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Venerable country competition holds its 24th show

By Ron Wynn, [rwynn@nashvillecitypaper.com](mailto:rwynn@nashvillecitypaper.com)  
January 26, 2006

The 24th Annual Colgate Country Showdown has been around much longer than other such events as *American Idol* and *Nashville Star*. Some past winners include Garth Brooks, Toby Keith, Tim McGraw, Tracy Lawrence, Martina McBride and Brad Paisley. Yet for some reason the event doesn't quite have the national glitter or reputation that it deserves, something that veteran Nashville producer Dean Unkefer and co-producer/Midas Records executive Brad Allen plan to change.

"This event is well known throughout the country music industry, but it probably hasn't gotten quite the national push that it deserves in past years," Unkefer said. "That's something we're going to address this year with the combination of both a syndicated and cable television component."

"This is a very exciting competition, and the level of talent that we have in the finals is very rewarding to me, particularly because I'm always looking for genuine, previously undiscovered talent, and there's plenty of it in this year's event," Allen added.

The 2006 competition features five women for the first time in the showdown's history. Michelle Rene is the West Regional Winner, followed by Jessi in the Northwest Regional, Ashley Ford in the Midwest Regional, Rebecca Frederick in the Southwest Regional, and Catherine Ritter in the Southeast Regional. The winners compete for \$100,000 and the title of Best New Act in Country Music. The judges for this year's competition include Craig Campbell of Sony Records, Keith Follese of Midas Records, producer Garth Fundis, Mike Martinovich of the Consortium Group, and Tinti Moffat of the William Morris Agency. The event is being hosted by actress/vocalist Kassie DePaiva of ABC's *One Life To Live* and she will be joined by the award-winning hit country duo Montgomery Gentry.

"This is a pure competition," Unkefer said in distinguishing the Colgate Country Showdown from *American Idol*. "The judges have a specific set of criteria that are written down and from which they make their decisions. They're interested in a wide range of things that relate to performance and talent, not anything arbitrary or aimed purely at someone's looks."

"These performers have made it through grueling local and regional competitions to make it this far," Allen said. "No one's going to be picked because they might be the most photogenic or something else like that. It's strictly going to be the most talented winner."

Tonight's national finals will subsequently be shown in March and April on a series of national television networks (locally on WZTV-Ch. 17), and then shown later on the Great American Country (GAC) cable outlet. It will also be presented on various government access channels in more than 175 countries.

For more information on entering next year's event or to learn which television stations are carrying the program in various areas, visit [colgatecountryshowdown.com](http://colgatecountryshowdown.com)

**What:** The Colgate Country Showdown Finals  
**When:** 7 tonight  
**Where:** The Ryman Auditorium, 116 Fifth Ave. N.  
**Cost:** Free and open to the public, but call ahead for complimentary tickets  
**Info:** 321-5130



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