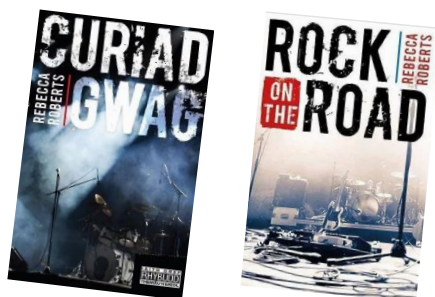


# Sing School

A short story accompanying 'Curiad Gwag' and 'Rock on the Road' by Rebecca Roberts

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\* A follow-up to the books - contains spoilers \*



'Why did you do it?' I get asked that question a lot.

Knowing what we know now about what goes on behind the scenes of \* *insert name of any reality TV talent show* \*, it's easy to be cynical and assume that I knew what would be expected of me as a participant.

But Search for a Pop Princess came before X-Factor and Pop Idol; before internet gossip forums and before Saturday night television decided the Christmas #1.

The show aired just after the turn of the millennium. I'd only just turned 18, aged out of Care, and dropped out of higher education. (It was a busy time for me.) I was working three cleaning jobs to make rent. Jobs which didn't require qualifications, and had the advantage that I worked alone, with only the radio for company. For years I was content to waltz around with a giant broom and sing as I scrubbed toilets.

My friend Ffion was on work experience at Theatre Clwyd in Mold. She was the one who presented me with the flyer:

*Searching for females 18 – 25 who want careers as professional singers. Must be size 4 – 12, personable and attractive, have a strong singing voice and be comfortable performing without backing tracks and in front of the camera.*

'You should totally do it!' she squealed. Yes, I know that the advert has more red flags than a Chinese parade (the clothing size specification alone should have been warning enough); but as I had nothing planned for the Saturday of the audition, I thought 'yeah, why not?'

You'll notice that the poster did not specify that the auditions were for a TV show. At this stage, no mention was made of either princesses or pop music. I imagined it would be an audition for cruise ships, so I accordingly prepared a few show tunes, including 'I Dreamed a Dream' from Les Mis, which I'd sung at my year 11 leavers' concert and reduced the entire teaching staff to tears. I also selected a few poppier rock tunes by Alanis Morissette and No Doubt, to give some idea of my usual genre and range. Truth be told, I was more worried about the size requirement, as I was a size 14. Several days of dehydration and depriving myself of carbs were needed to allow

me to squeeze in to Ffion's size 12 jeans (Don't try this at home, kids! Seriously. Thanks to the rise of the ultra-low rise jeans, we all had fucked up relationships with food).

I arrived at Theatre Clwyd on the day of the audition, with Ffion in tow, to find myself in an auditorium entirely filled with young women like myself. At this point, I realised that I should probably have phoned ahead and asked what I was auditioning for, as most of them looked like models, and I, frankly, don't. I almost walked back out of the theatre, but Ffion insisted, 'You might as well give it a try, now you're here.'

I needn't have worried about performing on a stage in front of hundreds of my peers, as the auditorium itself was nothing more than a giant holding pen. We were all given a numbered ticket, and every so often a door would open and a member of the production team would call out a string of numbers, and those holding the tickets would go out via a fire door at the foot of the stage.

Ffion, to her credit, waited with me all day. At 6pm a man came onto the stage and announced that the judges had auditioned everyone they could. A cry of disappointment went up from the fifty or so remaining in the theatre, but he quickly assured us that we could still audition – tomorrow, at the Pavilion Theatre in Rhyl – as long as we got there early.

Easier said than done when you don't drive and the journey involves a bus, train and a walk. Apparently some girls had been queueing around the block since 5am. However, I was only able to get there for 9am. Another ten minutes later and I would have missed the cut-off point. It was incredible to me that such a vague advert had generated such huge queues of hopeful wannabes. The rumour was that this was 'something completely new for TV' and everybody wanted to be a part of it. Their excitement was infectious. Lots of Mexican waves and chanting, despite another day of waiting in dressing rooms and corridors. Occasionally the cameras would pan shots of the queues, and a blonde woman would appear, thrust a mic under a competitor's nose and ask a few questions.

Eventually, leaving Ffion behind, I was taken to the 'green room' – a magnolia dressing room filled with other hopefuls. Here, I could see them entering and leaving the judges' chamber. Some came out smiling, most looked glum and some were in tears.

At last, it was my turn. I walked into the room and saw the set-up we're now all so familiar with: the branded backdrop, the judges' table and the camera crew covering all angles. That was the first time I saw the words 'Search for a Pop Princess' and realised that my all black, pentagram-bedecked witchy regalia was probably a mistake. One of the judges visibly smirked as I walked in. (I won't say which one. Details will need to be scarce as I'm pretty sure I could be sued for libel.)

The judges, quite rightly, questioned whether I should be auditioning for the show. Perhaps I should have taken the hint and left then. However, as I'd waited nearly fifteen hours to sing, I was damn well going to sing out of sheer stubbornness. I didn't want them thinking that I doubted my vocal abilities.

'Okay,' said the lead judge, with a barely repressed sigh. 'Let's hear you.' They heard me. Everyone in the green room and surrounding waiting rooms heard me too. I had zero need of a microphone.

'Well, you can certainly sing,' he said, wiping away a few rogue tears as I concluded 'I Dreamed a Dream'. 'However, this isn't 'Search for the next Elaine Paige'. Do you have any pop

songs you could perform for us, something a little less intense?’ I hit them with some Alanis, and was met with approving nods. I was through to the next round.

I later discovered that I’d been fast-tracked to the quarter finals on the strength of my performance. Other competitors had to audition again; but I was one of 10 contestants sent straight through to Sing School – a month-long residential bootcamp which promised to transform us from ‘dreamer to diva’. There would be a further elimination process during the semi-finals, and the winner would be decided following a series of televised stage performances recorded over another few weeks, to be broadcast on Saturday nights.

I had to be available for the initial month, and then until I either won or lost the show. I would be effectively unemployable for two months due to the filming schedule.

‘You’re on a short-term let and your job requires zero qualifications. Quit!’ was Ffion’s suggestion. ‘This could get you a recording contract, or at least get your foot in the door. You’ve wanted to be a professional singer for as long as I’ve known you, Soph – this is your big chance! You were FAST-TRACKED! Are you going to let a minimum wage job stop you from LIVING YOUR DREAM?’

However, I still didn’t know how I was going to feed myself in the period between leaving the show and finding a new job. I wasn’t willing to leave myself homeless, not even for a shot at the Big Time. I phoned a member of the production team to explain that I was flattered to have been chosen, but couldn’t work to their schedule.

‘Can’t your family help?’ asked the researcher. Family, what family? Auntie Mel, my foster mother, was the closest thing I had to family – but she’d been lying in Hawarden cemetery for years. I had literally no one to lend me a hundred quid when times were tough.

I regret the moment of self-pity that led to me telling the researcher my background. She ‘spoke to someone higher up’ and came back quickly to tell me that the production company were willing to pay me a small stipend that would just about cover my rent. At the time, I was delighted – but looking back, that was the moment ruined me.

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Six weeks and much crash-dieting later and I travelled to Essex to ‘Sing School’. The production crew had transformed a popular wedding venue into a ‘pop star bootcamp’, complete with a gymnasium, classrooms and dormitory.

It reminded me a bit of a boarding school. We all slept in the ballroom, in cubicles made of plywood, with flat-packed wardrobes and camp beds. 30 of us were crammed in like battery hens.

There were cameras in every room apart from the bedroom and bathrooms. We had to wear radio mics for most of the day. Knowing that your every move and every utterance was being tracked made you very self-conscious. I walked around with my chin in the air, a dancer’s poise and my stomach sucked in. When I smiled I tried to coax my dimples; but I avoided laughing in case I made that involuntary pig snorting noise. Not that there was much to laugh at.

A veteran of the Care system, I knew how cope in unfamiliar environments; how to blend in with the wallpaper so that I would be left alone. Eat everything, but don’t ask for second helpings. Keep your things tidy, but don’t volunteer to help with chores. Speak only when

spoken to. Hide anything you want to keep. Read books. Toys will be fought over, but the books will be all yours.

Except, this time there were no books. No magazines, no internet, no TV, no mobile phones or contact with the outside world beyond a short weekly phone call. We were required to hand over all electronic devices, which were locked in boxes. There was a murmur of dissent at this point – I think that was the first time we had an inkling of what sort of environment the production team were trying to create. No hobbies. No relaxation. No communication with our loved ones.

Even prisoners get visiting day and TV.

There was discontent, but we handed over our possessions. Well, most of us did. I yielded my CD player and Mp3 player; but the moment someone in the crew turned their back on me, I swiped my Mp3 player and concealed it in my sleeve. Growing up, I'd availed myself of many a five-finger-discount. My criminal record was the reason I was stuck working low-paid jobs, and I'd tried to put those days behind me. I mention this only because I pulled off several similar sleights of hand. I hid the devices inside my pillow case, and every night I'd pull the duvet over my head, plug my earphones in and turn the volume down to two.

In those days, Mp3 players had much smaller memories and as such I had room for only two albums' worth of music. Most of the songs I chose were by Band Substance, who were like a sort of aural comfort blanket. White noise, but make it funky blues rock.

This was a habit I'd acquired whilst living in children's homes, which are, by and large, neither quiet nor relaxing places. Ironically, drifting off to sleep to the noise of a go go drummer and three electric guitars was easier than sleeping in a house full of kids. No matter how unfamiliar, unsettling or stressful my latest placement was, once I plugged in my earphones and snuggled beneath the duvet, I was home.

I think I coped with the transition to communal living better than most of the other competitors, apart from a very middle class girl called Tonya, who'd been to boarding school. I knew what to expect – the loss of privacy, the constant noise made by 30 young women crammed into a too-small space, the need to be both pleasant and guarded – it caused friction and upset, just as intended. There were loud, indignant arguments almost daily. Little things festered and became magnified due to proximity. Nobody could walk away from a tense situation or escape the cameras. Tempers frayed to the point of tears, which usually had to be shed in public as the bulimic girls had locked themselves in the bathroom, again.

That's not me making light of eating disorders. It alarmed me how many girls on the show suffered from anorexia or bulimia – and what alarmed me more was how normalised it had become. Fashion trends and the 'side bar of shame' made us ultra-conscious of our bodies. Even I wasn't immune to the constant pressure to be thin above all else. It made me sad how we turned a collectively deaf ear to the retching noise coming from the bathroom, or accepted that someone never ate 'because of nerves/stress/appetite'. The production crew hired a chef to feed us one nutritionally balanced meal a day; but we were responsible for making our own breakfast and lunch – and there were some girls who never entered the kitchen unless it was to make themselves a black coffee to accompany a morning cigarette.

Even with so many sparrow appetites, the catered 'nutritionally balanced, calorie-controlled meals' provided by the caterer barely fed all of us. There may, in theory, have been 1000 calories per person, but some people always took more than their share. If there was one

chicken thigh each, some selfish bitch inevitably took two, meaning that the last people in the dinner queue would settle down to a plate of couscous and salad.

I noticed one of the elder singers, Jazzmine (yes, that's how she spelled her name), seemed to take a perverse pleasure in pushing into the queue in front of Mariah, a shy Irish girl, and taking food right from under her nose simply because she could, smirking in a 'snooze you lose' way. She seemed to view vegetarian alternatives as mere side dishes, and had zero qualms about taking two entrees.

The third time this happened, I saw tears fill Mariah's eyes. Jazzmine had pushed her way to the front of the queue and taken the last portion of veggie lasagne, just as Mariah's hand reached for the plate offered by the server. Jazzmine wasn't a vegetarian, and Mariah was. I felt myself turn into Ripley ('Get away from her, you bitch!') and my own stomach roared in protest, 'we need CARBS!'. Quickly, I got up from my table on the pretext of filling my water glass, and by turning around clumsily I managed to 'accidentally' knock Jazzmine and 'accidentally' spill the water all over her. She put down her plate of food to grab a handful of paper napkins, telling me angrily,

'Watch your bloody thunder thighs!' Of course, I apologised profusely and looked around for another stack of napkins, deftly snatching up her plate of food, turned and handed it to Mariah, who looked at me wide-eyed before dashing to the nearest table. I made a great show of trying to dab Jazzmine's skintight jeans dry and mopping up the water at her feet, apologising all the while. I was back at my own table before Jazzmine realised that the plate of lasagne had vanished; and the only people who knew were the server, who winked at me, and Mariah, who was too busy cramming the food into her mouth to say anything.

Of course, the sensible thing to do would have been to complain to the production crew that we weren't being fed enough, or that a fridge full of green stuff didn't constitute a balanced diet. But it was easier to turn on each other, as they intended. Hunger made for good TV.

In this tense atmosphere, driven mad by ambition, hunger and hormones, we were expected to undergo 'bootcamp' training – a series of vocal lessons where we were taught (and criticized) as a group, and thus we learned each other's weaknesses and insecurities. We were also expected to do some dancing classes, as pop princesses were inevitably dancers. I struggled a little with this, but I tried to view it more as aerobic exercise than a dance recital. I'd not exercised since giving up PE lessons at school, and although I'm not a natural dancer, I did enjoy learning to move with the music and thinking about the link between movement and sound.

Despite my best efforts to fly under the radar, I became the vocal coach's favourite pet, and this made me a rival for many of the girls. I was rarely given any critique, and of course the others were jealous because I didn't struggle in the way some of them did.

Singing has always come so naturally to me. I can hear a note, copy it and be nearly pitch-perfect. I imagine how a lyric has to sound when I sing it, and my vocal cords comply. I'm incredibly fortunate to have a natural ability, I know that. I've tried to pick up a guitar or bass or drumsticks many times and copy the other members of Konquest, but my fingers just won't do what they're supposed to. Whereas Daf says that he doesn't really think about the riff he's playing – his fingers just know how to move, and he's been that way since he was a teenager. So I fully appreciate that I have a natural skill most people don't have, and I try not to brag or appear boastful, because I know that in my case, being a good singer is more down to innate ability than

training or hard work. Nonetheless, some of the other contestants were envious and didn't try to hide it.

I should have enjoyed a chance to show my skills and excel at something, for once. Yet despite positive feedback, I didn't enjoy Sing School at all. The songs I was required to sing were not ones I would have chosen myself. I wasn't even allowed a few Avril Lavigne pop punk earworms. Never mind, I told myself. These are just rehearsals. If you progress in the competition they'll let you pick your own songs. (They didn't.)

The quarter-finals were brutal. After a fortnight of bootcamp we were each given the same song to learn, with just 24 hours' notice. The next day we were ushered into the drawing room and brought face-to-face with the judges (whom we'd not seen since audition day), and the TV cameras. Sing! They told us, and one by one we got to our feet, went to stand in front of the fireplace and sang, with no backing track and all the other contestants watching us. Looking around, I could see some of the girls losing confidence and wavering in the face of stronger performers. I could see some being thrown off by the stylistic choices of their predecessors. I did my usual trick of disassociating by playing 'The Devil Went Down to Georgia' very, VERY loudly in my head, so that I barely listened to the others. (It works with any hard rock or metal song – Disturbed, Slayer, Slipknot). Mentally, I was in another place until my name was called. When I stepped in front of the fireplace I was calm and sure of how my song was meant to sound, completely oblivious to the musical hierarchy that was being built around me. I would either be good enough or I wouldn't – all I could do was sing my very best. No sense in fretting about the competition, as I couldn't control them.

We received no feedback from the judges. They barely spoke to us. But we could see them scribbling notes, and after the last performance their scores were calculated and each girl was awarded an average rating out of 10. The performers with the lowest scores were going home immediately. Two of us were sent home that day, and the routine was repeated four more times: learn, sing, win/lose, repeat. We lost ten of the original thirty.

We thought that the final twenty would all go through to the live final rounds, but just as we were about to breathe a collective sigh of relief we were told that we were heading to a studio outside London for yet another 'elimination round'.

After a few hours on a coach we were ushered into a featureless square building and presented with a rail of clothes, a table full of make-up and told we had just 15 minutes to 'glam up' for 'the performance of a lifetime'. The clothing only went up to a size 10; so I brushed my hair, reapplied my eyeliner and declared myself ready. I may have looked out of place next to the others, resplendent in sequins and evening gowns and platform shoes – but I was less stressed and less self-conscious than most of them. (Did I forget to mention that nobody provided a full-length mirror?)

After a manic 15 minutes we were left sitting in the green room for another two hours, until the audience was ready for us. A mock theatre had been created and filled with an audience comprising screaming teens and 'a panel of industry experts'.

We were told that we could choose any of the songs we'd sung thus far – with a backing track this time, such luxury! – however, we only had 3 minutes to 'wow the panel – and the audience of millions who would be watching at home'. Not the easiest task, as most songs have their crescendo in the final minutes.

I was selected to go first, and sauntered out on stage in my baggiest of baggy jeans and oversized sweatshirt. I heard a few jeers from the audience, but ignored them. I belted out my favourite song and the three minutes went by in a flash. Before I knew it, a technician was fading out the backing track and the director at the side of the stage was miming for me to bow and exit. I, however, was in the middle of a sentence and decided to finish it, even without the backing track; deliberately drawing out the final note to show off my vocal range and show them that I wouldn't be flustered in the event of a technical mishap.

Twenty auditions later and we were provided with written feedback from the panel and teen audience members. Of course, the cameras were there to capture our joyous or indignant reactions – and the tears and self-doubt too.

I was surprised at how positive the response from the teen audience was – lots of comments about how it was great that I was so relaxed, confident, great voice. The adults were not so positive. One comment simply said, 'too fat'. This was after months of a strictly-enforced calorie controlled diet. Had she seen me at the start of the competition she would probably have wondered why Jabba the Hut had been allowed on stage.

I understand now that the aim of this little exercise was to weaken our confidence and make us more malleable. It was a shitty thing to do – especially as while some of the girls were still sobbing from the feedback of being called 'karaoke standard' and 'dressed like a stripper' and 'as charismatic as a wet flannel' we were separated into two groups of ten, and one group was told: 'Thanks for everything, but you're going home.' The female pop-star judge appeared to tell the remaining ten of us, 'Congratulations, you're in the final!' The director made us re-shoot our reaction shot until we seemed suitably ecstatic.

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Back to Sing School to prepare for the Saturday night finals. This preparation consisted of several day-long workshops to 'develop our persona, brand and narrative': vision boards, talks about our ambitions and aspirations, our fears and setbacks (all captured on camera, of course), lots of motivational speeches from the visiting judges about how we could all benefit greatly from this opportunity to use their insight and experience into the industry... They were really trying to ramp up the tension.

It was at this point that the researchers' questions about growing up in Care went from being a repetitive irritation to a major annoyance. Previously I'd dodged these questions by answering, 'I've not really thought about it' and 'It's never really felt relevant to me'. Now, evasion was impossible.

Researcher: Will you have any family cheering you on in the finals?

Me: No.

Researcher: No family or friends at all?

Me: No. I've explained this. I grew up in Care. I don't have any family.

Researcher: That must have been hard?

Me: It was different to most people's experiences, not necessarily worse.

Researcher: Do you wish you had family cheering you on?

Me: It wouldn't make a difference to my performance. When I'm singing I always try my best.

Researcher: What do you think your mum and dad would say, if they could see you now?

Me: I don't know. I don't know them at all. They might not even be alive.

Researcher: Do you think about your family often?

Me: Not when I'm trying to prepare for the competition. Can I go now? I've got dance class.

Repeat every. single. fucking. interview. How I didn't lose my shit with the researchers, I'll never know.

At least it wasn't just me. Tanya, middle-class as smashed avocado and a career in publishing, was questioned over and over again about her 'advantages' and 'privileges'. Leila, cast as the competition's other 'diamond in the rough', lost her temper when asked for the fifth time about 'growing up on the estate' and snapped,

'I'm not Jenny from the Block. My parents have paid off their mortgage and I went to university y' know.'

We all knew that the 'narratives' and 'personas' they were pushing onto us were stereotypes, but we were powerless to do more than reply in the negative, especially as some of the girls positively embraced the roles assigned to them.

To drive home the point that we were being transformed from our old selves into potential pop royalty, we were given makeovers – after being forced to wave at an imaginary audience and walk through a glittering curtain in a re-enactment of the old ITV favourite, *Stars in Their Eyes*. There weren't stars in my eyes however, but tears. I still flinch involuntarily at the word 'wax'. The style team seemed preoccupied with stripping off my hair and adding an excess of it in other places. Eyebrows, lip, legs, under arms were all waxed until I cried, and then they gave me false eyelashes so heavy I had a permanent squint, and a head full of hair extensions. Worse of all was that they bleached my hair, aiming for ice white but getting piss yellow. The extensions came down to the small of my back. I'm only a little taller than five foot. Unless my hair was tied back, I looked like Cousin It. Add to this silicone bra inserts, acrylic nails, fake tan and shaping underwear to shave further inches off my thighs... When I looked in the mirror I no longer recognised myself. There was no doubting that I looked prettier – but it was someone else's version of pretty. The message was clear: how I looked previously wasn't right, my old face and body simply weren't good enough.

That was bad enough, but what really broke me was the feeling that they were trying to erase me from the inside out. It sounds pretentious, I know, but I can't think of another way to describe it. I was no longer allowed to sing the songs I loved, nor to swear. All the things that kept me sane and brought me joy had been denied me as worthless and unworthy of a place in my life. Even my story wasn't good enough. It wasn't enough that I'd grown up in care and done my best to provide for myself. That wasn't *interesting* enough. Disadvantage wasn't enough. I had to be a downtrodden underdog.

The last thing they took was my name. I'd already lost my birth name, the one my mother or father must have given me. Now, the production crew took my Social Services-issued name, Sophie Shaw, and changed it to Sophee Summer. Light and playful, girlish and frivolous. The writing was on the wall: they wanted me to be someone else; and I very much did not want to be her.

The one part of my day that kept me sane, the one thing I looked forward to more than anything, was the few minutes before I fell asleep; curled tight into a ball under the duvet with



my earphones plugged in. The battery in my player was running low and of course I couldn't charge it without being seen, so I rationed songs carefully, listen mainly to Band Substance as they'd got me through many a dark night. I'd been a fan of Band Substance since my earliest teenage years, thanks to a step-dad who'd introduced them to me. (You've probably not heard of them – they're not terribly well-known outside the US.) In Sing School, their songs were little pockets of sanity; a reminder that out in the real world there were people who crowd-surfed through life, dirty, loud, drunk and bursting with laughter and f-bombs.

One night, I awoke with a shriek, as Jazzmine ripped off my duvet, yanking my earphones as she did so.

'You cheating bitch!' she yelled. 'You stole your music player back, just like you stole food!' Mariah had been sent home at that point, but given that she was terrified of Jazzmine I doubt she would have protested my innocence anyway.

'You're a bloody thief! They should kick you off for cheating! You deserve to go, but we know they won't get rid of you, because you have a sob story. It's taking the piss!'

At this point a chaperone arrived, and I'm glad she did as otherwise I may have done something that would definitely have resulted in me being sent home. I hated the way the other girls looked at me, as though I was shit on their shoe. I was made to hand over the music player, Jazzmine's ruffled feathers were smoothed and we were sent back to bed like naughty children.

The next morning, I received a stern lecture from a producer about keeping to the rules; but Jazzmine was also spoken to because what she'd done to me was deemed to be assault. I was relieved that I'd managed to remain calm and avoid a slanging match, because I thought that was the sort of 'narrative' the producers would love to highlight. However, when the show actually aired, no mention was made of any disagreement between Jazzmine and myself. I can only guess that it didn't look good that I was accused of stealing food, because it would imply that we were under-fed.

On the surface of it, I got off with my misdemeanour scot-free. However, Jazzmine's barb about the 'sob story' had found its target. I could no longer deny that my place in the show was largely down to my difficult upbringing. I received less criticism, marginally more praise; and I'd flouted the rules in ways that would have got others sent home. Once I saw the truth, I could no longer unsee it. I may have been fast-tracked onto the show because I could sing well, but there was no denying that I'd received special treatment since the production team found out I was an orphan. There was also no denying that they were now trying to make it my defining characteristic.

The remainder of my time in Sing School was pretty miserable. It was thankfully pretty brief. The other girls spoke to me only when absolutely necessary. I spent my free time in a rehearsal room, usually analysing my movement and dancing in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Initially I hated having to watch myself in the inescapable mirrors as I rehearsed – but I eventually realised that I could use them to my advantage by using them as a tool to improve my grace and posture.

I tried to look for the silver lining, honestly I did. This was it, I told myself: I was LIVING THE DREAM. Instead of mopping floors, I was being paid to do nothing other than sing and dance. I spent all day singing, and with every passing day I felt that I was edging ever closer to the recording contract and the single and album I'd dreamed of releasing most of my (admittedly short) adult life.

Except: singing was no longer the dream. Singing was no longer my favourite activity. School shows, competing in *eisteddfodau*, even karaoke, enabled me to feed off the audience's energy. But *Search for a Pop Princess* pre-dated *X-Factor* and *Pop Idol*. The budget wasn't there; so up until the final five we performed to just the three judges sitting in an empty comedy club in the suburbs.

I performed each week to a black, empty club and a row of bored faces. (I later saw that they edited in a smattering of applause from an imaginary audience the TV viewers never saw.) The dark eyes of the TV cameras captured each performance and therefore I had to pretend that I was loving every second of my time in the top ten. We were told time and time again – being a good singer wasn't enough. We had to sparkle with a 'star quality' – a radiance, a confidence, a lustre acquired by success we'd yet to experience. We tried our best; but by the time we reached the final I think many of us were exhausted, bored and hangry. The forced smiles faded as soon as the cameras were shut off; but if we ever complained we were told, 'This is how the industry works. Nobody wants to work with negative Nellies. Do you think Britney and Christina got to where they are by moaning?'

My fight or flight instinct had gone into overdrive. My stomach was constantly churning, I wasn't sleeping, and I almost had to be nudged on stage to face the cameras. My mind declared, 'Go time! Let's get this over with!', but my body was telling me, 'Not this shit again.'

Why didn't I just walk away? I've asked myself that question many times. I suppose it was largely down to age and experience, or lack thereof. Growing up, I'd had social workers, foster parents and teachers making most of my decisions for me. Education was statutory; as were court sentences. Jobs were mandatory if I wanted to avoid ending up homeless. I wasn't used to having the option of walking away from things I hated.

Some of the other girls had quit, saying the music industry wasn't for them. I honestly think that if I'd had a sympathetic buddy in the house to give me a cwtsh and a shoulder to cry on, I would have admitted sooner that I didn't see a future for myself in 'show business'. I didn't want to be Britney or Christina Mk2. A friend would have made it easier to ask myself the questions I needed to ask, and that may have enabled me to walk away.

Instead, the others regarded me as the frontrunner and barely concealed their jealousy. I'm self-aware enough to admit that I did nothing to encourage friendliness. I've always been standoffish, as a defence mechanism. I made things worse by believing the judges' hype. Another few weeks of misery and isolation and hunger and I could walk out of Sing School as a Pop Princess, with a recording contract. Short-term pain, long-term gain, right?

If you've managed to read this far you're probably hoping that I'll get my triumphal moment in the spotlight. You may be surprised that I've written a story about a singing competition which contains scarcely a mention of singing. It's all been a bit anti-climactic, hasn't it? Sorry to disappoint you, but things don't get much better.

I reached the final five and the live, televised finals with the audience vote. Jazzmine had gone home, and as a result the atmosphere in the house had thawed ever so slightly.

Then, early one morning I was awoken with the whispered instruction that I was going to meet the head honcho himself – the show's executive producer. Just me, and a chaperone from the production crew. I was so nervous that I spent most of the journey clutching a sick bag.

I wasn't surprised at what the Exec Producer told me:

‘This is a musical soap opera, a feel-good underdog story – and you are one of the lucky ones destined for the winner’s podium. The final five are going to be voted by the public, therefore your public persona is important.’ All I had to do was keep singing my best and ‘follow the narrative they had planned out for me’. They wanted emotion and vulnerability. Could I give it to them?

‘I want to win because I’m the best singer,’ I told him; made suddenly bold by the realisation that this was a game I either agreed to play for the rest of my career, or quit.

‘That’s not how it works, I’m afraid.’ I should have quit on the spot. Told him then and there that I wasn’t going to spend the rest of my career as a singing puppet. Instead, I just smiled.

Once I’d had time to process what I’d been told (confidentially), I made one vain attempt to seize control. When one of the judges visited the house and we were interviewed, she tried her best to get me to follow the ‘poor little orphan Sophie’ narrative, and it was my time to fight back as best I could.

‘I want to win because I’m the best singer,’ I declared – this time on camera. ‘I’m here to win on the strength of my singing, not because of my background.’

This display of insolent pride and my refusal to be cooperative and ‘play the game’ meant one thing: I could no longer be the best singer in the competition.

Two days before the final five performed, when our performances would be subject to a public vote, I was informed of ‘copyright issues’ and told that I would have to sing a different song to the one I was rehearsing. I now had just 48 hours to learn to sing like Mariah Carey. The producer couldn’t have picked a worse song for me – but that, of course, was the point.

I gave the song my very best effort, as ever; but within thirty seconds of raising the mic to my mouth, I knew that I was going home. Under-rehearsed, completely out of my comfort zone, aurally and physically and singing well out of my usual range – it was my worst performance since the school nativity play in year 2, when I’d refused to be a breakdancing donkey. The feedback of my performance and attitude were scathing. I wanted to scream out that this was all bullshit. None of it was real. None of us were real. But of course, I didn’t want to go down in history as the girl who had a hissy temper tantrum on live TV, so I bit my bottom lip until it bled.

Backstage, I ripped off the radio mic, locked myself in the toilets and snarled my rage. Fuck them for engineering my failure. Fuck them, fuck them, fuck this stupid game. Fuck singing. Fuck everyone, including myself for being stupid and naïve enough to believe that I really had a chance at becoming a performer, for trusting that the production crew had our best interests at heart.

I was out of the competition and back home within 24 hours. At least I still had a home to return to, thanks to the stipend. I hacked my hair extensions to a more manageable length with nail scissors and died it jet black. My hairdresser cursed me, and it took years to undo the damage. I gorged myself on all the foods I’d been denied for the past eight (or was it ten?) weeks, piling on weight so that I no longer resembled the permanently hungry size 10 wraith I’d been on screen. Despite the disguise, a few persistent journalists tracked me down. I pretended that I’d never heard of ‘Sophie Summer’ and deleted all my social media. Ffion was the only person I’d talk to about the show, and she was sworn to secrecy.

I continued to listen to music daily, although Band Substance were relegated to the backburner for a few years, until the flashbacks stopped. I gave up on my childish dreams of being a professional singer. If my experience on the TV show was anything like the real music industry,

I would rather cling to dreams of what might have been, rather than lose my love of music by burning out and becoming a bitter failure. Technically, I was already a failure – in the eyes of the general public, at least. But that had been pop music, and for a committed metal head like me, that didn't count. I still had rock music.

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Do I regret auditioning for the show? Surprisingly, no. Although the experience stalled my career for seven long years, it also helped to refine and consolidate my creative philosophy: punk, rough and ready, down and dirty, metal AF – that was who I was, not some manufactured, plastic princess. I would sing from the heart rather than to increase my bank balance. I would sing because it brought me joy, and for no other reason. It took years to find my way back to music; but when I finally met someone who shared my ethos, I – or rather, we – found success. That, however, is another story.

This particular story does have a happy ending, of sorts. One Saturday night a former drug addict and ex- A&R rep from a major record label turned on his TV and saw a reality talent show pitting young women against each other for a chance to release an album.

One of the singers caught his attention. When she wasn't grimacing into camera to try and convey her 'star quality', she was rigid with defensiveness, eyes dull and unseeing from sleepless nights. This young woman reminded him of his heroin-addicted ex-girlfriend. Had he not seen the girl trapped, almost broken in spirit, bleached an unflattering blonde and gaunt from hunger, he may never have seen the resemblance between her and his ex-girlfriend. He knew then that he was looking at the face of his lost child.

Sophie Bates of Konquest exists only because of Sophee Summer, failed Pop Princess.

*Bydd Sophie a Konquest yn dychwelyd yn 2025 gyda 'Diwedd y Gân', dilyniant Curiad Gwag. Ar gael o'ch siop lyfrau leol.*

*Sophie will return in 2025 with 'Diwedd y Gân', the sequel to Curiad Gwag. Available to buy from your local Welsh bookshop.*