

It's another trip to the rodeo for Hoedown Showdown contestants



By Brock Weir

Aspiring musicians from across Ontario descended on Theatre Aurora last week to see if they had what it takes to win the 2014 Wild West Hoedown Showdown.

Whether new to the competition, or returning for the second year running, their objective was clear: securing a spot in the Top 20. The Top 20 will perform at Aurora's Ribfest in September, while keeping an eye on the ultimate prize: \$1,000 cash, a \$1,000 Yamaha guitar, a professional studio recording session, and a chance to perform at Hoedown on September 13.





"We're looking for someone who has the ability to go on and take it to the next level of their career by winning this contest," explained country singer Chris Seldon, who judged the contest for the second year running. "That type of singer is someone who is just good, authentic, and someone who can go on with their own career."

Thursday's preliminary round provided a healthy dose of Aurora talent with the likes of John Abel, Shannon Beresford, Kahlan Crowe, Lauren Hoyles, Jessica Joerges, and Daniele Neising, taking over the stage.

"I've loved country music since I was a little girl and I have been singing since I could talk," said Joerges, who billed herself as "17-and-a-quarter" and five days, before she went up to sing "Wide Open Spaces" by the Dixie Chicks.

When she heard about the Showdown last year, it was too late to sign up, but this year Joerges was ready, priming herself through other competitions, making the Top 8 in this year's Aurora Teen Idol competition.

"I hope the judges will see I am a fun person, and that I hopefully have talent," said Joerges. "I want this really badly."

Joerges was in the first round of performances along with Neising. This was the second Showdown competition for Neising, 21, this time performing "Drunk Last Night" by Eli Young Band.

"Stage performance is one thing I learned from last year," she said. "I have known this song for a long time, so I am comfortable with it as well, and it suits my vocal range. I am in school now, so I don't have a lot of time to show around now [in competitions] but I have always just loved country music. It is fun, sometimes depressing, but it is very emotional and real and you can connect with it very easily."

Another competitor this year fresh out of the Aurora Teen Idol competition was Crowe, 14, who came armed with "Blown Away" by Carrie Underwood. She has been making an effort to get herself out into the music scene.

"Over the last year, I have been doing a lot more things with singing, so I think it would be great to try this as well," she said. "When I was really little, I had this guitar my parents bought and I would just strum around on it. It was the same with piano. I want to show the judges I can do the belty high notes, but I also have a low range. It is a very upbeat song, so I will be dancing around trying to get them involved in the process."

By the time the afternoon rolled around, Councillor Abel was ready for his second time participating in the Hoedown Showdown. Although it probably doesn't need to be said he shied away from the likes of Underwood and Lambert, and took his performance in a different direction with the Carl Smith classic "Let Old Mother Nature Have Her Way" from 1951.

"I am very comfortable with it, it borders between country and a little bit of rock and it suits my style," he explained. "I would like to be able to move to the semifinals to get to Ribfest this year because that was a great experience for me."

For Seldon, the importance of making it to these venues is all too clear for performers beginning their careers. After Ribfest, the Top 10 will then perform under the Hoedown Tent on September 12 as a prelude to the main event.

"Many of these people are true amateurs in the sense that they are singing at home in their bedrooms or at parties and this gives them the opportunity to play in front of some very large crowds," he said. "You're talking about 4,000 - 5,000 people and that will be the largest crowd these people will have ever played for. That is the big opportunity and [the prize] will give someone the chance to springboard from this competition into something more."