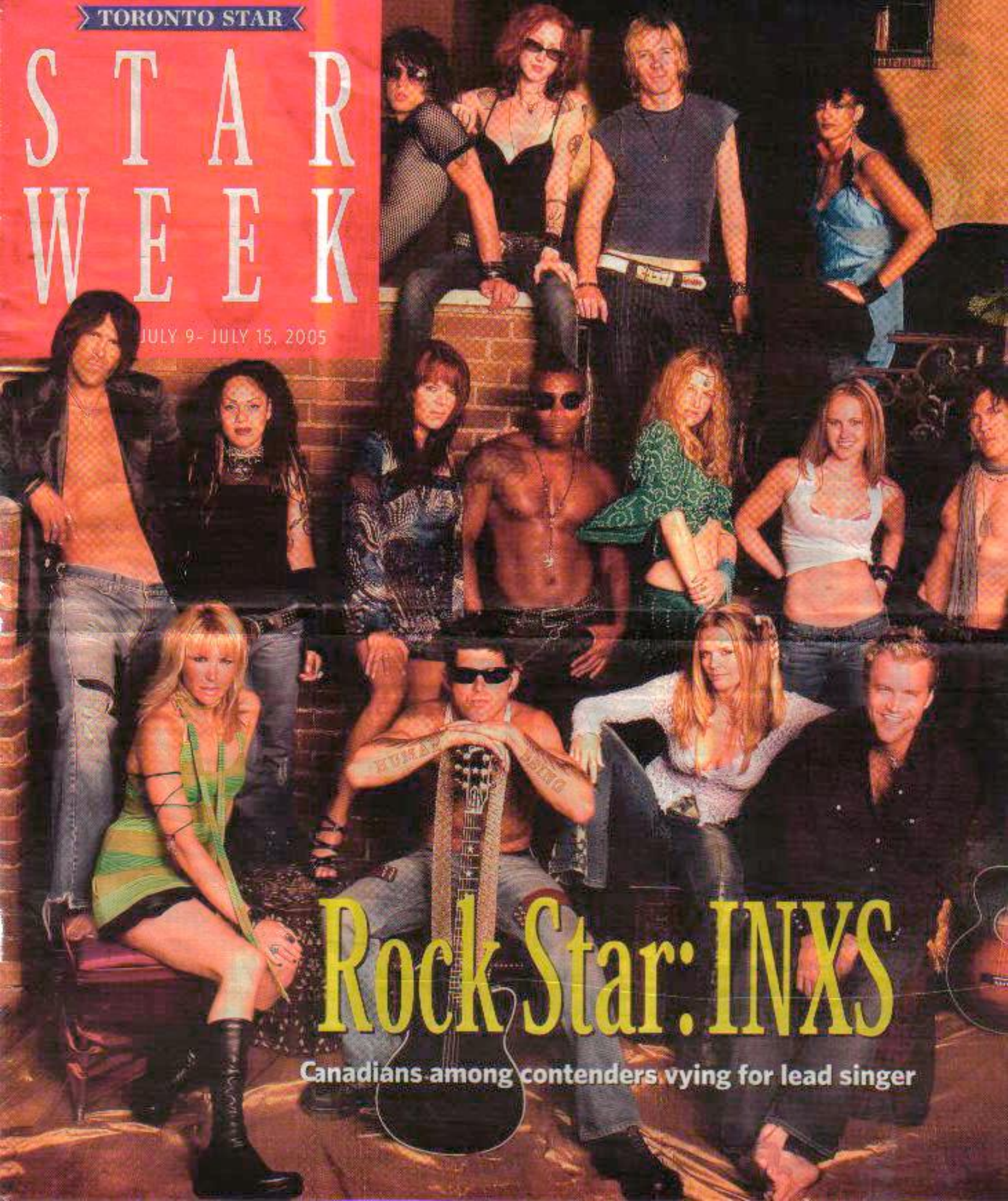


# STAR WEEK

JULY 9- JULY 15, 2005



# Rock Star: INXS

Canadians among contenders vying for lead singer

# INXS: the reality show

Four Canadian hopefuls are among 15 international contenders vying for the empty spot of lead singer for the famous rock group



Andrew Farriss, Jon Farriss, Kirk Pengilly and Garry Boers search for their new lead singer

By Christopher Hutsul

They say no one becomes a rock star without getting a big break. Four Canadian rock vocalists are hoping that *Rock Star: INXS*, Mark Burnett's latest reality TV offering, will be just that.

Beginning Monday on CH and CBS, 15 contestants will vie for the opportunity to front INXS—a hugely successful rock outfit throughout the '80s and '90s that sold over 30 million records worldwide.

Like the *American Idol* franchise, contestants will sing their way to stardom. But the similarities end there. *Rock Star: INXS* promises to deliver grittier music, rawer contestants, and a bigger prize—a megabucks career as a bona fide rock star.

Mississauga-born J.D. Fortune says he was drawn into the contest by the chance to sing for INXS. He says the band gives the show an edge uncommon in reality TV.

"It's not called 'church star,'" laughs Fortune. "We're all artists, and we all want to be the lead singer for INXS. I wouldn't have applied if that band weren't involved. They're mentors to all of us."

The Australian band was a natural fit for the show's premise—it's been seeking a voice since its charismatic frontman Michael Hutchence died suddenly in 1997. That position will be filled in the final episode of the end of the 13-week series, which will see contestants voted off based on input from viewers, judges (guitarist Dave Navarro and actress Brooke Burke) and INXS members. The winner will join the band on a world concert tour.

It's a testament to the quality of young Canadian performers that four of the 15 finalists are from north of the border. Producers conducted over 60,000 auditions in Sydney, London, Tokyo and throughout North America.

Fortune notes that Canada has a rich rock 'n' roll heritage, pointing to the likes of Bryan Adams, Tom Cochrane and Burton Cummings, but says we've never had a rock 'n' roll superstar.

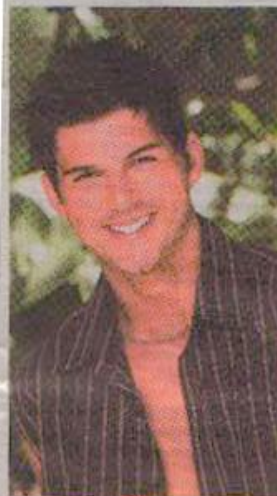
"We've never had an Elvis or a Jim Morrison or Lemmy Kravitz," says Fortune. "But this is a chance for a Canadian to be a sexier kind of artist."

Fortune believes that if he makes it to the finish line he could be that performer. He certainly has the look: Fortune has eagle wings tattooed on his forearms with text that reads "human" on one arm, and "being" on the other. It's a reference to some parting words from his late grandfather.

"Always be a human being, he told me," he says. Fortune, who started singing and playing the guitar when he was 5-years-old, says he knew he had to audition for this process when he heard INXS was involved.

"The first riff I learnt to play on my guitar was from 'Devil Inside,'" he says. "The album *Kick* was way over the top."

The four Canadians vying for top spot bring unique experience and vocal styles to the competition, but they have plenty in common—including the compulsorily glammed-out rock star look. Tara Slone, Deanna



J.D. Fortune: Born in Mississauga



Deanna Johnston: Originally from Kingston



Tara Slone: Grew up in Toronto and Halifax



Suzie McNeil: Born and raised in Toronto

Johnston and Suzie McNeil are all seasoned performers who've made music their life's work with various degrees of success.

Nova Scotia-born Slone, who grew up on a steady diet of Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, David Bowie, Rhytmatics and The Pretenders, spent seven years in a moderately successful rock band Joydrop. Slone had been looking for a new project to sink her teeth into since the band broke up. A long-time INXS fan, Slone jumped at the opportunity to take part in the LA-based competition.

"I have my moments of 'holy s---, this is for real,'" laughs Slone. "There's a very real chance that I could be singing for INXS."

Slone has a theory as to why Canada is so well represented in the final 15 contestants.

"I think there must be something in the water," she laughs. "Seriously, I think that we're just notoriously nice people... INXS isn't just looking for a singer; they're looking for a new person to join their family. Maybe there's a commonwealth connection too."

Most of us probably won't recognize Toronto's Suzie McNeil, but her voice might be familiar. McNeil is the singer behind the "happiness is Marineland" jingle. She doesn't mind the commercial work—or the regular gigs that come from being in an Abba cover band that plays to rural communities—but she's definitely ready for a slice of the big time. "I'm big on taking on new opportunities," she says.

"I try to never say no to anything. I never really

thought I'd be doing this, but it's amazing.

"I was weary of being on a reality show, but I've discovered what this show is about and the people making it really are wanting it to be about quality and be about music. So I'm totally proud to be a part of that."

For Kingston's Deanna Johnston, *Rock Star* is a chance to break away from her gig with a cover band that performs for corporate audiences in California. For the next 13 weeks, Johnston will get to be the rocker she's always hoped to be.

"For this, I finally get to be a rock singer," says the Johnston. "They told me after my first audition that I sounded like a real rock and roll singer."

Johnston's raspy, soulful voice has been compared that of Janis Joplin and Melissa Etheridge. One critic said she sounded like Sass Jordan on testosterone.

"It was supposed to be an underhanded comment, but I loved the comparison," says Johnston.

For Johnston and the rest of the group, one thing is certain. *Rock Star: INXS* will change the lives of these young singers forever.

"What's cool about this is that we're all performers who've at one point been shot down or turned away," says Johnston. "Being given this is huge. This is our big shot."

*Rock Star: INXS* debuts Monday at 9 p.m. on CBS and CH and also airs Tuesdays at 10 p.m. (a one-hour performance episode) and Wednesdays at 9:30 p.m. (a half-hour results show). Beginning next week, Monday's episode (home life show) will air at 9:30 p.m.



Rock guitarist Dave Navarro (formerly of The Red Hot Chili Peppers) and Brooke Burke will host *Rock Star: INXS* on CBS and CH three