



Why Harry Connick Jr. Couldn't Sit Idle During 'Idol'

The star couldn't stand hearing young singers mangle the Great American Songbook

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John Stark is the articles editor of Next Avenue. Follow John on Twitter [@jrstark](#).



When Harry met American Idol he wasn't amused
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Those of us who grew up in the 1950s and '60s got to constantly hear — on radio, TV and vinyl — the Great American Songbook sung by the likes of Bobby Darin, Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, Mel Tormé, Rosemary Clooney, Ella Fitzgerald, Doris Day, Sarah Vaughan. ... The list goes on. These were singers who belonged to our parents more than to us. Still, they set a high bar for crooners, even if we didn't fully appreciate it when we were kids. Besides having intonation, perfect pitch and

beautiful voices, these artists respected a song, its melody and lyrics.

They made singing sound easy, which it isn't.

My favorite singer as of this week is Harry Connick Jr., but not for his vocal talent. As a guest mentor on Wednesday's *American Idol*, he did something I'd never seen done on that show — and it was long overdue. He made it clear why, despite the impressive vocal abilities of the four finalists — Candice Glover, Angie Miller, Amber Holcomb and Kree Harrison — they probably will never be truly great singers in the mode of those who came before, like Dinah Washington, Peggy Lee, Vic Damone and Billy Eckstine. Again, the list goes on.

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Idol's theme on Wednesday was "Then and Now." Each contestant was asked in the first hour of the show to perform a current hit song. They chose newly released tunes by Pink, Bruno Mars, Rihanna and Carrie Underwood, who won *American Idol* in 2005. In the second half, they were asked to sing a classic from the Great American Songbook.

During the mentoring sessions, Connick would listen to the singers perform the songs they had chosen and advise them how to do it better. He was a kindly coach throughout the "Now" portion of the show, teasing, praising and hugging the contestants. But when it came to the "Then" segment, the joking stopped. His demeanor changed.

Songs of the past are an essential part of Connick's repertoire. He loves, respects and understands their exquisite craftsmanship. He knows how to make them sound "now" without losing what they were "then."

As Amber started to sing Rodgers & Hart's "My Funny Valentine," Connick stopped her. He asked her what the song is about. "What does it mean, 'Your looks are laughable?'" he asked her, or "'Is your figure less than Greek?'" Amber looked blank — she had no idea. She struggled for words. He told her to go do some research on the lyricist, Lorenz Hart, a physically diminutive, closeted homosexual who died of alcoholism at age 48. Before singing the song, Connick sternly told Amber, you need to understand what Hart was writing about.

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Kree also got stopped shortly after she launched into Harold Arlen's "Stormy Weather." She was

singing in a loose, bluesy manner, like she said she'd heard Etta James do the song. But for Kree to do those fancy runs, Connick said, were diluting the meaning of the lyrics. The woman in this song, he explained, is sad and depressed; she's lost her man. "You don't sound depressed," Connick observed. He wanted Kree to do it more like Lena Horne, who introduced the song in 1940. No frills needed.

Not one of the contestants took Connick's "Then" advice when they got on stage. Substance was thrown out the window for pyrotechnic vocal tricks. Angie sang Gershwin's "Someone to Watch Over Me," an ode to vulnerability, in full-power voice. She hardly came off as "a little lamb who's lost in the wood," as the lyric says. More like a John Deere tree cutter.

The judges loved Candice's version of Billie Holiday's "You've Changed," giving her a standing O. Not Connick, whose tip to "Keep it simple" went completely over her head. "One of the worst things that can happen in a relationship is when the other person starts to drift away from you," Connick told Candice. She needed to express that feeling. Her blaring version had no poignancy.

Connick squirmed in his front-row seat during the "Then" performances. I haven't seen such facial contortions since Linda Blair got anointed with holy water in *The Exorcist*.

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His breaking point came when Randy Jackson implied that Connick's advice had hindered Kree's vacuous rendition of "Stormy Weather," which none of the judges liked. He thought she should have sung it more like Etta James, as she had wanted to do. As it turned out, her rendition was neither Etta nor Lena, nor even Kree. It lacked any personality or feeling. You could see Connick about to pop his cork. That's when Keith Urban went into the audience, took Connick by the hand and brought him to the judge's table. Taking a seat, Connick proceeded to school a very defensive Jackson in the art of singing standards. The point Connick tried to make, which Jackson didn't want to hear, was that the show's contestants didn't know these classic songs well enough to take liberties with their melodies and lyrics. In doing so, they were murdering the music.

To me this made an even bigger point. Since its debut in 2002, *Idol* has always put value on over-the-top vocal performances. Subtlety and intimacy gets you the boot. If minimalists like Peggy Lee or Billie Holiday were to compete on *Idol* today the judges would eat them alive.

I was friends with Hal Schaefer, a famous vocal coach who died last October. He's credited with teaching Marilyn Monroe to sing. I once asked him what he thought of Barbra Streisand. "When she was a teenager she came to my apartment on Riverside Drive to see if I would give her vocal lessons," said Schaefer, who was then living in New York. "I was blown away not just by her voice, but her knowledge. She knew who every composer and lyricist was. She knew the entire American songbook. I told her after she sang for me that I would not work with her. She didn't need me. But I told her she had to promise me never to take vocal lessons from anyone, because what she did was completely right. Once in a while that kind of talent comes along."

On a recent NPR interview Streisand talked about how, when interpreting a song, she never violates its melody or lyrics, even when putting her own distinct spin on it. That's why she's so great. And that's why Connick got so frustrated with the *Idol* contestants.

He listened to them, but they wouldn't listen to him.

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