¹

The idea that being on a television talent contest is a guaranteed route to fame and fortune is not supported. While this can happen, it applies only to a minority of contestants. This observation is reinforced by the career outcomes of winners and finalists on shows such as *Popstars*, *American Idol* and *The X Factor*, where celebrity status is sought, as well as in other contests such as *MasterChef* and *The Apprentice* where non-celebrity career development is being sought.

On *Popstars: The Rivals* in the UK in 2002, the emergent girl band, *Girls Aloud* and boy band, *One True Voice*, were technically joint winners of the show but subsequently enjoyed contrasting fortunes in their pop music careers. *Girls Aloud* went straight to number one in the UK singles charts with their debut record, “Sound of the Underground”, keeping *One True Voice* at number two with “Sacred Trust/After You’re Gone”. The boys disbanded six months later while the girls went on to enjoy a further ten years of career success as a band and, in some cases, also as solo artists.²²

From *American Idol*, artists such as Kelly Clarkson, Carrie Underwood and Adam Lambert have gone on to achieve great success as recording artists and musical performers. Others such as Lee DeWyze, Kris Allen and Ruben Studdard have enjoyed only temporary success or failed to achieve much from the outset, despite having the same exposure in the competition. From *The X Factor*, Leona Lewis (who won) and *One Direction* (who came third) have gone on to achieve international stardom and considerable personal wealth in just a few years. In contrast, Steve Brookstein (who won) is back playing in pubs and clubs, as he did before the competition.

On the original format of *The Apprentice*, the winners were awarded a job with a leading entrepreneur. In the American version of the show, this has meant gaining a one-year contract within the business empire of the show’s host, Donald Trump. In the British version of the show, winners were employed by Trump’s equivalent, Alan (Lord) Sugar. In later versions of the UK show, the prize switched from a job with Sugar to an investment of £250,000 in a business proposition of the winning

21 Hudson, Alex. (2011, 12th December) The precarious path of talent show fame. BBC News Magazine. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16119375. Accessed 11th July 2013.

22 Booth, S. (2010, 17th November) “The TV talent show winners waking up to reality”. *Daily Record and Sunday Mail*. www.dailyrecord.co.uk/entertainment/tv-radi/the-tv-talent-show-winners-waking-1076057. Accessed 9th April 2013.

contestant. In the U.S. show, Trump eventually gave up on auditioning unknown contestants amidst rapidly falling TV audiences, and switched to shows that featured well-known celebrities playing to win money for charity.

Few winners of *The Apprentice* lasted beyond that first year in employment with the show's host and, despite its founding premise, few went on to develop their own businesses. Indeed, few of the top-ten finishers who left the show established new business interests *as a direct consequence* of the experience. Many of those who did subsequently run their own companies had done so before they entered *The Apprentice* and went back to these businesses afterwards. As an analysis of this series later in this book will show, there is little conclusive evidence that being on *The Apprentice* benefited contestants' business careers through the acquisition of enhanced business acumen. If anything, any benefits from being on the show derived more from the publicity value it bestowed on them, by raising their public profile among viewers at home. A few benefited from the celebrity capital they gained from being on the show, and subsequently established careers in the media as radio and television presenters and reporters.

Should we be surprised by all of this? Lessons learned from television talent show history teach us that we should not. If we look back through the early shows on both sides of the Atlantic, such as *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts*, *The Gong Show*, *New Faces*, *Opportunity Knocks* and *Star Search*, all of which ran for multiple seasons, between them they probably auditioned more than 5,000 contestants of whom fewer than 100 went on to become lasting household names. For others, there was some fleeting fame that was quickly extinguished once the public memory of their appearances on a talent show had faded.

Take the following case study. In 1971, 12-year-old singer Neil Reid won *Opportunity Knocks*. He released a single, "Mother of Mine" which was beaten to the Christmas number one spot in the charts by The New Seekers singing "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing". Nonetheless, Reid's record went on to sell 2.5 million copies worldwide and he became the youngest person in British recording history to have a number one album. For the next couple of years he performed at sell-out tours around the UK. Then, from across the Atlantic, along came "little" Jimmy Osmond, the latest in a line of singing siblings, who superseded him as a teenage pop sensation. By 1974, after falling record sales, Reid was dropped by his record company and was reduced from headlining his own concerts to serving as a support act at seaside summer season shows. This is how his career continued into his thirties when he got out of show

business, moved into the finance sector and developed a successful new career with his own consultancy.²³

The lessons of television talent show history, therefore, teach us that getting on a talent show is one thing, but enjoying lasting career success is another. Winning the show can increase the likelihood that success will follow, but this outcome is not guaranteed. Sometimes, those who do not win go on to greater success than do those who come out on top. Furthermore, the career legacy of taking part in a televised talent contest can take participants in directions other than ones they had intended. Those seeking stardom as entertainers might end up in the world of business, while those seeking business or specialised professional careers might end up as media personalities.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore the fortunes of those who have taken part in a variety of talent shows across different career categories. Are these shows beneficial to the future lives of their participants? Do contestants get what they deserve—that is, does the outcome of a talent competition reflect the quality and consistency of their performance? To what extent does taking part in a television talent contest amount to little more than a sabbatical from everyday reality, while ultimately having no significant, lasting impact upon that reality?

23 BBC Today. (2001, 13th December) After opportunity knocked. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9661000/9661126. Accessed 11th July 2013.

CHAPTER TWO

FINDING POP STARS

The modern era of TV talent shows that have focused on discovery of new singers and recording artists, has been led by two major franchises—*Pop Idol* and *X Factor*. Later on, a new franchise also emerged called *The Voice* that offered the twist of initial “blind” auditions with the judges hearing but not seeing the contestants. *American Idol* has been at the forefront of this genre for well over ten years, but it did not start in the United States. The American phenomenon was based on a British show called *Pop Idol*, which itself spun off from an earlier format called *Popstars* that had originated in New Zealand and then was further developed in Australia. After spawning the *Idol* format, however, *Popstars* continued in its own right in some markets.

The *Popstars* franchise started in New Zealand in 1999 and in its original format it took the form of a reality television show about the formation of a pop music band. In the first New Zealand series, producer Jonathan Dowling auditioned applicants for a new all-girl band called *True Bliss*. This band had a short lifespan of around a year, but was re-formed with four of the original five members in 2012.

The format was subsequently licensed to Screentime in Australia. It was later sold to Tresor TV in Germany. Eventually the format was sold to more than 50 countries worldwide. Despite the widespread international take-up of the show, in many countries it enjoyed a fairly brief shelf life, and was dropped within a few seasons after television audiences fell away once the novelty had worn off. In virtually every country that took the franchise, it ran for no more than three seasons. The main exception was Germany, where the show ran for nine seasons. Its longevity here was probably helped by the fact that it was rested for the years 2002, 2005 and 2011.

The demise of *Popstars* was undoubtedly also driven by the emergence of other more glamorous and entertaining formats led by the *Pop Idol* and *X Factor* franchises, in which viewers at home got to play an important part in the selection of winning contestants.

The initial Australian series produced three winning acts that subsequently enjoyed some success as recording artists. The first season was won by all-girl group called *Bardot*.¹ After winning the show in 2000, they released a single ("Poison") and an album ("Bardot") which both got to number one in the charts in Australia and New Zealand and also performed well in parts of Asia. In 2001, they released a further album ("Play It Like That") from which two spin-off singles got into the top five in the Australian charts. They decided to split up in 2002. By the end of their short career as a group, *Bardot* had achieved six Top Twenty singles in the Australian charts and completed two successful tours in Australia. Internationally, however, their music made little impact. The individual members of the group all embarked on solo singing careers but enjoyed limited success. Two of the girls (Sophie Monk and Tiffani Wood) released three albums between them, but only one of these made it into the Top Forty. Four of them released singles over the next few years but these mostly finished outside the Top Twenty in the charts.²

The second season of *Popstars* in Australia was won by boy-girl band, *Scandal'us*. They released just two singles, the first of which reached number one in the Australian charts and the second crept into the Top Thirty. Their album "Startin' Somethin'" reached number two in the album charts in their homeland. They also disbanded in 2002. Two of the band's members (Tamara Jaber and Jason Bird) subsequently enjoyed limited chart success as solo artists.³

The third season of *Popstars* in Australia, in 2002, was won by solo singer, Scott Cain. He already had a profile in his home country as a member of a band called *Funkapation*, and also as a solo artist. His single and album recordings after the show, however, provided no evidence that winning *Popstars* had significantly benefited his career as a recording artist. His first solo single after the show reached number seven in Australia's pop music charts, but his follow up was only a modest success, eventually just creeping inside the Top Forty. He later went on to establish a successful career as a television presenter and enjoyed further modest success as a recording artist.⁴

1 *Sydney Morning Herald*. (2003, 10th May) "The blond one". Available at: www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/05/09/1052280432668. Accessed 25th July 2013.

2 The Hot Hits. (2011) Available at: www.thehothits.com/news/23783/popstars-winners---where-are-they-now. Accessed 25th July 2013.

3 "Scandal'us" Available at: www.girl.com.au/scandlus_profile.htm. Accessed 25th July 2013.

4 Barry, Rebecca. (2003, 18th December) "Behind the scenes of the Disney Channel". See:

The show was rested in 2003 and then brought back in 2004 as *Popstars Live*. By this time, the *Idol* franchise had reached Australia with the launch of *Australian Idol*. The first winner and runner-up in the *Idol* show, Guy Sebastian and Shannon Nolf, both enjoyed significant success with their respective debut albums and this encouraged the producers of *Popstars* to resurrect their show.⁵ *Popstars Live* was won by Kayne Taylor. An album that featured cover versions of well-known songs by the finalists, together with a spin-off single, failed to make the top echelons of the Australian charts. The show's winner released a debut single that got into the Top Ten, and runner-up, Miranda Murphy, released a single that made the Top Twenty. Neither of these two artists had any further significant chart success.

In contrast, competitors that appeared in *Australian Idol* enjoyed more success in some cases. The first winner in 2003, Guy Sebastian, is a singer-songwriter who has enjoyed a buoyant career in popular music and was even selected as a judge for the 2011 season of Australia's version of *The X Factor*. The winner of Season Two in 2004, Casey Donovan, was just 16 at the time and continued to make records that enjoyed limited chart success and also performed in musical theatre. Of the other winners, Damien Leith (2006), Wes Carr (2008) and Stan Walker (2009), each had several albums of which most charted well in the Australian album charts, while Katie DeAraugo (2005) and Natalie Gauci (2007) had more limited chart success.

In considering whether appearing in, and more especially winning, these reality talent contests represents a good career move, up to 2012, *Popstars*, around the world, produced artists who delivered 42 number one hit singles for the winners, across 12 countries in which the show was televised. As with the show itself, however, for most of the winners or finalists lasting career success as a recording artist tended to be elusive. This pattern was repeated in respect of winners and finalists of many of the subsequent franchises that superseded *Popstars* around the world. For all those who enjoyed success as recording artists, there were many more who did not.

www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=3539916.
Accessed 25th July 2013.

⁵ See: www.popstarslive.com.au/finalists.aspx. Accessed 12th February 2013.

Popstars UK

The first British *Popstars* series in 2000 sought to audition contestants singing solo, with the eventual objective of creating a new boy-girl pop group. As with the New Zealand and Australian formats that preceded it, *Popstars* in the UK adopted a fly-on-the-wall documentary perspective about the way a modern pop group gets formed. A judging panel of three experts, a television producer (Nigel Lythgoe), a music promoter (Nicki Chapman) and a music mogul (Paul Adam,) auditioned aspiring pop singers, in different parts of the UK, who sang briefly in front of them. Those judged as the best were invited back for further auditions in London. Over a number of weeks, the judges eliminated contestants until they were left with ten finalists. These aspirants were put through their paces with yet more auditions and the judges made their final selections of five contestants, not only on the basis of their abilities as singers, but also in terms of who made the best fit as a group.

The first series eventually created a new band that comprised three girls (Myleene Klass, Kym Marsh and Suzanne Shaw) and two boys (Danny Foster and Noel Sullivan) called *Hear'say*, which enjoyed short-lived success and eventually split up after less than two years. As a band, they nevertheless managed to sell three million records internationally and achieved two number one singles in the UK pop charts.⁶

The three girls and one of the boys went on to forge successful solo careers in acting, musical theatre and television presenting/modelling, while the other boy struggled to maintain a career in show business. Danny Foster made an ill-fated return to reality talent television by appearing in the second season of the UK version of *The Voice*, but failed to get any of the judges to take him on at the blind auditions.⁷ The losing five contestants in the final round of *Popstars UK* (Michelle Heaton, Tony Lundon, Kevin Simm, Jessica Taylor and Kelli Young) formed their own pop group, called *Liberty X*, which went on to enjoy several years of chart-topping success, with ten UK Top Twenty singles. Perhaps the most successful male contestant from the first UK series of *Popstars* was Darius Danesh (who later reverted his original surname of Campbell) who was eliminated half-way through, but later entered the first *Pop Idol* competition in 2001 and finished third. He then enjoyed some success as a recording artist, starred in musical theatre in London's West End and won

6 Malone, Maria. (2001, 1st February) *Popstars—The Making of a Band*. London, UK: Andre Deutsch.

7 BBC. (2013) *The Voice*. Transmitted on BBC1, Saturday 4th May, 8.05pm.

another reality television music contest, *Popstar to Operastar* in 2010 (on which Mylene Klass also appeared as a presenter).⁸

After *Popstars* in 2000, another series was broadcast in 2002 that was designed to find a new pop band called *Popstars—The Rivals*, which pitched girls against boys, and eventually created an all-girl band (Girls Aloud) and an all-boy band (One True Voice).⁹

Popstars provided inspiration to Simon Fuller, a successful music mogul and ex-manager of the Spice Girls, to create *Pop Idol*—which we look at a little later—that took the form of a more open competition in which television viewers could take part by voting for the contestants they liked. This voting aspect was also integrated into the second *Popstars* series. While judges selected contestants in initial rounds of auditions, the later rounds were televised live and the survival of contestants after each show was determined by television viewers who could vote for their favourites by telephone or using a Red Button on their digital TV remote controls (if they had one).

Both the all-boy band and all-girl band had five members. Both bands released records at the end of the series with the aim of becoming the top-selling record at Christmas. The girls won the chart competition with their debut single, “Sound of the Underground”, finishing top of the charts and the boys’ double A-sided, debut single, “Sacred Trust/After You’re Gone”, reaching the second spot. Girls Aloud went on to enjoy significant success as recording artists and concert performers for the next ten years, part of the time as solo artists as well as in their band. In contrast, One True Voice released one more Top Twenty single and split up less than two years after they had formed.

Pop Idol UK

Pop Idol was launched in the United Kingdom in 2001 on the leading commercial channel, ITV. Simon Fuller took credit as the show’s creator and adopted an audience voting system after initial auditions in which a judging panel made the selections. It was this series that saw the debut of Simon Cowell as a judge—a role he subsequently went on to make his

8 *Daily Record and Sunday Mail*. (2010, 20th February) “Scots singer Darius Campbell wins Popstar to Operastar reality show. Available at: www.dailyrecord.co.uk/entertainment/tv-radio/scots-singer-darius-campbell-wins-1051120. Accessed 25th July 2013.

9 Wilkes, N. (2001, 4th February) Popstars winners revealed. Available at: www.digitalspy.co.uk/tv/s102/popstars/news/a1836/popstars-winners-revealed. Accessed 25th July 2013.

own. Nicki Chapman was retained from the *Popstars* panel and the two other panel members were Neil Fox (a well-known radio disc jockey) and Pete Waterman (a successful UK record producer). This show sought to find new solo recording artists.¹⁰

Pop Idol quickly became extremely popular with the British viewing public. It was one of the most watched shows on ITV—the UK’s leading commercial network—and was extremely profitable for the channel, not only because of the advertising revenue it generated, but also because, once the live shows started, the channel took a share of the revenues from telephone calls made by viewers in lodging their votes each week for their favourite contestants.

The format followed a number of rounds that have since become well established across music and entertainment talent shows of this kind. In the first round auditions, contestants sang in front of the judging panel and the four judges had total control over their fate. Those who sang poorly often faced harsh criticism from the judges and especially from Simon Cowell who was, at this time, unknown to the general public. The reactions of the panel became an integral part of the entertainment value of the show. The severity of some of the criticism levelled against the contestants, triggered controversy that was often publicly played out, attracting even more attention to the show.¹¹

After the first round, contestants that survived the cut were auditioned further in London, where the judges produced a longlist of 50 who went forward into the third round. At this point, auditions took place in a television studio. The contestants were split into five groups of ten, and over five pre-recorded shows they each sang one song. The judges offered their opinions about each performance and at the end of the show, and phone lines were opened for viewers at home to vote for their favourite contestant. A results show was then transmitted later on the same evening and the two contestants that obtained the highest number of votes from the television audience moved forward into the final ten.

In the second series of the UK *Pop Idol*, a wild card round was introduced in which the judges selected ten contestants who had previously failed to attract enough audience votes and gave them a second chance. In this case, the contestant who obtained the highest number of audience votes went through to the final round and was joined by a second contender, selected by the judges. This initiative was adapted from the

10 BBC. (2004, 23rd April) “Cowell reveals new talent search”.
www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/entertainment/tv_and_radio/3653461.

11 BBC. (2004) “Pop Idol judges criticised by MPs. See:
www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/3238635 Accessed 25th July 2013.