

**'KILLER' KARA  
NEW 'IDOL' JUDGE TOUGHER THAN PAULA, 'NICER THAN SIMON'**



By MICHAEL STARR

KARA DioGuardi, the new "American Idol" judge, is going through a bit of a behind-the-scenes audition herself.

On TV's biggest stage, no less.

After sitting through "Idol" auditions in New York, Jacksonville, Louisville and San Francisco, she's finding her footing, she says.

And she says her style continues to evolve as she critiques prospective contestants.

"I just know I'm getting my groove, loosening up and forgetting about the big elephant in the room," she says about the enormity of "Idol" and of keeping pace with Paula Abdul, Randy Jackson and Simon Cowell.

"The first few [audition] cities I was like, 'Oh my God, the camera is on me' - it was a little strange," she says. "But I'm starting to let my true self come out. You forget about the camera and start being you."

"And that's been fun for me."

So how does the "real" DioGuardi fit into the pre-existing "Idol" judge troika - nice (Abdul), middle-of-the-road (Jackson) or snarky (Cowell)?

"I'm one of those people who's pretty honest and kind of say what I feel," she says. "I think you're going to see me be nice at times, but I'm a little more hard on the contestants."

"That's kind of my motto: 'All right, I'm gonna give you another chance, but you're skating on thin ice.'

"If there's something there, I'll give someone a shot - and then kill 'em during Hollywood week."

DioGuardi, who was raised in New Rochelle, is a music business insider, but she's virtually unknown to viewers.

Her biggest TV role, before now, was as a judge on ABC's "The One: Making a Music Star," an "Idol" copycat axed after two weeks in 2006.

"American Idol" is "really taking a gamble because there's something to be said for [hiring] people who've been in front of the camera for long periods of time," says DioGuardi, 37.

"I'm not famous and I'm not known - although I've thought of that [fame] route - it's kind of a weird thing.

"Who calls you up and says, 'You're gonna be the next judge on 'American Idol?'"

DioGuardi is close to Abdul. "We spent weeks together at the very beginning of my career and I practically moved into her house," she says.

But Cowell, now one of the show's executive producers, and Jackson were little more than TV personalities to her before she was hired .

The daughter of former Westchester Rep. Joseph DioGuardi has her own music company, Arthouse Entertainment, which nurtures fellow writers, artists and producers. She works with Phoenix House and has a boyfriend she's been dating for a little over a year.

"I have a place in Maine and basically he was the general contractor on the house next door to mine," she says.

"I met him on the eve of the 10-year anniversary of my mother's death.

"It was kind of like my mom said, 'You've been dating a lot of dogs lately - I'm going to send you a present.' "