

# Lawsuit: American Idol set up high-pitched actress for ridicule, paid nothing, then profited off viral audition video

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With her high-pitched voice, carrot-shaped purse and sweet disposition, Normandy Vamos may have seemed like the perfect foil for American Idol's judges, who turned her into a laughingstock in last year's opening episode. But the Baltimore native is now pursuing a wage and hour class action against the juggernaut talent contest, which commences its 21st season later this month.

In a lawsuit filed Friday in Los Angeles Superior Court against the production companies behind the show and ABC, Vamos, 30, says Idol treated her like an employee and deprived her of compensation. The proposed class action was filed on behalf of Vamos and other unpaid or underpaid performers for Idol over the past four years.

"American Idol's producers seem to feel they can break labor laws and exploit ambitious young performers simply because they may be eager for a shot at becoming the next Jennifer Hudson or Carrie Underwood," says Vamos's attorney, [Chantal Payton](#), principal managing partner of Los Angeles-based [Payton Employment Law, PC](#). "Vamos and other performers who create content for American Idol have rights as employees, but the producers have chosen to ignore those rights. They treated them as so-called volunteers, when in reality they are employees who should be paid."

Producers invited Vamos and scores of other performers to stay at a Los Angeles hotel in the fall of 2021 to audition for the chance to advance to the "Hollywood Week" portion of the show. The contestants had already gone through earlier rounds of auditions or call-backs, and by the time they arrived at the hotel they should, under California law, have been compensated as employees because their performances had the potential to air on American Idol, according to the lawsuit. The producers expected contestants to remain at the hotel and be available, often for 15 hours a day, but they paid the contestants absolutely nothing, the suit says.

The lawsuit reveals the extent to which American Idol, one of the most successful shows in television history, subverts California labor laws to take advantage of starry-eyed performers, Payton says. It also reveals how far producers go in dictating how participants appear, orchestrating segments full of ridicule from celebrity judges Katy Perry, Lionel Richie and Luke Bryan that are a signature part of the series.

Before Vamos stepped in front of the judges, the producers told her to leave the hotel where all the performers were staying and drive home to retrieve a carrot-shaped purse she owns. They never reimbursed her for her time, mileage or the use of the purse.

The purse played a prominent role in the audition when Perry told Vamos to put it down. Vamos' disarming appearance in a buttoned-up shirt and bunny-shaped sandals, and the contrast between her high-pitched speaking voice and her lower-pitched singing, provided plenty of material for the judges to pick apart. When Vamos started singing, Kerry yelled an expletive and stormed away from the judges table. But Vamos said producers instructed her in how to appear and sound, creating an audition that grabbed headlines and went viral online.

"Reality TV isn't always real. There's a lot that happens behind the scenes," Vamos said. "Myself and hundreds of people worked about a week with no pay. I think a lot of reality TV participants aren't aware that they have rights."

Vamos is not the only audition-round contestant to have been cheated out of compensation for their time and participation in the show. The lawsuit states that Vamos and other contestants were required to sign "work-for-hire" contracts assigning copyright and licenses arising from their performances to the defendants, but at the same time the defendants made the contestants sign paperwork declaring they were not employees. The arrangement violated California Labor Code because the show's producers forced individuals to work on a volunteer basis. The show's producers also failed to give the participants adequate time off for meals, and when they did allow the participants some breaks they maintained the right to secretly record them, the lawsuit stated.

Vamos, who is originally from Baltimore and has nearly 80,000 followers on TikTok, has done voice work in Hollywood, including for the animated movie "Brighthouse." The lawsuit brought on behalf of Vamos accused the defendants of failure to pay minimum wage and overtime; accurate and itemized wage statements; meal and rest periods; prompt wages upon termination; and reimbursement for business expenses. It also alleges the defendants engaged in unjust enrichment and unfair business practices and that they violated California labor code under the Private Attorneys General Act. The potential size of the plaintiff class is unknown but is believed to number more than 400 individuals, according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit follows another proposed wage and hour class action brought last year by Payton Employment Law, PC, against Netflix and the producers of the reality show "Love Is Blind." That

case, brought on behalf of lead plaintiff Jeremy Hartwell who appeared on the show, is still pending in Los Angeles Superior Court.

The lawsuit was filed at the Los Angeles County Superior Court; NORMANDY VAMOS V. AMERICAN BROADCASTING COMPANIES, INC. ET AL., Case No: 23STCV02514. (Feb. 3, 2023)

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