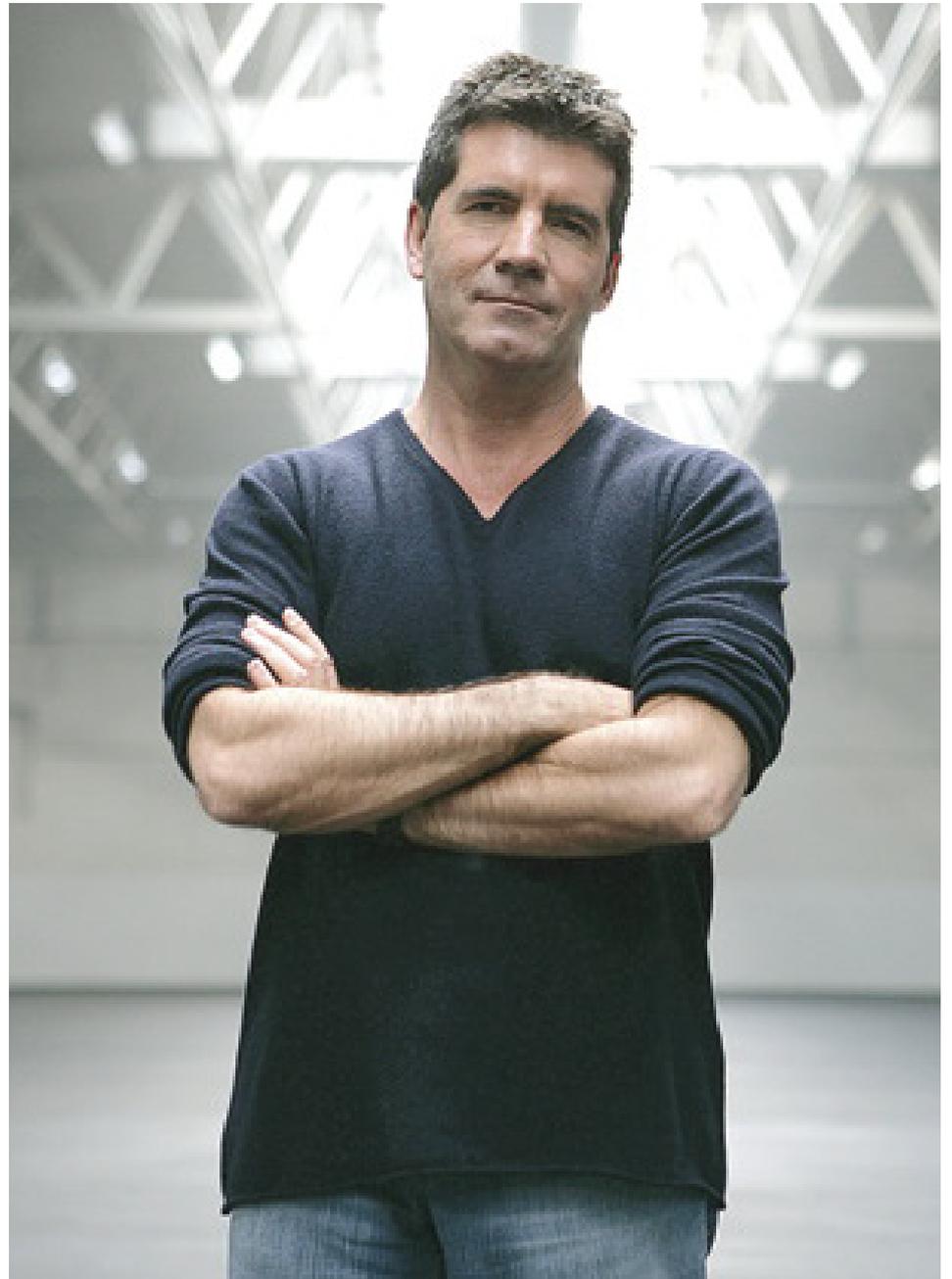




'Sharon [Osbourne, then a judge] wanted me to stage a walk-out one week to generate a huge tabloid story and get me votes'

BEN MILLS (3RD, 2006)



The winners don't take it all

We all know what happens to the X Factor winners.

But it's the runners-up who have the most interesting tales about Simon Cowell's star-making machine.

Some even make a lucrative career out of losing.

By Caroline Scott. Photographs: Steve Schofield

T share a train to Wembley with a gaggle of girls with startling orange complexions, a family of four wearing sparkly stetsons and a man whose general demeanor suggests care in the community. “The X Factor,” he says, “means everything to me.” Fifteen million people tuned in to The X Factor final in December and by the time the live tour had rocked through 27 sold-out venues across the country, 350,000 people had watched this year’s chosen eight contestants fight to be heard over a backing track that constantly threatens to overwhelm. Inside the arena, the excitement is palpable. Mums and dads, teenagers and small children have come to celebrate their part in propelling their favourites out of their ordinary lives and onto the pages of the Daily Mirror. At the end of a warren of steamy tunnels, the winner, 20-year-old Alexandra Burke is nestled on a sofa in a dressing room strewn with clothes and half-eaten food; she is tiny, pretty and earnest, and with the sheen of new celebrity already upon her.

According to X Factor tradition, the also-rans take to the stage first. Daniel Evans (seventh) is not a natural mover. He has the gait of a man shimmying from his office chair to the water cooler, but the story of his wife who died in childbirth and his little motherless baby is on all our minds and it seems churlish to dwell on his lack of range when we know she wanted this for him so badly. Next up is Rachel Hylton (fifth), who at 26 has five children by five different fathers – the eldest born when she was 13, three of them in care – and a history of drug addiction. She says: “Thank-you so much for being part of my beginning. I promise I’ll fight to the end...” She goes on to hammer a couple of rock classics to death and we all sing along. What with the flashing bunny ears, the screaming and the pulsating, vocal-obliterating backing track, it’s like being part of a mass religious experience.

The winner leaves The X Factor with a much-hyped £1m contract with Simon Cowell’s record label, Syco Entertainment – part of Sony BMG – and a place with Modest! Management, run by Simon’s old mucker Richard Griffiths. This year, 16-year-old Eoghan Quigg (third) and the boyband JLS (second) have each signed to Sony subsidiaries. The others must make what they can, fast – gigs, interviews, public appearances – because as sure as night follows day, when the tour ends, the agents, management and publicists who have supported them thus far will part like the Red Sea. “They’ll realise very quickly,” says Andy Abraham (runner-up, 2005), “that the industry doesn’t want them.”

What the industry does want, for as long as it can get it, is its share of the booty. Once key management has released its grip, contestants must take their chances with the exotic dancers, psychics and tribute acts that form the clientele of a sliding-scale of smaller agents; in some cases, they are artistes with such a fragile grip on the slippery celebrity slope that their various distinctions are listed in parenthesis: Anthony Hutton (winner of Big Brother 6), Ben Ofoedu (singer with Phats & Small and fiancé to Vanessa Feltz). When I request interviews, e-mails shoot back and forth. “What’s the budget? Any indication of the fee?”

All the ex-X Factorees are keen to hear what the others have said. Nobody wants to say bad things about the X Factor beast in case it turns around and bites. Recent participants are gagged, signing one



Above: Rachel Hylton hits a high note on The X Factor in October

Right: the brothers Carl and Andy Pemberton, aka Journey South

Below: brother-and-sister act Sarah and Sean Smith, aka Same Difference



'Simon understood us and the fact that we'd tried so hard. It seemed to really affect him'
JOURNEY SOUTH (3RD, 2005)



PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT: STEVE SCHOFIELD FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. RIGHT: KEN ACKAY. THESE PAGES, TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT, REX. CENTRE: STEVE SCHOFIELD FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

contract binding them to Syco if they win and another forbidding them to make comments that may be considered unduly negative or critical of the company and, particularly, Simon Cowell. Nobody wants to appear decimated by the experience either, though some of them were. Of his sudden celebrity status, Tabby Callaghan (third, 2004) says: "For a few years afterwards, my perspective and senses were totally distorted by it. If you'd told me the table was an elephant I would have believed you. I lived in a bubble of delusion from which I only just recovered."

Steve Brookstein (2004) will forever be remembered as the winner who somehow lost. "I'm probably served up as a warning to everyone: 'You don't want to end up like Steve Brookstein...'" Brookstein gained the highest-ever number of viewer votes — 5.5m — but Simon later admitted that he thought "the wrong act had won". Runners-up G4, a quartet of good-looking boys straight out of Guildhall School of Music and Drama also signed with Sony that year and went on to release two platinum-selling albums. Their first reached No 1 on Mothers' Day, a pivotal point in the year for record sales; they completed five sellout tours and released a bestselling autobiography before splitting up in 2007. Brookstein, meanwhile, was dropped by Syco 12 weeks after his first album was released despite his single, a cover of the Phil Collins song Against All Odds, going straight to No 1. And it still rankles. "If you really want to crucify someone, give them a Phil Collins song..."

Fatally for him, post X Factor, Brookstein refused to play the game. He didn't like the clothes or the cheesy photo shoots and wanted artistic control over the material he recorded. "Simon kept saying 'I know what I'm doing', by which he meant: 'I know what sells.' But it sounded like karaoke to me. I was offered £12,500 to go away quietly and when I didn't take it, life got very difficult. My website came down, there was a lot of negative publicity..." He mentions finding tickets for a film premiere suddenly cancelled. "I was basically shunned by the industry. No serious management would touch me because they've all got connections with Simon."

Tabby Callaghan, 2004's token rocker, points out that The X Factor is a one-hour show comprising ten minutes of music. "I've played guitar from six years old; it was incredibly f***ing frustrating to be given an instrument with no strings and be asked to mime, but you have to go in with your eyes open." Callaghan has dusted himself off and is back in his box-room studio again, and planning to launch himself in America. "I learnt a shit-load about myself and about life. There's so much stigma if you've been on the show. I was broken down to zero by it. I had to build myself up from nothing. But I'm as tough as old boots. It'll take more than The X Factor to finish me."

When I ask how he manages, he says: "Hey, I've two helicopters out back and an Olympic pool... Everything's great." Brookstein just sounds bewildered. "I sing at restaurants and birthday parties, which keeps me ticking over, but I'm scared the minute I do a gig The Mirror will be there to take the piss, 'Steve Brookstein working the pubs again.'" Only Rowetta Satchell (fourth, 2004), the former Happy Mondays backing singer who admits being drunk "a lot of the time" while on The X Factor, seems unscathed. Fresh from GMTV, where she's been talking about a recent stint in rehab, she's worked constantly — "British Gas balls, Gay Pride parties" — and is ruthlessly pragmatic about ➤➤➤



Above: debut albums from three former X Factor contestants

the whole business. “I’ve been really lucky. I love Simon to this day, I really do. I wasn’t expecting miracles. It was a TV programme. Did anyone promise to look after us? Was it written in our contracts? I don’t think so.”



The theatre impresario Bill Kenwright spotted Niki Evans (fourth, 2007) on the show and cast her as Mrs Johnstone in *Blood Brothers* at the Phoenix Theatre. I love this girl from the moment I clap eyes on her. She’s cracking company. Conversation veers from the size of her voice (“I’ve blown the speakers here, twice”) to her “not-quite-freebie” post-X Factor liposuction. “I had my back done, my hips, the tops of my legs and because I’ve got a meaty minge, I had to have that done as well. I’m not even going to tell you about the pain...”

X Factor contestants are grouped according to age and sex. “They make the younger ones look younger and hotter and the older ones older. I’d be very frigging surprised if a woman over 25 ever won.” But back stories (the crucial vote-stealing tussles with poverty, bereavement, brutal ex-husbands, drink but preferably not drugs) are as important, if not more so, than vocal skills, and Evans ticked all the boxes. She grew up on a council estate in Chelmsley Wood in Birmingham — “rough as it gets” — where she, her two brothers and a sister were in jelly shoes in November. Her devoted dad, a foundryman, who came home from work with his body scarred from the hot steel, died a few months before the X Factor auditions; she’d found an application form among his belongings. Never mind the belting voice, the show’s producers knew they had a story. Naturally, just before the semi-final, they took the chubby former dinner lady to her father’s grave and, deaf to her protestations, filmed her in her flowery apron while she wept.

Evans had been ‘discovered’ by Pete Waterman at 16. ‘He had a formula, it was working, so he kept doing it.’ So at least you made a lot of money then? “Oh God, no! Bloody hell, I came out of it owing thousands of pounds. It was a conveyor belt, just like *The X Factor*. I kept trying to tell Leon [Jackson, winner, 2007], ‘Yes it’s great you’ve got a £150,000 advance and they’re sending cars to Manchester to come and get you, but what you don’t realise, sweetheart, is that you’re paying for them.’ She is a bottomless pit of truly horrendous showbiz stories, mostly centering on size. “Everyone is small, even the men! Have you seen Kylie? I thought she was somebody’s child.” She describes one manager asking her to stand behind a curtain and sing while a little blonde, blue-eyed girl, who looked right but couldn’t hold a note, mimed the words. “They’d say, ‘If you do this, it’ll be another step up for you.’”

They were paid £40-a-week subsistence when they were in the X Factor house that year and £250 per night on the tour; she earned around £10,000 in all, but can’t really talk about money because her contract forbids it. She’s more forthright on the subject of other contestants. “Most of them can’t sing live and that’s f***ing annoying. But you know where you are in the hierarchy. I was fourth and I stayed that way.” Working in London has meant the agony of leaving her husband and two boys back in Birmingham. “I cry every night, but I had to do it.” She’s never seen a



‘You know where you are in the hierarchy. I was fourth, and I stayed that way’

NIKI EVANS (4TH, 2007)

Above: Niki Evans in Soho, where she is pursuing a career in theatre

Top left: winner Leon Jackson’s debut single went to No 1 in 2007

musical in her life, let alone had an acting lesson. In fluent X Factor-ese, she told Bill Kenwright: “I met my husband at 16, married at 19, had children and took three jobs to support them. It was a loaf of bread or my dreams...” “You’ve got the part,” said Kenwright.

Andy Abraham (runner-up, 2005), remembers two kinds of X Factor auditionees: “People with good stories and people who were off their heads.” His wife, Denise, now his manager, remembers another kind, the ones who genuinely, mistakenly believed in their own talent. “One boy who, bless him, couldn’t sing, was obliterated by Simon’s comments. He spent the next hour pacing the floor like a caged animal.” Andy, a former bin man — “Well actually I wasn’t really a bin man, I just helped a mate out for a couple of months” — had been playing pubs and clubs for years. When Denise saw Steve Brookstein win, she thought “Andy could do that” and sent off the application form. Boot camp was a hotel in King’s Cross where he roomed with Chico Slimani, whom he describes as “the most sincere guy I’ve ever met”. Chico, the Moroccan goatherd whose first single, *It’s Chico Time*, knocked Madonna off the No 1 slot, came fifth that year and has not stopped working since. He is currently touring Butlins holiday parks. “You’ve got to understand that the only reason your first single gets to No 1 is the X Factor brand,” says Andy. “And when the costs are all added up, you don’t make any money out of it. Once the show moves on, it’s an uphill struggle.” ➤➤➤

'You've got to understand that the only reason your first single gets to No 1 is the X Factor brand'

ANDY ABRAHAM (2ND, 2005)

Andy signed a five-album deal with Syco. His first album was released on Mothers' Day and stayed at No 2 for two weeks. Christmas shopping in Enfield after the final, he was mobbed to the point that Denise had to call security. "People love the idea that working-class people like us could get that far." His second album, "another load of covers — I did it because I was told to..." was released for Christmas 2006. He filled the Albert Hall, was given a party by Sony and then promptly dropped — by both record company and management. Leona Lewis (winner, 2006) was already on her way. Andy is still earning a living gigging and is "trying to build my own brand".

Ben Mills (third, 2006), whose fansite offers window wobblers and T-shirts bearing the slogan *Fama Semper Vivat* (may his fame last for ever), was also signed briefly to Syco. He describes recording several songs he "absolutely hated" and digs out a royalty statement. "Every time someone buys my album, I get 0.2p. The manager got 20% of my advance and 20% of every gig I did, and the record company took another 12½%. Still, all I've ever wanted is to make a living out of music, and I'm doing that, but there was a point when I certainly felt I'd lost control of my life."

Ben remembers his time in the X Factor house as "completely surreal. Sharon [Osbourne, then a judge] wanted me to stage a walk-out one week to generate a huge tabloid story and get me votes. When I refused, she didn't speak to me again. Simon always pre-warned me if he was going to spice up the show a bit by slagging me off, but I've

Andy Abraham eschews West End glamour for a local pub in Hertfordshire

never forgiven Ray [Quinn, second, 2006, now playing Danny in *Grease* in the West End] for crying during the semi. I offered him fifty quid not to, but he'd made up his mind. You could almost hear the old ladies at home reaching for their phones..."

Journey South (brothers Andy and Carl Pemberton, third, 2005), who spent their twenties hacking round northern clubs in a white van, were also dropped before releasing a second album — even though their first sold has now sold 550,000 copies. "We had a fantastic relationship with Simon," says Andy. "He understood us and the fact that we'd tried so hard for years and years. It seemed to really affect him." Momentarily, possibly. Until his head was turned by Leona, whose first album has sold 4½m copies and who is relieved to be in the US where nobody mentions the show. Back in Middlesbrough, Journey South self-released an album of their own songs and Andy's girlfriend now manages them. "I'll never say anything bad about X Factor," he says. "We make four or five times what I was making as an electrician. If it wasn't for that show me and Carl would still be playing gigs in horrible pubs with our mum and dad sat there."

Same Difference (third, 2007) the fist-bitingly awful brother-and-sister pop duo whom Simon described as "possibly the most irritating people I've ever met" — but stood by them anyway — are on their way down. "It just wasn't working for them," their (now ex) publicist shrugs. Dumped by Syco, they're currently on tour with 2007 winner Leon Jackson, the boy from a council estate in West Lothian. The idea is that in these troubled times it makes sense to double up, but there's a feeling amongst other contestants that little Leon's modest talent, eclipsed from the beginning by Rhydian Roberts, has not been supported as well as it might have been. X Factor veterans knew what was coming next. In March, Leon, whom everyone agrees is "an absolutely lovely guy" was dumped too.

"I see these kids coming off The X Factor now and I want to go up to them and say, 'Keep your eyes open,' says Journey South's Andy. "Because you may not be looked after as well as you think. The first year is going to be all-singing and dancing, but without a shadow of a doubt, unless you keep fighting your corner it will all disappear."

Back at Wembley, it's the last date of the current tour and Alexandra Burke, who has squeezed into a tight, golden sheath dress, finally takes to the stage to sing Hallelujah. Stained-glass windows appear behind her and, as the arena rises to its feet, she is bathed in the holy light of 12,500 mobile phones. Does the public deserve more than this recycled, over-processed tosh? Probably. But then as any fool knows, The X Factor isn't really about the music, it's about stories and sales, and even after Simon and his mates have divvied up their wedge, it's possible some contestants will do very nicely. JLS, the boyband from south London, having thanked the audience, their mums and their nans for everything that has happened to them so far, are dressing before leaving for another public appearance. We run through the long tunnels around the stage, through the corridors of dressing rooms and outside, where Simon's bullet-proofed Rolls-Royce sits alongside people carriers with blacked-out windows and stretch limos waiting for their newly minted charges. The band has already left the building, but for now, the teenage girls who've joined the fan site, bought the sweatshirt and downloaded the single, still line their route, waving banners and screaming their names ■