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Disney opens American Idol Experience

Text size: [small](#) / [medium](#) / [large](#)

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LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. Visiting Walt Disney World and watching the hit television show "American Idol" are two of my favorite obsessions. So you can understand why I was euphoric when I heard the two were pairing up.

The American Idol Experience is the newest attraction at Disney World's Hollywood Studios, one of the resort's four theme parks. Based on the popular show of the same name, it gives park guests an authentic feel for the live television production.

Guests at Disney can begin their own road to fame by making an appointment to audition for The American Idol Experience - the line forms at the rear of the attraction. The audition process is open to park guests 14 and older.

In round one, hopeful contestants must sing a cappella. If that goes well, they continue to a second audition that is conducted under the watchful eye of Jeff Lindberg, casting producer for the attraction, or one of his team of casting directors. They are the ultimate decision makers as to who will become a contestant for The American Idol Experience.

Lindberg explained that the Disney casting directors are not only "looking for great performance ability but also great song choice and a great story to tell."

The small audition room in the backstage area of the attraction resembles an actual studio setup.

After contestants are chosen to perform in front of a live audience in the 1,000-seat indoor theater, they proceed to the Red Room, fashioned after the one seen on the television show. They choose their song from a preapproved list and then meet and train with a performance coach. Before heading to dress rehearsal, performers get the full Hollywood treatment from professional hair and makeup designers.

Then it's showtime.

The park has up to seven 25-minute preliminary shows each day with audience members voting for their favorite using a digital keypad on their chair armrest. The top vote-getter at each preliminary performance is invited back to the 45-minute grand finale show held later that night.

The top vote-getting singer in the grand finale receives a Dream Ticket, giving him or her the chance to schedule a front-of-the-line audition to a future regional audition for the "American Idol" television show. Dream Ticket recipients must meet "American Idol" program requirements such as age and residency.

What's so amazing about this attraction is the 3,000-square-foot stage, a duplicate of the set used on the seventh season of the television show. The Disney show is similar to the television production as well with video clips, contestant interviews and judging banter.

The three judges at the theme park, who are all industry professionals, are very much in sync with their famous television counterparts. One of the slight differences is the judges' table. On television, the judges sit in front of the stage. At Disney, they sit on the stage during the performance and the critique.

The night we attended the show, the Dream Ticket was given to Mark Ellis of Pensacola, Fla., who had everyone clapping to his rendition of "Superstition" by Stevie Wonder.