

# The Hardest (and Best) One Yet

2009 PA STATE SENIOR IDOL contestants take the competition's talent level to new highs.



Martin Bentley Krebs



Patricia Rowell



Tom Boyd



Diane Seeger



Frank Fedele



Harriet Turner-Davis



Barry Llewellyn



Michele Hendricks Weiss

By MEGAN JOYCE

It was the fourth consecutive year that the PA STATE SENIOR IDOL finals competition had packed the Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre in Lancaster with eager audience members, but the 2009 crowd might have been the rowdiest—and for good reason.

Culled from the five audition sessions held in April, the 15 semi-finalists' consistently first-rate vocal performances made challenging work for the night's judges: Adrian "Buddy" King of The Magnificent Men, Valerie Pritchett from abc27, Janelle Stelson from WGAL, and RJ Harris from WHP580.

The scene looked like a miniature version of the massive crowds seen on TV's *American Idol*, complete with standing ovations, raucous cheering, and even homemade signs and posters held aloft in support of the evening's contestants.

But all the good-natured audience participation probably did little to soothe the nerves of the semi-finalists who each had to take their turn in front of the crowd—not to mention the judges—and show just why they deserved the title of 2009 PA STATE SENIOR IDOL.

From the original 15 participants, the judges had to whittle the competition down to three finalists by rating each one on ability, appearance/eye contact, and stage presentation. All four agreed that judging the 2009 competition was the toughest year yet.

"This is *hard*," Harris insisted. "This is the hardest one ever, I have to tell you, from our perspective."

First up was York native Martin Bentley Krebs singing "The Best is Yet to Come" by Frank Sinatra. King praised Krebs for his pitch and Stelson asked, "Who needs Tommy Dorsey when you have dimples like that?"

Patricia Rowell of West Grove followed with "Feelin' Good" by Michael Bublé. Rowell had conquered vocal damage to return to fine singing form. "I don't know what your voice sounded like before the damage ... but I can't imagine that it was better than that voice," said Stelson.

The third performer was Tom Boyd of Drexel Hill, who both sang and played acoustic guitar on what King called a "very soulful, very tender" rendition of "You'll Never Walk Alone" from the musical *Carousel*.

Diane Seeger of Philadelphia shimmied her way around the stage while belting out "All That Jazz" from *Chicago*, and the audience was delighted with her playfulness. "The word *coquette* came to mind when you were up there shimmying around," Stelson said. "You had great range and even better moves."

Frank Fedele of Williamsport had no problem hitting the final power note of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" by The Platters, which impressed King. "I knew the ending so I didn't put your ability score down until the very end, but you know how to sing," he said.

Next was Harriet Turner-Davis, a school bus driver from Harrisburg who sang "What a Difference a Day Makes," a jazzy classic. "I've played that song hundreds of times on the oldies radio, and it never sounded finer," commented Harris. "Honestly, you're right there with the original by Diana Washington."

Barry Llewellyn of Reading showed up onstage in a pinstriped suit, skinny tie, and tipped fedora hat to sing "Mack the Knife" by Bobby Darin. "Are you sure they carded you? Are you sure you're 50?" laughed Pritchett.

Manheim resident Michele Hendricks Weiss brought a distinctive female voice to the Ray Charles standard "Georgia," and RJ Harris was impressed. "I don't think I've ever heard a woman sing that song before," he said. "It's always a guy, so I didn't know what to expect, but you were great."

George Pellegrino of West Chester energized the crowd by inviting them onstage to jitterbug while he sang "Morse Code of Love" by The Capris. "You walk out and not only do you own the falsetto, which practically nobody else can do, but the crowd just totally digs you and it seems really mutual," Stelson said. "It feels good to be caught in the middle."

# PA STATE SENIOR IDOL

Next up, Wendy Meixell from Northampton earned the unofficial title of "SENIOR IDOL rocker" for her performance of "Alone" by Heart. "We've got a rocker," Pritchett proclaimed. "It was really fun and I really enjoyed listening to you, and as Buddy said, you really put yourself into it. That's what makes it so enjoyable to watch."

Dover's Jim Eberly wowed the appreciative audience as he sailed across the stage, sometimes onto his knees, while presenting "That's Life" by Frank Sinatra. "I just love to sing [and] the opportunity to show people that at any age you can have a ball," he said. "Any activity that you really love, if you get involved with it, you *stay young*."

Donna Mark of Etters' rendition of "Superstar" by The Carpenters had more than one judge praising her "smooth" vocals, which Pritchett also called "crisp" and "clear." Mark had some advice for others with similar aspirations. "Just get up there and do it," she said. "You only have one life, so that's why I'm here tonight because I thought this would be fun and different, and it has been."

Jack Wolfe of Mechanicsburg followed with his own acoustic-guitar-and-vocal arrangement of George Gershwin's "Summertime," which the judges enjoyed. "I keep watching the regular *American Idol* and I keep being very critical and thinking, 'Geez, I wonder how hard it is,'" Wolfe said. "But it really is!"

Peggy Keller's performance of "They Can't Take That Away from Me," also by Gershwin, earned her compliments from King on her voice's "very nice, musical quality." Stelson noted that Keller's "smile is even more sparkly than [her] dress."

Last to take the stage was Barry Ciabattoni from Exeter Township, who wrapped up the first part of the show on a unique note by throwing himself into "Betrayed" from *The Producers*. "Are you sure we're in Lancaster County and not New York?" joked Pritchett. "I felt like I was on Broadway."

After a brief intermission, the four judges' scores were tallied and Diane Seeger, Donna Mark, and Michele Hendricks Weiss were named the night's three finalists.

For their second selections, Hendricks Weiss sang "Since I Fell for You," a jazz standard composed by Buddy Johnson; Mark performed "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," made famous by Judy Garland; and Seeger sang "American Medley," a combination of patriotic classics.

The judges as well as the audience then voted for their favorite, and Donna Mark was named the 2009 PA STATE SENIOR IDOL. Colorful balloons cascaded down around Mark and her fellow contestants, and the barrage of hugs, congratulations, and photographs ensued.

As the winner, Mark will receive a limousine trip for two to New York City for dinner and a Broadway show.

"Everybody was so good and I was blown away by the talent," Mark said after her win. "And it was like, 'Why me? How come I got picked?' I just felt so blessed."

For more on the 2009 PA STATE SENIOR IDOL finals competition, visit [www.SeniorIdolPA.com](http://www.SeniorIdolPA.com).



Donna Mark  
2009 PA STATE SENIOR IDOL  
Winner



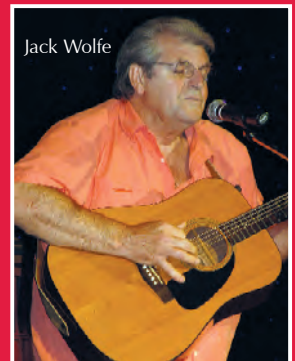
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