

“Fake or real!!?? Have your say!!!”: Negotiating authenticity on *Australian Idol*

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Abstract

Australian Idol performers and judges negotiate concepts of the real and the fake. Their exchanges encompass the tense interface between pure music ideals and commercial market imperatives. This paper examines three potential Idols from 2005, 2006 and 2007. Each provides a unique example of these authenticity negotiations; Lee Harding demonstrates how Idol protects its strategic apparatus by carefully exposing it, Bobby Flynn is held out of an example of Idol's use of real artists as a channel to authentic culture, and Tarisai Vushe illustrates how the Idol judges set out to defend Idol as a real and authentic cultural space. By exploring these three significant moments from Idol, this paper sets out to illustrate how potential Idols are mobilised to authenticate Idol as a strategic brandscape, which produces both corporate brands (that is, capital) and popular music culture.

Introduction

The climax of Australian Idol 2007 was Tarisai Vushe's dramatic exit from the show. Tarisai became another potential Idol who found herself caught in the crossfire between the real and the fake. She was voted off for not appearing real enough. Her exit from the show prompted an expletive-laden media rampage, where she claimed she was real; it was the judges who were fake. Tarisai intimated that the judges were staging Idol as a fake spectacle, rather than a real competition. Each year Idol's judges stage negotiations between the real and the fake in anointing a new Idol. The purpose of these negotiations, I argue, is to create the notion that Idol is an authentic cultural space, rather than just a strategic pop music and brand producing factory.

Following Zizek (1989, 2006, 2008), I argue that the authentic is deployed in Australian Idol as a spectral object, which evokes the Real within social reality. In social reality, the authentic encompasses pure, free and autonomous creativity and expression. Oppositions between the real and the fake, as they play out in social

reality, are a spectacle produced within the Symbolic order to evoke the ungraspable Real. Where the Real is that which cannot be Symbolised, reality is the lived experience within the Symbolic order. The real (as used by Australian Idol contestants and judges, distinct from Žizek's notion of the Real), the authentic and the fake are discourses which play out within the Symbolic order. Australian Idol contestants, judges and the audience use the word 'real' to evoke notions of authentic, pure, free and autonomous performances; and 'fake' to evoke notions of commodified, commercialised, and strategically manipulated performances.

The binary opposition between the real and the fake within popular culture serves as an interactive spectacle to suture over the Real. "The spectre conceals the piece of the Real which has to be forsaken if reality (in the guise of the Symbolic) is to exist" (Myers 2003, p.75). Savvy cultural participants know that reality is strategically manipulated to produce capital, but act 'as if' it is properly authentic. Ideology is thereby enacted in the 'doing' not the 'knowing'. In the reality of Australian Idol performers become undead objects, the savvy audience recognise them as fakes, but participate 'as if' they are real. Even though performers are ensconced within the strategic machinery of Australian Idol they continue to provide a Symbolic access to the Real, which legitimates the Australian Idol spectacle and empowers capital accumulation.

Australian Idol as a strategic brandscape

Australian Idol is a strategic brandscape (Goldman and Papson, 2006; Sherry, 1998; Thompson and Arsel, 2004) which symbiotically produces both corporate brands (that is, capital) and popular music culture. The brandscape is an experiential space where marketers engage consumers in the co-creation of brand meaning (Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Schembri, 2006; Sherry, 1998). Several critical cultural theorists have sought to critique the brandscape, beyond its strategic formulation in marketing literature. Thompson and Arsel's (2004) "hegemonic brandscape" and Goldman and Papson's (2006) "capital's brandscapes" each posit that branding is an experiential process which embeds the communicative logic of capital within a larger cultural whole. For instance, in Australian Idol commercial market imperatives, branding strategies and notions of authentic popular music culture interface.

Taking Australian Idol as a case study, this paper examines how the brandscape is a cultural and strategic space which enables participants to misrecognise their experience (Arvidsson, 2005; Goldman and Papson, 2006; Zizek, 2006). Potential Idols traverse the tension in contemporary culture between the authentic and the commodified. The Idol judges act to protect a notion of authenticity as pure artistry and a cultural ideal for which they appear nostalgic¹. While this notion of authenticity is used to judge the potential Idols, they participate in capital's production of space, regardless of the meaning they seek to create. In the brandscape of Australian Idol, authentic identities are pursued, at the same time they are strategically manipulated (Ram, 2007).

Examining Australian Idol as a strategic brandscape where both capital and popular music culture are produced enables us to interrogate the performance of apparently real and authentic popular music. The key question raised by this performance is, "how does it remain (or appear to remain) real and authentic when it is embedded within a regulated strategic brandscape?" "How does Australian Idol incorporate notions of real and authentic music culture when 'everyone knows' that it is a strategically manipulated pop culture spectacle?" I begin to respond to these questions by examining Australian Idol as an expression of the cultural logic of contemporary (late) capital (Andrejevic, 2004, 2007; Grzanic, 2004; Harvey, 2001; Jameson, 1991, 1996, 1998; Schiller, 1999; Zizek, 1989, 2004, 2006).

The opposition of real and fake is a spectacle in which participants ardently examine the authenticity of performers without examining the ideological apparatus underpinning the Idol machine. Idol provides an invitation to 'participate in one's own manipulation' under the guise of empowerment and participation (Andrejevic, 2007, p.242). Participants in Australian Idol, both performers and audience members, are caught in the interface between the Real and the Symbolic. Their participation is a never-ending game of using the Symbolic to reach out for the Real. Symbolic reality demands our complicity. Australian Idol is a Symbolic belief and brand building

¹ For instance, Idol shows are organised around nostalgic musical themes and performers such as Elvis, the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, the performer's year of birth, the Big Band era and so on.

apparatus in which cultural participants act ‘as if’ they access the Real. As cynical subjects we knowingly overlook the illusions which structure our reality.

The brandscape as a mechanism for producing space

The brandscape is a concept which enables us to consider how capital produces geographic, cultural, discursive and virtual space (Harvey, 2003, p.87; Lefebvre, 1991). The brandscape is a space where capital seeks to ‘load’ commodities with ‘evocative meanings’ (Sternberg 1998, p.3). Harvey’s critique of capital, paralleled by other theorists (Goldman and Papson, 2006; Harvey, 2001, 2003; Hearn 2006; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987; Jameson, 1991, 1998; Kline, Dyer-Witherford & De Peuter, 2003), is that the logic of capital prefigures the production of contemporary culture. The brandscape appears as a representational space which creates a regulated or simulated difference within which capital can thrive (Grzanic, 2004; Jameson, 1998; Harvey, 2001, 2003; Zizek, 1989, 2004, 2006).

While authenticity has become increasingly problematised in critical cultural perspectives, because it is seen to serve as a strategically deployed concept that sutures over the Real (Grzanic, 2004; Harvey, 2001; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987; Jameson, 1998; Zizek, 1989, 2004, 2006), it is a key feature of ‘contemporary promotional culture’ (Botterill, 2007, p. 123). Australian Idol provides a case study of the crucial role notions of authenticity play in validating the brandscape as a legitimate cultural space. The brandscape of Australian Idol is an authenticity building space, where potential Idols and the audience are guided in identity projects which simultaneously construct authentic subjects and authentic corporate brands.

Extensive content and textual analysis of Australian Idol was conducted throughout each of the 2005, 2006 and 2007 series. The analysis demonstrates how Idol functions as a strategic brandscape, encompassing at least three significant, interconnected, symbiotic brand and authentic culture building processes². Firstly,

² I analysed Australian Idol in-depth in 2005, 2006 and 2007. In 2005, I conducted extensive content and textual analysis of all Idol episodes, denoting production techniques, segments, corporate presence, and key interactions. In 2006 and 2007 I repeated this analysis, focusing more intensely on interactions between judges and performers.

corporations are engaged not just as traditional sponsors of the show, but as active participants in the production of the Idol experience. Corporate brands are integrated into the production of popular music culture. Secondly, Idol provides the audience with access to the exclusive zones of music culture production, making the apparatus of the culture industry visible to the audience. And thirdly, Idol stages significant negotiations between performers, judges and the audience about the tense interface between notions of real, authentic and commercially viable music culture.

Branded Idols

Examination of corporate involvement in Idol illustrates how Idol functions as a promotional cultural space; a space that produces music culture that produces brands. A third of the advertising on Australian Idol is by brands that sponsor the show, and seek to tie their product into the content of the show³. Corporations develop discourses of corporate social responsibility and democratic participatory culture, and, facilitate the journey of Idols. For example, McDonald's sponsor Idol's visits to Ronald McDonald's charity houses, Allen's confectionary sponsor the 'Are You a Natural?' Junior Idol competition, and Idols use Telstra phones to stay in touch, Maybelline and Garnier beauty products backstage, and Mazda cars to get to gigs. Corporations do not merely present or sponsor the show; rather they are an integral part of the production of popular music culture. The production of music culture is facilitated by these brands. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate not just how Idol functions as a brandscape, but rather, how the symbiotic production of popular music culture and corporate brands (capital) complicates notions of the real and the authentic, and how the tense interplay between pure artistic ideals and commercial imperatives strengthens this brandscape, and makes it appear more real.

Australian Idol continues to attract an audience because expressions of authentic music culture are found there, and the ordinary (yet savvy) audience are invited to participate in the construction of the text (Turner, 2006). The Idol judges act as directors of meaning and authenticity making, they ensure that performers "reference

³ The official sponsors of Australian Idol account for 726 of the 2153 advertisements screened throughout the series (33%). The top eight brands are sponsors of the show.

a realm of meaning that consumers find evocative” (Sternberg, 1998, p.11)⁴. A significant amount of on-screen time is dedicated to detailing preparations for, and dissecting, the performances⁵. This devotion to analysing performances is central to the Idol brandscape. The show devotes extensive time to protecting the strategic interests of the brandscape by exposing the apparatus of the culture industry (Andrejevic, 2004). This process intimates that Idol is authentic because its production is transparent. If the audience can see into the backstage and observe the judgments then they must be seeing music culture ‘as it really is’.

I present here three exchanges between potential Idols and judges⁶; firstly, Lee Harding, the undead amoral punk who harnesses a legitimate commercial authenticity by being a “million bucks waiting to happen”. Harding ruptures Idol’s Symbolic reality by being too Symbolic and not paying enough deference to the Real. Secondly, Bobby Flynn, the tragic superfreak who embodies an ungraspable Real cultural authenticity by following his unique artistic path, even though it will alienate the audience and see him voted off the show. Bobby was selected for the 2006 series as one of a number of performers who could play their own instruments and write their own songs, to demonstrate that Idol was real. And thirdly, Tarisai Vushe, a feisty soul singer whose meek onstage persona was dubbed fake by the judges (and consequently, the audience) despite her protestations of being real. Tarisai was axed by Idol as part of a spectacle which reinforced its defence of the Real.

⁴ In-depth exploratory textual analysis of the 2005 series led me to perceive the interaction between Idols and judges as a defining moment in the Idol process, and one which, through careful analysis, illuminates how the wider Idol brandscape functions. Each week on Idol there are up to 12 performances, each lasting 90 seconds (a total of 18 minutes of live music performance). Idol broadcasts a 1.5 hour performance show, 1 hour eviction show, and 1 hour Inside Idol special each week.

⁵ Several production techniques are used to expand, repeat, and manufacture content surrounding the performances. Some of these techniques and the potential intent and effects are; (a) montage of the ‘journey so far’ when a contestant faces a critical moment in the show, such as being evicted, nominated for eviction, or has an emotional crisis, (b) reviewing previous performances and interviewing judges, hosts, production staff and potential Idols about particular performances, (c) covering multiple angles of performances after the performance, such as backstage reactions, audience reactions etc., (d) altering the spatial and temporal representation of show. For example, showing ‘off-camera’ comments from judges during ad-breaks in previous shows, or showing potential Idols’ and judges’ actions after the show, for instance the hosts say, ‘you’ll never believe what happened once the camera stopped rolling...’ when in fact the camera is still rolling and capturing.

⁶ The Australian Idol judges throughout 2005 and 2006 series were Mark Holden, Kyle Sandilands and Marcia Hines. In 2007, Ian ‘Dicko’ Dickson also joined the panel.

Lee Harding: a rupture in reality?

Lee Harding (Australian Idol 2005) was a punk performer replete with facial piercings, bratty attitude and crazy hair. He appeared punk, and professed that he loved the style of punk music, but repeatedly appeared completely unaware of its cultural, social and political history.

Harding's usual trick was to arrange a classic pop song into a punk performance. The one actual punk song he sang during his Idol residency was Greenday's 'Holiday', an attack on George Bush, neo-conservatism and the War on Terror⁷. Harding sang the song smiling and jumping about stage. Mark Holden began his judgment by acknowledging that Harding "knew his product", but quizzed him about the song's political sentiments. Harding was blissfully unaware of the song's political content, "this is the *style* of music I want to play, I'm not a very political person actually", he insisted. Holden was incensed, if Harding was going to sing a political song he had to "mean it". Punk is, after all, political. Isn't it? Holden's fellow judges didn't buy this moral high ground. To Marcia Hines, Harding's performance was cool because the "audience dug it and they probably don't know what it's about" (prompting cheers from the audience). Kyle Sandilands concurred, instructing Harding that "the days of worrying about the message (are over). Who cares? I like that song and I've never even thought about it" (more cheers from the audience).

As the series went on and Harding's popularity escalated, despite his poor performances and shallowness, Holden began to accept that Harding was authentic because of all the Idols he seemed most likely to be commercially viable. Holden was caught in an authenticity bind, his judgments swung between lambasting and attacking Harding's poor music ability and apparent unauthenticity on one hand, and lauding and endorsing his market sensibility and capital value on the other. Towards the end of the series though, Holden was swayed by Harding's commercial appeal, awarding him a touchdown, after exclaiming, "you *know* your product"⁸. The other

⁷ Lee Harding's 'Holiday' performance (judges comments not available online) <http://youtube.com/watch?v=uZae23oJKu8> and performance of 'Eye of the Tiger' with touchdown from Mark Holden <http://youtube.com/watch?v=zldpPBjjDiY>

⁸ The touchdown is the symbolic prize Holden awards to Idols who appear to successfully combine 'pure' authenticity with authentic marketability. Holden usually stands and swings his arm like a Quarterback throwing the imaginary ball to the Idol standing on stage (in the imaginary end zone).

judges agreed, that Harding “spoke to youth” and was a “million bucks waiting to happen”; despite his vapidness he had somehow combined cultural authenticity with authentic marketability.

Harding’s performances and the judges’ qualified endorsement accommodate the cynical knowing savviness of contemporary cultural participants, who are ensconced within capitalist spaces (Zizek, 1989). By exposing Harding as unauthentic, the audience sees a negotiation about whether or not a performer is real, a negotiation which serves to make Harding real because the audience see him and the industry ‘as it really is’. For example, when Holden chastises Harding by saying, “mate, it’s great for a multinational record company to have an artist who doesn’t care about what they sing”, he exposes the apparatus of the culture industry. Even though he is criticising Harding for being inauthentic, the whole process serves to make both Idol and Harding authentic because he is being exposed ‘as he really is’. Harding’s complete ignorance of punk’s politics becomes a savvy, cynical, amoral, punk attitude in its own right. Australian Idol demonstrates to the savvy audience how “mediated appearances are constructed by the apparatus of the culture industry”, a strategy which “protects artifice by exposing it” (Andrejevic 2004, p.16). That is, the savvy audience thinks that because they can see the apparatus which strategically exploits them, they are not really exploited.

While Harding is a “million bucks waiting to happen”, the problem for Holden is that it would be a tainted million. He likes his commodities to be artists too. Holden doesn’t mind what kind of music the contemporary Idols create; he just doesn’t want them to pillage the past musical traditions where he clearly embeds his pure musical ideal. Original punk music was authentic in terms of its cultural, social and political struggle. Harding’s punk style, however, embodies the commercial amorality of capital, which troubles Holden, because it too overtly exposes the machinery underpinning the Australian Idol brandscape. While the judges came to accept him as he was, they realised that if Idol continued with performers of Harding’s ilk it would be reduced to an ironic and cynical hyper-real spectacle. Idol had to go in search of the Real.

Bobby Flynn: chasing the ungraspable Real

For the 2006 series Australian Idol producers actively recruited potential Idols who could play their instruments and write their own songs. One of these recruits was Bobby Flynn, whose artistry helped to obfuscate the machinery of Australian Idol. Eventually, however, like any tragic authentic he alienated the audience while the judges still endorsed him, and brought about his own downfall. Even though unlikely to win from the outset, Flynn performed an important authenticating role on Idol. His presence in the Idol brandscape gave the space a sense of diversity, freedom and musical otherness. In the process of participating and ultimately failing (at the hands of the democratic voting majority); he legitimated the eventual winner as the chosen 'One'.

The highpoint of Flynn's residency on Idol was a reworking of the Rick James funk classic 'Superfreak'⁹. Flynn performed a restrained, melancholy interpretation of the song, filled with pathos, pain and heartbreak. Following the song, Flynn was turned over for judgment. Sandilands 'got it' but was worried that the audience wouldn't have the "musical knowledge" to appreciate Flynn's arrangement and musical skill. Holden however dubbed Flynn a 'superfreak' and exclaimed, "every week you turn the genre upside down, nothing should work, but it always works!" Holden threw Flynn a touchdown and the audience erupted. For one splendid moment, Holden and audience became one; they understood Flynn. A few weeks later, Flynn was voted off the show, having alienated the audience with his unique and challenging interpretation of the pop music canon.

Potential Idols must epitomise ideas of authenticity (Botterill, 2007, p.112). The potential Idols fulfil the creative role in the brandscape, and as such, are the authenticity producers of liberal, democratic capitalism. The brandscape of Australian Idol interweaves the authentic identity projects of individual Idols, culturally influential musicians, and contemporary brands. The brandscape is a communicative structure where corporations reaffirm the "market as a domain of autonomy, freedom and choice" (Botterill, 2007, p.113). The culture industry's carefully crafted notions of freedom and authenticity continue to function as long as

⁹ Bobby Flynn's 'Superfreak' performance and the judge's comments http://youtube.com/watch?v=vmUBnjXRt_0

“branded cultural resources (appear) disinterested, invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value” (Holt, 2002, p.83). Flynn evoked this apparent disinterest and so, although ensconced within the strategic apparatus of Australian Idol, managed to embody the freedom and autonomy central to making Idol an authentic cultural space. Flynn was one of a number of Idols recruited in 2006 to explicitly undertake this authenticity work¹⁰. In 2007, the judges began to overtly defend the stage as a real and authentic space. Idol began to locate real and authentic culture not in particular performers, but in the Idol stage itself. The stage became a Symbolic mechanism which offered a passage to the Real.

Tarisai Vushe: zealously defending the Real

Tarisai Vushe’s tenure on Australian Idol 2007 provides further insight into the negotiation between the real and the fake by demonstrating the significance of the stage and the backstage. In Vushe’s downfall we can see how the apparatus of the culture industry is deliberately displayed not to demonstrate how capital is produced, but rather, to demonstrate how the culture industry zealously defends and enhances expressions of authentic music culture. The judges, who are in reality, on Australian Idol to defend the interests of capital, act as if they are there to defend authentic culture. They insist that performances on the stage must be real.

Althusser’s (1971) theory of ideology, the Gramscian notion of hegemony and Marcuse’s (1965) pure tolerance all share the common assertion that capital doesn’t set out to obliterate and control popular culture (in the case of Idol, the stage); rather it seeks to protect and then harness the authority and power of free and autonomous performances. Following Zizek (1989), the more real and even subversive performances on the stage are, the more the ruling ideology is strengthened. Vushe became a sacrificial lamb in this zealous defence of the stage. The judges pounced in the week following audience accusations of her being a fake. They sought to defend the stage as an absolutely authentic space, as the most effective means of coopting it.

¹⁰ Eventual Idol winner Damien Leith and fellow finalist Lisa Mitchell, were, alongside Bobby Flynn, touted as performers who played their own instruments and wrote their own songs.

The judges were, at first, smitten with Vushe; her real and authentic African immigrant story, the close bond with her mother, her rich soul-laden voice. While her performances were often vivacious and bombastic, and rumours swirled of her being a demanding and aggressive Idol housemate; she would meekly reply “thank-you” to the judges, regardless of their comments. Consequently, both the judges, and the bloggers, began to question whether her performances were real, when there was such a disconnection between her performance on stage, and her backstage persona. She was quickly labelled a fake. Preparing for a performance in the week when accusations of fakery had reached fever pitch, Holden asked her, “How are you today, Tarisai?” “Really pissed off”, she replied. The audience didn’t vote for fakes. Holden agreed, “its time for Tarisai to get real” by choosing a song to perform where she could express “real anger and rage”.

She chose tween pop duo The Veronica’s ‘When It All Falls Apart’ and promised “real anger”¹¹. After the performance Ian ‘Dicko’ Dickson described her as an “angry Bratz doll” and Holden passed the death sentence, “to me? Fake”. Sandilands tried to mediate “you have to be you, be the nutter we know backstage, and don’t put on a persona when you perform”. Vushe was exasperated, “I know to myself that I am being real, I wouldn’t have come on the show if I were a fake”. ‘Dicko’, in his zealous defence of the authenticity of the stage, gave her a peculiar choice (that is a choice in which there is no choice at all), “Look, I’ll do an amnesty. Starting tonight, we’ll wipe the slate clean if you start being real”. “I am real!” she pleaded before heading off stage. The cameras tailed her as she exited the stage and headed for the backstage, the exclusive zone of production, which the Idol apparatus affords its audience access to so that they can more astutely validate the authenticity of potential Idols.

Backstage, Vushe went on a real rampage, screaming at Holden, “I am angry!”, “I am pissed off!”, “I am real!” To which Holden repeatedly interjected, “This is it! This is what we want to see, *this is real*”. This exclusive backstage exchange was broadcast to the audience as further proof that the Vushe they saw on stage wasn’t real. She was

¹¹ Tarisai’s performance of ‘When It All Falls Apart’ and judges comments can be viewed at http://youtube.com/watch?v=n_k7FTG3OD8

voted off the next night. Revealingly, 'Dicko' said that she had been, "a great performer for us. That's what this show is about, fascinating people putting on great performances". It was as if he was cruelly thanking her for being an exemplary sacrificial lamb in Idol's ardent defence of the real. "Thanks", Vushe replied, dripping with sarcasm, "even though I don't mean it". She left the show and went on a several day media splurge telling anyone who would listen (the whole tabloid press and the blogosphere) that she was real, *really* "pissed off". According to Vushe, the judges were the "real fakes", she claimed that 'Dicko' and Hines said in the judgment she was fake but later backstage that they knew she was real, it was just that she *appeared* fake. Idol blogger Mary Kiley noted that to be real you had to know how to "act on stage" regardless of how well you sing¹².

"FAKE or REAL!?!? Have your say!!!"

"FAKE or REAL!?!? Have your say!!!" is the description accompanying a You Tube video of Vushe's final Idol performance. The injunction to 'have your say!' implies that, regardless of Vushe's status, Idol is real because it is directed by the free and open deliberations of the judges and blogosphere and the democratic voting of the audience. The exchanges between the judges and Idols demonstrates how capital feeds off the tense interplay between the real and the fake. The negotiations between judges, and the voting audience, create a deliberative and democratic spectacle encompassing multiple musical possibilities. While Australian Idol is reality TV replete with audience participation, commodification, and product tie-ins, it is also a form of music culture production. The Australian Idol judgments enable us to examine the authenticity processes which, I contend, are fundamental to the cultural legitimacy and therefore capital value of commercialised, interactive, mediated cultural spaces (like reality TV or web 2.0).

The task of potential Idols in producing capital, in contributing to the strategic imperatives of the brandscape, is not in endorsing the products (this doesn't appeal to the contemporary savviness of the audience). Their real task is to validate Idol as an authentic cultural space, as a mechanism which creates authentic popular music

¹² Tarisai's Idol fury, October 31, 2007 - 10:30AM, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/tv--radio/tarisais-idol-fury/2007/10/31/1193618930438.html>

culture. Following Hearn's (2006) autonomist Marxist perspective, social reality becomes a 'corporate colony' where the creative labour of cultural participants produces the 'capital relation'. Following Andrejevic (2004) and Zizek (1989), I argue that this colonisation of reality produces notions of authentic and real culture which suture over the Real. In the process, Idol acquires the cultural capital needed to be a profitable communications mechanism for the corporations who integrate with the programme. The judges on Idol perform the significant function of balancing the tension between authentic cultural ideals and market imperatives. Australian Idol is a brandscape for capital, a space where marketing communications is embedded alongside and within the production of popular music culture.

The interaction between judge and potential Idol is a negotiation about the performer's use of the Idol stage. The negotiation is about how their performance honours the stage as a significant cultural space, as both authentic and commercially viable. This study of Idol is embedded in a wider ethnographic study of popular music culture in Australia. Repeatedly throughout the fieldwork (online, reality television, print media and live music events) the stage is the vital authenticity creating apparatus. What makes Idol a unique and significant case study is that the negotiation and deliberation between performer and judges is staged as a spectacle. The Idol judgment process serves as a cultural blueprint for interrogating the performer's deference to, and defence of, the stage as a sacred space.

The three exchanges between potential Idols and judges covered in this paper illustrate three different variations on Idol's authenticity building process. Firstly, Lee Harding as an amoral punk demonstrates how Idol protects the strategic apparatus underpinning the brandscape by exposing it. Next, Bobby Flynn demonstrates how Idol moved to use real artists as a vessel to an ungraspable authentic culture. And finally, Tarisai Vushe illustrated how the judges set out to defend the stage as a real and authentic space. Australian Idol is a complex brandscape designed to enhance corporate brands and commodify music culture. By staging negotiations about authenticity, Australian Idol's capital value is enhanced; it becomes an effective brandscape where capital and culture are symbiotically produced.

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