

## Karaoke Singers Live the Dream at the Illinois State Fair

Near the 500-pound Butter Cow, 16 contestants performed songs by Whitney Houston, Billy Joel, Jamey Johnson and Shania Twain in a bid to win \$500 and appear on the Grandstand Stage.



Credit...By Adam Jason Cohen

**By George Gurley** Aug. 24, 2022 Updated Aug. 27, 2022 NYT

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — Tamika Swisher, a 49-year-old nursing home administrator in Kankakee, Ill., was one of 16 people who qualified for the Illinois State Fair Karaoke Contest. But on the day before the event, she wasn't sure she wanted to go. A few weeks earlier, her off-again on-again boyfriend of 11 years, Michael Faber, had died at 54 after a series of heart attacks. Ms. Swisher sang "Amazing Grace" at his memorial service. She then kept herself busy with her job, her children and grandchildren, and volunteer work — but she was still grieving her loss.

"You know how they say you have good days?" Ms. Swisher said at the fairgrounds on the day of the karaoke competition. "I don't have good days. I have good moments. And yesterday was really emotional for me. I was like, 'I don't think I'm going to be able to go.' If I wasn't carpooling with Andrew, I probably wouldn't have gone."

She was referring to Andrew David Johnston, a 30-year-old singer whom she started running into at karaoke lounges more than a decade ago. They got to know each other better while working at the same call center for a few years. "I used to

tell him we were karaoke friends until we worked together,” Ms. Swisher said. “Now I’m his friend.”



A view of the Illinois State Fair, located on 366 acres in Springfield.

On the morning of Aug. 14, he picked her up in his Toyota S.U.V., and they rode southwest more than 150 miles across the broad, flat countryside to the site of the annual Illinois State Fair in Springfield.

The people taking part in the Illinois State Fair Karaoke Contest had qualified by taking first or second place in similar competitions at county fairs earlier in the summer. The winner of that afternoon’s karaoke battle — the state finals, in effect — would receive \$500 and have the chance to sing two songs as an opening act for the country duo Brooks & Dunn on the Grandstand Stage that same night.

Both Ms. Swisher and Mr. Johnston had a shot at winning. Known in Kankakee as “Tamika Karaoke” and “the Karaoke Diva,” she had won multiple regional

competitions, and it was her fourth time in the state finals. Mr. Johnston had been singing in public for years as a [licensed street performer](#) in Chicago. Five years ago, after [a video](#) of one of his performances in a subway station went viral, he appeared on “Steve,” a daytime talk show hosted by the comedian Steve Harvey, and on “America’s Got Talent.”



A scene from fairgrounds.



The contestant Andrew David Johnston.

Ms. Swisher described herself as his No. 1 fan. “Truthfully, I can see him as an international multiplatinum recording star,” she said.

After reaching their destination, Ms. Swisher and Mr. Johnston walked across the 366-acre fairgrounds — past Happy Hollow, where giant animatronic dinosaurs roamed, and the Dairy Building, the site of the Butter Cow, a 500-pound sculpture made of unsalted butter.

They did not stop to sample the corn dogs, funnel cakes, fried Oreos or the turkey legs worthy of medieval royalty available from dozens of food vendors. Mr. Johnston said he was watching what he ate, and Ms. Swisher said she was “too nervous” to eat before the competition.

They reached the open-air Reisch Pavilion. Its roof did not provide much relief from the mid-August heat for the roughly 200 people who would fill the seats, many of them friends and family of the participants.



The competitors included last year’s champion, Tyson Schulte, a supervisor at Bimbo Bakeries USA, the parent company of Entenmann’s and Sara Lee. He was a cheerful, talkative 28-year-old with a beard and handlebar mustache. At one point, he lifted his shirt to show off a body-hair innovation: He had shaved and sculpted

the hair on his chest and abdomen so that it looked like a large fur necktie. “It’s more or less for humor,” he said. He had posted [a video](#) of his man-scaping session on TikTok, and it has nearly 10 million views.

Another formidable contender was Juston Vancleve. Wearing sunglasses, a cap and a black T-shirt, he said he was making his sixth appearance in the state finals. Before taking the stage, he seemed confident about his chances, saying, “Last night I went over to some friends, and we had a little get-together and cooked on the grill. We called it a ‘pre-winning party.’ That’s the way you got to think about it.” A top music producer had once invited Mr. Vancleve to give Nashville a shot, he said, but it didn’t work out. “I said, ‘Let me talk to my wife,’” he recalled. For various reasons, he said, she thought it was a bad idea and did not want him to do it. They ended up getting divorced about nine years later, he added, “and my kids were like, ‘Dad, you should have just took it.’”

Now he runs a detailing business (cars, motorcycles, trucks), and music is a hobby. Mr. Vancleve, 44, added that he still had hopes of going pro: “I might not ever get there, but every time I get the chance, I’m still trying. It only takes one person to hear you, one person to pass the video to the right person.”



Juston Vancleve, who said he once flirted with a Nashville record deal, performed songs by Jamey Johnson and Blake Shelton at the competition.

Another contestant was Michelle Kaesebier, a 37-year-old corrections officer at a women's prison near Springfield. She said she loved to sing so much that she did it all the time, even on the job. "Yesterday we took somebody two and half hours away from our facility, and I was singing along with the radio," she said. "I don't care who hears it. But we did have somebody in the back and my co-worker was riding with me. It doesn't bother me, because they're like, 'Oh, you can sing!'"

Also present was last year's runner-up, Tyler Robinson, 29, a resident of Cessna Park, a town of about 600 people. "The biggest thing we've got, I guess, is the bar and the Dairy Queen," he said. He added that he had studied theater and voice in college, worked for some years in radio, and now had a job with the Illinois public health department.

The competition comprised two rounds, with the 16 singers going in the same order both times. The audience was mostly white, and Mr. Johnston and Ms. Swisher were the only Black contestants. Dennis Reed, a proprietor of Hi-Tek Redneck Karaoke & DJ Service, served as the M.C. while overseeing the sound system and musical backings.

Mr. Johnston, who performs under the stage name Andrew David, was perhaps at a disadvantage, because he was chosen to go first. At a little after 1 p.m., he took the stage. "My name is Andrew David," he said to the crowd, "and this is one of my favorite country songs. It's called 'Colder Weather.' I hope you enjoy."

The song, a 2010 hit for the Zac Brown Band, is a ballad about a trucker unable to tear himself away from a life on the road. Mr. Johnston's voice soared at the climax, but the audience's reaction was muted. He got more applause the second time around, when he offered a dramatic rendition of "Desperado," by the Eagles. For both songs, he did not engage in theatrics, putting the emphasis on his pure, lilting tenor.

Tyson Schulte, the winner in 2021, went with a pair of up-tempo country rockers. First came "Chicks Dig It," a hit for Chris Cagle in 2003. Then he sang John Michael Montgomery's "Sold (the Grundy County Auction Incident)," in which the narrator finds the woman of his dreams at a livestock auction.

Image



The crowd at the Reisch Pavilion, the site of the karaoke finals, shortly before showtime.

Before the second song, Mr. Schulte thanked the organizers, the judges and the sound team: “Put your hands together — they’re the ones that make this possible!” As he sang, he roamed the stage, rolling his shoulders forward and rotating his arms in an attempt to rev up the distracted afternoon crowd. His voice was on pitch. The applause was firm.

Ms. Swisher followed him. “Hi, everybody!” she said. “I’m Tamika Swisher. I’m from Kankakee, like Andrew David. We car-pooled together. Go, Kankakee!” In Round 1, she sang “River,” a minor hit by the alternative rock artist Bishop Briggs, a song that seemed unfamiliar to the audience. For her second song, she was taking no chances: It was time for “I Will Always Love You,” the Dolly Parton heartbreaker that became one of the biggest hits of all time in the version by Whitney Houston.

Ms. Swisher started off quiet, perhaps tentative. By the first chorus, her voice had reached full power. During the instrumental interlude, she seemed on the verge of tears, and it looked for a moment as if she might not go on. “My boyfriend just passed,” she said into the microphone, as the recorded music continued beneath her voice. “If I cry, this is what it is. I’m sorry if I lose it.”

She regained her composure and powered through the rest. By the final chorus, she was singing with intensity, tears streaming down her face. Much of the crowd rose to their feet. The reaction gave Ms. Swisher the sense that she might have a real shot: “I hadn’t heard that response to any of the other contestants, so that was encouraging,” she said.

Image



Michelle Kaesebier, a karaoke enthusiast who works as a corrections officer at a women’s prison near Springfield, said she sometimes sings while on the job. Then came Mr. Vancleve. He swaggered across the stage in his cap and dark shades. His voice was deep and gruff as he threw himself into “That Lonesome



Song,” by the outlaw-country singer-songwriter Jamey Johnson. Before his second number, he seemed slightly miffed, because his song — Blake Shelton’s “Ol’ Red” — had already been done by another contestant, Abbey Gustaf.

“So, earlier, this young lady got up,” Mr. Vancleve said from the stage. “Her name was Abbey. Where’s she at? There she is, right there. And she gave you the *female* version of this song. And I’m going to give you the *male* version.” The audience seemed squarely on his side throughout his time onstage.

Ms. Kaesebier, the corrections officer, sang Reba McEntire’s “Why Haven’t I Heard From You” and Shania Twain’s “(If You’re Not in It for Love) I’m Outta Here.” “Any Shania Twain fans?” she said before her second song. “I’m gonna need y’all to help on this one!” Her cheerful, energetic performance got people clapping along to the beat.

Mr. Robinson, the runner-up in 2021, was the only one to look to Broadway for inspiration. As Mr. Vancleve stood watching, arms crossed, Mr. Robinson lent his operatic baritone to “The Impossible Dream,” a showstopper from the 1965 musical “Man of La Mancha.” On his second go-round, he was slightly more contemporary, singing Billy Joel’s “Piano Man.”

After more than two hours of karaoke, Mr. Reed, the M.C., called the 16 contestants to the stage. He shook their hands one by one. Then he went to the microphone and made the announcement everyone had been waiting for.



For her second song of the day, Tamika Swisher performed “I Will Always Love You.”

“Your grand champion this evening, who will be performing on the Grandstand Stage this evening? Get your hands together for — Tyson!”

Mr. Schulte, now a repeat winner, stepped forward amid the applause. He posed for photographs and sang an encore: Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Simple Man.”

Mr. Robinson, who had sung “The Impossible Dream,” took a seat not far from the stage. He had been named the runner-up for a second year running. He looked disappointed but said he wasn’t thinking about himself.

“That African American woman should have won, hands down,” he said, referring to Ms. Swisher. “Hands down. It should have been Tamika. Hands down.” Nearby, Ms. Swisher and Mr. Johnston were sitting side by side on a bench. They said they had both thought the other would win. “I was like, ‘You got this, baby boy,’” Ms. Swisher said.

She added that she was all right with how things had turned out. “It didn’t cost us anything,” Ms. Swisher said. “We had a great time.” After a pause, she added, “So all we have to do is find me a turkey leg and lemonade.”

After they went off toward the food stands, the winner sat down on the bench. “It’s almost surreal,” Mr. Schulte said. “I mean, there’s 16 contestants, and every single one of them got vocal talent. The judge walked up to me, and she goes, ‘I wanted to let you know what set you apart was your stage presence.’ And I said, ‘I appreciate that.’”

Image



The crowd at the Grandstand Stage awaits the performance of the winner.

Although he was scheduled to sing before thousands of people in a few hours as the opener for Brooks & Dunn, he seemed nonchalant. He said he had grown accustomed to public appearances as a teenager, when he regularly showed and judged livestock at events run by the Future Farmers of America.

“If there’s anything that I’ve got some pull in, it’s the livestock industry,” Mr. Schulte said. “I wish I had some pull in the singing industry, because, if I did, I’d probably try and pursue it a lot harder.”

His girlfriend, Sydney Boehm, 25, who works for a farm services company, said, “Tyson’s passionate about livestock, and he’s passionate about agriculture, and he’s passionate about his singing.” She added that she would support him if he decided to pursue music full-time, but noted they were remodeling their house in Beecher City. “I think, probably subconsciously, he doesn’t want to put that all on the back burner to go pursue a dream,” she said.

“I got bills to pay, man,” Mr. Schulte said.

Shortly after 7 p.m., about two hours before Brooks & Dunn would start their concert, Mr. Reed stood on the Grandstand Stage and introduced Mr. Schulte as the karaoke champion.



After his win, Tyson Schulte was an opening act for Brooks & Dunn. “I wish I had some pull in the singing industry,” he said, “because, if I did, I’d probably try and pursue it a lot harder.”

Mr. Schulte bounded onto the stage and took the microphone from its stand. He complimented his fellow contestants, most of whom were seated in the crowd.

Then he sang the songs that had brought him victory, “Chicks Dig It” and “Sold.” There were *whooooo*s from the crowd, with many people pressing close to the stage.

In the summer twilight, Ms. Swisher and Mr. Johnston walked across the fairgrounds to the parking lot. During the long drive back to Kankakee, she brought up something she had mentioned to Mr. Johnston many times — the fact that, in all the years they had spent together in the same karaoke rooms, they had never sung a duet.

“I’m a little offended,” she recalled telling him.

She plugged her phone into the Toyota’s stereo and flicked through a Spotify playlist of duets. He said no to “Shallow,” the Lady Gaga-Bradley Cooper ballad from “A Star Is Born,” saying it was played out. A song that piqued his interest was “Islands in the Stream,” a hit for Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton. Together they sang along with part of it, Ms. Swisher said, and it sounded good.

The duet that really took off, as they rode through the night, was “You’re the One That I Want,” the big one from “Grease” by Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta. Like many experienced karaoke singers, they knew all the words, and Ms. Swisher said she loved the vocal flourishes that Mr. Johnston added as he did the Travolta part.

***Correction: Aug. 26, 2022***

*An earlier version of this article misstated when Juston Vancleve and his wife were divorced. It was about nine years after he had met with a music producer, not three years.*