

BRIAN CHEONG spoke to the finalists about their hard-earned venture into the final round.

Tough Competition

COMPETITION is tough for the finalists of the Astro Talent Quest (ATQ). The quality of the contestants for the nation's biggest Chinese singing contest is astoundingly good and the standards of judging are extremely strict.

It is clearly not easy to reach the finals, or for that matter, even the semi-finals. This year's ATQ received over 1,000 applicants, of whom 144 were chosen to compete in the heats. The list was then narrowed down to 24 contestants for the semi-finals, held in two parts recently. From the semi-finals, 10 were chosen to compete in the grand finals.

Contestants were tested on their vocal ability and stage performance. Those who have been following the heats and the semi-finals can attest to the fact that the judges, comprising musicians, radio deejays, producers and record executives, were rather stingy in awarding points.

However, the strict judging lends credibility. With Astro's support too, ATQ is probably the best-known and most high profile singing contest for Malaysian Chinese aged between 18 and 28.

Over the years, it is evident that the contest is able to unearth gems such as Christopher Lay (1998), Winnie Ho Yin Nie (2000) and Eric Lim (2001). Last year's winner, Nicholas Teo, gained so much popularity with his rendition of *Huang Huen* (Dusk), a previously unfamiliar song by Taiwanese Xiao Gang, that he will soon be releasing a much anticipated album.

The grand finals for ATQ 2003 will be held at Arena of Stars, Genting Highlands, on July 26. It will be broadcast live over Astro's Wah Lai Toi. Taiwanese R&B boy group Tension, Malaysian singer based in Taiwan Chang Chi Chen and Teo will appear as guest artistes.

Here is a take on this year's finalists:



Ang Yunn See

Ang Yunn See, 20, a college student from Muar, Johor, whose choice for the finals is *Music All Night* by Shino Lin.

"I'm studying music in college now and harbour a stage ambition. I joined ATQ because I wanted to gain more experience. I took part in ATQ last year too but only managed to get into the semi-finals. This year, I'm more relaxed and can concentrate on doing my best. My strength is my R&B inflected vocals but I also feel that I need to improve on it. I'm applying what I've learnt in school for this competition."

Lau Yee Yee, 19, a college student from Sibul, Sarawak will sing *Tuan Le Xien* (Broken String) by Mindy Quah.

"I'm very surprised and happy because it has exceeded my expectation. This contest is very challenging and to be able to get into the finals is an indescribably rewarding experience. I've wanted to have a special experience in life and this is one of the reasons I joined ATQ. It's my first time taking part and I never expected to come this far. I think my strength is my confidence. Friends have told me that my singing moved them. But I think there is still a lot to learn. I've been studying singing under a coach for a



Lau Yee Yee

year now and the coach said that joining this contest has helped to improve my vocals. So that's a big bonus!"

Teh Teong Hean, 27, a marketing executive from Penang will sing *Yee Pan* (Half) by Sky Wu.

"I was very confident at first but once the competition started, my confidence ebbed because all the contestants were so good! So I feel very lucky to be in the finals. I joined the contest simply because I love singing. This is my third attempt. In 1998, I only got third placing at state level. I took part again last year and managed to get into the semi-finals. But I came down with chicken pox, so I had to back out. It's good enough that I got into the finals this year; I have no illusion of winning. My biggest hope, however, is that I'll leave the audience with a good memory of my performance at the finals."

Lee Bee Kien, 21, a college student from Kuala Lumpur picks *So Crazy* by CoCo Lee.

"This is my first time taking part in a singing contest. I'm surprised to have come this far. I took part in ATQ because it is the biggest singing contest in Malaysia. You also learn so much from being in the contest. I find it so exciting to



Teh Teong Hean

perform in front of a live audience. I hope that at least I can improve on my points at the finals."

Koh Kian Ngee, 20, a college student from Malacca picks *Lui Sa* (Flowing Sand) by David Tao.

"I wanted confirmation that I can sing; that's why I joined ATQ. I had performed for two years at a cafe in Malacca during my high school days. ATQ is good because it gives aspiring singers a platform to show off their abilities. I've been taking lessons in classical music and my tutor has been giving me pointers on singing. I think my strength is in my expression of the lyrics. What needs improving? Probably my image, and I've been asking for some suggestions from my sister and mom."

Chew Ju Lee, 24, a college student from Taiping, Perak chooses *Xin Xin I'm Not A Star* by Shunza.

"I've joined ATQ twice before but this is the first time that I got this far. I can't read Chinese very well, but because I love to sing Chinese songs, I would memorise the sound or pinyinise the words so that I could sing it. My younger sister, who is better at Chinese, helped me a lot. I took part in ATQ because it is



Koh Kian Ngee



Lee Bee Kien



Chew Ju Lee

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