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All 4 'Voice' judges rejected Maddie Poppe. Then she won 'American Idol'

Poppe, who visits Salt Lake City on Oct. 14 with Ingrid Michaelson, is learning how to blaze her own trail



SALT LAKE CITY — Maddie Poppe sang her heart out auditioning for “The Voice,” and not a single judge turned for her. Not Adam Levine, Christina Aguilera, Blake Shelton or Pharrell Williams.

“I was totally rejected on national TV and it was really embarrassing,” the 21-year-old Poppe recently told the Deseret News. “It was so discouraging, and I thought, ‘Man, if these people don’t like me, then no one will.’”

“The Voice” gave her a “no,” and “American Idol” was in its farewell season that year. Poppe thought her shot at reality TV was over — and so did the lady who read her palm on a summer afternoon in Lake George, New York.

“She straight up looked me in the eyes after reading my palm and she said, ‘You will never be on another TV show again.’” But “American Idol” came back in 2018, and Poppe took a chance. Defying the palm reader’s prophecy, she auditioned for “Idol” judges Katy Perry, Luke Bryan and Lionel Richie, singing “Rainbow Connection” from “The Muppet Movie.”

And she won them over.

“You have that storytelling voice,” Richie told her with a smile.

“Storytelling is the best thing in the world. I have a career based off of it. We need you in this show.”

The indie-pop/folk singer went on to win season 16 of

“American Idol.” As a small-town girl from Iowa, Poppe said the victory showed her that fame and fortune is possible “no matter where you come from.”

It also showed her not to take palm readings so seriously.

“Now I know that she was a fraud,” Poppe said with a laugh.

These days, Poppe is on tour with Ingrid Michaelson — a tour that stops in Salt Lake City Monday night. It’s her first non-“American Idol” tour, but Poppe knows it’s the show that got her to this point.



A small-town girl

“American Idol” took her from a town of 1,500 to a national audience of more than [10 million](#). From Clarksville, Iowa — a town without a stoplight — to the bright Hollywood lights of Los Angeles.

In Clarksville, where the latest big news is the arrival of a Dollar General store, Poppe was one of 22 kids in her high school graduating class. Auditioning for “American Idol,” she was one of thousands. She had to drive four hours to Omaha, Nebraska, for her preliminary audition.

“I wouldn’t have wished to grow up anywhere else,” she said. “But it kind of shut me out from the rest of the world, because when I got outside of it, it was such a culture shock. But I think it was really cool for a town of 1,500 to see the neighbor girl on TV. ... It was super cool to know that those kinds of things are possible ... no matter if you go to a school with 50,000 kids or 22 kids. Anything’s possible.”

Poppe isn’t the first small-town girl to win “American Idol” — Carrie Underwood (season 4) had never been on an airplane before her “Idol” audition. Season 11 winner Phillip Phillips was a small-town Georgia boy working in his family’s pawn shop when he auditioned. Poppe had seen her scenario play out on TV a number of times, but even still, she never thought she’d win “American Idol.” She’d been rejected on “The Voice,” after all. So she went in to have fun.

“I was kind of afraid of winning. I wasn’t expecting it first off, and secondly, I was kind of afraid of what was to come, because you hear stories about these people winning and then getting tied down in all these contracts and not having any freedom,” Poppe said. “I was worried they were going to try and make me into this pop princess. But everyone’s given me so much freedom, and it’s not been anything like I thought.”

But for all of the freedom, it was hard being away from her family for months at a time. Poppe thought she'd be able to return to her hometown once the show was over. But "American Idol" was only the beginning. Following her victory, Poppe spent months doing media events and traveling on the "American Idol" tour. And being on the road with Michaelson will keep Poppe away from her parents and two sisters for another few months.

But that's a sacrifice Poppe is willing to make.

"This is what I've always wanted, and I know my family understands that, too," she said. "The good definitely outweighs the negative."

A fast-track to fame

The last year since winning "American Idol" has been a whirlwind for Poppe, with an "American Idol" tour, a debut album and a coast-to-coast tour with Michaelson. When she takes a step back from her busy schedule, it's hard for her to believe that just a year ago she was an unknown singer from Iowa who would perform on the sidewalk.

“‘American Idol’ was a great fast-track for me. I didn’t have to do the whole moving to L.A thing and struggling,” she said. “It was super great, but also my life changed overnight. I had to learn everything just by going through it. It wasn’t like I read a rule book or anything before I got thrown into it. I was just kind of thrown into it and had to learn from my mistakes.”

Poppe is learning a lot about the ins and outs of the music industry these days, including the importance of standing up for herself and not letting people change her image.



“Not that I’ve been in it too long, but there’s been a lot of things that I feel like I’ve had to speak up for,” she said. “Everyone has good intentions, but sometimes they don’t know what’s best for you like you know what’s best for you. Sometimes it’s hard to speak up for yourself, but I think it’s important. ... I think my career could’ve been very different.”

Poppe could’ve given up after being rejected on “The Voice.” She could’ve listened to the lady who read her palm and never auditioned for another show. But she didn’t.

“It was a lot of work, and I don’t know if I could go back and do it again,” she said. “I definitely would, but man, it was a lot to take in, and if I knew all that was ahead of me, it’d be a hard pill to swallow.

“But I want people to know that even if you hear a ‘no’ from ‘American Idol,’ it doesn’t mean that you’re not going to make it. It doesn’t mean that you’re not good enough,” she continued. “It’s important to not give up.”

If you go ...

What: Ingrid Michaelson’s “The Dramatic Tour” with Maddie Poppe

When: Oct. 14, 8 p.m.

Where: Union Event Center, 235 N. 500 West

How much: \$42

Web: theunioneventcenter.com