

And then there were 10 ? Hoedown Showdown winner to be crowned Friday



By Brock Weir

They braved the wind, rain and damp ? and all the havoc those factors can play on their voices and instruments ? but 20 of Ontario's best emerging country singers were whittled down to the Top 10 at Ribfest last weekend.

The Top 10 Finalists of the Hoedown Showdown, the annual talent competition hosted by Magna International in conjunction with their Wild, Wild West Hoedown, are expected to take the stage under the big top this Friday night, as part of York Region's biggest two day party.

Helping get the party started was 13-year-old Aurora resident Melissa Suma, who secured a place in the Top 10 after encouraging the crowd to get up on their feet while she performed Lee Ann Womack's 'I Hope You Dance.' A recent finalist in the Aurora Teen Idol competition, Melissa wowed the judges not just with her voice, but also her look and progression since the preliminary rounds earlier this summer.

'You're like a little ray of sunshine,' said singer and actress Beverley Mahood, who served as one of four judges on Sunday. 'From what we're seeing today [compared to the] preliminary I thought it was a different girl walking out. You have worked on yourself, your vocal and your look to get where you are and I just thought you were amazing.'

Echoing this assessment were fellow judges Al Rowe, a Canadian Country Music Association nominee who will be mentoring the Top 10 this week ahead of Friday's show, Tom Cross of Spin Music, and Steve Hinder of Magna for the Community.

Also competing was Ben Hudson, who made the Top 10 in last year's Hoedown Showdown. Not content to rest on his laurels, the deep-voiced singer from Uxbridge took on Josh Turner's 'Why Don't We Just Dance.'

His vocals were accompanied by a healthy cheering section in the audience. As the judges praised and critiqued his performance, and provided a few helpful tips along the way, Mr. Cross asked whether his 'fan club' had all secured their tickets for Friday night.

'They'll be there Friday, so it would really let them down if I wasn't there,' said Mr. Hudson.

His fans won't be disappointed.

Rounding out Top 10 are:

- ? Naomi Bristow, 17, of Beeton, who has already shared the stage with several top country stars and made a splash, becoming a champion yodeller, winning several awards and recording six CDs.
- ? Cameron von Creigern, 17, of Peterborough, a multifaceted performer who has participated in the Next Country Star, as well as taking the lead in a production of Aida.
- ? Alex Roberts, 16, of Richmond Hill, who has been a lifelong fan of country music.
- ? Karissa Nicole, 18, of Burlington, who has been performing since she was 12, winning the CNE Rising Star Competition, Burlington's Battle of the Best Talent competition, and making the finals at the Hamilton Music Awards Rising Star competition.
- ? Robyn Ottolini, 20, of Uxbridge, whose stage credits include Oklahoma, The Wizard of Oz and Footloose.
- ? Sarah MacRae, 24, of King, who is a relative newcomer to country music with a Bachelor of Music from Humber College.
- ? Lauren Vandervecht, 19, of Sharon, who has been performing since she was seven, training not just in country, but also classical, jazz, and alternative.
- ? Brad Battle, 39, of St. Catherines, a father of three, who is planning his debut EP later this year.