

Jessica and Shannon fly the flag for Aurora at this Friday's Showdown final



By Brock Weir

As 17-year-old Jessica Joerges hit the stage Saturday at Aurora's Ribfest, the dull roar of the thousand-strong crowd hit a crescendo.

Several friends, family and supporters hustled to the stage, armed with signs and very little shyness to cheer on their girl as one of the 20 semi-finalists in the 2014 Hoedown Showdown.

Although it was clear through her rendition of Lady Antebellum's "American Honey" that her voice alone would be enough to carry the day, her cheering squad didn't hurt and, by Saturday evening, Jessica was named one of 10 finalists in the competition, and one of only two Aurora residents, set to take the stage this Friday, September 12, in the Hoedown Showdown Finals.

Featuring headliner Tim Hicks, Friday's event will showcase a wide array of local, up-and-coming country talent from across York Region and Southern Ontario. The ultimate winner will be crowned Friday, winning, among other prizes, the chance to sing in front of the thousands due to descend on Aurora on Saturday for the Wild, Wild West Hoedown, hosted by Magna International.

Shannon Beresford, who wowed the crowds with Miranda Lambert's "Mama's Broken Heart", will also represent Aurora on stage.

As the local duo posed for pictures after being named to the top 10, Jessica was almost at a complete loss for words.

"I am so happy, I am going to cry!" said Jessica. "I have already picked my song [for Friday], so I am just going to keep working at it. I watched what other people can do, so I am going to apply that to what I should be doing. Everyone was phenomenal. All my friends and family came out!"

The Top 20 singers performed throughout the afternoon before three judges — country singer Chris Seldon, businesswoman and former Newmarket-Aurora MP Belinda Stronach, and Steve Hinder of Magna for Community. While Mr. Seldon and Mr. Hinder were on hand for the first round of auditions, this was the first time Ms. Stronach had heard the Top 20 "live" and she was wowed by what she heard.

?I was really impressed with the 20 that performed today,? she told The Auroran. ?I think the talent was really strong. As judges, we had a hard time making a decision because they are all terrific. What we heard today was perhaps even stronger overall than the previous year. I hope that means the Hoedown Showdown is getting more recognition. Great talent is coming out!?

Working through a checklist of criteria, Ms. Stronach said she agreed with Mr. Seldon's assessment that performances such as these are all about having fun.

?It's a can you entertain people, are they dancing and singing along, and does it make you want to grab a beer and have a good time?? said Ms. Stronach. ?We listen to the quality of the artists, their technical ability, but also the way that they kind of get into the song. Do they make it their own? Can they inspire others? Are they having a great time??

Looking over the massive crowds that evening, Ms. Stronach added she thought the audience was bigger than in 2013 and while many came for the ribs, many still stuck around for the talent.

?This is just a really good community event.?

For Mr. Hinder, who worked to revive the Showdown last year, the 2014 crop shows that the event is really taking hold in the community.

?I have been involved in the planning of this event from the word go. I know the program we developed is incredible I know the program they are going to see that night, topped off with Tim Hicks as the headliner, is great.?

Tickets for Friday's Hoedown Showdown are \$25. For more information on that, and Saturday's main event, visit www.hoedown.ca.



The Hoedown Showdown Top 10 with judges Steve Hinder, Belinda Stronach and Chris Seldon. Auroran photo by David Falconer