

'American Idol' Contestant Malaya Watson Says, "I'm Not Afraid to Be Myself"



By Liz Kim

At only 16 years old, Malaya Watson is the youngest contestant ever to compete on *American Idol*. She dominated the competition from early on, and viewers quickly forgot how young she was after listening to her powerhouse vocals. Her positive attitude, confidence, and jokes garnered a lot of fans, so it was no surprise that the singer's elimination caused controversy with many who stated that the judges use of the save last week was a joke and that Watson deserved it more than Sam Woolf. Some have also said she deserved to win and that the votes were miscounted, while others announced that they would no longer watch the show.

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Throughout it all, Watson remains upbeat. Although she didn't walk away the winner, she still gets a neat consolation prize. "It's weird being the youngest contestant, but it's cool because I can 'be in the books,'" she says. "It's pretty awesome." She admits, though, that being a teenager also has its downfalls. "At the same time, it was hard because I also have to focus on school. Managing time with school and my music and just trying to balance everything evenly and get everything done was tough."

The Southfield, Michigan native cites her father Ronald Watson and her two grandfathers as her musical influences. Her father is a professional guitar player, and the contestant shares, "If he didn't do music, I wouldn't have either because I wouldn't have been around it a lot. Growing up, I was always around music, and having him around always playing music really influenced me." Her childhood explains her love for old school R&B, blues, and soul music, and it makes sense that she can see her first album having a similar sound.

Watson may have an impressive set of pipes, but that's just the beginning. She can also play the tuba, the sousaphone, and the piano. Although she can't divulge all of her secrets, she hinted at a tuba performance during the *Idol* summer tour and even planned on playing it next week had she stayed.

The performer also stood out because of her trademark glasses and braces. Although the music industry is notorious for unrealistic beauty standards, she says the best advice she received on the show was to always focus on the music. "Harry told me that I should focus more on my craft rather than my stardom," she says of judge Harry Connick Jr. "At first, I thought the music business was just all about how you look, but it's honestly all about how you sound."

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With school and music, there's hardly any time to worry about boys and dating, but Watson still knows exactly what she wants. "He has to play football; he has to be taller than me (in heels); and he can't be stupid," she reveals. "He has to have a nice side and be loyal and honest, and he must be busy because my schedule is busy. He also has to understand what I'm going through – no whiners!"

Although she's still young, the singer has a good head on her shoulders. Her advice to teens wanting to audition for *American Idol* and pursue a career in music is to "focus on school but to follow what your heart wants you to do. If I didn't audition for *Idol*, then I wouldn't be here. If you really want to do something, do it while you still have the chance. There will come a time when you want to do something but don't do it, and you'll regret it later."

You can catch Watson on the American Idol tour this summer. In the meantime, keep up with her on www.facebook.com/IdolMalayaWatson