

Kara DioGuardi: Here Comes the New 'Idol' judge



What does it take to join Randy Jackson, Paula Abdul, and Simon Cowell as a judge on "American Idol"? For the songwriter taking her place on the panel this season, the keys to success are telling it like it is — and knowing "when to shut up"

By Jennifer Armstrong

Kara DioGuardi is ensconced in the black velvet cocoon of a small home-recording studio, laying down a demo track while warmed by the glow of spice-scented candles. She's crooning a song she co-wrote — an encapsulation of falling in love that involves shooting stars and dancing shadows — in a powerhouse pop voice that lies somewhere between Natasha Bedingfield and Sara Bareilles. Somewhere good, that is. "She kills it every time she sings," raves her writing partner, Jason Reeves. "He's one of the greatest melody writers I've ever worked with," DioGuardi returns.



Sweet, right? So sweet, in fact, that we're starting to worry for DioGuardi, a heretofore behind-the-scenes songwriter-producer who's about to take on the most-watched, most-dissected job in pop music: When *American Idol* returns to Fox on Jan. 13, she'll become a fourth judge to Randy, Paula, and Simon. It's a job that requires a distinct dearth of sweetness, and a certain amount of, for lack of a better term, Simon Cowell-ness. "Oh, I'm not gonna be this nice on the show," DioGuardi assures us.

In case we weren't convinced, she drops this rant when the subject of *Idol* auditions comes up: "A lot of times people will sing a big song that they don't have the voice for instead of bringing out the uniqueness in their tone," she says. "Another thing is, don't cheese me out. It's not a wedding band. And emote. Make me feel like you mean it. Don't just sing the way the song was written. That was Mariah's interpretation. Now what are *you* gonna do?" Okay, we're worried again — but this time for the contestants.



That's exactly what *Idol's* producers are counting on. Heading into season 8, they're hoping viewers will be as rapt with how DioGuardi shakes up *Idol's* "dawg"/"beautiful"/"dreadful" judging dynamic as they are with which singer takes the big prize. And though the show has constantly worked to stay fresh — allowing contestants to play instruments last year, for instance — DioGuardi's new energy comes at a critical time, after last season's ratings took an 8 percent dip from 29.8 million viewers to 27.3 million. *Idol* actually tried adding a fourth judge once before in season 2, with New York radio personality Angie Martinez, but she quit just a few days in, saying it was "uncomfortable for me to tell someone else to give up on their dream." Producers expect no such trouble with DioGuardi, who regularly evaluates new talent as a VP of A&R at Warner Bros. and co-owner of music production and publishing house ArtHouse Entertainment. She's the kind of 38-year-old who can rock a black leather jacket with leggings and write hits for everyone from Pink to Ashlee Simpson to the Jonas Brothers. "She's very strong-willed, and we needed that with Simon around," explains exec producer Ken Warwick. "I don't want anybody too benign on that panel. Kara tells it as it is."

The feisty spirit that landed DioGuardi on America's most-judged panel of judges goes back to her Italian upbringing in Scarsdale, N.Y. "My grandfather was a guy who came through Ellis Island and started a grocery store," she says. "So my father had incredible balls. He had this I'm-gonna-do-whatever-I-want-to-do-and-you-can't-stop-me thing that I got." That drive spurred her to college at Duke, where she started out in the opera program but didn't quite fit in with the classical crowd — so instead she went pre-law. "I always wanted to be a trial attorney," she says. "I love to argue."

After graduation in 1993, DioGuardi was living at home and fronting a garage band called Gramma Trips — "covering songs, not writing my own" — when a friend snagged her an interview for a job as the assistant to the editor in chief and publisher at *Billboard* magazine, where she ended up spending five years. While mastering the business side of the music industry during her workday, DioGuardi spent her downtime learning to craft songs, which she now describes as "the worst things I've ever heard in my life. My first song was called 'Show Me Love,' about a girl who wants the guy to open up his heart. It was like, Honey, he's just not that into you." Eventually, though, she pulled together a respectable demo that she gave to none other than a pre-*Idol* Paula Abdul in 1998 by simply walking up to the pop star in New York and dropping the name of a *Billboard* connection.

"I asked her if she was any good," Abdul recalls. "She said, 'Yeah, I'm really good.' And I believed her." Luckily, the demo delivered on DioGuardi's chutzpah: Abdul liked DioGuardi's work so much that she flew her out to stay at her Los Angeles home for six weeks of intensive collaboration. The results: a song called "Spinning Around" that became Kylie Minogue's 2000 comeback single — and a genial relationship with Abdul that both women hope will help squelch those intra-panel rivalry rumors. "We were the best roommates," says Abdul. Adds DioGuardi, "We didn't have one argument. We lived very well together — it was the strangest thing."

The following year DioGuardi scored with Enrique Iglesias' multiplatinum album *Escape*, on which she co-wrote seven songs. The title track in particular revealed her knack for irresistible pop hooks, which led to a stunning roll on those charts published by her former employer. With 168 of her songs appearing on multiplatinum albums, you can thank (or curse) her for Simpson's "Pieces of Me," Celine Dion's "Taking Chances," Gwen Stefani's "Rich Girl," Hilary Duff's "Come Clean," Christina Aguilera's "Ain't No Other Man," and Pink's "Sober." She's also penned cuts for several products of the *Idol* machine, including Kelly Clarkson, David Archuleta, David Cook, and Katherine McPhee.

Industry insiders attribute DioGuardi's prolific portfolio to her no-nonsense work ethic. "If you're in a jam and need something done, she's a great closer," says Jimmy Iovine, whose Interscope Records includes DioGuardi collaborators the Pussycat Dolls and will.i.am. "I'd use her for anything." Music mogul Tommy Mottola — who paired her with Dion, Marc Anthony, and Jessica Simpson, among others — agrees: "She's one of the best I've ever encountered. In pop music, where things can be sort of crap and mundane, she finds new twists lyrically, and her melodies are extraordinary." Another plus, as far as her *Idol* credentials go: She's got vocal chops. "The truth is she can sing like there's no tomorrow," Warwick says. "So whereas in the past when the kid would say, 'Aw, you couldn't sing any better' and none of the judges even tried, she does, and she can."



But the question remains: Can she hold her own as a TV star? Sure, she appeared on ABC's 2006 *Idol* rip-off *The One*, but it was canceled after only four episodes. And crashing Randy, Paula, and Simon's party is something else altogether. "They're like brothers and sisters at this point," she says, having already wrapped the brutal preliminary auditions as well as the Hollywood round. "And I'm like the long-lost cousin who they're not sure they wanted to see, but now they're like, Okay, you can stay for dinner." She has what sounds like Randy Jackson's unequivocal — and ever-so-Randyesque — endorsement: "I think people will look at me first and say, If the dawg is feeling her, then I should feel her too."

For the record, she'll sit between Randy and Paula. "They tried [putting] me between her and Simon," explains DioGuardi, "but they kept trying to communicate and I didn't want to be in the middle of that." And, yes, both she and Abdul will be keeping their seats; producers insist DioGuardi isn't being groomed as her former mentor's replacement. "That's just cheeky journalistic hype," Warwick says. Adds DioGuardi, "Paula and I have a good vibe. I have respect for Paula. I'm not of the thinking that women should drag each other down." Abdul says she isn't worrying about her job security ("I was never told that she was coming in to take my place") — and, in fact, only feels more confident with DioGuardi around: "When I heard she was going to be the fourth judge, I thought, ha ha, hee hee, Simon has no idea I have an ally now."

That's a relief to DioGuardi, who says her biggest challenge will be "being aware of when to shut up." But could her penchant for telling it like it is end up rankling a nation of rabid *Idol* fans? In between singing the praises of a new love on her demo and waxing rhapsodic about writing partner Reeves, DioGuardi muses repeatedly, and without prompting, about whether America will think she's just too darn mean. "I know who I am, but what are people going to perceive me as?" she wonders. "They may think my intensity and my boldness are bitchy. I hope not. I don't think I'm bitchy. Do you think I'm bitchy?" No, but fortunately for *Idol*, we think she has a lot of potential.

Additional reporting by Adam B. Vary