

# Disney's **American Idol Experience**: Reality TV gets realer



The American Idol Experience studio, above, is a full-scale replica of the actual "American Idol" set in Hollywood, Calif.

By Jerry Soverinsky

It is, to the letter, a perfect reproduction. The set design, atmosphere and format, they're all true to the TV show. From the moment you arrive, the experience and excitement, they're a seamless tie-in with the real-life process.

It's the American Idol Experience at Disney's Hollywood Studios, the newest attraction at the Orlando theme park.

The American Idol Experience is a hands-on, first-person engagement, the only Disney World attraction, apart from the odd vintage skeeball machine, that tempts consumers with prizes. Winners of the American Idol Experience competitions receive Dream Tickets that propel them to the head of the line at future "American Idol" regional auditions. The prizes are awarded daily.

And judging from the turnout during recent visits, droves of park visitors are lining up for the opportunity to perform. (Similarly, the TV show has become so popular that regional auditions attract thousands more applicants than they're capable of screening.)

## Making the cut

American Idol Experience hopefuls arrive at Disney's Hollywood Studios early in the morning to register for an audition. They perform a cappella for two AIE producers, who select the most talented to perform on stage later that day before a studio audience.

The selected performers are schooled by vocal coaches and primed by makeup artists and hairstylists. Then it's show time. Depending on the season and park traffic, AIE plays three to five preliminary shows daily before up to 1,000 park visitors each show.

The Orlando studio is a full-scale replica of its Hollywood twin, a glammed-up, bright-lights extravaganza that makes contestants and studio members feel as if

they're a part of a real TV show.

There's a smarmy, Ryan Seacrest-like host, judges (each a caricature of TV talent appraisers Randy Jackson, Paula Abdul and Simon Cowell) and videos of real "American Idol" winners offering encouragement to contestants.

A stand-up comedian warms up the audience, detailing the American Idol Experience process and encouraging support for contestants. The lights dim, the host comes on-stage and the show begins; from that point on, the American Idol Experience hews to the format of an "American Idol" episode. The Simon-like judge is even routinely booed for his unsympathetic analyses.

After the last contestant performs, the host turns things over to the studio audience, who vote for their favorite singer using armrest keypads. The winners from each day's preliminary shows return for an evening grand finale, an extended version of the earlier shows played before a (usually) packed studio. The daily Grand Finale champion is awarded the "American Idol" Dream Ticket.

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## An instant hit

According to Mark Sadowski, Disney public relations manager, the auditions have been packed, and the studio

audience nearly always fills the auditorium to capacity. And occasional cross-promotion on the TV show continues to create a buzz.

The American Idol Experience is included with admission to Disney's Hollywood Studios Theme Park. There is no additional charge for participants or audience members. Visit [www.disneytravelagents.com](http://www.disneytravelagents.com).