

Top 10 Showdown finalists get ready for the Hoedown spotlight



By Brock Weir

Inspiration was just a channel flip away for Schomberg's Zoe Jayne.

Recently named to the Top 20 in the 2017 Hoedown Showdown, the annual competition hosted by Magna International to find Canada's next country star, Jayne was just about at a loss as to what song she was going to perform before the judges for the semis. Time was running short as the semi-finalists were due to hit the stage at Aurora's Ribfest on Saturday afternoon, but the muse called and she hit the boards as a woman on a mission.

"The news came on in the background and I thought this song was more meaningful today than it has ever been," Jayne told judges as she launched into "That's Why I Pray" by Big & Rich.

"Than on the TV's gone insane, everybody's just laughing," the song begins.

"People cross the world holding on

"The earth caved in, the ocean came crashing

"My neighbour lost his house 'cause he can't find a job

"Don't you dare pledge allegiance, don't you dare speak of God

"Now I'm begging for forgiveness

"I want to make a difference even in the smallest way

"I'm only one person but I can feel it working

"I believe in better days

"That's why I pray."

The timeliness of the 2012 lyrics was not lost on judges Tom Cross of Metalworks Studios, TV personality and philanthropist Joan Walker, and Steve Hinder of Magna and Neighbourhood Network. Nor was the quality of her voice, which landed her in the Top 10 on Saturday afternoon.

"I have been playing this song for a long time and I thought it was a very good time to share it," she said.

"You are my surprise of the day," said Cross. "You came up, you sang great, and sang a song I actually have never heard and it sounded like your song. Then I looked back [at the semifinals] and thought the last time you sang, it was a song I had never heard and you're through until here. You're onto something. You know who you are and I really enjoyed it."

Ms. Walker agreed, adding: "You could probably sing anything. I just love your voice, the power and subtlety."

Before securing a place in the Top 10, Jayne was keeping her fingers crossed she would make it over the next hurdle. Between now and the finals on Friday, September 14 at Magna's annual Wild, Wild West Hoedown, the Top 10 will undergo an intensive mentorship week with industry professionals who will be on hand to help the musicians hone their craft.

Being able to experience that would be "unreal," said Jayne, but now reality is setting in.

Joining her in the Top 10 are:

John Anderson (Barrie)
Sarah Campbell Mills (Burlington)
Mike Chianelli (Sutton West)
Patrick James Clark (Mulmur)
Abby J. Hall (Burlington)
Jamie Lynn Reid (Keswick)
Katie Sacco (Toronto)
Lauren (Renee) Vandervecht (Sharon)
Cameron Von Criegern (Peterborough)

Aurora was well represented in the Top 20 by Collette Zorzella, who wowed the crowd with her rendition of Dolly Parton's 'Jolene', as well as former Aurora Teen Idol Melissa Suma, who also borrowed from the Dolly's songbook with 'I Will Always Love You,' which won praise from the judges.

'That was a really powerful performance and I keep finding myself looking [at the sheet] to make sure you are only 15 because it has been a treat sitting in this seat for three years and watching you grow,' said Mr. Hinder of Melissa. 'Watching your vocal progression has been great and you sure make Aurora proud.'

The judges, however, encouraged the 15-year-old to embrace her youth and try out more contemporary work.

'Sometime I want to hear you sing a song a 15-year-old would sing,' said Mr. Cross. 'You're always singing songs that are about yesterday, that older entertainers should be singing. Sometime I would like to see the fun girl in Melissa who has her whole life ahead of her because you are a great singer and a great talent.'