



# The A Cappella Book

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## Introduction

If you picked up this book, the odds are you love a cappella. Maybe you sang with a group when in high school or in college. Maybe a family member, friend, or significant other convinced you to come to a show and you got hooked. Maybe you were among the millions who tuned in to an episode of NBC's *The Sing-Off*, and ended up sticking around to see the competition through.

Whatever your roots or your stake in a cappella, if you picked up this book, your interest likely transcends just singing or just listening to a cappella—you're one of the thousands who reads reviews of a cappella shows, tunes in to a cappella podcasts, and develops your own critiques about everything from intonation to color coordination on stage.

For us—the co-founders of The A Cappella Blog—it all started with some girls.

Be it fate or pure coincidence, the two of us both started dating girls in a cappella groups around the same time. In early 2006, we came up with the idea for a website in which we would critique a cappella performance. Early on, we decided we would avoid getting lost in the technicalities of music in favor of sharing our opinions so a layperson could understand them.

The philosophy is simple: an art form that only appeals to the artists themselves is severely limited. A cappella is entertaining and engaging enough that it merits a broader audience than just its practitioners. If we're going to build that broad, universal community around this brand of music, we need to make it accessible across the board.

We ironed out many of the preliminary details for The A Cappella Blog along a 12-hour round trip road trip to see one of our girlfriends compete at an ICCA quarterfinal at Brown

University. By the end of the weekend, the relationship at hand had suffered a severe fracture—because one of us was too frank in our appraisal that, no, the girl’s group shouldn’t have advanced to the next round of competition. A poor decision in boyfriend etiquette? Probably. But the vigor of the response only further proved the point that people are passionate about a cappella, and the time was ripe for our new site.

The A Cappella Blog went live in January 2007. We reviewed five ICCA shows that year, and interviewed over 20 groups and a cappella personalities. The next year, we introduced a regular video feature called Tuesday Tubin’, and added our first recurring opinion piece, Measure for Measure.

Five years later, we’ve seen and reviewed performances by roughly 200 distinct collegiate a cappella groups (many of them multiple times), in addition to featuring guest commentaries from personalities like Varsity Vocals Executive Director Amanda Newman, recording extraordinaire Bill Hare, Contemporary A Cappella Society Founder Deke Sharon, and GQ Editor (and a cappella alum) Mickey Rapkin. We experienced the honor of hosting our own ICCA show in 2010 and the rush of uniting a cappella and philanthropy as we used the site to raise money for the VH1 Save the Music Foundation.

The book you’re holding now marks the culmination of our experiences from founding and operating The A Cappella Blog. The book is not laced with jargon and technical precision, but instead a frank discussion of the philosophy behind good a cappella, ideas for best practices, and broad strokes gleaned from conversations with the best in the a cappella business. Some of what you’ll read here is innovative; some culled from experience; some informed by the guidance of those who have worked the a cappella stage for decades. The

common thread is that these thoughts represent our honest and open thoughts on the a cappella world.

Chapters 1-4 will look at a cappella from behind the scenes, discussing the fundamentals of how a collegiate a cappella group can best operate as a student organization, how to make the most of rehearsal time, what to consider when picking out songs, and some of the fundamentals of creating an arrangement.

Chapters 5-7 will focus on performance, ranging from how to deliver a top notch solo, to how to lay down a vocal beat, to a frank assessment of everything from clothing to choreography when it comes to visual presentation.

Chapters 8-10 grow more eclectic. We explore networking and marketing techniques. Then we explore the many potential uses of humor in a cappella, and how to decide which ones to apply when. In chapter 10, we venture into the increasingly complicated world of recorded a cappella.

Chapters 11 zeroes in on competitive a cappella—a world all its own. Today, more and more groups define their ultimate goals around winning an ICCA crown, topping the Harmony Sweepstakes, or making it into contests the scale of *The Sing-Off*. This chapter guides groups through many of the points worth considering as they enter the arena of competition.

Chapter 12 breaks down the many considerations that go into hosting an a cappella show of one's own, be it a simple campus show for a group, or a competition or showcase that involves welcoming more performers and more fans to the auditorium.

Chapter 13 attempts to answer the age old question of which a cappella groups are best: all-male, all-female, or co-ed? Through a comprehensive in-depth analysis of a number of criteria, we try to answer this question once—if not for all.



The final chapter provides a brief look at the future of a cappella, centered on questions like will a cappella get cooler, bigger, or better? We look back at history to guide us, while speculating on what just may be coming around the corner. The book closes on a comprehensive directory of collegiate a cappella groups at the time we sent the book to the presses.

So come along and join us on this whirlwind tour of the a cappella world as it appears to us. It's a world full of controversy and criticism—the bread and butter of any blogger worth his salt. But, more importantly, it's a world full of community, beauty, and music. Thanks for joining this tour, and be sure to keep in touch with us after you've reached the other end.

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## Chapter I: Operating as a Student Organization



The Stereotypes, an all-male a cappella group at Washington University of St. Louis.

Outsiders to a collegiate a cappella group can quite easily overlook the many factors that go into running a student organization. Before the glamour of performing on stage, a group needs to learn and polish its songs, book the performance venue and sound equipment, advertise the show, select outfits, and more. Rest assured, it's no small feat for any group to make it to the stage. In this chapter, we'll talk about the ways in which groups come into being and come to thrive in a collegiate setting.

## Starting a Group

A cappella groups have become such an institution at colleges and universities that the idea of starting new one from scratch can be pretty daunting. Putting your pipedream alongside the century-long tradition of a group like The Yale Whiffenpoofs is enough to make anyone second guess if she has any shot at all at having a lasting impact on the a cappella world. Similarly, there are those schools in which the number of groups, and the number of spaces therein can't accommodate the number of people who want to participate. How can a new group carve its own niche at a college or university with deep a cappella roots already entrenched in its every archway?

In either of these cases, the first step is to gauge interest. As long as your school has people who want to be in an a cappella group, then you have the core foundation from which to build. Of course, musical prowess, determination, and the capacity to work together will be integral to sustaining a group (not to mention producing good music) but these elements won't come into play at all until you can identify the need for a new a cappella group in your community.

Word of mouth is one of the easiest ways to gauge interest. If you ask around and find that, even in your immediate social circles, there are people interested in a cappella, but not yet attached to a group, then you have a start. Moving past just the people you know, though, flyers, mass emails, or Facebook postings can be a good way of getting the word out that you're interested in this project. If you can get people to write to you or call you based upon this word, then you've found people who have more than a passive or fleeting interest in this endeavor—you've found people who are prepared to actually do something about it, which bodes well for their subsequent

willingness to show up for an audition, and from there, to learn music and come to rehearsals.

Once you're sure you have a quorum of interested parties, the real work begins. First there's recruiting. Recruiting may sound like a redundant step after you've already gauged interest, but it's key to group quality. Whereas the first step ensured you would have the sheer mass of people to have an organization, recruiting is about reaching well beyond your immediate social circles and connections. The flyering becomes more intense, and you should cover a more diverse spectrum of locations. The online efforts should also grow more aggressive. Recruiting will, ideally, bring out people who were nowhere near your radar, and who may not have even thought about a cappella until they see how compelling your advertisement is. Furthermore, it's about getting the best of the best. Classically trained singers might think a cappella is silly, or that they're too busy with all of their other musical obligations. Recruiting shouldn't portray you or your group as desperate for members, but rather as a group that talented singers should be desperate to be a part of.

After you've established interest in a cappella and recruited a mass of hopefuls it's time to get down to the nitty-gritty and hold auditions. Having a co-founder or two is helpful in all of the legwork involved with the previous stages of founding a group, and becomes all the more critical at this juncture. It's very easy for one person to get overwhelmed and lose focus after a long series of auditions. Having multiple minds at the judging table offers different perspectives and support—you and your co-founders will make different observations and have different tastes. When you can all agree, you can be certain you've found a top-notch prospect. On the flip side of the coin, if you disagree, but can identify different positive and

negative points to balance one another, you'll come to better-informed decisions about your auditionees.

But what do you look for in auditions? The obvious answer is a good voice, and, of course, you can't ignore that. It's also important to remember, though, that this is not *American Idol* and you're not just looking for great soloists. Ideally, you'll want to cover a range of parts—depending on your group make up, running the gamut from sopranos to basses to cover each sound, besides equipping yourself with a diverse selection of potential soloists. You'll need role players—even if someone doesn't have the stage presence of a soloist, he or she still might have a great ear for pitch, or keep a steady rhythm. These days, a good percussionist is all but essential. For all of these reasons, an audition should consist of much more than just a solo, including opportunities to match pitch, sight read, and perhaps even sing with others to see if they can blend.

In addition to musicality, in a student a cappella group it's especially important to think about personalities. By way of metaphor, consider the difference between a fantasy basketball team and a real basketball team. For the purposes of fantasy sports, you want a collection of the best players possible, and you quantify their talents primarily by the players' statistics. Thus, a team with a starting five of Chris Paul at point guard, Kobe Bryant at shooting guard, LeBron James at small forward, Amare Stoudamire at power forward, and Dwight Howard at center sounds fantastic in the context of fantasy. And sure, in the real world (minus salary caps) such a team would surely be quite good. But would they match up against a team with great chemistry and role players? For example, let's put the fantasy five against the real world Bulls of 1997, the winningest team in NBA history. The fact is that real world super teams are rarely chock full of superstars, and more often

comprised of a mix of super talents, role players, good coaching and chemistry. That Bulls team would put up good, but not fantastic fantasy numbers. But when you combine Michael Jordan's scoring prowess with Scottie Pippen's defense, Dennis Rodman's rebounding, Steve Kerr's three-point shooting, Toni Kukoc's versatility, Ron Harper's selflessness, and on down the line, you arrive at a team that could do everything well, and teammates who could complement each other's talents. Put the fantasy team together for a full season of real life, and it's possible they would succeed, but it also wouldn't surprise me if we got a lot of squabbling over who would get the last shot in the clutch, and a lot of finger pointing in instances when the team comes up short.

Tying these principles back to a cappella, you absolutely want the best singers available to you, and you absolutely want to cover all of your parts, but beyond that, you need to consider your mesh of personalities. No one can be a soloist for every song—a cappella groups demand a lot of spotlight sharing. Elsewhere, a collection of type-A personalities may lead to a stress-fest when everyone is obsessed with efficiency and going above the call of duty. Conversely, if everyone's too laid back, it may be impossible to get anything done. You can't expect to get a complete picture of anyone based on the limited engagement of one audition, but you can start to see ways in which people might conflict, and start to see how different personalities may fit your vision for the group.

After gauging interest, recruiting, and holding auditions, one of the last steps of group formation will be registering as a student organization. This may seem backwards—forming the group before making the group official, and, indeed, at some institutions, this route may not prove practical. But in a lot of cases, forming a group first is key to gaining acceptance as a

registered organization. Once you have your group together, it's no longer a hypothetical proposition—you have a product to show off. If you can get your group a gig or two and build notoriety, you can make it all the easier for your student governing body to readily accept that you should be an official student group. Likewise, if you show up and plead your case through song when you're pitching your proposal, you have a unique opportunity to demonstrate what you're all about and prove your value to the college community.

Some groups resist registering as official organizations, and that's fair given that the policies and practices for organizations vary from school to school. If registering your group hamstrings you with too many obligations and inconveniences, then, OK, make a go of it on your own. But in general, getting registered opens a lot of doors to groups, from more easily reserving performance and rehearsal space, to getting more advertising rights, to garnering funding for any number of purposes, including travel and lodging for competitions or other “away” shows.

OK, so now your group has formed. You have your members together; the next step is to establish yourself as their leader.

## Leading a Group

Leading a collegiate a cappella group is a multifaceted job. For one thing, lots of people get involved with student groups for the social appeal. After all, college students have plenty of serious business to take care of for their classes and their work study jobs—extracurricular activities are supposed to be fun. So how do you whip a group into top performance, but still make group membership an enjoyable experience? In addition to transitioning a group into work mode, directors and presidents have to assert themselves as leaders for a collection

of students. Why should they listen to you—a fellow student? What's to keep someone else from talking over you? In short, how can you command respect? Even if you can get your group serious and assert yourself as the group's leader, how do you get everything done? After all, there are songs to arrange, performances to be choreograph, venues to book, emails to answer, rehearsals to plan, and so on, and so forth.

### *Staying Focused*

One of the hardest things a new student director has to do is to channel his inner-leader. It's true that a leader with lesser or equal life or music experience is susceptible to challenges of authority. It's up to a good leader to prove his worth.

Leaders can prove themselves through preparation. For example, if a musical director knows the music at hand inside and out, and better than anyone else in the group, then it doesn't matter if that person lacks supervisory credentials outside of the group. Leading a student organization is all about identifying the group's niche and mastering it. Once a leader has done the legwork, all that's left is playing the part—demonstrating confidence (without arrogance or belligerence), having a plan (plotting out the structure of a rehearsal in advance), and being flexible enough to adjust as unexpected developments arise.

Student leaders often fall victim to the myth that group members only want to have fun, and don't want to work. While there will be times when this is the case, and there may be individual members who represent this attitude, on the whole, you'll find that this is the exception rather than the rule. The students who just want to hang out are sitting in their dorm rooms, eating pizza they snuck out of the dining hall, playing *Call of Duty*. The ones who auditioned for your



group and then showed up to the rehearsals are motivated. Though they'll be susceptible to the occasional distraction and side chatter, more often, they'll be annoyed when other people are unfocused, because those other people are wasting the entire group's time. In short, group members are going to respect a leader far more when he or she plans out a rehearsal and keeps the group focused, as opposed to the leader who tries to joke along with the group clown.

With all of that said, there is a place for laughter in a capella. After all, one of the biggest differences between good and great groups is technical perfection versus technical perfection *while the group is having fun*. We've all seen it—the stiff as a board, under-confident group that sings in tune but is simply no fun to watch. Any day of the week, I would rather get entertained by a group that's members are a tad bit rougher around the edges, but who smile and make me believe they actually want to entertain me.

The key is balance. A group's leadership needs to rein things in when they get too far out of control, but will also benefit from the letting the group get out its giggles from time-to-time—laughing along for a second rather than snapping that the group needs to get back to work. A group leader might also offer up the occasional joke or pun to keep the mood light, without taking the group too far of course. In 2009, I sat in on some rehearsals with The Johns Hopkins University Octopodes, and I distinctly remember a point at which the group's music director said they all needed to “check the clock.” Despite the late hour of the rehearsal, the group let out a mix of laughter and groans. It was getting late, but besides that, the song they were about to perform was called “The Clock.” That briefest of interactions reminded the group its leader was human, gave them a quick laugh, and yet still com-

municated pertinent information and kept the group moving forward to the next step of rehearsal.

### *Goal setting and Prioritizing*

Goal setting and prioritization are essential to an a cappella group's long-term success. I've seen comedy groups and I've seen almost painfully serious groups. I've seen groups that enter competitions every year and I've seen groups that take every spring break to tour a different region of the country. None of these characteristics are bad; nor are any of them objectively good. If UC Berkeley's Men's Octet is trying to be a comedy group—well, they're sort of missing the mark. Likewise, if The Brown Derbies aspire to be ICCA champions, they really ought to consider entering the competition every once in a while.

Ultimately, a group needs to decide what it wants to do and what it wants to be. Sometimes these are decisions the founders arrive at at the inception of the group. Other times, they're communal decisions the first full group comes to, or that the full group comes to for each individual year, given that the membership changes each year.

A good, if mildly excessive example of effective goal setting was evident at the founding of California State University Northridge Acasola. Under the leadership of Chase DeLuca, the first incarnation of the group developed a 25-year plan that included many steps in the group's evolution, prioritizing recording an album (done), owning a house for the group (done), and eventually owning their own island (not yet done). Furthermore, the group adopted budgeting processes that saw them plan their spending 18 months in advance. Such a thorough and far-reaching approach to planning won't work for every group, but does demonstrate the degree to which

planning is possible, and since Acasola has known its goals from the onset, the group has found itself in an uncommonly strong position to pursue those goals in a focused, precise way.

After you have established your group's purpose and goals, you need to put some serious thought into *how* to attain those goals. No matter how organized, talented, and diligent the leaders of a cappella groups may be, if they truly want their groups to thrive, they will need to recognize that they can't do everything themselves. They need to delegate.

### *Delegation*

One of the most difficult components of leadership is arriving at a point at which you trust others to take care of business. The sheer amount of work that goes into sustaining a successful cappella group demands dedication. Furthermore, it's in any group's best interests to let the individual talents of its members shine through, as opposed to one person trying to be a jack of all trades (and master of none) or shoehorning people into roles with which they are not comfortable.

Oftentimes, groups fall into a pattern of having the musical director function not only as the person who runs rehearsals, but the person in charge of handling so much of the rest of the group's business—setting rehearsal times, booking shows, answering emails, managing money, and so on. These sorts of jobs can quite easily be split three or four ways.

It has become increasingly common for a group to have both a musical director and a president. This is a nice separation of powers in that one person can focus solely on the music—arranging it, assigning parts, leading rehearsals, maybe even choreographing—while there's someone else who can lead the efforts of organizing events, serving as a public face for the group at student government meetings, or having

difficult conversations with group members who are skipping rehearsals or not spending enough time learning their music.

Another key leader can be a group's business manager. This person can take charge when it comes to managing the production and sale of tickets to shows, CDs and other group merchandise. In addition, this can be the person who takes charge if the group needs to work out travel or lodging arrangements, basically serving as an organizing force wherever and logistics come into play.

Lastly, it's worthwhile for any group to consider having a public relations manager. As we will address in our chapter on public relations and networking, regardless of how good a group may be, that group's success is limited by how many people are aware of the group. A public relations manager is pivotal because this person can divert his or her focus from music and focus on getting the group's name out and presenting a positive image. For example, successful groups often get a significant number of emails asking them to perform around campus and the surrounding community. In order to stay vital, it's important that a group offers every message a timely and professional response. Similarly, if a group is not as successful at the current moment, it will be all the more important to stay on top of communications in order to capitalize on any opportunity available. Such tasks are a perfect fit for a public relations manager, who can act as a liaison between the group and those external to it. As part of this role, your PR person would also manage outgoing communications, including sending messages to the group's email list, and perhaps actively pursuing opportunities to perform at events. Taking the role beyond the realm of email, now more than ever, groups stand to benefit from having a presence on the Internet, and a public relations manager can take the lead

on updating the group's website, managing its Facebook page, Tweeting, and posting videos on YouTube, besides keeping an eye out for the next big technological opportunity that will keep the group ahead of the curve. Lastly, a public relations manager can be the group's delegated contact with the media, sending out press releases when a new show or CD is coming out and handling any interview requests.

There are many more roles a group can consider developing, from a social chair who would keep the group fun and coordinate opportunities for the group members to get to know one another outside of rehearsals, to a choreographer or visual presentation specialist who would take care of working out any movement and perhaps even the group's performance attire (if you have a member with a background in dance or theatre this could be a great way to put his or her knowledge to work). Ultimately, the positions you create should depend upon the needs of your unique group and the individual talents of your group members. Once you have each of these factors in hand, you can decide how to most effectively delegate.

A final caveat on this topic: there are some groups that cannot afford to delegate. This is the exception, not the rule, but there are some instances in which a group's members are not responsible enough, or do not have the talents available to distribute roles as described above. Each group needs to figure out where it can or cannot afford to slip up, and how it will set up its priorities. Often, this is a matter of trust, and recognizing that it's OK for some mistakes to happen as a matter of growth and learning, and the recognition that giving some people some responsibility will go a long way toward meeting their affective needs.

## *Building Community*

Research has shown that people perform best both academically and in work settings when their social and emotional needs are met, and all the more so when they truly buy into the work they are doing. If we apply these principles to a cappella groups, we can see that if group members like one another and genuinely want for the group to succeed, they're all the more likely to contribute as much as they can to the group. And so we arrive at the importance of building community within a student a cappella group.

As we've discussed earlier, right from the audition stages, it's important to consider personality types and how people will mesh with a group. Whenever you're working with a collection of human beings, though, it's inevitable that some degree of interpersonal conflict will arise. Too often student groups shy away from any expression of such conflict, and hope it will resolve itself over time. The fact is that such conflicts present a consistent obstacle to overcome—one group member is a know-it-all; another member is always late to rehearsals. There's a benefit to talking through these sorts of issues and it's all the easier to communicate and cooperate when group members know, respect, and even like one another as people.

Building community can come in any number of forms, from planning get-togethers that have nothing to do with music (a group dinner out or movie night), to using organic elements of the group to bond (if you're competing at another school, don't let anyone drive alone or exclusively with friends from outside the group—car pool and caravan). Likewise, peripheral projects like designing a group t-shirt can be fun and help to cultivate a group identity and sense of communal belonging.

Thus far, we have framed community as a device through which to promote success for your a cappella group, but it's

also important to consider the human element of a student organization on its own merits. Over our years of operating The A Cappella Blog, we have communicated with members of collegiate a cappella groups from all over the world. While it isn't universal, a striking number of individuals have spoken about how important a cappella was to their overall college experience. Some have even gone so far as to say they would have transferred to a different school and/or moved back home had it not been for the community they found in their a cappella groups.

The bottom line is that a cappella groups, as student organizations, present a unique social opportunity—bringing together people with similar talents and interests, who are in similar places in their lives to spend a lot of time together, learning, practicing, and performing together. For the good of the group and the good of every individual involved, it's worth your while to build your own community.

### *Building tradition*

Once you have established community in your immediate, present-day group, it's worth thinking about your group's future—and its past. When we think of established, well-known, and celebrated student organizations, we often think of sports teams. A part of what lends these groups a sense of importance and history is the fact that their pasts are archived and subject to lore. How many people remember who led Syracuse University's chapter of Amnesty International in 2003, or what that group accomplished? Contrast that with the 2003 Syracuse basketball team that Carmelo Anthony led to national championship. OK, so you can't really, fairly compare the two—the basketball team had a national audience and a truly break out year. But a part of why teams like this can

achieve such fame is a matter of tradition—people know about and follow Syracuse basketball. It has been an institution at the school for decades, and Jim Boeheim, the team's long-time coach, provided continuity, wisdom and a familiar face.

Acting as a spectator to a cappella isn't likely to eclipse watching basketball at many major universities anytime soon, but a cappella groups still have an advantage over other student organizations in that they practice a performance art, and one that can develop a long-term following at their institutions. This sense of tradition—the collective consciousness of a group—can lend importance to it. It can make being a part of the group matter, and make the group a part of the fabric of the school. These are the sorts of accomplishments that make people want to be a part of a cappella groups. These are the sorts of accomplishments that make group members want to make their groups great.

One way in which to cultivate tradition is to have a traditional song. Some groups are reluctant to carry songs over from year to year lest the group grow stagnant, and this is a legitimate concern. I've seen a number of groups fail to expand their repertoires in any meaningful way for a period of years, and it makes the groups at hand far less engaging for their sustained fan base, as well as the members themselves. Having traditional songs can, however, provide a thread between different generations of a group, helping to shape a cohesive identity and common experience over changing times. On a practical level, it can also provide some built-in repertoire for times when a group goes through a dryer patch in which it struggles to find new material. Perhaps best of all, though, is the potential to have a true alumni song. Take the University of Rochester Midnight Ramblers for example, who wrap up just about every show with Steam's "Na Na Hey Hey



Kiss Him Goodbye”—a truly fun musical experience for which the group frequently welcomes any alumni in the audience to join them on stage. This may never have been more poignant than in 2004, at Cornell University, when alumni and current members gathered to sing and celebrate on stage as the group sang the song as an encore after advancing to the ICCA Finals for the first time.

On the topic of alumni, a group has a great deal to gain from cultivating relationships with its alumni. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the Tufts Beelzebubs, who Mickey Rapkin wrote about in *Pitch Perfect: The Quest for Collegiate A Cappella Glory*. The group has a longstanding practice of talking with past group leaders to discuss issues of group dynamics, to make decisions, and, as needed, to get music arranged. Members who hoped to ascend to the position of music director would go so far as to call past directors to garner support for their bids. Not every group is going to have a large or dedicated enough constituency of alumni to make this sort of system work, but just about any group can benefit from the wisdom, experience, and objectivity of people who were a part of the group in years past. Alumni have the combined benefits of having lived through their time with the group, and having had some time removed from it to see the bigger picture. This objectivity allows them to discern petty issues from those that will remain important long term.

In addition to the insights they can impart, alumni also may be in positions in their lives to help a group. Maybe they are connected with professional musicians or people in the recording industry with whom the group could collaborate. Maybe they work with a company that produces t-shirts and could get you a discounted rate. Maybe they've just, flat out, done well for themselves in their careers, and are in a position

in which they could make a donation to help your group pay for any number of needs. Regardless of what your alumni have to offer you, at the very least, it never hurts to expand your group's network, and keeping alumni in the mix is a great way of retaining long-term support.

Perhaps the most compelling reason of all to preserve tradition and treat your alumni well is the simple fact that one day, you, too, will be an alum. No one stays in a collegiate group forever, and though some alumni will be able to leave their college pals and activities behind without much sentiment, even they will probably be interested to check out what the group is doing over alumni weekend, or check in on the latest news from the group from time to time. For your own sake, think ahead and start celebrating the history of which you will one day be a part.

### *Live balanced lives*

This piece of advice may seem counterintuitive coming from a book devoted to a cappella, but the fact remains—there is life beyond a cappella.

Make no mistake about it—if groups want to succeed on stage, the individual members need to be dedicated. They need to show up for every rehearsal, they need to practice outside of rehearsal, and it's ideal if they're often thinking of the group independently to stir new ideas and plant the seeds for new projects. With all of that said, most college students who devote themselves to a cappella at the expense of their school work, social lives, and other obligations are setting themselves up for disaster.

Being a student is the principle purpose for anyone attending college. While an a cappella group may represent someone's favorite extracurricular pursuit, it can't replace the aca-

demics themselves. I've heard of multiple groups jeopardized by people who did not follow this rule—who had members on the verge of, or actually flunking out of school, and in so doing, putting their role in the group in jeopardy. Such a gamble puts the group at risk of losing an important vocal part and an important contributor to group dynamics.

In addition to keeping academics at the fore, people who dedicate themselves too completely to a cappella run the risk of burnout. While there will be some exceptions, most people who spend most of their time with just one group of people, and spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about just one topic are going to get tired of that way of life, and reach a point where the switch flips from them “doing” nothing but a cappella to the opposite extreme of wanting nothing to do with it. Conversely, individuals who can find balance—devoting a pocket of time to a cappella, but also taking the time to finish their homework and taking advantage of social opportunities—will find themselves better-equipped to live a sustainable lifestyle and live up to all of their obligations in the long term.

## Conclusion

The logistics of starting and running an a cappella group transcend music, and demand attention to interpersonal dynamics, the management of logistics, and promoting balance. Keep these factors in mind and your group will have the potential to achieve sustained success.

## Chapter 2: Rehearsal



Stockapella, a mixed a cappella group at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

In an iconic series of events from the first season of the television show *Glee*, our heroes find out that competing show choirs have stolen all of their material. And so, on the fly, they decide to learn two new songs to pair with another song they haven't performed for months before competition. Choreography? As one of the characters reassured everyone, they all perform better when they're "loose." The results? A show-stopping set that earns them first place honors (sorry if I spoiled that for anyone).

Real life is not so easy. Most of us can't just pick up sheet music and assimilate it in a matter of minutes or even hours. You aren't going to blend out of instinct. And no matter how good you are when you're loose, the group isn't going to synch up if it hasn't practiced its choreography.

Real life musical ensembles, and particularly a cappella groups, generally undergo hours of rehearsal each week leading up to big performances. But how can you make the most of rehearsal time, keep the group motivated, and truly ready yourselves to get on stage for important shows? In this chapter we explore the ins and outs of a cappella rehearsals.

## Keep It Organized

Keeping a collegiate a cappella rehearsal organized is a bit of a catch 22. On one hand, most group members will probably say they prefer very little structure and rigidity. On the other hand, the same group members will hate rehearsals that waste their time, and will be as disappointed as anyone if a group ultimately does not perform up to its potential. Although it may not be a popular decision—at least on the surface—the musical director who keeps rehearsals moving in an orderly fashion serves her group the best.

Each rehearsal should have a purpose, and that purpose will determine not only the activities in which the group engages, but also the tone of the session. The purpose of some rehearsals might be working toward a product—learning a new song, applying choreography to a piece. Alternatively, the purpose may be to refine an element of the group, including exercises on tuning or blend, or building a sense of community amongst the group. Furthermore, the purpose of a rehearsal may be to polish—to refine the group's performance before a big show.

As you might imagine, the feel of rehearsal designed to build group unity and morale will be quite different from a rehearsal meant to implement the final preparations before a serious competition. In the former, it's to be expected that group members will contribute openly, and side chatter and jokes are well in order. In the latter case, the director will have to cut off side conversations and drill the essential elements of performance. Whatever the case, establishing your purpose for a rehearsal will guide how you run it. If you broadcast the purpose to the rest of the group, it may also help them conceptualize how they should conduct themselves throughout the rehearsal period.

While the gravity of a rehearsal may vary, it's worth developing an agenda for any rehearsal. Whether it's just notes for the director, or written on a chalkboard for the whole group to see, an agenda helps map out how time will be used, and various milestones that the group needs to hit over the prescribed time period. An agenda should be based around a rehearsal's purpose, and help to refine the group's focus. Starting on time and moving through an agenda in linear fashion will also cultivate a sense of professionalism in the group.

Don't forget to warm up. Warm ups not only prepare your group to perform vocally, but also serve as a centering exercise to hone group energy and attention. In cases when the warm ups are familiar, they can serve as a memory cue to get people in a rehearsal mindset; if you're trying something new, it can be a way of grabbing the group members' attention and forcing them to think.

As you progress through a rehearsal, don't forget the benefits of differentiation. As plenty of contemporary education theorists have posited, people in a group setting can only stay focused for so long—15, 20, 30 minute periods. Over the

course of a two hour rehearsal, it's imperative that the person leading the rehearsal find ways to change up what the group is doing, whether it's shifting between foci (tuning now, blend later, choreography after that), or shifting positioning and grouping (whole group singing in a circle versus practicing in break out groups by vocal part) or splitting up music practice with group discussions and decision making. Moving between styles and topics keeps everyone fresh and more focused on whatever new topic may come to the fore.

Regardless of what the agenda may be and what exercises it may incorporate, a group's leader needs to allocate some time for breaks. While there may be the occasional rehearsal when the group really hits its stride and doesn't need a break, more often than not, people will reach a point when they lose focus—whether they're bored, crave the opportunity to socialize, or just need to use the bathroom. A prudent director will think of natural breaking points in the agenda, but will also be wise enough to respond to the needs of the group as they come up. In such cases, the director will recognize when a group starts socializing or when frustrations mount, and give everyone a breather.

## **Make People Want to Come to Rehearsals**

Rehearsals are easier, more enjoyable, and ultimately more productive when group members actively look forward to taking part in them.

Some group members may most enjoy those meetings in which the group accomplishes a lot. They want to feel as though their time went to a good cause and there's something they can take away from the time investment, be it a better overall sound for the group, or the addition of extra polish before the group takes a song to the stage for the first time.

Remaining organized, as the previous section emphasized, will go a long way toward satisfying these people.

Besides taking care of business, there is inherent value in rehearsals being fun. Oftentimes, a high energy leader can naturally promote this dynamic, but at the same time, it's important that a group's director be true to himself—artificial cheeriness is not a viable substitute for the real thing and the mellow leader who thrives in details and musical precision need not put on the façade of a different identity. Such a group should, however, identify where the comic relief and motivational skills *will* come from, and make sure the group doesn't lose sight of the positive impact of happy group members.

On the notes of energy, tone, and atmosphere of a rehearsal, it's also worth noting the value of positivity, and being constructively critical. A group that shies away from improving itself will never get very far. There are different ways of improving a situation, though. College students and singers in general tend to be sensitive to direct criticism. With that in mind, group leaders often need to think about how deliver a message that is not only clear, but that will get past the group's defenses and get group members to actually listen. At minimum, this involves choosing not to disrespect anyone or put them down on a personal level, instead focusing on the music, and focusing on how to improve, rather than dwelling on what has already been done.

Moving past what the director can do to sell a rehearsal, think about what the group itself can bring to the table. Any individual is more invested in a meeting when she has an active stake in it—a participatory role. If you don't do so already, consider delegating responsibilities to group members, for example, appointing or electing a business manager to oversee the group budget, a publicity manager to coordinate advertis-



ing efforts, a booking manager to work with setting up gigs. Then give these respective officers all opportunities to give progress reports during rehearsals. This set up not only splits up the workload, but also empowers people. In the context of the rehearsal itself, it lends these group members a sense of ownership over a portion of the meeting—even if it only lasts a couple minutes. This will be a motivating factor for many people to come to rehearsals and to feel important in that context. Regardless of whether you appoint officers, consider having open forums at rehearsal during which people have the opportunity to volunteer ideas for new songs, or for how the group operates. This less formal approach to whole-group involvement will still give everyone the opportunity to speak out and make rehearsals more interactive.

## Get Ready for the Stage

Performance is the be-all end-all for a cappella groups. Whether the group is gearing up for its end of semester show, a big community event, or a competition, the end game of a series of rehearsals should be having the group ready to actually perform in front of a crowd. Beyond aural and visual presentation, there are a number of more subtle, less tangible items worth attending to in rehearsal.

Groups should strive to simulate the experience of performing before they ever have live audiences. If the performance venue itself is available, aim to practice there to get a feel for the actual stage. Do a run through with the mics you will use, and even the lighting and sound folks if it's possible.

In addition to the mechanics of a performance, don't leave any stone unturned in consideration of the *details* of performance. Does your soloist know what she's going to do with her hands when she's singing? Have her practice with a water

bottle in hand so she's used to holding onto something akin to the microphone. Do you know how you're going to transition from one song to the next? Rather than practicing one song, breaking and talking about it, practice the actual transition, even if it means singing just the last ten bars of the preceding song, repositioning accordingly, and starting on the next one. Groups that practice such transitions look poised and professional, and look like they're performing a cohesive set of songs, as opposed to looking as though they're stringing together a group of random, independent performances into one show.

Don't be afraid to get critical of your group before a big performance. Invite outsiders into rehearsals to give objective feedback on what they're hearing and seeing. Consider practicing choreography in front of a mirror or videotaping to re-watch and re-listen to everything the group is doing. Another simple strategy is for the soloist to face the group in rehearsals so he can comment on what everyone else is doing, and they can provide him feedback as well.

Once a group actually performs publicly, the group opens itself up to all the praise and criticism in the world. With that in mind, a performance should never be just a public rehearsal. Work out the kinks behind the stage, get critical feedback from people you know and trust, and deliver your best when the time comes to perform.

## **Conclusion**

Though a cappella groups may exist for the purpose of performing, most groups will spend far more time in rehearsal than on stage. Consider how you can run your rehearsals efficiently, make them engaging and enjoyable, and how you can best utilize your practice time in order to shine on stage.



## Chapter 3:

# Song Selection

One of the most simultaneously exciting and daunting pieces of running an a cappella group is determining what songs to sing. Should your catalog remain upbeat in order to consistently entertain the audience or should it include ballads that will demonstrate your emotional range? Should you stick with the modern music that will keep your group on the cutting edge or should you focus on oldies that will please an audience across generations?

Some groups focus on radio cuts that most people will know, while others embrace indie chic. Some adhere to the bounds of their own gender—or at least the gender of the song's soloist, in the case of co-ed groups—while others experiment by reinventing songs in a different gender. Some groups stick to the music as it was originally written, translating as directly as possible, but other groups thrive when they switch up the style or mash different songs together.

There are few purely right or wrong moves when it comes to song selection, but there are decisions to be made that will help define your group identity and go a long way toward determining just what your group might accomplish. In this chapter we will explore the ins and outs of song selection.

## Who Picks the Songs?

Initially, the question of who picks the songs in an a cappella

group's repertoire might seem quite simple; in practice, it's far more complex.

Plenty of groups choose songs through a democratic process. For example, they might have meetings at set points each semester in which group members bring their songs of choice to the table and vote on a finite number of songs to be arranged (or, in more advanced cases, to accept the already written arrangements). There are certainly advantages to this approach—it's orderly, and it reflects the opinions of the group as a whole, so as to better reflect the group's cumulative personality.

Other groups are a bit more haphazard in terms of song selection, but equally open to ideas from the group community. For example, in some groups anyone is welcome to arrange at any given time, and when a song is ready, the group takes it on. This approach works well because it empowers individuals to have a vision and see it through. You think you can arrange an "Amazing Grace"/"Rapper's Delight" mashup? Prove it. If you make it work we'll run with it. This system simultaneously celebrates group involvement in contributing song ideas while demonstrating an appreciation for hard work by rewarding the individuals who actually step up to get arrangements done.

Yet another approach is for creative direction to be more centralized. The music director, perhaps with the aid of an assistant, picks songs, arranges them, assigns parts and leads the group into performance. Sure that person might take suggestions from the group, but the real power falls in the hands of one person. This method can lead to a more cohesive set list—with just one mind in a leadership role, a group can focus on a particular style, or take on songs that complement one another to form a consciously well-rounded repertoire. Furthermore, if the musical director is especially good at arranging, she'll

probably be at her best preparing songs she wants to use, and ones that she sets up to play to the strengths of her group.

After just three paragraphs, I'm sure plenty of readers are fuming:

How could a group song selection process lead to anything but a lukewarm collection of songs that everyone's OK with but that no one feels passionate about?

If everyone arranges independently, what's to stop everyone from just arranging different Lady Gaga songs (or, worse yet, the *same* Lady Gaga song)?

If just one person calls the shots won't the group's repertoire reflect his interests alone, and leave everyone else cold?

The fact of the matter is, each of these approaches—or hybrids thereof—will lead to different pros and cons and will play out quite differently depending on the personalities, tastes, and overall dynamics in a given group. There's no right or wrong answer, but whichever route a group chooses is going to yield a profound effect on the way that group's cumulative repertoire turns out.

## Speeding Up a Notch v.s Setting the Mood

In my non-a cappella musical life, one of my favorite pursuits is to create mix CDs. My mixes tend to span a range of emotions and genres. I often aim to tell a story and to develop a melodic, rhythmic or narrative flow between tracks. Despite these extensive efforts, I've always found it remarkable that when I play such a CD in the car when I'm driving co-workers to lunch, or have a friend riding shotgun on a road trip, without fail, there's a negative response to slower songs.

They yawn.

They call me emo.

They hit the next-track button.

Though no one will deny that there are great ballads in the world, by and large, the general public doesn't want to hear them out of context.

But what is the context for a slow song? Based on my highly informal study of the human race, such songs strike people best when they, themselves are wallowing—mourning the loss of a loved one, broken-hearted over the end of a relationship. It can resonate sometimes on a solitary night-time drive, laced with introspection. People can dig a slow song for their first dance at a wedding or their last dance at a prom. The other main acceptable forum seems to be amidst a film or TV show, when a song sets the mood.

So, we can extrapolate that a casual audience likes sad songs when they have a narrative context for it. This is harder to establish when you're singing a cappella. There's always the option of giving a spoken introduction to the song—explaining that your pet ferret just died and this is a dedication; explaining that it was the song playing in the bar when you first kissed your hubby.

Alternatively, or in conjunction with openly telling the audience what to feel, there's the sheer delivery of a ballad. We discuss this in greater depth in other parts of this book, but to make an emotionally wrought song really click, you need to earn it. The whole group needs to sell the facials. The movement needs to be subdued, subtle, or otherwise a perfect fit to the music so it doesn't break the fictive dream around the song. The soloist needs to both drip with emotion and know what to do physically to communicate the essence of the lyrics.

It's not easy to make a slow song work. Sure, now and again, life will serve up your context on a silver platter—calling on you to sing at the memorial service for a prominent alum, or at a Holocaust remembrance ceremony. When it

comes to more general performances, though, you can't ignore the importance of engaging an audience with melodies they can tap their feet to, and that make them smile.

Upbeat songs are fun and engaging on account of rhythm, tempo, and the way in which such songs lend themselves to arrangements that are intricate and all the more impressive when delivered at full speed. An upbeat song necessitates less selling on the part of the performers because the casual audience will actively want to like it, and that buys you a great deal of leeway to take risks with exactly how you execute it—to employ comedy, to throw in off-beat samples, to go off the wall with choreography.

Between the fast songs and slow songs exist what I refer to as the tweeners. They're not really upbeat, but they have a driving rhythm; they aren't slow, but they aren't exactly happy-go-lucky either. It's songs like "Grenade" by Bruno Mars, "Drive" by Incubus, or most selections from the Fray catalog. These are good songs, but the problem is that they invite middle of the road interpretations in which groups try to look intense while doing step-touch choreography, or snap their fingers and sway while they're singing about the worst days of their lives.

If a group doesn't know how to communicate the song, the audience isn't going to know how to react either, which is why tweeners are dangerous. While emotional ambiguity and complexity are authentic parts of the human experience, people don't come to a cappella shows in search of mixed emotions—they'll ride waves of happiness and sadness; they'll laugh with you and cry with you, but it's a lot to ask for them to sit idly by and enjoy a song for its layers of interpretation. When groups pick twener songs, it's important to develop a unified emotion or style that the group wants to convey, and



make sure every group member sells that emotion vocally and visually for the duration of the performance.

## Today's Tunes vs. Kicking it Old School

There's a constant back and forth in the a cappella world about whether to aim contemporary or turn to older music, and, in all honesty, there are pros and cons to either approach.

The dominant philosophy nowadays seems to push toward covering modern music. When you cover something that's currently on the radio, you'll connect with audience members who are used to hearing that song, and who will be actively interested in hearing it re-imagined a cappella. Better yet, when a song has only come out in the last few months, it makes your group look as though you're on the cutting edge (perhaps justly so) and appear all the more impressive for having arranged, learned, rehearsed and refined the song over such a truncated time table—in other words, you don't have to worry about the real or perceived stigma that you're singing the same song your group has been kicking around with different soloists for the better part of a decade.

Another advantage to singing something contemporary is you don't run the risks that come with songs like "Lean on Me" or "The Longest Time"—songs everyone has heard time and again. Of course, on the flip side, it can be hard to predict if other groups might have the same idea for a song. While picking a new song won't lead you into the trap of singing a song that has been overdone over a period of years, you do risk falling into the Imogen Heap "Hide and Seek" pit of 2006-2007, or the Katy Perry "Firework" pattern of 2011—you pick a new song—in one case indy, in the latter top 40, only for half the other groups in the country to do the same thing, leading to multiple iterations of the same song per show. If your group

is the best of the best when it comes to executing a song, you can come out OK for the effort, but even then, you'll be a part of an act that the audience grows bored with, which is never a good thing.

The fact that multiple groups might be tempted to take on the same modern song is indicative of a larger limitation of contemporary song choices, and a broader advantage to looking further back in time. There are only so many contemporary songs—especially if you're limiting yourself to top 40 fare. When you look to older music, though, you have decades, if not centuries of viable song choices, from songs of yesteryear, to songs from your youth, to the music of your parents' generation, all the way back to folk songs from long before. The sheer depth of the American (if not the international) song catalog gives you so many songs to choose from that there's little doubt at all you will find music that suits the musical talents and stylistic sensibilities of your group.

In addition to the sheer amount of music available across time, when you pick older music, there's the opportunity to select songs that will resonate with people via memory. Don't get me wrong—it's a tricky proposition, because when you turn to music that doesn't have the common point of reference of being current to today's audience, you risk picking something that a segment of your audience won't find familiar, or worse yet, just won't find accessible. If you strike the right chord, though—ideally an older song that people love but haven't even thought of in years—say, Journey's "Separate Ways" as opposed to "Don't Stop Believing," you can strike gold.

## Picking Your Genre

Many groups successfully transcend genres, and successfully appeal to a broader spectrum of the audience for their ability

to diversify. That's admirable, but the fact remains that most groups do have a default setting—a style of music they favor and in which they find their most natural fit. Like so many components of song selection, there is no one-size-fits-all option that will work for everyone; you have to take the time to figure out what style will best fit your group.

To give a well-known example, consider Jerry Lawson and the Talk of the Town, as they appeared on *The Sing-Off*. Sure, this group could probably perform in all sorts of different styles, but they thrive on what I would describe as a classic contemporary vibe, and that's where they find their center. They might convert songs from outside these genres to better fit their sound, but at the end of the day, it only makes sense that they're going to make the most of the style of performance that best highlights what they do well, rather than drawing attention to their own shortcomings.

To provide an example from the collegiate ranks, consider Rutgers University Casual Harmony, as the group started to cement its place among ICCA contenders. Though they've always performed a decent range of songs, they developed an identity early on as the group that covered System of a Down, Muse, and other rock acts in a time when relatively few groups dared to do so. This fit the ensemble identity perfectly as a group of imposing men with a killer bass sound and some soloists who could really let a rip. Sure, they still had Dave Matthews and Maroon 5 songs in their repertoire, but the inclusion of progressive rock helped distinguish their act from other all-male groups roaming the east coast with whom they otherwise might have gotten lost in the shuffle.

When you're picking a genre, think about what your group does best, what kind of songs the group is naturally drawn to, and perhaps even what songs get the biggest reaction from

your audiences. From there, inductively use this information to develop a more coherent and focused group identity.

## Gender Bending

If you're part of a single-gender group, the most obvious thing to do is to sing songs originally performed by artists who correspond to your group's gender. If you're a co-ed group, you'll usually match your soloist to the original artist. There are a handful of obvious exceptions to make; women may be more comfortable hitting Justin Timberlake's high notes, for example.

But what about actively taking music from the opposite gender and making it your own? It's a tricky proposition. Consider the all-male group that takes on a song by Sara Bareilles. Maybe, they'll work it out. More likely, whether it's intentional or not, the song is going to come off as comedic because of how people are used to hearing it, and because people won't be prepared to imbibe the song a few octaves lower; and that's putting aside the choices a group will need to make about whether or not to change gender pronouns and other elements of lyrical content.

Similarly problematic, and more frequently attempted, is the practice of all-female groups taking on male songs. While guys tend to come across as comedic when they cover women, women covering men have a greater tendency to sound amateurish. It's not fair, but when we hear softer, higher voices sing a song, our minds often jump to images of children singing their favorite songs from the radio. The effect is generally all the worse on rock songs or hip hop, when guys show their greatest bravado and women sound especially weak trying to emulate the sound.

If a group can pull off the gender transition, though, it has the potential to result in something singular and memorable.

Consider The University of Rochester Midnight Ramblers, Ithacappella, and the pockets of all-male groups that followed in covering Sarah McLachlan's "When She Loved Me." It's a beautiful song about the relationship between child and toy, written for *Toy Story 2*. Taken out of that context and put in the hands of an able all-male group, it's a no-less-powerful ballad of love lost, remembering a woman who once loved the singer, and presenting a sensitive male solo.

Other instances in which men can successfully cover women include ones like Rider University VocalMotion's take on Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide," in which the soloist's soaring vocals transcended the gender line—high, emotional, and rich enough to make you forget that he was translating at all.

And then there's the Lady Gaga phenomenon of 2010-2011, in which the majority of all-male groups in the western world decided it would be hilarious to cover Lady Gaga. To be fair, University of Oregon On the Rocks and a handful of their contemporaries chose these songs and performed them quite well—taking the music seriously, and letting the visuals go far enough to still acknowledge the inherently comic nature of what they were doing. Cool to an extent, but the problem remains that the concept got so overplayed that there was something ra-ra-ra-ra-wrong with guys covering Gaga. The moral of the story is that if an all-male group plays its cards right covering a female artist's song, it can be quite funny, but it's essential for such groups to recognize where originality transitions to a cliché.

In terms of women successfully covering men, there are a few routes through which it can work. Take what University of Oregon Divisi did in its iconic 2006 ICCA Finals set, in which the groups boldly took on Usher's "Yeah," performing it with every bit as much attitude as any male group ever could, or The Florida

State University AcaBelles' comparable treatment of Kanye West's "Gold Digger" in 2012. These are examples of all-female groups defying stereotypes and coming out with as much firepower as possible to engender shock and awe in an audience.

Another example of successful transition from male to female would be Brigham Young Noteworthy's take on Stevie Wonder's "Signed, Sealed, Delivered" at the 2007 ICCA Finals. Similar to Divisi and The AcaBelles, a lot of this song's success can be attributed to attitude and firepower, but beyond that, it's also an example when the vocals themselves were close enough to the original not to sound out of place, but were also distinct enough to remain interesting, and so make the gender crossover worth the audience's attention.

The other main way women make male songs work is by commandeering the songs for their own purposes. A prime example of this would be Carnegie Mellon University Counterpoints' 2011 take on Train's "Hey Soul Sister" in which the softer sound and precise clap percussion made the song decisively more feminine, and to a reasonable extent, appropriated the song as one about the bond between women as opposed to that between a man and a woman.

All in all, changing up the original gender of a song opens up a lot of options, but it's not something for groups to take lightly, or without thinking about what they hope to get out of the transition.

## Samples

Lots of group put an original spin on a song by imbedding a sample of another song within it. This can be as simple as inserting a single line from another song, to slipping in a full chorus and verse before you return to the first song.

Sampling can serve a number of purposes. It's a good way of breaking up a long song, and can even be used as a relatively subtle way to make an abrupt cut from one segment of a song to another—for example, to trim the piece for length, or to edit out a lengthy instrumental part. A good sample can rouse the audience and spotlight a different soloist. It can be funny. It can add layers of meaning to your performance. If a group matches up melodies and rhythms, it can underscore a neat musical connection between two pieces.

Samples fall short when groups throw them in just for the sake of having them there. We've all heard it. A song is going along swimmingly when, all at once, the group breaks into another song without thematic or musical purpose. Then, just as quickly, they bounce back to the original song. Sure, there's probably some logic to the transition—some inside joke among the group, or some obscure lyrical connection. But if you have to explain such reasoning to the audience, the odds are the connection itself isn't working in the first place.

Samples should be brief enough not to lose the thread of the main piece of music, and ideally there should be enough of a thematic connection to expand the narrative, and enough of a musical connection to make each transition smooth.

"But does a sample really need to be brief?" you may ask. "Couldn't we give more or less equal play to the songs, or broaden our strokes to three or four separate songs within one piece?" "You certainly could do such things," I would answer, "but then you're no longer talking about sampling so much as you're getting into the worlds of mashups and medleys."

## **Mashups and Medleys**

Medleys have been a part of the a cappella-verse for a very long time. Sometimes they're based on a time period (the '80s

are a popular choice); sometimes an artist (Michael Jackson provides some good fodder); sometimes a general theme (break up songs, anyone?).

Mashups are relatively recent addition to the a cappella lexicon, though, in truth, groups have been hitting on the central elements of them for decades. A mashup is less about combining a series of samples and more about intertwining and combining two songs, shifting between the two both abruptly and fluidly, and finding the common ground between the two.

Medleys and mashups share the benefits of allowing groups to exercise their creativity, in addition to packing a number of different styles, soloists, and musical moments into a compact period of performance time.

While these techniques are often quite useful, they can be utilized to a poor effect. You can take two excellent song choices, spotlight two distinct and uber-talented soloists, and offer up a combination of songs that few people would think to put together. The problem comes in when most people wouldn't think to put the songs together because there's no reason to put them together. Groups need to think about thematic connections as well as melodic ones, lest the group end up with an off-kilter, unsettling sound that never really takes off, and, worse yet, never really allows the audience to buy in.

For an example that worked, let's consider The Johns Hopkins University Octopodes' seamless integration of Katy Perry's "Firework" and Muse's "Starlight." Via some arranging magic, the melodies to these songs fit so surprisingly smoothly together that you could hardly tell there was a transition at all, save for the shifting soloists. Beyond that, there was an immediate visual connection between looking up at the night sky to see fireworks or starlight. Perhaps most brilliantly of all,



the group captures two different but complementary styles—at once appealing to the top 40 sensibilities of the audience that was still rocking out to “Firework” on the radio when they first performed this song, while also appealing to the less mainstream rock fans by interweaving the sounds of Muse (albeit from the pop-most end of their catalog). The results were almost universally appealing, and one of the most memorable package performances of 2011.

## Original Songs

Some groups put aside the question of who or what to cover, replacing it with the innovation of writing their own original songs.

Original songs in a cappella can be an interesting proposition. There are certain benefits. There’s no need to worry about figuring out how to adapt anything, or how to make a song work for the particular talents of your group when you’re writing directly for your group. In addition, one of the surest ways to make sure your song selections aren’t played is to pick songs that literally no one else in the world is singing. On top of all of this, on a somewhat tangential note, I have long held that if a cappella will ever break out as its own, independent genre, it will need original music of its own to do so, rather than depending on really good cover artists. And so, people who write original songs are each, in their own small ways, pushing a cappella forward.

Writing original songs—particularly for a cappella—is easier said than done, though. The amount of creative energy that goes into the process, when done well and at an advanced level, can far exceed the energy groups invest in translating preexisting songs to the a cappella format. With that in mind, it raises the important question of whether it’s worth a group’s while to concentrate so much on wholly original material.

If a group does elect to write its own songs, it's also opening itself up to the risk that people won't connect with what they're putting out there. When a group covers material, they already know the fan base to which they're appealing—when they cover Lady Gaga, they know that song has millions of fans already; when they cover Bob Dylan, they know there's a gradation of respect for the music they're taking into their hands. Original songs don't have track records or pre-established audiences. When they succeed, they give a group tremendous potential to make a name for itself. Audiences tend to connect most readily with songs that they already know and love, though, so performing a less than sensational original song will often make for an uphill battle for a group trying to win over its audience.

## Conclusion

As we have illustrated throughout this chapter, song selection can go a long way toward defining a group. As such, there exists no objective right or wrong path to choose, but rather best fits for a group's talents, and best routes through which a group can arrive at the ends it is trying to achieve. And so, when it comes time to add new songs to your group's repertoire, be sure to think about who's making those decisions and why, how song selections will complement one another, which talents they will showcase, and just where those song selections will lead the group as it moves forward.



## Chapter 4: Arranging



Evan Feist is a successful professional arranger for a cappella groups.

If an a cappella performance were a human body, the arrangement would be the skeleton. Before you apply the nuances of what's unique about your individual group members, you have the on-paper plan to build from—around which to shape everything from your fat to your muscles to your hair to your skin tone.

To the casual observer, the arrangement is invisible. We focus on the soloist; the vocal percussionist and the basses get our head bobbing; the harmonies from the sopranos, altos, and tenors create the illusion of instrumentation.

The audience hears and sees the product of a group's work—the performance stage. It's easy to forget the importance of the plan—the basis around which an a cappella group carries out all of its actions.

An arrangement is the blue print from which a group builds. It's the plot for the story a group tells its audience. In this chapter, we explore key points and best practices in arranging a cappella music.

## Know Your Group

Let's clear up one misconception from the get-go—there is no such thing as a universally good arrangement. Complex? Thoughtful? Interesting? Yes, yes, yes, these things are all possible. But as compelling as an arrangement may be on paper, it will only turn out as good as the group executing it.

Think about the make up of your group. Do you have an overwhelming number of altos? Does the volume level for your basses range from loud to super-duper loud? Do you have members who get lost when their part doesn't hook around every eight beats?

In the end, you know your group's strengths and limitations, and while all of your members should always strive toward improvement and adaptability, there does also come a point when you need to be realistic about whether your group has the voices and skills to carry a given arrangement, or the attention to detail to pull off the nuances that make it great.

An ideal arrangement is going to be specific to any given group, and that arrangement should be designed to highlight what everyone does best and mask your group's deficiencies.

## Keep It Interesting

Despite the fact that some group members will struggle to

memorize their parts, or might get lost when they have too much to keep track of, you also have to be sensitive to the fact that no one wants to sing a monotone “ba-da-da-ba” for four minutes straight.

You can't spread out the solo or the melody for every song, but you can consider what sort of syllable changes or variations in tone you can employ to keep everyone interested. A reasonably challenging, if not difficult arrangement will give struggling group members something to aspire to, and will keep more advanced folks engaged in the process.

If you can't make every song interesting for every group member, you should at least consider how you can diversify your arrangements to the point that everyone has at least one or two songs to look forward to in a given show. This sort of balance will boost morale and at least give different group members a handful of moments in which to shine.

Keep in mind that if singers get bored, it might transcend sound and affect how they look on stage. No one wants to see the group member who slouches, rolls his eyes, and exaggeratedly bobs his head to the music without rhyme or reason. This sort of projection—conscious or not—gets distracting to an audience, and can really hurt a group's overall presentation.

## Arrange with a Purpose

Too often when people arrange they're just putting notations down on a sheet of paper. An arranger needs to think about her purpose in putting together a piece of music.

Are you singing a Barenaked Ladies lick that's supposed to be funny?

Is it a Tori Amos song that's supposed to make the audience edgy?

Are you arranging a doo-whop song to appeal to an older audience over Parent's Weekend?

In the case of the Barenaked Ladies song, you probably don't want gritty, sudden sounds that are going to grate on the audience. For the Tori Amos song you probably don't want to throw in a comical little syllabic jab to poke fun at the rival school's mascot, just because it fits your rhythmic pattern. For the old-fashioned Parent's Weekend tune, it's not going to make a lot of sense to radically re-imagine the structure of the piece if the very purpose of the song is to set an older demographic at ease and entertain them for a few minutes.

Your purpose in arranging need not be the same as the original song writer's intentions, though that's often a useful starting point. Think about what the song means to you, or to your group, and think about what sort of sounds, syllables, and words reflect that meaning. Consider picking out the lyrics that you think really define the larger song, and focus on them to develop your theme.

Think about whether the arrangement allows the group to sound hard when it wants to rock, or soft enough on a ballad. It's OK to break convention from time to time, but make sure that you're pursuing that intentionally as well. In the end, arranging with purpose is all about not settling for what's easy or the first thing that comes to mind, but rather thinking about how every moment of that arrangement is going to feed into a bigger message.

## The Layered Effect

Take two groups, give them the same song, and the arrangement can provoke remarkably different reactions from the audience.

Consider the case of Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for A Hero," as it was performed at the 2011 ICCA Finals. Both

all-male Midwestern champions The Washington University Stereotypes and European Champions Cadenza performed the song. Both groups spotlighted talented soloists. Both groups employed a bit of humor and a bit of choreography. The overall sound of each group was quite strong—undeniably worthy of the Finals.

The difference lies in the arrangement. Listen to Cadenza's version, and you hear the high parts singing whole notes in perfect time with perfect intonation, and the occasional dramatic roll or echo of the lyrics from the basses. Listen to The Stereotypes' version and, well, it's really hard to immediately define just what you're hearing.

There's something to be said for clarity of sound, but in a cappella, it's often not in your best interest to have each part sound quite so recognizable. You want to hear variation amongst the group, and variation between what each part is doing over the course of the song. And if you can execute all of that at real speed, it's all the more impressive. Throw in some dramatic choices of when the instrumentation falls out, when the group goes choral, and where the dynamics make their swings, and it will allow your group to tell a far more compelling story.

In the end, it's about layers. Synergize enough disparate parts and the audience won't be able to focus on exactly what it's hearing. This effect, when accomplished correctly, won't lose the audience, but rather draw them in all the further because they'll stop consciously thinking about the music in favor of experiencing your performance. The strongest arrangements are often those that no one recognizes when the group is singing, but rather that people only notice after they're done hearing it the first time, and work backwards to analyze what they heard.



## Think Differently

A cappella groups rarely thrive when they act as cover bands without instruments. The essence of cover bands is imitation and approximation; recreating great music with the fundamental understanding that, no, we're not as good as the original artist. Few and far between are the cover bands that do anything fresh and new with the pre-existing material.

The translation of a song to a cappella does carry with it some inherent ingenuity. After all, an a cappella group can't simply strum the same chords on a guitar and hit drums in the same rhythm. There is a creative process that comes with the transference from instrument to human voice. But why stop there? Innovative arrangements are a big part of what stands to separate a cappella from quirky imitation to a legit art form in its own right.

Consider tweaking the execution of a song. In 2007, the SUNY Albany Earth Tones arranged an interesting version of Counting Crows' "Accidentally In Love" in which they slowed down the intro and sang it all chorally. Within seconds, much of the crowd recognized the song for its lyrics and the off-tempo melody. This made the song fundamentally more interesting than a straight cover. It also built anticipation for the moment when the guys launched full speed into a more conventional contemporary a cappella take on the song.

On the topic of adjusting tempo and dynamics, a wise group will consider how it can truly make a song its own. The group will arrange in such a way to make the song function well in the a cappella format and cater to the voices available. Consider the 2011 Florida State University AcaBelles, with their cover of Katy Perry's "Firework." The original song features Perry yelling her way through verses and screaming

the chorus against a backdrop of production effects that mask blemishes and elevate the instrumentation to match her at every turn. The many groups that translated Perry's work in literal fashion ended up yelling at their audiences and threatening to run out of gas by the end of the second verse, before the song gets *really* big. The AcaBelles, meanwhile, demonstrated the wisdom to speed up and get big on the choruses while restraining themselves on the verses, stretching syllables and lowering their voices. All of this culminated when they sent sparks flying on a true musical climax in the final chorus of the song.

What The AcaBelles accomplished transcended musicality, into the realm of dramatic presentation, which is another fine item for a group to consider when arranging. Over the last decade, there has probably been no group better at arranging for dramatic effect than the University of Southern California So-Cal VoCals. The best example of this came in 2010 when their rendering of "Crazy Ever After" by The Rescues included not just fine harmonies but rotating soloists that kept the crowd engaged and communicated the broader, conflicted tone of the song. An arrangement that does more than simulate instruments and engage the audience, but actually tells a story in and of itself via its own execution allows a group to most earnestly make a song uniquely its own.

When a group wants to innovate, it's worth considering what new sound effects the group might accomplish. There may be no stronger example of this than Northwestern University Purple Haze's take on the I Fight Dragons' interpretation of Imogen Heap's "The Process." The song is laced with a neat synthesizer effect that resembles something out of a video game, which makes it among the last songs you would reasonably expect to hear executed well a cappella. And yet the

group made it work, singing remarkable trills that were cool in live performance, and borderline awe-inspiring in recording with the help of some post-production techniques. This is an example of a group letting its imagination run wild and trying something genuinely different from what anyone else has put out there.

On the note of experimenting and creating new sounds, it's important to keep in mind that not every product is going to be a gem. I know of an all-female group that had two members spend weeks on an arrangement of Coldplay's "The Scientist" that was intended to be a heart-wrenching ballad to anchor their spring performance sets and showcase a star soloist. On paper it looked great. In practice? Even the soloist was bored to tears and the group never ended up performing the song live. There are two important lessons to be learned from this example. First, don't be afraid to scrap what isn't working—if your group doesn't like it, what on earth makes you think that a more objective audience will? Second, don't stop trying. Put your failed experiments behind you, salvage what you can, and keep plowing forward.

## **Arrangements from outside the current group**

Earlier in this chapter, we discussed the benefits of arranging to your group's strengths, and knowing the individual talents and abilities at play to best contour a song for your group's purposes. Achieving such nuanced results in arrangement is, of course, more difficult when your arranger is not a part of the group.

So why do people accept arrangements from outside parties? Sometimes it's a matter of necessity. When a fledgling group takes shape, the founding members might not have the time or the know-how to put together more than one or

two very basic arrangements. If a group has assembled for the purposes of competing, or has committed to a high profile engagement in its infancy, there is some understandable pressure to look for outside help.

Even for groups that are not so new, it's difficult to resist the lure of a sleek, professional arrangement. After all, if someone is arranging for living, her breadth of experience probably means she can whip something up that will be suitable enough for your group, and with a level of complexity your own group members wouldn't come up with on their own.

Another popular, and more affordable option is for alumni to contribute arrangements. Sometimes this happens amidst a rebuilding period, when a long-time musical director steps down and the group needs time to find itself; other times, it's a built-in part of the tradition and culture of the group for alumni to stay involved in submitting arrangements long after their college days have passed. Alumni arrangements often carry with them many of the benefits of professional arrangements in terms of the experience level of the arranger, as well as some of the benefits of a current group member arranging, as an alum will have an inherent sense of the group's identity and, depending on how recently she left the group, a sense of the voices at hand.

And so, there are some obvious benefits to pulling arrangements from outside the group. There remain, however, reasons not to get too dependent on people outside the current membership. In addition to the aforementioned argument about current members knowing the group best, there's also the principle of allowing the current group to shape its own identity. An alumni arranger may love Lady Gaga long after anyone in the current group thinks she's cool. A professional arranger may not have a sense of what sort of fun syllable play

you could use to reflect the identity of your school. All in all, one of the unique features of any student organization is that it almost always undergoes major changes at least once in a four-year period on a simple basis of membership turnover. Student organizations are living, evolving things, and while it's good to remember and learn from the past, groups should strive to keep defining themselves in the present.

Beyond the way in which arrangements forge a group's identity, there's also a matter of sustainability. Groups too dependent on professional and alumni arrangements stand to work themselves into a hole where, should the money run out, or should a prolific alum get too busy to write for the group anymore, they could be left without a steering wheel. Current group members need to have a part in the arrangement process both for the present day, and so that they can later become the alumni who submit arrangements. Groups that don't think about the future are doomed to one day regret it.

## Conclusion

Arrangements tend to form the backbone of a group, determining how complex the group sounds, whether and how the group innovates, how the individual talents will have an opportunity to shine, and in what directions the group will evolve over the passage of time. There are plenty of bells and whistles that contribute to a cappella performance, and we discuss many of them over the course of this book. Few elements are as fundamental to a group's success as how it arranges.

## Chapter 5: Solos



Forte, a mixed a cappella group at Centerville High School in Ohio.

When it comes to a cappella performance, nothing stands out more than the solo. Sure, you need the whole group to work hard, harmonize, and create a cohesive visual presentation in order for a song to really pop. But the soloist stands up front. The soloist has the lyrics. More often than not, the soloist will have more eyes and ears on her part than anyone else on stage at any given moment of a song. With so much riding on the shoulders of just this one group member, groups that hope to succeed need to place a premium on getting their soloists

right. For their part, soloists need to think about what they will do to thrive in their positions.

## Texture and Character

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking your best soloist is the group member who can belt the loudest. Sure, there's something to be said for the fresh-out-of-gospel-choir diva, or the guy who can make himself heard over the rest of the group, no mic required. But big, and big alone, will only get you so far.

What can be far more compelling than sheer volume is *texture*. Texture is that intangible quality that just makes a voice sound interesting. It's the human quality that transcends digital effects—beyond pure talent, it's what makes Michael Stipe's or Regina Spektor's voices immediately recognizable and pleasurable to hear. A voice with a unique tone makes the audience lean in and want to listen more carefully, rather than leaning back as the power of the voice washes over them.

It's also worth considering how a soloist works his individual dynamics. Most anyone can sing at the same audio level for three minutes. What takes real skill is to carefully, purposefully, modulate one's tone and sound output. The quiet moments draw the listener in and build anticipation. The loud moments really pop when they've been built to—when they stand out against the contrasting sound that led to that point. In short, variation in a soloists dynamics keeps the listener interested and engaged, rather than allowing the listener's mind to wander amidst a familiar melody and set of lyrics.

Between dynamics and texture, the soloist has the ability to make a song her own. As we've already discussed, the soloist is the individual the audience will most naturally gravitate toward from both an oral and visual perspective, and so that person has a great deal of power to enforce her will upon a song. A

great soloist does not so much imitate a recording as she takes the words, the melody, and the rhythm and makes them all her own, projecting her own voice and her own attitude.

When it comes to attitude, a soloist needs to consider how he looks on stage. What is the soloist doing with his hands? Is he clutching the mic with both of them? Will it be distracting if he switches the mic from hand-to-hand throughout the song? If his hands are in his pockets does he look too casual? Are his hands hanging limp at the sides, and does that just awkward? Great soloists think about every motion they will make—lifting their arms as they ascend toward their power notes, reaching out to convey yearning, folding their hands behind their backs if the song calls for them to appear prim and proper. The best part is, if a soloist is truly firing on all cylinders, the audience probably won't even notice the hands—everything will look and sound so natural the audience won't be able to imagine that the performance even could be executed any other way.

Beyond hands, soloists also need to think about if or how they'll work the stage; how they'll interact with other group members, and how they'll communicate with the audience. Through all of this, the universal truth remains that the soloist is not just a singer, but a thespian. A soloist who can project confidence, fear, joy, sorrow, or any emotion in between, in line with the needs of the song, will capture the imagination of the audience, and go a long way toward carrying the larger group to success.

## Surprises

Some of the most satisfying solos are those that most surprise us. Most spectators have preconceived notions about a cappella, and more particularly about the group at hand when they come



to a show. A strong soloist holds a unique potential to exceed, circumnavigate, or blow right through such expectations.

One way in which a soloist can surprise the audience is by transcending expectations. In this day and age, we all expect for groups to break out a handful of ballads in any given show. We expect the soloists on these songs to have pretty voices, and we expect to start looking at our watches a minute-thirty in to see how much longer we have to wait before we can start tapping our feet to the vocal percussion again. But great solo performances can grab and retain our attention for the full three-to-four minutes of a slow song. It's the guy who steals your heart, leading you to believe, at least for the time of the performance, that he actually is in love, or actually is heartbroken. It's the woman who appears genuinely vulnerable to the point that you forget it's an act and just *hear* her song until the applause at the end break that fictive dream. In each of these cases, it's a matter of executing what the audience expects so well that they forget they expected it in the first place.

The other main form of surprising the audience with a solo is the more obvious, more literal undermining of preconceptions. For whatever reason, audience members are still preconditioned to believe that little people will have little voices. So what do you do? Let your loudest little girl rip that audience a new one. Audiences also tend to expect a cappella soloists to flat out sing; but what of rapping? If you have a soloist with the chops, such a performance can truly electrify an audience.

So much ground has already been covered in a cappella that you might fool yourself into thinking there's no room left for surprises. Keep challenging convention, though, and you may surprise yourself with what your soloists can innovate this time around.

## Ten solos that are just right

There's no one right way to make a solo work, and so, in order to illustrate the myriad ways in which great performers have made songs their own and thrived in the spotlight, we will spend the remainder of this chapter reviewing ten uniquely outstanding solos in collegiate a cappella from the last few years.

*“Coming Home” by Northwestern University Purple Haze*  
American Idol alum John Park delivered a soul-wrenching solo for this John Legend song at the 2010 ICCA Finals. When you talk about an artist's unique tone, you're just hoping for an undercurrent of sound the likes of which Park delivers—smooth, but rich; perfectly reserved to lead up to the big moments of the song.

This performance makes perfect use of an artist's control, tone, and character, and marks a wonderful song selection for a vocalist like Park to take the lead on—slow and steady enough to let him operate and show his chops; not so much a love song, but a song that represents mixed emotions of a weary traveler with the promise of returning to the point where the journey began. Only a truly capable soloist can pull all of these strings together to forge a coherent and compelling narrative. Park brought down the house with this one.

### *“What a Good Boy” by The Yale Dukemen*

Sam Tsui became an Internet sensation over the course of his college career, but this performance as the front man in the 2009 ICCA Finals confirmed him as a bona fide live performance superstar. I remember not caring for Tsui at the song's opening, finding his diction too precise, his overall sound too clean on the first verse for an a cappella group that's trying to sound contemporary.

The magic happened as the song carried on, though, and reached its climax when Tsui lowered his voice to its softest level. It would have been easy for Tsui to have belted, or to have just looked forlorn. But when he reprised the opening lyrics about when the narrator of the song was born, his voice positively dripped with emotion, sounding not unlike a modern day Michael Jackson. When you can synergize a capacity for soaring vocals with dramatic choices and pure acting chops, you have the potential to unleash a truly exemplary solo.

### *“Halo” by Berklee College of Music Pitch Slapped*

In 2010, Pitch Slapped stood up and forced the a cappella world to take notice with their run to the ICCA Finals that would, in turn kick start the magical year to follow that, including an appearance on *The Sing-Off* and an actual ICCA championship. But where the group first made a claim to greatness was amidst a cover of Beyonce’s “Halo,” the middle song of their 2010 ICCA set.

As good as the group was, there’s no denying the sheer importance of soloist Hannah Juliano. Herein, we discover the value of the soloist arranging the song. Juliano generated a version of the song that matched her group’s talents brilliantly, most notably fitting her own lead vocals perfectly. Juliano’s voice is grittier than Beyonce’s and she made some bold decisions about how to build her sound as the song moved along, starting soft, getting bigger, then positively exploding on the song’s finish. Ballads need not be boring, and this is a textbook example of how a charismatic and uber-talented soloist can make a song positively pop.

### *“It’s So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday” by The SUNY Potsdam Pointercounts*

In 2010, all-male powerhouse The Potsdam Pointercounts

put together a somewhat uneven set. The group's middle song proved strong enough to keep the group in contention for every accolade, though, and some would argue, put them in contention for a trip to the ICCA Finals. As good as the guys were in general, it was soloist Jordan Davidson who truly lifted the group on his shoulders and carried them as far as he could go.

On the start of the song, Davidson's voice threatened to sound a bit too classical for contemporary a cappella, but he used that tone to wonderful effect as the song went on, generating an impossibly big sound without ever wavering one bit off pitch. No, The Pointercounts did not replicate the R&B chic of Boyz II Men, but instead made the song their own, and made it genuinely moving in their own right.

### *"Not Ready to Make Nice" by Florida State University All Night Yahtzee*

This 2008 stunner is a strong piece on almost every level, but the solo itself is simply off the charts. Kristen Owen's voice dripped with the *feelings* of the narrator throughout the first verse, just hinting at the power to come. As the song hit the bridge, she demonstrated incredible poise and breath control, positively ripping through a very fast, very big segment of the solo, while still restraining enough to pop again on the final chorus.

Cooler yet, Owens arrived at the end of this solo with the control to rein things back in to the same level of quiet emotional restraint with which she started—not out of breath, not wavering on any notes, but perfectly in synch with the music she was producing, and clearly making perfect, conscious decisions with how she sang every moment of this lead vocal.

### *"Sir Duke" by University of Delaware Vocal Point*

In 2007, Vocal Point delivered a solid set, out of which this

particular piece stood out due to a superstar quality solo from Alfredo Austin. Austin's silky smooth vocal stylings were every bit up to the task of covering Stevie Wonder, and better yet he demonstrated remarkable stage presence for a college student.

Few collegiate soloists have the chops to sound like they're truly professionals—Austin had that covered. Fewer yet have the swagger to look like they could just as easily be fronting a major label band as an a cappella group—Austin looked 100 percent at home leading the charge on this one and demonstrated how a combination of talent, professionalism and attitude from one special performer can make an entire group pop in the ears and eyes of the audience.

### *“Dream On” by Rutgers University Casual Harmony*

In the spring of 2005, less than a year after the group had first formed, Casual Harmony entered the ICCAs. They were runners up in the first round, and in a tournament quirk unique to that year, had the opportunity to compete in an afternoon qualifier round to make it to the regional championships. The boys from Rutgers not only performed well enough to earn a spot in the night-time regional finals, but performed so strongly that they were a close first runner-up to make it all the way to the ICCA Finals.

How did the fledgling underdogs advance so far? The answer—as embodied by “Dream On” soloist Patrick Bridge—was pure desire and determination. Don't get me wrong, Bridge was a strong soloist to begin with, but watching the solo on this particular night, his passion was almost palpable, belting lyrics about dreams as the group swelled behind him. One got the impression that the guys were very genuinely chasing a dream in this competition and that Bridge, in particular, refused to fall short for lack of effort. This selec-

tion was less polished than others on this list, but probably the most inspiring entry of all.

*“Ready for Love” by The Syracuse University Mandarin*s

In the 2004 ICCAs, India.Arie ballad “Ready for Love” proved to be the musical and emotional anchor for The Mandarin’s run to the ICCA Finals. “Ready for Love” is a deep, slow, passionate song that unfortunately has a lot of potential to put a restless audience to sleep. A stirring arrangement, and nice dynamic variations contributed to this particular rendition’s success, but the most important piece of the puzzle by far was Rachel Roy’s solo.

Roy proved soulful, emotional and confident in all the right proportions. Her eyes never flicked to the sides, she never looked unsure of where to place her hands. Instead, every note came across textured and clean, and Roy appeared in complete control of her every motion, imposing her will on the audience, desperately reaching to the audience with a twinge of theatrical restraint. The level of emotion and commitment spells all the difference between a snoozer and a tearjerker, and this solo provided The Mandarin with what was arguably their most compelling tearjerker in group history.

*“Landslide” by Rider University VocalMotion*

When you have a soloist with a scintillating, clean vocal quality, it can be difficult to find the appropriate song to showcase his abilities. Picking a ballad will help, to give him some fermatas in which to operate; finding the complementary harmonies will help showcase what he’s doing; putting the song toward the middle of a show will help the solo stand out in contrast to those songs before and after it.

At the 2011 ICCA Mid-Atlantic Semifinals, VocalMotion put all these pieces together to provide a showcase for Richard Crandle to own the stage. When we think of exceptional male solos, we so often think of big, belting songs, or the occasional super-slick serenade. This selection didn't quite meet either preconception, instead, delivering a soft, reflective song in which Crandle had the opportunity to sing simply and beautifully, stunning the crowd into silence.

### *“School of Rock” by Ithaca College Ithacappella*

Throughout this list, we've made allusions to the traditional male showman with a big voice and big attitude to match. It just wouldn't be fair to go through this entire list without at least one nod to one such performer. In the spring of 2007, Ithacappella's Garrett Deming embodied everything that such a performance can and should be about, unleashing unparalleled energy and confidence for a wickedly fun rendering of “School of Rock.”

One of the coolest things about this performance was the way in which Deming broke the fourth wall, venturing off stage and into the crowd to interact with the audience while he belted the lyrics, channeling a bit of Jack Black without ever losing his sense of himself as a vocal talent and as an entertainer. A cappella just doesn't get much more fun than this.

## Conclusion

The soloist sings the most noticeable, recognizable piece of most songs. There's no one right way in which to execute a solo—so much of it depends on the song itself and an individual soloist's talents. Nonetheless, it does remain a universal truth that the best soloists make songs their own, deliver a unique sound, and interweave the visual and audio elements

of what they do in order to deliver a performance experience that captures both the spirit of the song and the imagination of the audience. Though the backing sound is far more important and complex than casual fans may notice, the solo remains one of the key difference makers between a song audience members will or will not remember, and will or will not like.





## Chapter 6: Vocal Percussion

Vocal percussion, and particularly beat boxing, has developed a following all its own in recent years. Whether it's street performers, guys like Blake Lewis infusing songs with rhythm on platforms like *American Idol*, or percussionists squaring off in drum-offs during the deliberations at ICCA shows, the art of percussion is entertaining on its own, and a key component of many successful a cappella ensembles.

But what separates the bad from the serviceable and the good from the great? In this chapter, we explore key principles in vocal percussion, what mouth drummers should think about when they practice, and the visual presentation of vocal percussionists.

### Principles

Part of what makes effective vocal percussion a challenge is that many of the best practices therein are such radical departures from what your instincts and normal life experiences might lead you to do. We've talked with a number of successful vocal percussionists and synergized their wisdom with our own observations to develop a handful of principles for the drummer to keep in mind.

First and foremost, don't be afraid to spit. We know what your mother told you about how impolite it is to spit and we recognize that there's a real chance you might look gross sprinkling saliva on the microphone, but that doesn't change the

fact that you've just got to go for it. Forget about how you look. More often than not, the crowd shouldn't even notice a good vocal percussionist—fans will be too wrapped up with the solo and the choreography to even recognize the beat, much less to consciously watch the drummer. And so, do not worry about looking foul. Worry about sounding great, keeping the beat, projecting, and pounding out your best approximation of any number of percussion instruments.

Also bear in mind that it's to your advantage to hold the microphone close to your mouth. Many percussionists move the mic away not only because they want to get less of their spit on it (points for clearing that first hurdle!) but for fear that they'll be too loud and overpower the group. While it's a fair concern, this is where a percussionist needs to have faith in the sound technicians. Any sound technician with a clue of how to cover a cappella will monitor the levels and adjust mic output accordingly to make things balance out. Great percussionists master numerous different nuanced sounds in order to get their parts right. When you move the mic away from your mouth, you risk losing so much of that detail, such that all the audience really gets is a dull, metronomic thud.

But what do you do if your inner metronome goes awry, or you have mic problems, or you can feel the group slipping away despite your best efforts? Most performers hold that showmanship and stage presence are half the battle in any performance situation. A vocal percussionist will therefore, be best served to keep trucking along, maybe letting her sound fade out for a second to recollect herself, but continuing to move and keep the mic steady such that only the most keen listeners in the crowd will recognize the audible difference of the lack of percussion. The fact is, most people in a collegiate a cappella audience aren't going to be music experts themselves, so don't be afraid to hide

an error with some smoke and mirrors—the crowd, on the whole, probably won't recognize the difference.

Once you've gotten over your fear of spitting and have mastered mic technique and stage presence, consider branching out to new forms of a cappella. Let's consider The Binghamton Crosbys who have made a name for themselves every bit as much as for their power chords as for their propensity for body percussion—clapping, slapping their chests and stomping their feet. Body percussion is loud and powerful coming from just one person, and if the group can synch up some moves, it offers up an awesome sound, in addition to a really cool visual.

Beyond body percussion, consider what else you might do with your mouth. In 2011, Brigham Young University Vocal Point came to the ICCA Finals equipped with more than just the usual vocal drum kit, but vocal wood blocks and maracas to really spice up the sound on Michael Buble's "Meglio Stasera." If you're having trouble thinking of new sounds that will rouse the crowd and give you room to experiment, consider watching Stomp Live and writing down what implements of percussion most interest you. Then practice, practice, practice making those sounds.

Speaking of practice, that brings us to our next section.

## Practice

Like most skills worth learning, vocal percussion is one that you will get better at through practice.

Persistence, in and of itself, is not enough. In order for practice to be worthwhile, it needs to be directional. While some folks have a natural aptitude for vocal percussion, most of us need to be taught. If there's someone in your group or at your school who really knows how to do it, don't be afraid to

ask for guidance, exercises, and pointers on technique. If you can't find a mentor in person, start scouring the web. There's no shortage of YouTube tutorials to get you started. Otherwise, identify those percussionists who you admire most from the collegiate scene and get in touch with them. While some will balk at helping a stranger, you'd be pleasantly surprised by just how many drummers will be flattered you reached out to them, and excited to share their advice. Figure out the proper form, *then* start drilling to bring yourself fully up to speed.

Once you know how to practice, think about what different sounds you want to make. Identify the core sounds that are important to you—consider the snare drum, the kick drum, and the high hat for starters. Once you have three distinct sounds for those three distinct instruments you'll be well on your way to diversifying your vocal drum kit, and will have enough range that you can cover (or at least fudge) more percussion parts. Then start thinking about how you can diversify even further, whether it's your vocal tambourine, timpani, gong, or aluminum trash can.

In addition to both mastering and innovating sounds, you'll need to think about the practical application of your percussion skills. It's great that you can make an authentic snare sound, but can you keep the rhythm with it? For how long? One of the most important parts of practice is thinking about breath control and how you'll keep up your sound over the course of a two-to-four minute song. Practice will help both from the standpoint of physical conditioning, and in terms of figuring out when you will have time to breathe, or when you can slip those breaths in without anyone noticing, and pick right back up with the beat.

## Visual Presentation

Once you've mastered your sounds, your rhythm, your technique, and your stamina, the next phase worth thinking about is how you look on stage when you're drumming.

If there's one rule I would like to get across to drummers everywhere, it would be not to isolate themselves. I can't count the number of times I've seen groups perform a perfectly ordinary song perfectly well, only for it to stick out in my memory just because the percussionist stood anywhere from a few feet to several *yards* away from the rest of the group. Does the drummer have a contagious disease? Does he smell bad? Is he really claustrophobic? Unless the answer to one or more of these questions is yes, there's no reason for the percussionist to be so far removed from the rest of the ensemble.

Isolating the drummer diminishes group cohesion. It's fine if the drummer doesn't always participate in the choreography, but otherwise, there's so little reason for this person to actively stand apart from everyone else. A good rule of thumb is that if you're dividing the audience's attention, you should do so purposefully. It often makes sense for a soloist to wander and work the stage, because the soloist is so often the featured performer of a song, at least on a superficial level. There are some occasions when a percussionist may be featured, like when a song includes a truly noteworthy drum solo, or is introducing a novel percussion sound, or if the drummer's part stands out for some other reason. Otherwise, though, the best percussionists are heard but not seen.

When a drummer does get the spotlight, it's worth considering how to make it worth the audience's while. First off, it probably goes without saying that only a good percussionist should get a drum solo. The world has been exposed to enough beat boxers now that second rate work when the

spotlight is on the drummer can make the entire group look bush league.

In addition to the quality of the drummer, consider how the percussionist will look to the audience. Will the drummer groove his way across the stage, or stay right where he started? Will he smile at the crowd or just stay in the zone? Consider the controversial example of The University of Georgia Accidentals' drummer who went so far to do a standing back flip mid-drum solo to wow the crowd at the 2010 ICCA Finals. Most folks lauded the effort; some purists knocked the flip as showy and unmusical. The truth is, there's very little black and white or right and wrong when it comes to a beat boxer's showmanship. The key is to have a purpose in mind and execute based upon that purpose.

Along the theme of how to use the spotlight, there's a legit question of how a percussionist should present herself when drumming an ordinary part. Many percussionists pantomime drumming with one or both hands—(Naturally 7's Warren Thomas goes so far as to sit himself down in front of an imaginary drum kit and go to town). Others hold the mic in one hand, and let the free hand hang loose, or plant it in a pocket. Again, there's not a surefire strategy for success, but the drummer should think about whether she wants to closely synthesize the physical drum experience, look casual, look intense, or fall somewhere in between.

## Conclusion

You might notice that this is the shortest chapter of this book, and that's in large part because percussion is such a physical act—it's hard to write about and hard to conceptualize without doing it. Get your principles down, learn technique, practice, and polish how your percussion looks before you take it on

stage. Get all of this taken care of and you'll be prepared to provide your group with its rhythmic backbone for many-a-song to come.





## Chapter 7: Visual Presentation



Buck That!, an all-male a cappella group out of Ohio State.

A cappella groups are, first and foremost, musical ensembles. With this in mind, plenty of groups consider visual presentation an afterthought. Case in point, when The A Cappella Blog surveyed 300 collegiate groups in the fall of 2010, 53 percent of groups indicated that they do not regularly choreograph their performances.

We'll get back to choreography specifically. First, let's touch upon a more general point: we live in a visual culture. It's an age old theory that Franklin Delano Roosevelt would not have

been elected president in 1932 were TV prevalent then and were people able to see the level to which he depended upon a wheelchair for mobility.

FDR got by on the power of his words and ideas; on his reputation and his leadership. In a perfect world these are probably the exact qualities we should prioritize in the leader of the free world. But human beings are not so objective or good at prioritization. We care about the full package.

Let's transition to the music world. When you think about the most popular musical acts of the last twenty years, you simply can't divorce what people see from what they hear. Consider the top female solo artists. You've got Madonna, who without question paired music with captivating imagery, and, most prominently sex. "Like a Prayer" is a prime example of this. Sure, the songs itself is quite lovely. But add in a music video that includes violence, a burning cross, and religious imagery intertwined with interracial sexual energy and you have something downright iconic. Skip ahead a generation, and you have Britney Spears selling records off of "... Baby One More Time." It's a catchy pop ditty, but there's little question Britney's people made it a hit by dressing her in a Catholic schoolgirl outfit for the music video. Skip ahead another generation, and Lady Gaga has taken visual imagery to a whole new level with dresses made of everything from bubbles to meat. Across the decades, pop singers with a radio-friendly music have developed their "it factors" based on their visual presentations.

Bringing us back to a cappella, whether a group is performing live or people are watching songs on YouTube, it's far more likely for a cappella to be consumed through a visual medium than a simple sound recording. And so, it's essential for groups to think about their visual presentation. From attire, to the use of props, to stage presence, to full-on chore-

ography, we live in a visual culture and groups are going to be evaluated on how they look when they perform.

## Attire

The way in which performers dress says a great deal about their group. Clothes are expressive of a group's level of professionalism, its attitude, its style, its maturity, and more.

Take groups like The Yale Duke's Men or the UPenn Counterparts. These groups each have a tradition of formal wear—full tuxedos and evening gowns. One step removed from this, you get groups like Ithaca College Ithacappella with ties and blue blazers—not quite the black-tie-only look, but nonetheless, professional. The look is undeniably sharp and cohesive. It tells everyone these groups are serious about what they do and that the group is well-equipped to sing at a formal banquet or university event (talk to our booking manager after the show...). Furthermore, if there are parents or grandparents in the audience for a given show, this style of dress makes an a cappella group look polished and proper—no need to make excuses afterward or get self-conscious.

There are limitations to formalwear in a cappella, though. Sure, a tux is more likely to get you invited to the chancellor's fundraising event. But what about the gig in a dorm lounge or at the popular pizza place off campus? What about the arch sings, in which groups perform outdoors and any old passerby becomes the audience? The professional attire doesn't preclude any of these opportunities, but it does set up a wall between the group and its audience. Groups in business or formal attire are not the ones you envision hanging out with, or who you actively think of as cool. If anything, this style of dress may reinforce stereotypes about a cappella groups being nerdy and taking themselves too seriously.

As a counterpoint, there are groups like The SUNY Potsdam Pointercounts whose uniform consists of a white Pointercounts baseball jersey and jeans. These guys have the look and the aura of a sports team—high energy, fun, exciting. Such a group looks no more out of place at the after-party than they did onstage. And no, based on their look, they might not be the first group to get selected to perform at a formal event. But the clothes do provide an approachability factor that makes them more accessible than their formal counterparts. And so, a spectator might approach them on the spot to set up a performance, rather than navigating more formal channels.

All of the aforementioned groups share in common the choice to adopt a uniform look. This may be the most fundamental part of setting up a group's attire. Sure, there's a place for individuality—costumes for a Halloween show or a looser pattern like just asking everyone to wear black or to wear funny t-shirts for a one-off show in an informal venue. But in general, developing a cohesive, consistent look is central to developing a common identity. Sure, groups should be known first and foremost for their musical proficiency, but a signature piece of garb that folks recognize all around campus goes a long way toward making a group memorable.

One particularly good bit of costuming is that of Syracuse University Orange Appeal. The guys consistently wear black collared shirts and jeans. On top of that, everyone wears a tie and a pair of Converse All-Star sneakers, but the latter two bits of attire are up to each individual to pick the color and style. Former director Malcom Merriweather described this approach to the dressing the group as "finding uniformity in individuality." The resulting look is distinctive, hip, semi-formal, and yet casual enough to fit in. It's never really out of place, but always stands out.

Along a similar thread, the 2006 incarnation of Brigham Young University Noteworthy—that year's ICCA champions, adopted a similar look with black collared shirts and jeans, and uniform pink undershirts and bright green ties. The group presented a similar chic, semiformal look, but took things one step further by making their attire a conscious part of the set—over time, tucking in ties, pulling out the undershirts, and otherwise transforming their look uniformly to fit the music and provide a more dynamic viewing experience for the audience.

The long and short of it is that a group's attire should fit the image the group wants to project and fit the goals the group wants to achieve. If a group wants to create an aura of elitism, and perform only at formal events, formal attire is a great avenue to go down. If a group wants to focus on explosive choreography and fit into the fabric of the collegiate audience, t-shirts and jeans are probably more their speed. Whatever a group's individual needs may be, having a distinctive and cohesive look emerge as the common threads for strong group attire.

## **Costumes and Props**

Some musicians will reject the idea of giving a lot of thought to their attire, insisting that the music comes first, and they aren't there to impress anyone from a visual perspective. What these individuals fail to account for is the inherent impact of what the audience sees on what they hear. In the previous section, we talked about the messages different outfits send, but did not yet discuss conscious or unconscious messages groups send within those choices in attire.

For example, I once saw a group put together a very good, unique, and semiformal outfit with black slacks, blue shirts, and white ties that both looked good and matched the colors of their school. All good things. And yet, when the guys took

to the competition stage, many of them wore their ties far too long, practically stretching down to the space between their legs. This sent the message that they were trying to look serious and professional, but did not yet have the professionalism to know how to tie a tie properly. And so, before the group sang its first bar, I was predisposed to think of them as immature and in over their heads (which was remarkably misleading for a group that went on to win that night's competition!).

The length of a man's tie is a subtle thing, and a goodly portion of the audience might not catch on to it. When groups enter the realm of costuming and props, however, they are forcing the issue.

There's an unfair stereotype that groups that spend a lot of time choreographing don't place enough emphasis on their music. I would contend this argument applies much more strongly to groups that over-think the items they carry on stage. For example, I recall watching a group singing Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for A Hero." Great arrangement, break-neck percussion, killer solo. And yet, when they reached the part of the song in which the lyrics state, "He's gotta be sure, and he's gotta be soon, and he's gotta be larger than life," one of the group members held up a stick of Sure deodorant—and held it there for about eight beats. To be fair, this took place at a regular campus show, as opposed to a competition or special event, so it was OK to be a bit whimsical. Nonetheless, the gesture took a very subtle joke and made it into a grand gesture that was going to distract a lot of the audience (if not the group itself), besides the fact that (I can only assume) a small percentage of the crowd actually got the joke.

An even more powerful example of the misuse of props came in a competition set. An all-female group, clad all in black, sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Again, very nice sound,

and again the use of props spoiled the song. As the group sang the final measures, each of the group members pulled a different-colored piece of fabric from her waistband in an overwrought attempt at manifesting a rainbow. It was so over the top and un-clever that it really did ruin the song for me.

There are the odd occasions when a special prop or costume can work. One example would most certainly be the case of The Amherst College Zumbyes, who consistently have one member of the group dressed in a full body banana costume. On one hand, this can be awkward enough to have an adverse effect on the group—I saw them perform Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” with the full choreography, and what probably should have been badass quickly became a farce because, well, we had a banana doing the Thriller dance. Nonetheless, the costume works because the group has developed tradition and even an identity around it. It’s a lightning rod for attention on a group that’s otherwise very strong musically, to help push them over the edge from memorable to unforgettable. Best yet, the suit is a constant comedic elephant in the room. People always ask them, “What’s the deal with the banana?” Group members always reply, “What banana?”

## Stage Presence

One of the most fundamental pieces of a group’s visual presentation is its members’ stage presence. When the audience watches, is it seeing poise and confidence—people having a great time doing what they love? Or are they seeing a bunch of kids afraid of failing?

I recall watching one particular compete one year. They were probably the most talented collection of singers to perform that night. And yet, from the moment they took the stage I saw fidgety hands and sideward glances. This trans-



lated to trembling voices and missed notes and within the first minute of their first song they had put their entire set in jeopardy. While the rest of the set got much better, they came up far short of where they should have been, and ended up not placing in a competition they probably should have won.

Contrast this with groups that get their stage presence right. For example, the guys of Rutgers University Casual Harmony have a trademark move of reaching out their hands in time with the music. It's not choreography per se, but it is visually captivating and generates a sense of passion and desperation as the guys break down the fourth wall, extending themselves out toward the crowd.

On a simpler note, you have the University of Rochester Midnight Ramblers. The all-male group was among the first to get me hooked on a cappella, and I particularly recall that a part of what got me hooked was how they looked on stage. At first I thought their choreography was out of this world. Later, I came to recognize that the guys choreographed very little, and instead spent almost every song in the same arc around a soloist. And yet, for every measure, the guys visually captured the power of the song. For up-tempo numbers, I'll be darned if every guy didn't snap his fingers and bob at the knees like he was legitimately freestyle dancing. For the ballads, they looked perfectly somber and serene. In every single case, they came across as confident and fully engaged with their music, such that they not only didn't distract the audience from enjoying their efforts, but actually made the listening and viewing experience more personal and more authentic.

One of the keys to stage presence is to recognize that, for many performers, it doesn't come naturally. Sure, there are some people who can instinctively work the stage, groove, and produce facial expressions that win over a crowd. But for

many more singers, these elements of performance require a conscious effort. One of my favorite methods of preparing for visual performance is that which I've seen from The Johns Hopkins University Octopodes. They'll rehearse with the soloist facing the rest of the group. In doing so, they take in the auditory performance from both ends, but also have a chance to look at each other and critique what is and is not working.

Let's focus on the soloist for a moment. A new soloist will prioritize remembering lyrics and tone and shifts in the dynamics—all of which are, of course, quite important. But more experienced performers will also think about what they're going to do with their hands. Are they using a hand-held mic or is it on a stand, or on their lapels? Are they going to keep their hands on that mic or use them to gesture? Will their hands rise and fall, and if so when? This may all sound silly, but I can't begin to count how many soloists I've seen awkwardly tuck their hands in their pockets or swing them around because they haven't given the matter any forethought, and think of nothing but hand placement when they actually get on stage. Contrast this with folks who do plan ahead, and you'll see singers who know when to ball their hands into fists of passion, when to raise them in celebration, and when to let them fall. It's a subtle art, but one that any number of spectators can see when they're looking for it.

## Choreography

There may be no point of greater contention in contemporary a cappella than the importance of choreography. Some groups swear by it, and map out a full dance routine to every song they learn. Other groups completely reject choreography as a matter of principle, because they're musicians not dancers, gosh-darn it, and they're not about to jeopardize their sound

by concentrating on a bunch of silly step-touch moves.

Not all choreography is built equally, and in assessing it here, I'm applying a pretty liberal definition—essentially, any planned movement on stage. With that said, there is no clear cut answer to the choreography debate, as the value of choreography varies based upon the group executing it, the song its performing, and, most importantly, what the group is ultimately trying to achieve.

There are some fundamental no-nos in a cappella choreography. The most basic one is that you don't want to overdo it. But how does a group know how much is too much? A rule of thumb: as soon as the movement starts to detract from the music it's a problem.

Choreography shouldn't be so pronounced that it distracts the audience from the music (either because they're disgusted, or so blown away). On the contrary, the purpose of choreography should be to enhance and complement the music—providing a visual companion and helping to maintain the audience's focus on stage.

Choreography also shouldn't distract the group itself. If the movement has grown so complicated that someone stops paying attention to the blend, then the group's priorities are out of order. This is where it's especially important for a group to know and be true to itself. Some people take to dancing quite easily. Some people just can't do it. As appropriate, you can hide your weak movers in the middle of the pack or in the back row so the audience won't notice them. If you have a full group of people with two left feet, then focus on your strengths instead and find some other way to embellish the music.

Groups that choreograph for the sake of choreography are not approaching visual presentation in the right way. The choreography should be a physical manifestation of what's already

going on on stage—representing the power, the emotion, the grace, or the joy of what’s already happening in the music. For this reason, groups that choose to assign a gesture to every word and a hand jive to every syllable just don’t get it. They come across as forced, not entertaining.

On this note, it is virtually impossible for the soloist to attempt the same choreography as the rest of the group, and the results generally come off looking absurd. As spectators, with pop music conventions engrained in our minds, we’re conditioned to accept a level of movement from background dancers during a musical performance. There’s some room for an a cappella soloist who is also a gifted dancer to lead the charge, channeling Michael Jackson, or to get more contemporary, someone like Jason Derulo. But most collegiate a cappella soloists who try to fall in line with a group end up looking as though they’re trying to do just that—follow someone else’s lead. This looks terribly awkward on stage and is just one of those things that rouses the audience to the fact it’s watching a performance, breaking the crowd’s concentration on the full audio and visual experience of the song.

Likewise, to all of those directors out there who feel compelled to visibly conduct while on stage—just stop. A part of what makes contemporary a cappella more appealing than a formal choir concert is the departure from convention. It’s the illusion that this music does come easy, and that’s an illusion that a conductor will inevitably shatter. I understand that this is a practical necessity for some groups on some songs if they’re ever going to get their rhythms quite right. But I would encourage groups to rehearse songs until they don’t need the conductor, or to at least restrict these performances to smaller on-campus shows.

Speaking of individual group members standing out, another convention I'll never quite understand is all of the groups that opt to isolate their drummers. We've all seen vocal percussionists who wander off to the edge the stage, apart from the group. I can understand that some percussionists may need some space to focus and be able to separate themselves from the rest of the group's sound to keep their own beat. Likewise, I can understand the choreographers who want to keep the drummers apart because they won't be able to fully engage in the planned dance moves. But with all of this said, the vocal percussionist who stands several yards apart from the rest of the group becomes a visual distraction—either awkward and seemingly ostracized for his B.O., or too cool for school and stealing the show. In general, neither of these appearances is good for the group.

On a similar note, groups should take a moment to think about how choreography is going to look to an objective observer. Earlier on, I mentioned the Octopodes tactic of the soloist watching the group and vice-versa, which can work well. Another option is to call upon friends—musicians or otherwise—to sit in and watch the choreography unfold. It's discouraging for a group to learn choreography only to end up dropping it, but if an objective observer can tell you that the whole group looks stupid, then it's better to get the frustrations and embarrassment out at that point than to have a full audience or competition judges observe the same thing when you're performing for real. As much as some groups don't want to admit it, foolhardy choreography, much like poor stage presence, makes a powerful enough impression that even great musicality can't necessarily overcome it.

But what does it mean to look silly, or stupid, when you're executing choreography with your a cappella group? One of

the prime examples is when an a cappella group (unintentionally) looks as though it's performing musical theatre. It's a matter of people shimmying from side to side, swinging their arms in rhythm, or executing an unnecessary box step. In musical theatre, the dancing is all but equally important to the music itself, so overacting is to be expected. On the a cappella stage, performers need to keep their priorities in check.

Perhaps the most egregious of mistake in choreographing a cappella is the decision to choreograph slow songs. As a general rule, a depressing song does not make people want to dance—it makes people want stand still and reflect. Nine times out of ten, the best plan for a ballad is for the soloist to emote his or her heart out while the group stands back, a wall of support, or a shell of that soloist's broken past, but in either case, understated and mostly invisible. I've seen plenty of groups place hands on shoulders or sway together. In most cases, this just comes across as cheesy and forced.

There are, of course, exceptions to the ballad rule. Once again, choreography is all about choosing the appropriate visual presentation to accompany a song. Take what The Missouri State Beartones did with "No More Walks in the Woods" by The Eagles in 2010. The group didn't have anyone walking around, and didn't have members stretch and flail to simulate tree branches blowing in the wind. Instead, they delivered subtle repositionings, group members angling inward and angling outward--enough to keep the group from growing stagnant, and enough to visually engage the audience, without ever becoming so pronounced to create a distraction.

There are also those rare occasions in which a slow song can benefit from choreography. After Hours, out of The University of Rochester, put on an absolute clinic on this topic with their rendering of Ingrid Michaelson's "The Chain" in

2010. The coed group started out with a smooth and suave partners' waltz, and then transitioned between subtle shifts that continually called upon the formal dance motif. This visual tour de force culminated in the end with the group singing in a round while executing a series of arm movements, also in a round, to mirror the music. In cases like this, a group creates a beautiful image to match the sound, and consequently elevates the song on the whole.

Orange Appeal delivered a similarly appropriate, if utterly disparate display of a cappella choreographing in 2007, when the guys tried their hand at an old spiritual called "The Battle." The group opted to make the number both epic and comical—going all out with their vocals, but embracing the absurdity of their choice to cover this song in juxtaposition with songs by Muse and Death Cab for Cutie. The resulting performance incorporated air flutes, marching, and simulated chariots. The visual presentation was ridiculous, and yet executed with energy and sureness. That's often the way to make comedy work best on stage—to be funny, but not tongue in the cheek; to draw rolls of laughter without ever winking at the crowd.

Speaking of epic, anyone who saw the University of Southern California SoCal VoCals perform Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City" in 2010 got a glimpse of sheer brilliance. From the innovative construction of a human bridge for the soloist to run through, to the kind of hustle and bustle from the group that simulated city crowdedness and traffic, to elevating the soloist up on the group's shoulders, to a group elevator ride, to a positively sublime free style dance break—this was just spectacular fun to watch. The movements fit the song at every turn and were consistently creative. And yet, not once did the choreography come across as forced. I maintain that it's the

movement that allowed for the apotheosis of this group, making them the undisputed choice for ICCA champions that year.

What The BearTones, After Hours, Orange Appeal and The SoCal VoCals all shared in common was the ability to integrate polished and creative movement with great musicality. And there are countless more examples, from Casual Harmony's trademark, ultra-hip step-and-slide move, to Ithacappella's variation on it—doing the slide while doing the robot, to the Syracuse University Mandarin's spelling out the letters of "LOVE" with their bodies for "Accidentally in Love" by The Counting Crows.

So let's close on a case study. I present, for your consideration, the 2010 University of Georgia Accidentals. The all male group wore white collared shirts, red ties, black vests and black slacks. They sang "Comin' Home Baby" by Mel Torme. The guys carried out the song with amazing energy and perfect tone before flipping a switch to send their vocal percussionist into high gear. Such a high gear, in fact, that the group stood aside as he kept on going with an out of this world drum solo. The solo culminated in the guy handing off the mic to another group member, doing a flat-footed, hands free back flip, then reclaiming the mic and carrying on as if he didn't miss a beat.

Critics of this performance called it over the top and suggested the acrobatics were so unmusical that they actively hurt the performance. Those who were on board with The Accidentals, and more specifically their drummer, lauded the showmanship.

So who's right?

There's no clear answer to that question, but the fact of the matter is that The Accidentals made it all the way to the ICCA Finals and finished in third place. And their drummer returned home from New York with a certificate in recognition of his outstanding vocal percussion.



This all goes back to doing what's right for a group. I wouldn't recommend that groups go out and hire gymnasts to handle their perc just for the sake of creating a visual spectacle. But if you have the talent on board and a plan to maximize that talent's potential, why not shoot for the moon and have some fun?

Audiences can tell if a group is having fun based on the way that group looks on stage; if the group looks like it's having fun, the fans are all the more likely to enjoy themselves, too.

## **Conclusion**

When it comes to visual presentation, everything from a group's attire, to its use of props, to its choreography will make an impression. Successful groups consciously decide on a message, think critically, listen to and trust objective feedback, and, most importantly, are true to themselves.

## Chapter 8: Public Relations and Networking



The Carbone Auto Group of Utica, NY, supporters of a cappella.

An unspoken question underlies much of this book: how does an a cappella group maximize its success? It's a complicated question, not only because of the level of work that goes into achieving excellence, but the many and varied definitions of success.

Let's start by reframing greatness. For example, we could ask which of three famous authors is the best: Leo Tolstoy, Flannery O'Connor, or JK Rowling. We could ask which of these famous films is greatest: *The Godfather*, *Citizen Kane*, or *Shrek 2*.

With all due respect to the creator of Harry Potter, few objective literary critics would place her work in the same stratosphere as short story master O'Connor, the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy. And yet, when you consider sheer book sales, or how many everyday people today would recognize and appreciate the author's work, Rowling comes out ahead of these literary giants. Likewise, although the second installment of *Shrek* would not land on many critic's top 10 list of films of 2004, much less of all time, at the box office the movie grossed over three times as much money as either of the two more acclaimed films. Granted, these numbers aren't adjusted for inflation, but they still tell a tale.

The point is that any artist or product is only as great as the number of people who can recognize it as great—if someone doesn't know a product exists, it simply doesn't matter how great it might be. Lots of outstanding a cappella groups will achieve major artistic successes and never perform in front of anyone but a niche audience of family and friends at their schools. Musically, they could be every bit as good as that year's ICCA champions, but they simply can't make a realistic claim to being the best collegiate group in the world that year because so few people have heard them.

In this chapter we discuss reasonable ways for a group to garner attention. We'll start at the basic level and then progress to modern technology.

## Flyers

There is no more basic step toward generating publicity on a college campus than hanging flyers. Bulletin boards everywhere from the residence halls to the academic buildings to the student union to the library are littered with the things, and any group that doesn't enter the fray is squandering a

valuable opportunity.

Some student groups have grown disillusioned with flyers, under the idea that that advertising space is saturated—when there are flyers everywhere, what’s to make someone notice yours in particular? These folks figure that they’re going to get lost in the white noise and opt not to participate at all. There are several important factors that people who shun flyer-ing overlook.

For one thing, there is a flyer audience. This audience is often the same group of people who read every edition of the college newspaper, who check their email compulsively, and who actually open and read every mass email they get. These people don’t want to miss anything. They are the people who scan every flyer they can see when they’re killing a few minutes before class, or when they wait for their friends, or when their order is being prepared at the café. While this may not be an overwhelming portion of the student population, it is a segment that is well-informed, and will often serve as a source for getting others to go to events on campus—making others aware there’s a movie screening, or a cultural dinner, or even an a cappella show.

Even those individuals who do not go out of their way to see flyers will catch some of them. It’s like exiting pop-up ads on a computer, or channel surfing during TV commercials, or flipping past the full-page ads in a magazine. People won’t get all of the messages, but there are some ads so clever, or visually striking, or otherwise *different* that people will take notice—even if it’s just for a few seconds. For this reason, it’s worth a group’s while to think about how they can stand out. In general, simpler is better—advertise the funny title of your show, or one popular song you’ll be debuting, as opposed to a complete set list or the names of all of your group members. Rather than a picture of your full group, consider a close-up

on one or two members—with just one or two stars highlighted on each flyer, people are that much more likely to recognize one of them from their everyday lives and, by extension get more interested in the group. Creating personal investment is key to getting people to not only remember the ad, but actually follow through on attending a show.

Beyond using flyers, college campuses across the country also have on-again-off-again love affairs with advertising through sidewalk chalk. The method has passing appeal because it's really striking when you first see it, but quickly reaches a point of over-saturation when there's chalk everywhere. And so, if chalking isn't already happening on your campus, the time may be ripe for your group to take advantage of a medium that is grabbing, different, and difficult to miss.

Another option is three-dimensional flyers—an effect the advertiser achieves by stapling the right edge of one flyer to the left edge of another flyer, then stapling the free corners of each flyer to the bulletin board such that the advertisement protrudes three dimensionally from the board, and catches the eye of people who would otherwise just by it.

In addition to ads that stand out, there are advertising campaigns that succeed purely because they are so ubiquitous that they become a part of the communal consciousness. Everyone knows the Geico Gecko or the Coca Cola Polar Bears (or at least they did when these ads were in regular rotation). Therefore, there is something to be said for putting up a high volume of flyers, and putting them up in as many different contexts as possible so that *everyone* sees them.

## Arch Sings

While we would maintain that flyers, and variants thereon, are the most basic mode of advertising, number two is to let the

product speak for itself. For decades, groups have made public performance a habit, most prominently in the form of arch sings.

An arch sing traditionally occurs when an a cappella group performs underneath an outdoor archway. It's very public and open—a unique method of drawing an audience of passersby, besides those who consciously show up with the intention of hearing a group. Better yet, the arch provides shelter from inclement weather, and provides good acoustics for the music. The definition of an arch sing has broadened since its inception, and no longer necessitates the actual presence of an arch.

In terms of allowing the product to speak for itself, arch sings can capture the attention of people who never would have attended an a cappella show on their own, and win them over via the sheer experience of hearing a song and getting drawn into the show.

Of course, the way in which arch sings thrust the music upon an unsuspecting audience can have its downside. Some audiences aren't going to like a cappella regardless of how well it's executed, or a group might have an off day. Therefore, there's a lot of potential to put forth a poor representation of the group using this format. While we urge groups to focus on achieving success, as opposed to trying to avoid failure, it's worth considering how to be time efficient, and best serve the interests of the audience.

To mitigate disaster for spectators who don't enjoy the show; to look out for the comfort of fans who are enduring heat, cold, or whatever else the mother nature may bring; and to truly put a group's best foot forward, arch sings are best executed when they are short and show off a group's best new material. The brevity helps the arch sing serve as a commercial or a trailer for a bigger show—bolstering awareness of a group's product and selling the quality thereof. It's fairly

obvious that a group will want to show off its best stuff, but the new part is important, too—because groups that do arch sings tend to do them on a repeated basis, it's safe to assume a fair bit of the audience will come back for multiple performances as well. There's something to be said for familiarity and having signature songs, but there's also a real risk of the “broken record effect,” when a group grows annoying for the repetition. Singing the same songs repeatedly also runs the risk of making it look like a group only knows a small handful of songs. Arch sings are a great opportunity for groups to demonstrate their range and versatility not in one shot, but over a series of regular shows.

## Email Lists

In the mid-to-late nineties, email took over as one of the predominant modes of communication. And why not? It was easier and cheaper than hard copy mailings. Messages were delivered instantaneously and conveniently to the recipient's computer.

Amidst the rise of email came the rise of email lists. Businesses, universities, individuals, and, yes, student groups, took to gathering email addresses as a way of communicating mass messages to their constituents.

This strategy seemed like a genuinely efficient way for an a cappella group to keep itself in its fans' minds, and let them know about upcoming shows, CD releases, auditions, and the like. The problem is that mass email has evolved into the modern form of junk mail. If it's not personal mail, a bill, or something the consumer paid to have mailed to him or her, the odds are it's not even getting read before the recipient tosses it into the recycling bin.

So, in a world full of cynicism around mass mailings, is it possible for an a cappella group to use one successfully? The answer is yes, as long as the group handles it correctly.

First things first, a group should not spam its email list. Even the group's most committed fans don't want to see daily messages, and there's no surer way for a message to get overlooked than to have it buried amidst a stream of other messages sent in the same time period. Once per week is plenty, but ideally groups should only email their lists once or twice per month, or however often they legitimately need to in order to communicate important information.

This brings us to the content of emails. Should you email the list when you have an end of semester show coming up? When you have released a new CD? When you are raising money for Relay for Life? The answer to all of these questions is yes.

For emails advertising a big show, it's important to make them count. Consider name dropping an exciting new song the group will sing, or even including YouTube clip previews (more on this later). Also be sure to include the vital information—when the show is happening and where; if you're charging for tickets, and if so, how much. The fans shouldn't need to work to discover this information, so put it out there, front and center.

Using email to promote a new CD is a trickier proposition. As soon as a group is outright selling something, an email becomes noticeably more spam-like. It's in the group's best interests to be very conscious of the message's language to avoid sounding like a sales pitch. This often means keeping to basics, and resisting the urge to tell people what a great deal the CD is, and instead letting the product speak for itself.

When a group emails about supporting a good cause, this is one of the greatest opportunities to put the group's best foot for-



ward. For example, a simple bullet point list of what the group is doing and where the money is going can help sway people to back the group in supporting the cause, while also serving the public relations function of making the group members come off as great citizens. It's truly a win-win proposition.

When you're emailing for any of these purposes, the key is not to overdo it. As we mentioned earlier, spamming does a lot to hurt a group's email credibility. For the show or the CD, a group can respectably issue one announcement email, and one last minute reminder to shore up the audience, but that's it. Likewise, if a group is supporting a good cause, it's great to get to the word out, but despite the fact that the group's supporting a good cause, the audience is going to have a limited attention span, and won't want to hear daily updates on fundraising efforts, or get hit with a barrage of facts about the cause. In short, respect everyone's time and interests, and you'll get a much more positive return on your efforts.

## The School's Website

Ask most folks who have graduated from college, and they'll tell you there were a number of things they took for granted that they wish they could access again, be it the buffet meals, the expansive library, the affordable gym, or the grassy quad on which to lounge on a spring afternoon. One of the resources that no a cappella group should pass up is its school's website.

Thousands of people visit a school's website each day, and these visitors come from wide constituencies that include current students, prospective students, alumni, faculty, families, and community members. It's a real waste not to tap into this audience.

Most colleges and universities have some form of an announcements page or calendar of events linked on their home screens. Every group should do what it can to promote itself

and its events in this fashion. Like flyers, it's a great way of tapping into an audience they may not be consciously seeking you out, but rather just looking for something fun to do on a Thursday night. Send your concert information early and be sure to include all of the requisite details.

In addition to an events page, most schools have a listing of student organizations people can get involved in. This is another great opportunity to build interest in membership, and even fans—if someone doesn't have the voice to cut it with your group, it still doesn't hurt to have that person know about your group and come to your shows.

Student organization lists often feed into links for each organization's web page, hosted on the school's server. More and more, groups are moving away from hosting on the school's server, and doing so privately. This is fine—there are usually limitations on what a group can do with a school-sponsored page. The link is what matters, though. Groups should make sure the links to their student groups are either feeding directly to their website, or, if the college won't allow that, then the group should ensure that its college-provided web space automatically redirects to the group's real site. In either case, it's the listing that groups should be sure to put to good use.

## Your Own Website

First things first—if your group does not have a website it should set to work developing one immediately. It need not be fancy, and a good Facebook or MySpace page can be a suitable stand-in while you work something out (more on those options to follow). Nonetheless, a group's website is its lifeline to the outside world. It establishes a group's identity to everyone who visits, and serves as an essential tool for publicity and networking.

The most essential component of a group's website is contact information or a contact form. People might want to book you. Your fellow students will want to audition for your group. Media outlets might want to contact you for an interview. Other groups might want to invite you to perform at their shows. All of this interest in your group is moot if the interested parties don't have a way of contacting you. For a number of years at The A Cappella Blog, we sought out 30-40 groups to interview in the fall; in 2010 we took on the task of contacting literally every a cappella group for whom we could find a website to conduct a survey. In each of these ventures, we've been shocked at just how many groups either do not offer any contact information at all, or have information that's so far out of date as to no longer be useful.

Beyond contact information, a group's website is a valuable space in which to show off its personality. Are you funny? Ultra-professional? Cool? Civically-minded? The writing on a site, the photos you post, the media you share, and even the color scheme you employ in your layout say a lot about what your group's all about, and each group should be sure to assess its site at least once each year to be sure the message it's putting out there is still the right one.

Moving away from the group and to the individual, individual profiles are another key element of a group's website. Once again, there's plenty of room to distinguish personality based on the selection of photographs, and the bits of profile information you choose to share. Nonetheless, it's important to recognize that collegiate a cappella groups get a ton of traction based on the popularity of individual performers. After the show, there's going to be a pocket of fans that want to know more about the cute bass, or the exceptional soloist, or the sick vocal percussionist, or the funny-looking dude. In

each of these cases, fans will go to the website, find out who that person is and read everything they can about him. Is this a little creepy? Maybe—but it's a way of encouraging and cultivating a fan base, so we say it's all the better.

Lots of groups include a history of their ensembles on their sites, and this is another key component to legitimizing your group's identity. Has your group been around for over 25 years? Make mention of it—it demonstrates that this is an organization with deep roots that isn't going anywhere. Although your group hasn't made it out of the ICCA quarter-finals in the last five years, did the group once go all the way to the finals? Don't make it secret—the fact your group once made it to the big dance can go a long way toward developing an aura of excellence. Did your group raise money for a local children's hospital a while back? Don't be shy about the group's tradition of service. In short, a cappella groups accomplish a great deal, and there's no reason not to let the larger organization benefit from its past accomplishments. Furthermore, mentioning what the group has done before is a great way of paying tribute to alumni. All in all, posting a full history of a group is a fantastic way of celebrating the broader story of your group. On the flip side of things, if your group's only been around for a short while, start cultivating those historical details for future generations; and in the meantime, don't be afraid to brag that you're already as good as you are, despite the group only forming six months ago.

Group websites come in all shapes and sizes, but one of the more unusual trends in recent years has been to use a blog format, publishing through BlogSpot, Wordpress, or a like provider. There are some obvious benefits to going this route which include the use of good, professional-looking templates. Furthermore, using a blog set up lends itself to consistently

updating the site with news about the group. Despite these benefits, though, there is something to be said about using a page design for what it's intended for. Blogs are designed for regular updates. I've seen groups attempt to adapt the form to a more traditional website's content—for example, using one post for individual profiles, one for the group's repertoire, one for contact information, etc. Such attempts result in a really lackluster site, which can, in turn, really sell the group short.

Ultimately, groups need to keep in mind that their websites, like their actual performances, like their choices in attire, like the projects and goals they espouse, make a statement about the group—websites can make or break the group's image.

## YouTube

For an a cappella group, YouTube is a modern day re-conceptualization of the arch sing. Like the arch sing, people might very well stumble upon a YouTube clip, be it because YouTube identifies your video as related to something someone else is watching, or because the video goes viral. In either case, a YouTube video is an opportunity to transform an unsuspecting, unintentional audience member into a bona fide fan.

Prior to YouTube catching on, CDs were the most common way for a group to reach remote audiences. Online videos have proven a more effective networking tool. First of all, they're free, which erases a major barrier from drawing in new listeners. Perhaps even more importantly, though, videos have the potential to capture the verve of a live performance. Sure, the audio quality probably won't be as good as what the live crowd hears, but it's still more true to form than an over-produced CD, or otherwise inorganically recorded CD track. Beyond the sound, there's the sheer visual effect that an audio track will never capture—a group's stage presence, its movement, its

look. Videos are the surest, most thorough approximation we currently have of the live performance experience.

For those who don't want to let go of their precious production values, though, there's also plenty of opportunity to spruce up video recordings, be it editing and splicing from multiple camera angles, or interweaving multiple performance like On the Rocks did for their famous take on "Bad Romance," or recording a full-fledged music video like The Lehigh University Melismatics did for "Wild At Heart." If you don't have these expertise "in house" within your group, think about outsourcing—every college has a cluster of people who are very good at video recording and editing, and a professional finished product can be almost equally as valuable as a group's actual musical prowess in bolstering your group's reputation.

## Social Networking

Email and the Internet opened up a number of dimensions when it comes to a cappella groups interacting with their audiences. The next major shift came about a decade later with the proliferation of social networking sites.

Taking the term broadly enough, any range of sites could be seen as social networks, but if we consider only high profile sites that involve regular, direct sharing of ideas and media, it narrows the field significantly. The three platforms on which we will focus are MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook.

### *MySpace*

In the early 2000s, MySpace emerged as one of the first mainstream social networking sites. A part of the appeal of the site is the fusion of uniformity with individuality. Members and organizations share similar URLs and the same basic page designs, but at the same time, the site allows users to customize

everything from color schemes to graphics to the music that plays when visitors view a page.

Indeed, the music factor has been key to MySpace's mainstream success, and is a key element of why MySpace remains useful to a cappella groups. Although the practice of playing audio upon entering a page has developed into more or less equal parts nuisance as novelty, great potential remains in a group's ability to post multiple songs to its profile and allow users to play them through a built-in track player. Furthermore, MySpace is a known commodity in terms of band promotion and music sharing, which makes it a natural home for a cappella groups.

### *Twitter*

Since its founding in 2006, Twitter has carved an improbable niche in the social networking world. Text-heavy utilities like LiveJournal gave way to more visually-oriented mediums like Facebook and MySpace. Twitter provided an alternative, centering itself upon text, but the briefest snippets of text possible—140 characters or less. In so doing, it took social networking away from the computer, actively marketing itself toward people using mobile devices, essentially setting itself up as a way of sending a text message to the world—or at least to everyone following the user's Twitter feed.

The Twitter system is improbable, in part, because of Facebook status and mobile photo sharing functions that seem to encapsulate all of Twitter's core purposes. However, in its simplicity, Twitter has staved off many of the stigmas of its social networking peers—it's not just this new-fangled thing college kids are playing with, or a system through which predators stalk their prey. It's fun, and despite the privacy settings avail-

able on other social networking platforms, the text focus of Twitter makes it immediately less invasive to new users.

The less threatening nature of Twitter is a big selling point for a cappella groups to make use of it. There are large segments of the population resistant to other social networks, and Twitter may be just the way to connect with an older demographic—to keep parents, professors, and college staff in the loop.

Another of the key selling points for Twitter has been the celebrity factor. The text-based environment has created a safe space for celebrities to interact with the general public in a new way, and while it's certainly possible (and probable) that a lot of celebs have PR representatives Tweeting on their behalf to present pleasant faces to their fan bases, the point remains that fans using Twitter at least feel as though they're getting unique insights from the celebrities who most interest them; besides receiving reminders to watch that celebrity's TV show that night, or buy tickets to her concert, or buy his new book, etc.

Herein lies a great opportunity for a cappella groups to introduce themselves, their personalities, and their news to the public. Groups can spread the word about shows and new CDs. But much more so, a Twitter feed succeeds where an email list and group website tend to come up short. Try to email your list before every show, much less every time a clever thought pops into your head, and you're bound for reply emails from former fans asking to be removed from your contact list. But Twitter, in a sense, is built for personalized spam. Post whatever you want—your followers are expecting both random and constant contact. Likewise, groups simply can't expect fans to visit their websites with such regularity that they'll get every piece of news the group puts out there. Even if a group successfully implements a blog on its site to regularly share of news, and successfully shows off its person-



ality through the writing, the general public won't fall into the habit of following a solitary group's website religiously. That leaves only the small segment who make use of RSS feeds like Google Reader to really keep up on your latest posts. Twitter delivers content to followers in a simple, easily accessible way, that doesn't call upon the fans to put any more effort into finding your news than simply subscribing to your feed.

Beyond the ability to share information and the ease with which it is shared, another key functionality to Twitter is the potential for two-way communication. Twitter allows users to make "@" posts, through which they can respond to or forward the ideas from another user. Your group should make a conscious effort to network and connect with others, both by proactively linking up to fans' Tweets, and paying attention to who is responding to your own material. This is social networking at its best because it actually is social, and helps fans develop a more personal connection with your group because, in a sense, it makes them feel like they are your real friends.

One last utility unique to feature—the use of hashtags (#) to denote a topic. I've never seen this used to better effect than at the 2012 ICCA South Semifinals, where the emcees actively called upon the audience to Tweet throughout the show, bundling the conversation under a common hashtag so everyone in attendance could participate in an ongoing discourse throughout the show and people who were not there could follow live updates.

### *Facebook*

We saved Facebook for last, not in the interest of chronological order, importance, or out of an interest in developing coherent themes and connections between social networking tools. Instead, we are wrapping up on Facebook because the

sheer size of the user base and wide array of system capabilities make it the most powerful and useful social networking tool for any a cappella group to use to its advantage.

Whereas services like MySpace and Twitter weigh heavily toward specific demographics Facebook has not-so-quietly emerged as one of the most universally-used platforms on the Internet. As of this writing, the service has approximately 550 million users which, there's a good chance, covers your roommate, your mom and your high school music teacher.

The wide range of people who use Facebook translates to a large collection of people who can "like" your page, asserting themselves as public fans of your a cappella group, and in so doing, making their friends aware of your group's existence, and encouraging them, too, to "like" it. One of the central components of Facebook is the way in which it facilitates ordinary people publicly sharing what they like. Any collegiate group that does not use that Facebook function to its advantage is really missing an opportunity.

Beyond the cyber word-of-mouth campaign that Facebook allows for, it also affords groups the opportunity to establish a celebrity presence. Any group will earn likes from family and friends, but the people you win over via live performances, CDs, and even YouTube are the ones who can more earnestly be considered fans. Having a page through which they can formally proclaim their fanship is key to building a culture of celebrity around yourselves and developing a following devoted to you, based not on social connections, but legitimate appreciation of your art.

Like so many online social networks, a part of what makes Facebook so useful is the potential for a group to interact with its fans. To date, Facebook's functions include photo, video, note, status, and link sharing. Whenever a group uses such

functions, it should tag liberally, in so doing, drawing attention to the group, individual members, and supporters—each of these tags will make the posting all the more publicized to not only people who already “like” the group, but also anyone who is friends with a tagged party.

In addition to tagging, a group has a lot to gain from regular commenting. In other words, if someone else posts photos or videos of your group, or mentions going to your show in their statuses, a friendly comment is a great way to acknowledge it and form a more personal connection with that individual fan.

By the time you’re reading this chapter, it’s entirely possible Facebook will have developed new functionalities to even better serve an a cappella group’s needs, or perhaps even developed technology to, for better or worse, directly replace something we’ve written about. This should not be read as an indication that this book is obsolete. On the contrary, it’s a testament to the ever-developing nature of Facebook as a company that never rests on its laurels, and always drives forward. This essence of the company is a big part of what allowed it to surpass so many other means of social networking, and publicity in general. When a group assumes a presence on Facebook, and keeps up on the latest functionalities, it affords itself a gateway to ongoing, advancing platforms for publicity. Until something better comes along, Facebook is the most essential networking tool for an a cappella group.

## Conclusion

In this section, we’ve discussed the importance of publicity and networking—the fact that, in many respects, it doesn’t matter how great you are if no one knows about it. We covered ways of publicizing yourself on campus and in the immediate

surrounding community, such as flyers and arch sings. We've talked about ways of reinforcing and improving connections to your existing fan base, including utilization of email lists, your school's website, and your own website. From there, we talked about using online resources such as YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook in order to develop a broader presence both within your local area and well beyond it, capitalizing on the potential of the Internet to help you generate a following anywhere in the world.

Ultimately, some groups will prefer to stay close to home and only have a presence at their own colleges or universities, and there is nothing wrong with that. Even within that limited audience, though, there's plenty of room to reach out and let others in the community know what you have to offer. Similarly, for those groups that are looking to make names for themselves well beyond their own campuses, today's social networking and media sharing resources afford unprecedented opportunities to connect with others and share your work. Whereas, traditionally, a group would need to tour and send out hard copy mailings to reveal itself to the world, such endeavors are now easy and essentially free via the wonders of the Internet.

We'll never know for sure if a tree makes a sound if no one's around to hear it, and people will never know how great an a cappella group is until they get to hear the group at work. Whatever a group's goals may be, public relations and networking should be a key component in selling what your group is about, and in exposing the music to a wider audience so that it can speak for itself.



## Chapter 9: Humor

While a cappella can, and in many ways should be serious business, it also provides a unique platform for the practice of humor. After all, a community that loves music but foregoes the use of instruments in favor of making the most of the human voice is bound to have its share of quirks, and groups have been using the medium for the purposes of comedy for quite some time.

But how do groups achieve success with their humor? What's legitimately funny and what should groups avoid? In this chapter, we explore ways in which groups have used humor and focus in on key principles to guide the use of humor in a cappella.

### Group Names

One of the most basic ways in which groups can use humor to their advantage is to make the group name, itself, something funny. Funny names set a tone for a group, indicating that even if the group does work hard and take itself seriously, it still has a sense of humor and seeks to have fun with its audience. Furthermore, funny (or, more often than not, punny) group names tend to be more memorable. In the increasingly crowded a cappella scene, anything a group can do to make itself stick out in an audience's mind is usually a good thing.

A number of groups based out of law schools have taken to using humorous names, which is probably suggestive of the very nature of engaging in an a cappella group in law school—members are looking for something offbeat, community-oriented, and fun to do alongside their studies. Given the rigors of these students' studies they simply aren't going to have time to make a cappella their number one priority, and so humorous names establish a more fun tone from the get-go. Fine examples include Harvard Law's Scales of Justice, as well as the group name shared by groups out of Yale and Northwestern Law—Habeus Chorus.

Other groups use funny names that serve the dual purpose of establishing their identity. Take The Testostertones, a group name shared by groups out of Holy Cross and Whitman College that makes it clear this is an all-male group while including a musical pun, and poking some fun at what drives a group of men. Compare that with all-female Harvard Business School group, The She-E-Os. This group name makes statements about gender and the students' course of study, while implying empowerment by relating them to company CEOs. And, of course, it's a delightful pun.

And then there are, more broadly musical puns in general. A cappella groups have a history of exploiting this region. Luminaries in this area include Mt. San Antonio College Fermata Nowhere, and their siblings in group name spirit, Nazareth College Fermata Thin Air. Otherwise, you have The Treble-makers (Boston University, Drexel University, Northwestern University and the University of Maryland College Park), The Offbeats (Oberlin College), The Vocal Chords (Johns Hopkins University), and, enough other punny group names through which we could probably double the length of this chapter we were to try listing them all. Rest assured the use of musical

puns in group names goes beyond common practice to the category of a cappella tradition.

## Unexpected Song Choices

One approach to comedy that transcends a cappella is the practice of catching the audience off guard. There are times when a good build helps you arrive at a comedic climax, but there are other times at which a joke strikes most sincerely when it surprises everyone in the audience. This is the essence of creating comedy through unexpected song choices.

Consider the case of University of Oregon On the Rocks. They identified Lady Gaga as in vogue and provocative, but clearly a female act. So they took the concept, spun it on its head and sang their heart out on their own rendition of “Bad Romance.” Couple this with a well-produced music video and you have the hottest a cappella act of the year. The act got so big, in fact, that dozens, if not hundreds, of other all-male groups took up the cause over the year that followed, employing outrageous visuals for a fun and offbeat song selection that still caught casual fans off guard (though less casual fans may have grown wary of just how many acts moved in this same direction).

For another unexpected song choice, you have The University of Rochester Midnight Ramblers picking a song that is, in and of itself, quite funny, in Tenacious D’s “Tribute” and ramping up the comedy factor through outrageous facial expressions and bold choreography that included a member flapping his arms like a dragon as he ran around stage. You just can’t make this stuff up, and in the context of any show, a spectacle like this marks both a remarkable surprise and a comic thrill.

Perhaps no act better personified the act of using unexpected songs to the greatest comedic effect than the aforementioned Fermata Nowhere on the “Heartless Medley” that



helped win them an ICCA championship in 2009. The rap gimmick itself can be funny, and the guys worked in some good, amusing transitions, with group members pantomiming cell phones and whatnot. But the truest magic of the song hit when the guys transitioned to Beyonce's "All the Single Ladies," complete with choreography. No one in Alice Tully Hall expected this big, bruising-looking collection of dudes to break out a song like that, and when they did so—and did so with conviction—it positively brought the house down.

## Choreography

Visual presentation is another compelling way in which to achieve comedy through a cappella. While a listener may fail to observe a tweaking of the lyrics or a comedic falsetto, a viewer will often have a harder time looking past the visual spectacle of someone playing the clown, enduring a slapstick onslaught or even performing remarkably well, but in a wholly unexpected way.

Choreography that does not register as funny often falls short on account of a lack of conviction. Take, for example, Cambridge University Cadenza. The group performed well enough to earn its spot at the 2011 ICCA Finals. The members proved charming and musically gifted. But when they executed their moves to Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out For a Hero"—a couple members reining in their steeds; a guy taking off his outer shirt to reveal a Superman tee, before he lifted the soloist—the effort came across half-heartedly. Some of it has to do with context. Two stand alone funny moments do not a comedic piece make; in fact they do more to raise the question of whether the piece actually is comedy, and if those moments were intended as jokes. It's OK to engage and challenge an audience's thought

process, but a group should do so purposefully; not because the group members weren't 100 percent committed.

Contrast the Cadenza performance with Syracuse University Orange Appeal's interpretation of old spiritual "The Battle" in 2007. The guys were in motion from the first note, marching, posing, pantomiming flutes and horses. They executed the most absurd moves with precision, confidence, and power as if to openly proclaim to the crowd that they were there for the audience's entertainment, and had plotted out every moment of the entertainment experience, leaving nothing up to question.

Bold, fun choreography is one of the easiest ways to get viewers laughing. Uncertain movement distracts to the audience, if not the group itself, and rarely proves worth the effort.

## Parodies

In many ways, a cappella is a medium built for the successful execution of parody. It's a medium largely rooted in covers. It often involves the human voice mimicking the sounds of instruments. It's often executed by college students, who are both sharp enough to recognize opportunities for irony and juvenile enough (in a good way) to go for the gusto to get a laugh.

Parodies can include the aforementioned unexpected song choices like guys going Gaga, and in so doing, almost inevitably making Lady Gaga's theatrics all the more over the top. Parodies may also include more overt song re-writes. Consider the case of Johns Hopkins's comedic a cappella group, The Mental Notes, which performs songs like "Part of Frat World" (spinning off of *The Little Mermaid's* "Part of Your World") and "Holding Out for a Gyro" (their answer to Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for a Hero"). The group goes one step beyond simply interpreting an existing song, and actively seeks out

ways in which it can contort songs to their own topical, comedic purposes.

Parodies can run the risk of offending people who love the original song, or alienating people who will find such attempts at humor more cheesy than clever. Nonetheless, they also mark a real opportunity for creative engagement with a song that results a finished product that's unique to the group performing it.

## A Word on Inside Jokes

Inside jokes are a tricky thing. On one hand, they represent a subdivision of comedy that so many of us find most amusing—the jokes that are intrinsically funny, and funny only to those who share a common, specific experience. It's about laughing over an infamous run in with your crazy aunt, or recalling something you got away with in your grade school days.

As human beings, we love our inside jokes. Strangely enough, though, we also hate them. Think about your most uncomfortable encounters with humor. If you remove that which actively offends you (the racist, the homophobic, the otherwise non-inclusive) you are left with these jokes that those around you enjoy, that you *just don't get*.

Such is the essence of inside jokes in a cappella. If you pick something that's funny for your group members, it can be a lot of fun and great fodder for memories. However, you don't want to ignore your audience. If a joke is "inside" enough that only group members themselves will get it, then it's fine to tell it among yourselves, but it makes little sense to bring it to the performance stage.

Taking things a step further, you might identify a song or a change of lyrics or a bit of choreography that will be funny at your school or in your city. If you're performing your end of

semester show on campus, it's probably perfectly reasonable to break out such a performance. If however, you're performing in competition, and particularly away from home, you need to be conscious of just who will or will not understand your joke, and how it's going to play for the audience either way.

Listeners don't like it when they feel excluded or unintelligent because they don't understand the punch line. Humor should be a vehicle for spicing up and adding depth to a performance; don't make it a reason for people not to like you.

## Timing

As I think we've established by now, humor can add a great deal to an a cappella performance. It's also worth noting, though, that there times when a misplaced joke can really ruin a good performance.

Consider Brandeis University VoiceMale's 2008 treatment of Daughtry's "Home." Sure, it's a cheesy song, but when you're truly *performing* a cappella, you want to treat it seriously. The sarcastic interpretation of the song, complete with nonsense facials and gestures made a statement that the group was not so much invested in the music as it was in looking too cool for it. This took what should have been a soulful break from their otherwise exceptional high-energy, high-entertainment set, and made it "just another song."

A similar misstep was visible on the part of The Yale Duke-smen at the 2009 ICCA Finals. The all-male group decided to take on Rihanna's "Umbrella." The song choice was bold and different, and the guys proved to have every bit of the musical chops necessary to make it compelling. This should have been intense and powerful, akin to the original female power song. Instead, the guys opted to incorporate enough pelvic thrusts to not only become unfunny, but to get actively awkward.

Look the song up on YouTube. Listen to just the audio and it's a pretty remarkable performance. Watch the video, and it's something altogether different.

Comedy shouldn't be forced, and when groups overdo it, they're only sabotaging themselves.

## Attitude

One of the most important parts of executing humorous a cappella, which is also one of the easiest pieces for groups to miss, is the attitude that comes with the performance. Unless you're Woody Allen, you're probably not going to pull off funny-while-nervous. Likewise, if you come across as a jerk, laughing at someone else's expense, or like you're putting down other groups, you're going to turn off a goodly portion of your audience.

While every group needs to hit its own stride, the most successful comedic a cappella acts are the ones that come across with an unassuming confidence. These are the performances in which the audience forgets it's watching a show because the show itself is so engaging. They are the performances in which the audience laughs, but the group itself never has to crack a smile to show it's having fun.

For the best embodiment of the appropriate attitude toward executing humor in a cappella, let's turn once more to 2009 ICCA champs, Fermata Nowhere. When their set reached its comedic climax, the guys ran, danced and sang their hearts out for a performance that was intense, musically excellent, incredibly entertaining, and all the more funny for the simultaneously serious and tongue-in-cheek way in which they executed their work.

## Conclusion

It's unlikely that an art form as quirky as a cappella will ever exist without at least some touches of humor. When groups make smart choices about when, how, and in front of which audiences to apply their humor they stand to transcend strong musicianship and arrive at a point of unparalleled entertainment value. Music will earn a group fans; personality will earn a group a true following. Groups shouldn't be afraid to make their audiences smile.



## Chapter 10: Recording

In order to get at my aesthetic for CDs, let's start by taking a step back from a cappella. I like a pretty wide range of music, from rock to folk to pop to alternative to a smidge of hip hop, country, and jazz, and many points in between. One of my top five favorite albums of all time is Sarah McLachlan's *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy*.

McLachlan reached the high point of her popularity with her first big commercial release in 1997, *Surfacing*, which featured hits like "Building a Mystery," "Adia," and "Angel." It's a good album. The thing is, for fans like me, it just never came across quite as true as the preceding release from 1993, *Fumbling*.

*Fumbling* was raw, emotional and thought provoking—it was different. From the soaring opening chords of "Possession"—a song of obsession, to the emotional pleading of "Good Enough" to the simple rejoice of "Ice Cream" to the discovery of an inner balance and peace in the album's title track, this is an album that takes the listener along for the deeply personal story of a life's journey, and does so through beautiful music without a ton of post-production effects. It's the kind of album that anyone can identify with some part of, but that at the same time remains distinctly McLachlan's own.

Contrast this with *Surfacing*. The latter recording has flashes of the same brilliance, but gives itself over to commercial expectations. McLachlan is a singer of sad songs,



so the tracks should predominantly be melancholy, piano-driven pieces, right? I suppose that's right from a marketing standpoint, but I find the conflicted nature of "Hold On," "Wait," and "Fear" (all *Fumbling* tracks) far more compelling. I'd liken *Surfacing* to a fresh-painted bathroom wall, taken care of by a professional, as opposed to a high school girl's bathroom wall that's gone untouched by the institution for the better part of a decade, and tells the marker-and-pen-graffiti stories of crushes and grudges and gossip and fads. I suppose the former is more palatable when you're trying to sell the property, but the latter tells a far more interesting story.

OK, so what on earth does all of this ranting about the Sarah McLachlan catalog have to do with a cappella recordings? Well, besides the fact that McLachlan's work is a staple in the collegiate a cappella community, I'm also trying to demonstrate where I'm coming from when I evaluate an a cappella recording. I like to feel connected to the musicians more so than the producers or retailers—in short I appreciate a more minimalist approach to production (more on this to follow). Furthermore, I appreciate a cohesive narrative thread, and an attention to flow. I like it when an album has enough cohesion to represent what a group is all about, while also demonstrating enough diversity in sound to surprise me and please the range of individuals who comprise a group's core audience.

The most important part of all, though, is that a group know what it wants to accomplish and take the appropriate steps toward that goal.

## Goals

There are a number of different reasons to record, and many of them overlap. There are groups that want to commemorate a year of work, groups that want to make money, groups are that

are seeking prestige. Again, these motivations are not mutually exclusive, but they do call for different steps when a group approaches the recording process.

Lots of groups aren't interested in recording for any audience beyond themselves. They want to record in order to document a year of work, putting every song the group sang on the CD, and making a point of giving every senior a piece of the solo pie. When you're recording an album like this, you should get input from a lot of your group members. If your intention is to put out an album by which they can remember their experience with the group, you want to make sure everyone has input on the recording process so it can authentically be their own.

These sorts of CDs are often labeled yearbook albums. There's nothing wrong with this approach, and it can be a simple and meaningful project for the group. Groups that intend to sell their work need to make sure they're taking the appropriate steps to acquire licenses to the music their covering, and think about how they're going to market and sell their recording to an audience. While a group certainly can try to sell a yearbook album (dozens, if not hundreds of groups do every year), you can also record it just for the group members. If the recording is more of an internal document, it means there's far less need to think about legalities and marketing strategies; besides which the group need not consider how viable its song selections or production quality will be for a paying audience.

Recording a yearbook album for the sake of the group serves two important functions—it's a fun souvenir for everyone involved in making the CD (and their families and friends) and it's a historical document for the benefit of the group to document what songs the group sang and how they

sounded as the years go by. A project with these intentions may even benefit from being a completely in house affair—not even going to a recording studio—so as to capture the group’s sound in its purest, least adulterated form.

Yearbook albums and the prospect of recording for more personal purposes are not for everyone. A number of groups may either have a financial necessity, or at least a business-oriented mindset that will lead them to record for profit. Indeed, collegiate a cappella groups generally have a great platform for selling CDs. For one thing, with an average of 10 to 15 members, each individual group member will probably be able to sell at least five or so CDs to family and friends who want to support them, completely independent of the quality of the CD itself. From there, most groups have at least a bit of a following on campus—a new group at a small school can probably count on at least 20 to 30 people who would be excited to buy their recordings. And between that group and newly-won-over admirers, a group can probably expect to move 40 to 50 more CDs at a big end of semester show. All of this amounts to over 150 CDs sold before we even consider selling CDs online, or getting tracks on iTunes or acaTunes. And if you put a recording in the hands of a group at a larger school or with a more committed fan base, the numbers will only increase proportionally.

And so, how can a group capitalize and make the most out of recording as a money-making venture? Groups need to think carefully about working with recording professionals. On one hand, a group that wants to maximize its profits may think it’s in the group’s best interests to minimize its costs initially, and record an album as cheaply as possible. When you’re trying to sell a product, though, you need to make quality a consideration. The cheapest method of recording possible

would be to sing the whole CD into a computer microphone and burn the tracks to CD. But if you're looking to convince potential buyers that your product is worth their money, it's important that you have a CD that sounds professional. Clean and balanced sound will be a lot more convincing than a recording with a muddled, airy background noise that swallows different parts.

It pays to shop around when it comes to finding a producer or recording engineer. Compare quotes and try to get samples of the professional's work. Have they recorded a cappella before? If so, what did the other group(s) have to say about it? What do you think of the albums they've previously worked on? Ultimately, you want a high quality recording to encourage CD sales, and remember that word of mouth is huge in inducing more sales in the college community. But just because you shell out for a professional to help you record doesn't mean that that person will have the experience, knowledge, or equipment to take you where you want to go—or even if that professional does have all the tools, that your CD sales will be able to justify a truly astronomical quote. In the end, if the bottom line is your group's primary concern, you need to think about how you can strike the best financial balance to result in the greatest net profits.

Some groups don't want to record just for money, or just for sentimentality, though—some groups keep an eye toward their collective resumes. These are the groups that aspire toward recognition, most often aiming toward earning recording awards or placement on compilations. Groups approach me from time to time to ask for advice on which compilations they should apply to. This sort of decision is ultimately one that only the group itself can make, depending upon its own ideals and vision.

Before a group submits to a compilation it should do its research. First of all, there's real value in Googling around for a compilation's name to check out its history and what other groups have to say about it. Some compilations, for example, may have different aesthetics from what your group is going for—if you can listen to last year's edition and not like a single song on it, do you really even want to be a part of the same project for this go round?

The Best of Collegiate A Cappella (BOCA) and SING! are two compilations have been around for quite some time, and that are quite open about how they select songs. They always include eclectic song selections and they don't involve an inordinate financial investment for groups to submit to them. These are the sorts of compilations that offer low risks and high profile rewards. There are other perfectly viable alternatives, but there also other recording ventures that are a bit less scrupulous—those that charge groups a great deal to apply, with little guaranteed returns, or that obligate groups featured on the compilation to purchase a high volume of CDs themselves—in essence, paying their way onto the album. Even with these considerations, some groups will make the decision that such compilations are right for them, and that's perfectly fine. The key is to know what you're getting into and make informed decisions.

When a group is focused on earning awards or landing its work on prestigious compilations, it becomes much more viable to think about investing in high-end production. This will vary to an extent based upon the aesthetics of a particular compilation, but the trend is for collegiate a cappella recordings to come across highly produced. There are individuals like Bill Hare who can make an honest claim to having gotten a track on every BOCA CD since the collection's inception.

While Hare's work won't come cheap, he has decades of experience, has worked with essentially every style of a cappella out there, and is known as an innovator who helps groups work out new approaches to top-notch recording. If you want to make it to the best compilations, you need to consider working with the best in the recording business.

## Production

OK, so we've danced around this question over the course of the last few pages, and it's time we settle down and address it. What's all this talk of production? What's good, what's bad, what's ugly?

Live a cappella is fundamentally about what a collection of people can do musically using only their bodies. On the most obvious level, this is all about singing. Vocal percussion muddies the waters a little, but remains a combination of singing and using the mouth to synthesize instruments—in this case, drums, cymbals, and the like. An ever-growing population of groups also incorporates everything from claps, snaps, stomps and beating their chests, all of which we'll put under the umbrella of body percussion.

Taking things one step further, a cappella performance has also come to incorporate a non-human element—that of microphone manipulation. Groups need to think about how many mics they use and how to arrange them. Should everyone be mic-ed equally? Generally, groups want the soloist and percussionist to come across more loudly.

Recording can represent a different beast from live performance. All of the factors above still come into play—a group is generally still performing the same music, using the same means, and while mic-ing may need to be different to optimize

recording, it remains an important non-human consideration. But what else is there?

As Mickey Rapkin described at some length in *Pitch Perfect. The Quest for Collegiate A Cappella Glory*, Bill Hare changed the game of a cappella recording when he teamed up with the Tufts Beelzebubs to record *Code Red* in 2003. Sure, he played with mic-ing levels and fixed tuning blemishes. But on top of all of this, he distorted sound in such a way as to convert human voices to something between voice, instrument, and robot. One of his more famous methods was having a group member tap his fingers against his teeth into a microphone and amplifying the sound enough to make it a legitimate mode of percussion. Such was Hare's big experiment, the results of which many purists shunned, but the results of which also undeniably paved the way for the next decade in a cappella recording.

Contemporary production effects blur the line between what the human body produces and what's an electronic effect to the extent that it's often difficult to distinguish that the performance actually is a cappella. Forget about trying to hear individual syllables, or pick out individual voices—such recordings are blended and polished to an extent that a casual listener will actually think the human voices are synthesizers.

So is this extent of production a good thing? There is plenty of evidence to say that it is. The effects take a foreign form of music and make it more accessible to a broader audience. Accordingly, these recordings tend to sell better than the rawer alternatives, and even have a marginally better success rate when it comes to being selected for compilations like BOCA.

So production effects are great, right? Well, this ultimately comes down to aesthetics. Allow me to use Rutgers University Casual Harmony for a mini-case study. As a live act, Casual

Harmony has long been one of my favorite groups, in large part for their edgy, complex but bold sound. Their self-titled CD offers up a very different sound for the group, in large part because of the way in which it was recorded and produced. Listening to this disc reminded me of a studio art class I took when I was in tenth grade. I was working on a pencil sketch of a still life, and shading and cross-hatching the heck out of it, much to the approval of my teacher. I was chatting with a classmate one day and noticed he had a different approach to his piece. He would shade in an area, and then rub over it with his finger to smear the pencil strokes and create a smoother look all around. I decided to give this a try on my own drawing, and it had a similar effect of really smoothing out my shades. I liked the look of it until my teacher came around, put his hands to his head and asked me what on earth I had done.

See, my teacher was upset because when I smudged the shading I took out a lot of the individual values and contrasts I had previously worked in. Sure, it looked smoother, but it was no longer textured, varied or nearly as interesting. This, I fear, is the same result at which Casual Harmony unwittingly arrived through all of their production effects on this album. The sound isn't displeasing—on the contrary, I enjoyed it quite a bit, and it holds up after multiple listens. The production is so thick, though, that more often than not you can't pick out syllables in the background, or distinguish intricacies of the group's vocal percussion from an actual drumbeat. The end result is a CD that does not give us the sound of a great a cappella group, but rather of a really good cover band. It's an enjoyable CD—just not the CD I intended to listen to.

## Standing Out

The marketplace for collegiate a cappella CDs is by no means



as cluttered as the general music market. By the same token, if a group wants for its recording to stand out from the other two or three being produced at the same school, much less the dozens coming out of the same geographic region, or the hundreds from across the nation, that group needs to think about how it intends to be different.

One of the primary ways in which groups get noticed is through originality. Sometimes this is a matter of song selection—covering an artist or song that no one else has thought to thus far, or being the first to cover a hot musical act that is on the rise. Otherwise, some groups are able to develop thematic connections or focus on a particular genre to create a more cohesive album that is, by extension, distinctive in an a cappella recording world full of CDs recorded without rhyme or reason.

Sometimes groups achieve originality through innovation in arrangement. Groups can identify new ways to deliver the a cappella sound, or put a creative spin on existing songs. Such was the case with the mashup fad that arrived full-force in 2009 and is still kicking at the time this chapter is written.

There's also the potential to do something new in terms of recording. As we noted earlier, *Code Red* made a splash not so much because the album was good, as because it was unlike any a cappella recording to precede it. When it comes to production effects, there are always new techniques and tricks just waiting to be discovered, and hitting upon the right one can be a great way to set a group apart.

Besides originality, there is a universal and age old element of a cappella that will help any group's recordings stand out: the soloist.

It's easy for a group to lose sight of how important the soloist is, because group directors—and the group itself—tend

to focus on how the larger majority of the group sounds. I don't mean to diminish the importance of tuning or blend, but particularly in recorded a cappella, the first thing a listener is going to notice is the soloist's voice. I would go so far as to say that casual listeners will all but ignore the larger group sound unless it's truly sensational or truly awful, while *none of them* will miss the solo, as the most familiar, most up-front piece of a song. Therefore, if a group truly wants to stand out and appeal to a larger audience, it's important to think about assigning the right soloist to the right song, making sure that the soloist sounds good, and doing everything they can to accentuate his or her strengths and hide his or her weaknesses (for example, dropping the group sound for a money note, or going for a big crescendo or adding a backing solo for a note the soloist hasn't perfected).

## Reviews

For better or for worse, the boon in recorded a cappella has paved the way for a boon in the number of a cappella critics. Sometimes groups want criticism; sometimes they don't. Regardless, today's a cappella CD releases are often subject to review by the long-standing Recorded A Cappella Review Board (RARB), in addition to websites like The A Cappella Blog, and podcasts like *Mouth Off*.

In general, my philosophy is that any artists who put out work for public consumption are opening themselves up to criticism, because the public deserves an earnest account of a product's quality before it invests time and money in artists' work. Therefore, groups should prepare themselves for the benefits and rewards of having their CDs reviewed.

On the positive side, any review—even a bad one—means press for the group. A review will make the public aware that

the CD even exists, and might lead old fans to look into your new work, or motivate someone to buy your CD just because they want to hear a particular track done a cappella.

Ultimately, a positive review—from a site with a reasonable readership and reputation—will help your CD sales. A critic's praise offers you public commendation, which can serve as the tipping point between someone who was curious enough to read the review, and someone who actually bites the bullet and buys your music.

Negative reviews aren't all bad, either. Besides the publicity factor, groups that can take criticism and learn from mistakes often enjoy the greatest success down the road, when they can implement the feedback in meaningful ways. For a CD, this may mean diversifying the song selections the next time around, or opting to work with a different producer.

When push comes to shove, a review only matters as much as the reviewed party lets it. Much like submitting a group's work to compilations or for award consideration, it's important that a group know the reviewer and his or her aesthetic. As I've made plain here, when I review a CD I want to hear human voices, not over-produced sound effects. If your group depends upon blurring that line, then you have to accept in advance that I'm going to bash that aspect of your CD. Likewise, if the goal was to capture your group as organically, earnestly, and purely as possible, your lack of effects probably won't win you the favor of another bunch of critics. You need to know what you're getting into, and take in any criticism through the appropriate lens.

## Conclusion

Looking back at *Fumbling Toward Ecstasy*, I loved it, and it received a mostly positive critical response. Album sales didn't

exactly set the world on fire, though, and from a recording production standpoint, it didn't break any new ground. I say all of this to arrive at the central point that recording—the process and the product—is what you make of it. If you and your group want nothing more than a memento of the year's work, there's nothing wrong with that. If you want to push the boundaries of a cappella, and do some true sound engineering, that's your choice as well. If you're going to do everything you can to record BOCA-friendly tracks, and not stop until award nominations roll in, there's no inherent reason not to do that either.

In the end, recording a CD is one of the unique and intrinsically cool parts of being part of an a cappella group. Make the project your own and you won't be disappointed.



## Chapter II: Competition

There are many competitions in a cappella, from the barber-shop tournaments, to one-night contests at festivals, to the highest profile of a cappella endeavors, NBC's *The Sing-Off*. When it comes to collegiate a cappella, which is the main focus of this book, no competition supersedes Varsity Vocals' International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA). The competition took shape in 1996, and has since seen groups from different regions of the US and Canada, and (depending on the year) groups from Europe, Africa, and elsewhere participate. Competing groups navigate their way through four rounds of competition—a qualifying round for which the groups submit recordings, a live quarterfinal, a best-of-the-region semifinal, followed by the international finals in the New York City. Additionally, in recent years, Varsity Vocals has added an online Wild Card round—an additional route for top runners up at semifinals to get to the finals. At each level, groups get 12 minutes to impress the judges through a mix of musicality, visual presentation, and the raw reactions they provoke.

As we're writing this chapter, more groups than ever before are competing. But how do you know if competitive a cappella is right for your group? And if you do decide to compete, what should you do to prepare, and how should you carry yourself

on stage? What do you do when the competition's over? This chapter explores these questions and more.

## When to Compete

### *New Groups*

There are plenty of a cappella groups that do not enter competitions for fear that they are not developed enough to compete. Particularly in the case of new groups, when a group first takes shape, the founders tend to focus on fundamentals like learning and teaching the craft of a cappella, developing a repertoire, and building a name in the local community.

There are other groups that take form with competition immediately in mind. There's California State University Northridge, for which founder Chase DeLuca started to recruit members in the summer of 2006 before leading the group to its first bid in the ICCAs in the spring of 2007. Similarly, there's the east coast story of Rider University Vocalmotion, which first competed in February 2011—three months after the group formed.

Old hands might balk at the idea of such inexperienced groups trying to compete with groups that have decades of institutional memory and repertoire to draw from. But then, those naysayers should probably consider that, by 2008 Acasola finished second in the ICCA West Semifinals—one spot shy of representing the most competitive region in the tournament at the ICCA Finals. Likewise, in its very first outing, Vocalmotion finished second at its quarterfinal, and went on to finish second in its ICCA semifinal debut, too, just five months into the group's history.

Clearly, not every new group will arrive at such immediate success as the Acasola or Vocalmotion, and clearly there is some intuitive value in waiting to enter contests—most groups

will be more successful after they've had time to develop their skills and a group identity. But then, what of the decision to compete early? Outside of the outliers who can thrive after just a few years, if not months, is there value in the everyday group rushing to the competition stage?

This is a chicken and egg situation. Can great groups justify competing early, or do groups become great for the experience competing? I would argue it's a little of both. Entering competitions forces a group to focus and refine its act, and to do so immediately. Furthermore, performing alongside more experienced groups gives new groups the chance to witness what other groups are or are not doing well first hand, and even pick other competitors' brains backstage.

The greatest benefit of all to competing early is that it helps a group establish a tradition of excellence. If a group doesn't compete in its first year of existence, it's easy to justify not doing so the second year either, or the third. Follow this pattern, and the group can easily fall into a routine of mediocrity—singing the same songs year after year, settling for middling intonation. It's not until a spark plug takes the reins of the organization that the group might break free and try new things. On the flip side, if a group starts competing right away, even if it falls short in its first outing, there's motivation to improve and redeem the group in its next outing. Otherwise, if a group succeeds right out the chute, it sets a precedent: establishing the group's reputation and proving to the members that they are capable of big things. This is the sort of group that will follow in its own tradition and enter competitions in future years not as plucky underdogs, but as proud champions.

### *Established Groups*

New groups aren't the only ones that are reluctant to compete.



There are those groups that have firmly established reputations who choose not to participate in competitions like the ICCAs not out of intimidation or a sense of inadequacy, but out of a sense that they have little to gain and plenty to lose.

As a case study, let's consider The University of Rochester Midnight Ramblers' ICCA bid in 2010. By this point, the group had a long history of excellence, including a trip to the ICCA Finals a few years prior, numerous awards, recordings, tours, and charitable work to their names. A group like The Ramblers doesn't need an ICCA championship to enhance its reputation, but does choose to compete—be it for the glory, or the networking, or the opportunity to prove themselves.

The Ramblers placed third in their Mid-Atlantic quarterfinal. Granted, it was a stacked show with ten groups competing, at least four of which delivered semifinale-caliber performances. Still, in my humble opinion, The Ramblers outperformed any other group that took the stage that night. Regardless of that fact, when the judges' scores were tallied, The Ramblers did not even finish in the top two groups, such that they could advance to the next round.

What did The Ramblers get out of this competition experience? They may have won a few new fans in the audience and may have made some new friends. Maybe, just maybe, the defeat lit a fire under their bellies to make them work all the harder, and become an even better group moving forward. But otherwise? Prior to that night, the guys could make a reasonable (if arbitrary) argument that they were among the top ten-to-twenty best collegiate a cappella groups in the country. After that night, the judges had deemed them weaker than two groups that—despite being very good—had far less claim to being among America's elite. This is the plight of elite groups that compete. Win and you only confirm the greatness that

you would hope everyone already knows about. Lose and your reputation takes a serious hit.

So should elite groups compete?

To answer this question, we need to move beyond questions of image and reputation, and focus instead on actual greatness, by whatever terms a group may define greatness for itself. One of the most objective ways for a group to tout its own quality is through competition—by placing itself in juxtaposition to other groups and asserting itself as the best among its peers. There are a number of elite groups that have proven themselves in such away, including The University of Southern California SoCal VoCals, Brigham Young University Vocal Point, University of Oregon Divisi, and Berklee College of Music Pitch Slapped, just to name a few. These groups have made it to the ICCA Finals multiple times within a span of a few years, or even win multiple championships, and as a result made big names for themselves. These groups have not only asserted how good they are, but demonstrated both a depth of talent and quality as an organization to thrive over time, surviving not only the burden of time that challenges any team, but also the college-specific plague of losing your most seasoned group members to graduation.

But then, there is more to greatness than the ICCAs. You have The Tufts Beelzebubs, who blazed a trail through innovative recording to complement their popular road act. There are The Yale Whiffenpoofs, who have the unique claim to being the nation's oldest collegiate a cappella group. University of Oregon On the Rocks and The Yeshiva University Maccabees have staked claims to fame based on their wildly popular YouTube videos. The aforementioned Ramblers have raised money and turned it around to create an annual scholarship for incoming freshmen at their school. These are all profound

accomplishments that give each of these groups a claim to greatness, and none of these accomplishments have anything to do with competition.

Which a cappella group is the best in the world? We'll never know with any certainty, in part because of the arbitrary nature of the question, and in part because we'll never have a fair way of comparing them all, because a wide array of groups so rarely perform via the same platform in the same given year.

But, I have digressed. Back to the original question—should great groups compete?

There are plenty of reasons not to, and a group clearly need not compete to be great—unlike sports, a cappella is not an inherently competitive form. With that said, for we, the fans of collegiate a cappella, how cool would it be to have a year in which all of the best of the best groups did compete? Imagine an ICCA Finals populated with The 'Bubs, The Ramblers, The SoCal VoCals, Vocal Point, Purple Haze and All Night Yahtzee, just to pose one formation. OK, so a 12-minute set doesn't take into account depth of repertoire, recording, or innovation beyond the stage. But a 12-minute set does provide an ample forum for a group to make a case for itself, and I, for one, think it would be pretty cool if we could all see it at least once.

## Preparing for Competition

When a group decides to enter the ICCAs, it can't just show up with three of its best songs and make a go of it. The competition is serious and institutionalized enough that it demands careful planning and preparation, from the songs a group chooses to perform, to the perfection of those songs, to making the most of the venue.

## *Song Selection*

We address song selection in greater depth in chapter 3, but for now, let's consider a few factors specific to picking songs to bring to competition. The first, and perhaps most obvious consideration is to pick songs that will represent your group well—songs that are well-arranged and reasonably complex; songs your group has proven itself up to executing; songs with good soloists; ideally at least one song with some physical movement with which to ramp up your visual presentation score.

In addition to thinking about songs your group can perform well, you also want to come off as original. This often means performing relatively contemporary song selections—if the song came out on the radio within the last six months, it usually fits this bill nicely. But contemporary isn't everything. Katy Perry's "Firework" was getting plenty of play in the spring of 2011. Nonetheless, it didn't exactly feel fresh when multiple groups started performing the song at most shows. In other words, you want to avoid clichés. A nice work around is to pick a "secondary" work by a popular artist—the less popular of two singles, or an album track from an artist that may be popular enough fans will still recognize the song, but the song itself won't be fodder for constant covering.

There's nothing inherently wrong with picking an older song, but if you're going to do so, you should have a purpose. It might be that you're reinventing the song—switching the gender, upping the tempo, mashing it up with something else. It might be that you have something worth showcasing in your group—a remarkable enough soloist, a stunning enough arrangement, or a vocal percussionist you're eager to feature. Otherwise, though, old songs tend to come with the stigma that your group itself is stale—that you're probably rehashing an old arrangement or you have been honing this song for

years, in contrast to the groups that arrange, learn, and master new music to entertain the crowd.

On top of all of these other considerations, you want to pick songs that will help the crowd and judges remember you—and remember you favorably. There's an intangible likeability factor that plays into every competition. Although it's hardly a dominant factor, singing songs that seem to fit your personality and paint you as earnestly nice, bold, creative, or even badass can go a long way toward winning over fans to your cause. That could spell the difference between a first place and a second place subjective vote from the judges.

### *Set Structure*

Song selection is important, but it's essential that you complement good stand-alone songs with an attention to how the individual pieces of your set fit together.

You need to exhibit your group's range. Everyone loves a high energy opener, but if you keep the whole set running at a frenetic pace, belting for all you're worth, you're going to drain the audience. You'll get less bang for your buck for each individual big moment, because listeners will start taking them for granted. Similarly, a killer ballad can be a fantastic way to pull at the heartstrings of your audience, but if every song is slow, you're not going to tap into an unlimited reservoir of emotion from the crowd—you're going to see them nod off halfway through your second piece. Perhaps even more important than your effect on the audience, it's extremely difficult for the group itself to project a constant level of emotion for 12 minutes straight. While this approach can work, it's an unnecessary challenge for a group to impose upon itself, and in the competition setting you should try to take advantage of any break you can get.

Performing a wide range of material—different tempos, different genres, different styles of arrangement—makes your set more enjoyable to perform and to listen to, and also gives you broader opportunities to connect with the audience. Think of your set as a high-end buffet. Everything tastes great, but there's also enough variety that everyone from grandpa to the kids will find something to connect with and applaud.

In addition to range, you should think of how your songs will connect to each other—in other words, transitions. Will your positioning on stage at the end of song two set up your choreography for song three? More importantly, will there be a thematic or narrative thread through your set? This isn't always possible and isn't something you should lose sleep over, but if you develop a sense of cohesion between songs, it will make the audience appreciate the individual pieces all the more.

Consider, for example, the Mt. San Antonio College *Fermata Nowhere* set that took home the international championship in 2009. The group opened with Sergio Mendes's "Magalenha," a Portuguese song of remembrance and celebration, establishing roots. They moved on to a tremendously soulful performance of Secondhand Serenade's "Fall For You," retaining a theme of love, but focusing it, making it more contemporary, and bringing it to America. The group wrapped up with a pop medley anchored with Kanye West's "Heartless" and Beyonce's "All the Single Ladies," that continued to tell a bit of a love story, but re-broadened the scope of the set to a more general exploration of interpersonal relationships, but in the contemporary American context.

Did *Fermata Nowhere* really plan its set out with these themes in mind? Probably not. Nonetheless, they demonstrated their range while retaining their earnest and (except for the Beyonce part) masculine identity for one heck of a set.

When it comes to set structure, there has been some controversy over the appropriate number of songs and types of songs to cover in 12 minutes. The traditional set consists of three songs—usually an upbeat opening number, a ballad in the middle, and a relatively raucous finisher. That middle song tends to showcase the best of a group’s musicality, often spotlighting a star soloist or lending lead vocals to a choral, monolithic voice. The last song tends to be the most choreography-intensive with big moves to match the big vocals, quite often including an element of comedy.

In the mid-to-late 2000s there arrived a major push toward defying convention. It started with the inclusion of more medleys and mashups—a convenient vehicle through which to put a creative spin on songs, evade long instrumental sections, and most aptly showcase the emotional range of which a group is capable. From there, a number of groups have embraced four- or even five-song sets. Syracuse University Orange Appeal advanced to the 2007 Mid-Atlantic Semifinals via a set that opened with Deathcab for Cutie’s tour de melancholy “Steadier Footing,” continued with the still-borderline-cutting-edge Muse sound of “Time is Running Out,” moved on to non-traditional Beatles head scratcher “Because,” and closed with a theatrical interpretation of a spiritual called “The Battle.” Such a set is designed to show both the emotional and genre range of which a group is capable, and stretches twelve minutes to its fullest.

While this is a relatively encouraging example, other groups have made less inspired efforts in a similar light. “Kitchen sink sets” as I’ve come to call them pack four or five songs within time limit, with little regard to how the songs connect or what they demonstrate about the group. These sorts of performances tend to come off as clipped and rushed, and often include at least one piece the group had no business

bringing to competition. Sometimes, less is more. When a group slows down, really polishes its music, and picks longer songs, it gives itself a better chance to develop a coherent narrative and connect with the audience.

Other groups have opted to go smaller on their sets. I once heard a group narrow its set down to just two pieces, the second of which was Meat Loaf's "Paradise by the Dashboard Light." A song like "Paradise" is a gamble for the sheer fact that it's so long that there's little chance you can wedge in a third song to accompany it. Furthermore, the opening is long enough that there's a real risk of losing the audience before you get to the rocking finish that everyone knows and loves. With all of that said, there's also a fair argument that a single, extended song choice demonstrates a group's ability to maintain a quality performance, exceeding just two-and-a-half to four minutes of sustained quality to achieve something far more significant in stature.

The crux of all of this discussion of set structure is that there are few pure rights and wrongs—it's largely about how your song selection matches your set structure, and whether the combination of the two reflects the best of what your group is capable of. The three-song set structure is a lot like the five-paragraph essay through which students learn to write in high school (introduction, three main points, conclusion). Neither are inherently bad, as long as the person using them recognizes that one size does not fit all, and aberrations from the prescribed structure are not necessarily wrong. In many cases, a three-song set is exactly what will allow a group to tell a story, and there plenty of examples of this structure being successful. As long as a group is showing at least some range, doing what it does best, and filling between 10 and 12 minutes, it will probably be just fine.



### *Focus on the Set*

One of the main differences between a quality group that is competing and one that is not is the group's range of focus. For a group that is not competing, the spring often represents the time to refine work from the fall, while arranging new material to fit the group's emerging talent and round out the year's repertoire. Groups that are competing don't have the luxury of getting to learn a wealth of new material or rest on traditional pieces. On the contrary, in order to succeed, such groups need to narrow their focus to the competition set itself, and maybe an extra song or two—ones particularly apropos for an on-campus engagement, and maybe one to use for an encore if the group wins its competition.

The insularity of focus that a competition imposes is one of the main deterrents from competing. After all, focusing on three or so songs is not conducive to building up enough material for an album, and it's harder to justify touring under the circumstances.

When groups compete, there's a very clear difference between groups that perfect those three songs versus those groups that are just performing three of their better songs among a collection of songs they've worked on more or less equally. The latter group is solid enough and entertaining to watch. The former comes in looking like a machine—focused, determined, and designed for ICCA success.

### *Getting Outside Opinions*

Lots of groups are hesitant to let anyone else watch their sets before a competition, in the interest of preserving a surprise for the whole live audience, or out of fear that they'll hear opinions they don't want to hear. The problem with this line of

thought is that these groups aren't looking at their art form as a business—they're looking at it as a personal endeavor. Sure, it's cool to impress your schoolmates and family members with a set of songs they've never heard before. But if you're going to receive criticism, it's far better to hear it from people who know and love the group members, and are invested in the group's success, as opposed to an objective judge who is docking the group's score (or \*ahem\* a blog critic with no personal connections, who will broadcast your weaknesses to a few thousand readers).

One of the best things a competing group can do is to invite five to ten trusted critics to watch its set two-to-three weeks before competition. The critics may include members of other a cappella groups (ideally ones who aren't competing that year, or at least who aren't competing against you) and objective music experts (not having a direct stake in a cappella might help them look beyond what a cappella peers would notice, to observe more fundamental tone and syncopation issues). Lastly, going to the opposite extreme, it may be useful to invite in one or two people with little formal music or a cappella knowledge who can give you an average Joe's perspective. As much as some of their criticism may be superficial, or may not seem particularly relevant to what you're trying to accomplish, sometimes they can provide bigger picture or catch-all observations any given judge might notice, despite it not being a particularly musical point—for example, pointing out that two of the songs you have put next to each other sound too similar and make the set boring, or that one of the group member's facial expressions didn't sell the tone of the song.

The timing of this feedback is important. While it can be helpful to get notes on something like song selection as early as possible, in general you want to take the time to perfect

your set as much as you can on your own and fix your own problems before you open yourself up to outside critics. That way, you will truly receive feedback you could only get from an outside voice. Nonetheless, if you wait until you have less than two weeks to consider and implement feedback, you run a real risk of making changes with little enough time that it will be difficult for the group to really master the new music, or you just won't have enough time to implement changes at all. In the latter case, you'd might as well not seek out criticism, because all it can really do is rattle the group's confidence.

### *Watching Other Groups*

With the inception of YouTube and like sites, it's easier than ever to hear and see what other groups are doing. I've heard plenty of arguments against watching other groups' work: concerns that watching another group will too heavily influence your own group and stifle your creativity, or arguments that a group will only be intimidated when it hears the proficiencies of others.

I will grant the skeptics that it isn't necessarily a great idea to watch your direct competitors before a competition, for the very reasons listed above. The last thing you want to do is (intentionally or not) copy someone who will be performing at the same show as you, and, on top of that, how is watching the competition before the night of the show really supposed to help? It will rarely make sense to alter your own set based on what another group does. And so, watching others at the last minute will unnecessarily intimidate the group, inaccurately inflate your self-worth, or, at the very best, give you an accurate representation of something it's too late for you change anyway.

OK, so it does not make sense to scope out the competition before the night of the show. It does, however, make sense to

listen to and watch a lot of a cappella. Think of it like an aspiring writer reading other books, or an actor watching films and plays. If you can cultivate an aesthetic for what you objectively like in the work of others, it can go a long way toward helping you develop a clearer conception of your own group's goals and identity.

Watching other groups can give you ideas for song selections. Consider, for instance, the explosion of all-male groups covering Lady Gaga after *On the Rocks* made it big with its rendition of "Bad Romance." No, most of the groups that followed were not as good, and yes, for those of us who attend multiple competitions each year, the choice did grow quite tiresome. With that said, on a more objective, non-comparative level, these guy groups did stumble upon something entertaining and different for their campus shows—something that both drew the audience in and came across as comfortably familiar because of the tradition *On the Rocks* established.

Competitions themselves represent a unique opportunity to see a lot of groups perform live. I have long held that one of the primary reasons groups should compete is for the sake of seeing what else is out there firsthand. Of course, this does represent a bit of a crossroads. It's great to see what other groups are doing, but what about the aforementioned intimidation factor? Can your group get psyched out by watching an excellent first half of the show before you take the stage?

Unfortunately, this is not a question I can answer with any certainty because it depends so profoundly on the group itself. Many groups have the capacity to sit back and relax when it comes to competition night and to focus, unaffected by any form of nerves when they perform themselves. Other groups enter competitions far less sure of themselves and crumble at the realization that other groups are even comparably good. If

you're concerned about your group's mental state—or at least the mental state of certain group members—you're better off not watching the groups that sing before you.

### *Travel*

For most groups, competition implies travel—sometimes a lengthy road trip or even a plane ride; at least a journey across town to a foreign campus. Whatever the case, as long as it's within a group's means and the scheduling works out, you should travel in such a way that it will least affect the group's performance. Factor in extra time for travel: consider the likelihood of getting lost; think about when and how the group will be able to eat before the show.

If the site of a show is more than a two-to-three hour drive away, you should travel a day in advance. Use the resources within the group—if a member or alum can provide housing near the host school, that's ideal. Otherwise, if you have the budget, contribute some of it to overnight accommodations. Avoiding day-of-the-show travel can be a real energy saver and go a long way toward putting a group at ease—sleeping in at the hotel, grabbing a big group brunch to bond before you head to the school, and having time to warm up properly before you perform. All of this can come in contrast to rushing out of cars, struggling to find everyone, then find the performance space, and only having an hour to calm down before sound checks.

Groups are best served when they can capitalize on the travel experience as a mode of cultivating community among in the group. Particularly for those lengthy road trips, make sure you're carpooling and caravanning. The experience is fun and helps to make the full competition experience more of a common one for everyone in the group. As we've discussed

elsewhere in this book, great groups care the most about one another as people—the positive social dynamic makes them care more about what they’re doing on stage, in addition to helping each individual group member feel more supported. Worst case scenario, a group that travels together to a show will have some fun road trip stories to share at the end of the weekend, regardless of how the competition itself goes.

When groups compete at their own schools, they enjoy a number of advantages. They don’t have to worry about the time, money, and disorientation involved with a long drive to a new place. They have an easy time cultivating a large cheering section through a fan base rooted at the school.

There are plenty of advantages to competing “at home”. However, groups in this situation miss out on the bonding effects of travel. In addition, these groups lose the unique experience of winning over an objective crowd (or perhaps even a crowd biased against them). Such experience grows increasingly valuable if a group advances to later rounds of competition for which it *does* need to travel. Travel allows a group to cultivate its road identity—how it will carry itself performing at off campus events in the local community, or if the group goes on tour.

## Performing

After all of the preparations are done, it comes time for a group to actually perform. Fortunately, by the time a group performs, most of the work is already done. All that’s left is to execute what the group has prepared. Nonetheless, there are a number of factors to consider in how the group executes.

The way in which a group takes the stage makes a first impression on the audience and the judges. For this reason, I positively love it when group members do something

unique—though not necessarily gimmicky—to take the stage. Examples include the number of all-male groups that jog on stage, chest-bumping and high-fiving one another. This practice communicates confidence and camaraderie. Furthermore, behaving so loosely helps people relax and shake off their performance jitters.

Another example of getting on stage in a memorable way is the gradual entry, with group members filtering on stage over the course of the first song. This approach is dramatic, gives individual group members more of an identity, and, when executed correctly, can really captivate the imagination of the audience. (Wait, this group only has four members? Oh there are six. No, wait, there are eight. No, twelve? Sixteen?)

Once the group is on stage, the members need to be themselves. Some groups opt to talk on the mic to introduce themselves or to segue between songs. This isn't essential by any stretch, but it is one way of letting a group's personality shine through on a more personal level. Personality is a huge X-factor in competition. You can't quite quantify it, but if judges like groups, they'll be more compelled to give them the benefit of the doubt and, by extension, higher subjective rankings. Anything a group can do to show off its own unique self in an earnest and engaging way is worth considering.

When the set is done, it's worthwhile for a group to consider how it will exit the stage. Too often, I've seen groups sing their final notes, look around at one another, present an awkward wave or two to the audience, then shuffle out of the spotlight. It's a minor detail, but a well-rehearsed exit can do a lot to sell a group's professionalism. It doesn't take much—just a coordinated bow, and all filing off stage in the same direction (it doesn't hurt to assign the person on the end to act as the leader of this procession). Alternatively, a group may opt

to jog off stage, continuing to display its energy. Regardless, a group should think about its exit as the last impression it will make on spectators. The exit should represent a lasting image of how the group wants to be seen.

### *Performance Order*

The order in which groups perform at ICCA shows are all determined at random the day of the show. There are plenty of arguments about the benefits of performing earlier or later—about whether it's good to make the first impression of the night, or be last thing on the judges' minds; about setting the tone or outshining the preceding acts. Ultimately, there's no concrete proof as to actual benefits of performing earlier or later in a show, or toward the middle. Judging occurs through a combination of subjective and objective ranking scoring, designed to give groups as fair of a shake as possible. Like the decision of whether to watch other groups, the ideal point at which a group performs will vary based on the group itself and the nature of the performance (for example, when two very similar groups perform in close succession, they're open to comparison: this will usually bode well for one group, worse for the other).

The bottom line is that, groups have typically have no say about when they perform. There are enough factors within a group's control (as discussed throughout this chapter) that there's no real benefit in fretting about that which a group cannot affect anyway.

### *The Aftermath*

As important as a group's performance in competition can be to the group's reputation and long-term future, it's also worthwhile for a group consider how it will conduct itself after the competition. In the event your group has the good fortune to win,



sportsmanship in the realm of a cappella is every bit as important as it is any other walk of life. It's to the long term benefit of your group that people like you. You should want for others to be happy when you win—to celebrate your success, and perhaps even look into collaborating with you in the future.

Most collegiate a cappella groups I know have won with grace and respect. I have, however, also seen those groups that come across as arrogant or uncaring about their fellow groups. Such a reaction practically begs outsiders to question your group's worthiness of winning, and to start building a case against you.

In addition to being gracious winners, groups should accept defeats with professionalism and poise. The sheer experience of competing is invaluable to a group's long-term success, from performing in an unfamiliar space and in front of an unfamiliar crowd, to garnering the objective feedback of the judges, to networking with other musicians, every group that competes earns some level of rewards. Similar to being an arrogant winner, coming across as a sore loser can really hurt a group's credibility. Groups should congratulate the winners in person and even online afterward, and take the experience of not winning themselves as opportunities to learn and work toward the long-term betterment of the group.

## Conclusion

Competitions are a huge part of a cappella. It's important that groups think carefully about when and why they want to compete; that they prepare thoroughly and purposefully; that they deliver performances the group can be proud of; and that they are sure to learn and grow from the overall competition experience.

## Chapter 12: Event Planning

While a cappella groups can pursue any number of endeavors, the core function of just about any group remains live performance. Groups may serve as guests of other groups or perform at competitions, but the heart of every group is and always will be holding its own shows.

Whether your group is the only one on the bill, you have an array of guests, or it's a competition, the key elements of planning for an a cappella show remain the same. The process requires planning and a great deal of prep work. To that end, this chapter breaks down the steps of arranging an a cappella performance, providing a systematic approach that will ensure you consider every essential factor and prepare for an array of contingencies.

### Preliminary Work

Whether you're new to event planning or a seasoned veteran, there's no substitute for organization. With that in mind, I suggest you create a spreadsheet on your computer to help organize tasks and document the process. Consider using a structure similar to the following:

**Spreadsheet Title:**

Event name (e.g. Spring A Cappella Competition)

**Tabs:****1. General**

Enter event details, such as name, date, location, general notes, etc. as well as the current date to help keep track of when information was last updated.

**2. Tasks**

Enter task details, current statuses, and people responsible.

**3. Financials**

Include revenues and expenses (e.g., equipment, supplies, services)

**4. Day of Event**

Enter day-of-event task details, including task names, start and end times, statuses, and people responsible. Put the list in ascending order by start time for easier readability.

**5. Summary – use for post-event notes and lessons learned**

Document post-event notes, lessons learned, unusual occurrences, successes, and other general points from the event. This will help with future event planning.

This is by no means an exhaustive list; it is meant to act as a core template on which you can base your own spreadsheet. It's likely you'll find other bits of information you'd like to track, so I encourage you to modify it as you see fit.

**Venue**

Choosing the right venue is extremely important in planning an event. In my experience hosting and attending events, the

following is a list of venue-related items that you should take into consideration.

*Does the venue have the capacity to hold the number of people expected to attend?*

If you have no idea of an estimate, try reaching out to others in the area who have held a cappella events to get an idea of the popularity. You may also be able to ascertain a number based on your marketing and promotion strategy (addressed later in this chapter).

*Can you afford it?*

Most venues charge, or at least expect a percentage of your profits for allowing you to use the space for a show. The sad truth is that the nicer the venue, generally speaking, the higher the costs. Consider your budget, determine a price range, and stick to it. In general, you don't want you and your group to have to sweat ticket sales to make back money you spent for the venue.

A couple important caveats: If you're a student, you can often reserve spaces on campus at a discounted rate, or even free of charge. Moreover, if this is a charitable event, many organizations will happily allow you to use their facilities at a lesser expense.

*Is it convenient?*

If parking is a known issue or the venue is in a bad part of town, people are likely to pass on the show, so make sure it's easily and comfortably accessible to your intended audience.

*Does it have more than just a stage?*

If your show includes multiple groups, the groups will need their own spaces to rehearse, drop off their belongings, and

relax before and after their performances. Make sure that the venue has a number of additional rooms equal to the number of groups you anticipate performing.

*Does it have any other features that I might need?*

If you plan to play a slideshow during the introduction of the event or want to have a light extravaganza after the final group, make sure that the venue has the equipment (or at least the means) to make it happen.

*Does it set the right tone?*

There is a reason arch sings are such a treasured tradition among a number of a cappella groups—they're informal, free, and designed to attract a casual audience. If those are your goals, an outdoor, public setting is perfect. If you're aiming for something more artsy and intimate, see if you can arrange a performance at coffee shop. If you're aiming for cool and edgy, maybe you should look into securing a black box theater. If you want the show to be distinguished and formal, a traditional theater is probably your best bet. While you can always make modifications to the performance space to better reflect your purposes, starting with the closest fit possible helps establish your target atmosphere from the get-go.

## **Emcees, Judges, and Volunteers**

If you think about all of the resources that go into an event, from the equipment down to the tickets, you come to recognize that each aspect of the show must be managed and coordinated by people. Three of the most important groups of people are the emcees, judges, and volunteers.

Usually, the emcees of an event kick off the show by greeting the audience, announcing relevant information about the

event, and, oftentimes, throwing in a bit of humor to break the ice. Specifically for scholastic settings, hosting duties are best-handled by two people. Having a pair of emcees allows for comedic banter, acting, and theatrics not possible with just one person on stage. As the number of emcees rises beyond two, the show often suffers as the wide array of personalities give the show a disjointed feel, which makes it difficult for the audience to determine who to focus on, and, worst of all, has a tendency to take attention away from the event's featured performers, in favor of non-musicians hogging the spotlight.

When deciding who should fulfill this role, consider individuals who *know* a cappella—who can speak knowledgeably about the topic, avoid uninformed statements, and perhaps add some interesting tidbits to enrich the show.

More generally speaking, strong emcees tend to be outspoken, comfortable in front of an audience, and able to read a crowd to have a sense of how well they are connecting. If you look beyond the normal bounds of a cappella, you may find actors, actresses comedians, or local celebrities to be effective hosts.

If you're planning for a competition, you'll need judges to adjudicate the event. Traditionally, three judges fit the bill—a manageable enough panel to make decisions quickly and maintain a level of quality control, but also a sufficient number to break ties and spread the judging power amongst a few individuals, so it's not up to one person to determine the fates of every group.

Ideal judges have a polished musical background—think professional musicians, music teachers, or established music critics. Furthermore, the best judges are ones who can be objective. In the event of an intercollegiate competition, it's best to err on the side of omitting alumni from a particular school, or at least alums from one of the groups that's performing

that night. Furthermore, the most successful judges are ones familiar with the a cappella form—ones who can identify clichés and won't be wowed by sheer notion of groups executing choreography while they sing; ones who can see past soloists to recognize the intricacies of a cappella arrangements.

Of course, in the end, judges are only as effective as the criteria they have to judge by. If you're organizing a competition, you need to be as clear as possible about the objectives of the competition. Is this contest all about musicality—intonation, blend, rhythm, precision? Or do you intend to reward innovation in choreography, transitions and blocking? Is vocal percussion an area in which groups are to be evaluated, or window dressing for what the judges are really listening for? How should audience reaction play into the outcome of the event? Decisions around these factors will go a long way toward identifying the optimal judges for your particular show.

Lastly, for virtually any event you host, an ample number of volunteers will be invaluable to a successful outcome. From publicizing the event in advance, to hanging signs and helping groups to their rehearsal rooms, to fielding questions, to handling will call, to assisting with merchandise sales during intermission, to cleaning the venue after the show, there's no shortage of tasks that volunteers can help out with.

## **Equipment and Services**

If you're lucky, the venue you've selected will already have many of the resources you need—microphones, monitors, speakers, proper lighting, etc. If the venue is not pre-equipped, you'll have several options to consider.

First, if you're hosting your event at a college, explore the cost of renting equipment from the music, theatre or media services departments, as they may be the least expensive

option. However, you may find that they don't have all of the equipment you need. If that's the case, or if the event is being held outside of a college where renting from a department simply isn't possible, consult with other a cappella groups to see if they have any recommendations for the services you're seeking. In some cases, generalist technicians will be well-equipped to handle the needs of an a cappella performance, but another option is to consider a cappella experts such as the folks at Liquid 5th, Sled Dog Studios, Diovoce and A Cappella Productions, which are among a few of the best-respected names in providing such services.

Once you've secured the necessary company or individuals for your equipment and service needs, it's imperative that you schedule a time to meet at the venue prior to the event so that the professional can get a general feel for the setup and address any issues well in advance. Similarly, you'll want to make plans for the day of the event to conduct sound checks with each group and test the equipment to make sure there are no surprises once the show begins.

## Tickets

Depending on the type of event you're planning, you may decide to sell tickets. And so, you will need to determine how much to charge for them. The easy answer is enough to cover the costs of holding event (the venue, sound equipment and services, guest group booking fees, etc.). From there you need to consider whether you're trying to turn a profit, and if so, where the proper balancing point lies to draw a large audience, give that audience its money's worth, and still maximize income.

You will also need to consider how to sell tickets. Online sales are becoming more and more dominant today, and are very convenient for alumni, family members, or other pro-



spective audience members who may be coming in from out of town. You'll also want to keep in mind, though, that some people—particularly college students—may not have credit cards, or even if they do, may be far more inclined to pay cash at a table in the student center or the dining hall than having to remember to visit your website to make the transaction. In addition to these considerations, you'll also want to allow for last-minute ticket sales from folks who hear about the show late, aren't sure if they can make it, or are averse to planning. For all of the technological advances in the last couple decades, audiences still expect events to have the infrastructure to sell tickets at the door, and you should plan accordingly.

When it comes to printing tickets, the most economical approach is to simply find a word processing template which you can use to print tickets on regular computer paper. If you're interested in a more professional appearance, consider contacting local printing services, or an online company like Vistaprint that can deliver a professional print job at a low cost.

## Programs

As the world grows increasingly paperless there's some debate about whether programs are still a relevant part of a show, or an antiquated gesture. Still, for the benefit of more traditional audience members, and to preserve the history of your group and its performances, programs seem to have their place.

Programs document the name, date and time of the show. Furthermore, they give audience members an idea of who the group is—offering at least a cursory description of the group, sometimes a full group history and member biographies. No group should look at programs as standalone works though—when every member of an audience that came to hear you sing is receiving a copy, you should take full advantage of the op-

portunity to plug your website, your latest CD, your Facebook page, etc.

While the utility of programs is, itself, the topic of some debate, there are also differing opinions on listing songs in programs. A set list gives an audience a sense of what to expect—it sets people at ease, lets them know how long they have to go before intermission. If they came specifically to support a single soloist, or a single group amidst a multi-group show, it helps the audience members prepare accordingly. There is quite a bit to be said, though, for the element of surprise. A mashup or medley often depends on those dramatic turns to really capture the imagination of the audience—listing the swerve in the program spoils what's to come.

No program is complete without an acknowledgments portion—one of the best opportunities to publicly thank sponsors, volunteers, and anyone who has supported the show. These lists are generally the most comprehensive, and therefore the most effective when groups keep detailed notes over the course of planning and preparing for the show.

On a practical note, if you choose to provide a program, consider going with the same printer you used for tickets to negotiate a better rate. While programs are relatively simple to photocopy yourself, a professional print job can better sell the show as a special event, and make audience members more likely to hang on to the program as a keepsake.

If you're worried about the cost of printing programs, or are otherwise concerned your ticket sales might not be enough to earn back the expenses of the show, you can also consider selling ad space in your program to other a cappella groups or local vendors. If you set the rates appropriately, you can give them a great value and earn yourself revenue with very little extra effort involved.

## Group Work

No event would be complete without groups to perform. During the planning phase, you may or may not have an idea of the groups you'd like to participate in your event. In the case where you're hosting a competition, such as the ICCAs, where the governing organization has prescribed the competing groups, this may be a moot point. However, if you're in control of the lineup and you'd like to give your event some prestige, then you'll want to put some thought into the groups you invite to perform.

If you're already involved in the a cappella scene, then your network is a great place to start reaching out to groups. If you're relatively new to a cappella and have not yet had a chance to meet some of the people that can help assemble a good mix of groups, then consider the ACB group directory, which will list groups in your region along with their college, and, if available, their website (which oftentimes includes a contact form to email the business manager).

You'll want to consider variety. If you sing in an all-male group with a comedic bent, it's probably not in your best interests to invite a group of a similar ilk who might sing of the same repertoire, or might burn out the audience via similar antics on stage. Worst of all, you could unintentionally incite an informal competition—at least in the eyes of the audience. Whether your groups comes off looking the worse for it, or you put the other group to shame, it's really a lose-lose proposition. And so, consider seeking out really different groups—groups that complement your style without replicating it, groups with different gender make ups, groups with unique specialties (e.g., Jewish groups are on the rise) or

groups from a different walk of life (a professional group, or a really talented high school group).

Once you've secured your groups and ironed out the details of the event, ensure that each one has what they're looking for at the show. For example, buying a couple cases of bottled water for your guests is a small expense for you, but is very practical for your visitors and will help better your relationship with them. Similarly, picking up a few pizzas, or a snack distinctive to your college town is a great way to welcome outside groups into your community. These gestures foster good relationships, and can, indirectly, be leveraged for future engagements.

## **Extras**

While your show will, obviously, be centered primarily on a cappella performances, consider other ways of engaging the audience. For example, you might consider raffling off prizes between sets or while the judges deliberate. The prizes need not be anything especially elaborate to excite an audience, and the sheer thrill of winning will capture an audience's attention and leave everyone—particularly the winners—with a really positive impression of the event on the whole.

## **Marketing and Promotion**

If an a cappella group sings at an event and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Promotion is a critical component of ensuring your event's success.

At the time of the Yale Whiffenpoof's founding in 1909, there were only a handful of mediums one could use to spread information. Today, more than ever, there are literally dozens of ways to promote your event. Consider the following routes to increase awareness.

**Flyers/Posters** – although this approach may seem a bit old school, simply posting pieces of paper with event information on the walls of the venue at which your event will be held, on bulletin boards of local colleges, and at local coffee shops and music stores will increase exposure and drum up excitement. Be sure to use a unique color of paper and/or a font that will grab people's attention. Don't try to cram in too much information—focus on the essentials and use big print.

**Social Media** – Social media websites like Facebook and Twitter provide you with a captive audience, which makes it extremely easy to announce your event to the world. In the case of Facebook, you can be even more targeted by setting up an event on the site and inviting friends and friends of friends. In addition, this medium has the added benefit of helping you track the event attendance, which could be useful for estimating costs that may vary with audience size.

**Emails** – For the small population that does not use Facebook or Twitter, email is a very effective way of reaching the rest of your network. If you've created a flyer for the event, consider attaching the flyer to the email, rather than drafting a new email communication altogether. Better yet, if your email provider has the capability, send it as an invitation so you can track attendance.

**Website** – If you own a website or have the ability to create one, I suggest you develop a static web page that will act as the all-encompassing reference guide for your event, and that you can direct attendees, groups, and sponsors to. Content could include event date, time, and location; participating group

information; directions to the venue; parking information; and nearby hotels and restaurants. Over a short period of time, search engines will index the web page, causing it to appear in more search results, and, in turn, promote the event itself—a positive byproduct of incorporating all of this information into one central location.

**Word of Mouth** – One of the most effective ways to promote an event remains word of mouth. People trust and rely on the opinions of others more so than any other advertisement. That is the goal of all of the previously mentioned strategies: increase people's awareness of your event, drum up excitement, and get them to tell their friends. Try to spread the word through networks of musicians as well as the web of your own personal friends. Just a few invested, well-connected parties can spread a message extraordinarily quickly.

## Day of the Event

So it's the day of the event and you've done all of the leg work necessary to get you to this point. How can you ensure smooth execution? Fortunately, most of the mind-exhausting work is done, and successful completion of the remaining tasks will rest in the hands of your group of volunteers, so make sure you've assembled a reliable and trustworthy group.

Think about what sort of tables and stations you'll need and how you're going to effectively manage them all while not spreading yourself too thin. Ticket, will call, and merchandise tables, are important and require not only trustworthy volunteers, but a cash stock of small bills to make change. It's also a good idea to post an email sign-up sheet wherever you can to promote future events and solicit feedback.

You'll also need to have arrangements to meet with groups, judges, timekeepers and any other personnel to show them to their respective rooms. In the auditorium itself, you'll want to think about reserving seats for handicapped individuals, judges, groups, and other special guests. Consult your spreadsheet for an orderly list of all planned day-of-event tasks.

Other smaller matters will likely arise and will need to be handled on a case by case basis. If possible, delegate these tasks to your volunteers so that you'll remain free to tackle any larger problems that emerge.

## **Post Event**

I always advocate for two announcements to be made directly following any a cappella show. First, it's important that you or the emcee thank everyone involved in the event, from the volunteers, to the participating groups, to the sound person. It takes all of 30 seconds to do, and enhances your rapport with the community. Second, where applicable, announce an after-party location where you, your volunteers, groups, judges, and fans can gather to celebrate the success of the event. Just don't forget to call the restaurant or bar beforehand to make reservations.

If you're the type of person who likes to be the first one to arrive and the last one to leave the party, then I suggest you come up with an efficient plan for putting furniture back in its original location and tearing down the equipment, signage, and any other paraphernalia involved, so you can leave the venue as soon as possible. Again, don't hesitate to delegate some of these tasks to make for a quicker wrap-up process.

During the week following your show, I suggest you make an effort to package all information and materials gathered during the event and post them on the event page discussed

in the Marketing and Promotion section. This could include photos or videos from the show, a feedback form, reviews, and relevant links. In addition, like any good project-planning effort, it's always smart to set up a post-mortem meeting, in which you can discuss lessons learned, review feedback and develop future plans. Document all of the thoughts that come out of this meeting—they'll prove invaluable in planning future endeavors and keep you from having to “reinvent the wheel” in the future.

## **Emergency/Contingency Planning**

By their very nature, it's extremely difficult to plan for unforeseen events. Nonetheless, as the event planner, there are proactive measures you can take to expedite the process of resolving problems. First, make sure everyone involved in the event planning and execution has everyone else's cell phone number and email address. This can be easily accomplished prior to the event by simply creating a list of each person's information and sending it out to the group via email. This will ensure that communication channels are open and that relevant parties can be informed about and start to troubleshoot any issues as soon as possible. Second, have “filler” ready to use in case groups don't show or deliberations take an unusually long time for a competition. This could involve the host group preparing to sing extra songs from its repertoire, the emcee instituting a beat box contest, or a different act altogether taking the stage to entertain the audience (e.g., an improv group, a guitar player, an amateur stand up comedian).

## **Conclusion**

Putting on an event requires hard work, persistence, time and patience. There's no substitute for planning, researching and



communicating. Great events reflect great effort—if you give your all to an event, you will more than likely be pleased with the outcome.

## Chapter 13: Battle of the Sexes

It's the question that a cappella fans secretly ponder but rarely actually come out and ask. Out of all-male, all-female, and mixed groups, which group make-up is best?

Most arguments on this topic come across arbitrary and ultimately empty. First of all, on what criteria can any group be described as "the best?" With so many different criteria at play, and so many of those criteria subjective, it's a complex task, to be sure. What's more, even if we did discern a full-proof system to identify the best groups and effectively rank them, how could we apply that generalization across the breadth of all a cappella groups? If the best group is all-male, does that mean that all-male groups are best? Or is looking at the single best group too narrow a lens? If three of the top five groups are all-female, does that mean all-female groups are best? Dis-tend that lens a little further and what if 52 out of the top 100 groups are co-ed?

For all of these reasons, we say screw it. We have developed our own system for identifying the dominant group type in a cappella, and we're sticking with it. Through a combination of speculation, hard data, and common sense, we will evaluate each group type in the following categories:

- Ability to Entertain
- Musicality

- Diversity of Song Selection
- Accomplishments
- Group Dynamics

From there, we will rank each group type in the context of each category. If a group type takes first place in a category, it will be awarded two points. If a group takes second place, it will get one point. If a group type is placed third, it will not be awarded any points for that category. In this fashion, we will arrive at the definitive answer of which group type is best.

Ready? OK, let's get started.

## Ability to Entertain

When you talk about the most bottom of bottom lines in evaluating an a cappella group's success, you need look no further than the group's ability to entertain. In this context, entertainment marks the nexus between what's aurally pleasing, what's visually engaging, what makes us laugh, what makes us cry, and what brings the house down.

A big part of entertainment comes from visual presentation, and for the sake of this particular argument, we'll focus on choreography. All-female groups are notorious for over-choreographing. We have to credit them for making the effort to plan physical movement to accompany so many songs, but in the same breath, we need to recognize and prioritize the differences between quantity and quality. The truest hierarchy for choreography has to place good choreography on top, no choreography in the middle, and bad (unnecessary, actively inappropriate, poorly executed) choreography on the bottom. While some would argue that bad choreography is entertaining (and perhaps, in the sense of unintentional comedy, more entertaining than good choreography) that undermines the

underlying purpose of this assessment—to identify *the best* in a cappella, and so we're going to put that argument aside.

With all of this mind, it's a close race. The guys who are willing to go all out with their choreography tend to do it well, usually because such groups are already willing to not take themselves too seriously, and so will let their hair down and go a little nuts to entertain the crowd. I give you exhibit A: The Washington University Stereotypes whose 2010 performance to "Jai Ho" from *Slumdog Millionaire* wasn't technically perfect, but was easily among the top ten most fun a cappella performances I've ever seen for the sheer gusto with which the guys delivered the song and its choreography.

As documented, all-female groups have an ugly habit of over-choreographing. There are exceptions, such as Brigham Young Noteworthy which generally choreographs and executes both appropriately and with verve. There's University of Oregon Divisi, which choreographs a little too much for my taste, but handles the movement well. There are The Acabelles, who refuse to let anyone out dance them on stage. But then you get most of the rest of the pack. Female a cappella performers are often lighter on their feet and look smoother than their male counterparts, but they're also often less interesting, more distracting, and generally girly with their movement.

Co-ed groups may mark the best compromise on choreography, as the two sides balance one another—the females will make sure there's choreography, but the guys will keep it from getting out of hand. The mixed dynamic allows for dramatic interpretation, which can be pretty awesome when handled ably (the University of Southern California SoCal VoCals exhibit this perfectly). Of course, on the other hand, the theatrical stuff can grow rather awkward—are those two

actually dating and PDAing it up in front of a crowd? Or are they overacting? Either way, why am I watching this?

A great deal of the entertainment equation amounts to whether the audience has fun watching a group, and so much of the audience's fun is tied into whether the group itself is having fun. Take two contrary examples. You have the a cappella group that looks genuinely petrified to be on stage. You hear voices quiver, the choreography is stilted and reserved, and the sound is just too quiet. Contrast this with big booming voices, smiles, natural dancing (even if it's not great) and a general sense of confidence, poise, and energy. Showmanship counts for a great deal in the realm of entertainment, and as a general rule, this is an area in which male collegiate performers tend to trump their counterparts.

Last, but far from least important to a group's ability to entertain, we have sense of humor. In a cappella performance, this can manifest itself in a number of ways, including choreography, facial expressions, a change of lyrics, the delivery of a lyric, and transitional banter between songs.

From all I've seen and heard, it's far more difficult for female singers to be funny than it is for their male counterparts. I'm not sure there's a way of saying this without sounding sexist, but anyone who has seen a descent cross-section of collegiate a cappella will likely know what I'm talking about. Women can joke, plot out elaborate set ups, throw in a good visual pun, and will all draw some laughs. But all a guy needs to do is put on a funny face, or do the very same semi-awkward choreography an all-female group would do, or sing in falsetto, and it's just flat-out funnier.

### *The verdict:*

1. All-male groups (2 points)

2. Co-ed groups (1 point)
3. All-female groups (0 points)

## Musicality

While many groups would contend that musicality should be more important than, or at least equivalent to entertainment, it has a tendency to get lost in the shuffle of a performance. A part of the issue is divergent opinions on what constitutes good musicality. What's most important? Is it the complexity of the arrangement? Or if a group's harmonies and blend are clicking, does that supersede the fact the group is only singing block chords? And what of dynamics—the ability to show range and control? Does all of this pale in comparison to the two most readily recognizable elements of any a cappella performance—the solo and the vocal percussion?

There's no one right answer, but fortunately we have the opportunity to look at all of the pieces here, add them together, and arrive at a conclusion.

So what of arrangements? Co-ed groups have the most potential to diversify an arrangement, given they can cover a full range of vocal parts, and will have the widest range of talents to nail any variety of arranging style (for example, inserting fun syllables in the background, while others sing stock chords, while the soloist diverges from the group sound). On the topic of having fun with arrangements, all-male groups are known to have the most fun, often inserting comedic samples, or handling rap interludes with the most grace. On the other hand, all-male groups tend to most frequently be accused of block chords and foregoing a complex arrangement in favor of going for laughs. All-female groups, on the contrary, are known for nuance. While there are certainly exceptions,

women in a cappella have a tendency to represent a combination of patience, subtlety and nuance in their arrangements that often arrives at the most complex, if not the most fun finished products.

When it comes time to perform, groups need to think about blending. When I think about blend, I tend to think of a cappella that sounds smooth enough that I don't immediately recognize it as a cappella—it's smooth enough that individual voices do not leap out at me, beautiful enough that I don't miss the conventional instrumentation. On the other side of the blend coin, a cappella should be distinctively human. While I like the illusion of not recognizing the human voice at first, a more careful listen should reveal something different—it should provoke that unique chill that only the synergy of multiple human voices arriving at the same end can create. When a mixed group blends well, there are few better sounds—making such divergent vocal parts cooperate and complement one another is a testament to the quality of the group. Unfortunately, it's not a common occurrence. All male groups can blend as well, but again, with a focus on fun and showmanship, odd voices tend to pop out, creating more a medley than a unified force of sound. One of the great qualities of all female groups is that they have the greatest tendency to actually listen to one another. There's little inherent reason why this should be the case. Maybe it's natural or a conditioned proclivity toward verbal communication and listening. Maybe it's because they're physically less prone to have big, booming voices than their male counterparts, and so it's easier to absorb everything around them over their own voice. Whatever the case female groups tend to blend best.

A capacity to swing from the most booming fortissimo to the tiniest of pianissimos marks a group's ability to master

dynamics. Dynamics are integral to a group's ability to tell the story of a song. Take Berklee College of Music's Pitch Slapped interpretation of Beyonce's "Halo" in 2010. This song is all about starting soft and sounding emotionally vulnerable before building to enormous walls of sound behind the soloist. In so doing, the group doesn't just have the lyrics tell a tale, but demonstrates the way in which the narrator swells with the strength provided by her angel. You can contrast this with the many groups that emerge as mumbled and barely audible, or the groups who just sound as though they're yelling at you. Great groups have a volume knob and show off a full range of what they can do. Both of the aforementioned groups are co-ed, which is illustrative that this is an especially difficult category in which to proclaim one type of group the best. To over-generalize, all-male groups have a tendency to be loud. All-female groups have a tendency to sing softly. While co-ed groups don't always find the happy medium, they have the most potential to do so, and there certainly are a number of mixed groups that capitalize on this.

It's difficult to compare the relative quality of all-male, all-female, and co-ed groups' soloists. I won't recount all of the top 10 solos I've seen here (refer to the Solos chapter), but let's revisit that list by the numbers. Of the soloists selected, seven out of ten were men, which would seem to suggest that all-male groups have a decisive advantage. Looking a bit closer, a total of three of those seven male solos came out of co-ed groups; in addition to that, one of the female soloists did, too, for a total of four elite solos coming out of mixed groups. That's still one fewer great solos than the all-male groups had, but two more than the all-female groups. While there's an argument to be made that co-ed groups have the greatest diversity of soloists available at any given moment, it seems



that men still tend to offer the strongest solos, regardless. And so, this would seem to be an area in which all-male groups take the duke.

Vocal percussion is another area in which all-male groups lead the way. It's a poor and misguided stereotype that women can't do vocal percussion—there are many good female drummers out there. The issue is that men tend to be bigger and better in this arena—with all due respect Courtney Jensen, Belatrix, and their brethren, the very best beatboxers are predominantly male. There's no reason co-ed groups can't get it done here, but we have to give it to the guys for, in general, exhibiting both greater depth and greater quality of vocal percussion

And so, one might notice that the most visible and clearly audible elements of musicality belong to the guys. The more subtle ones generally belong to the women. So how should we determine superiority? Overall, this comes down to the group effort. The most easily recognized musical qualities are also the ones based in individual effort (soloists, percussionists) rather than ones we can attribute to the team (harmony, blend, dynamics). When we are assessing the best group type, we need to prioritize what the whole group is doing, and so, all-female groups get the nod.

*The verdict:*

1. All-female (2 points)
2. All-male (1 point)
3. Co-ed (0 points)

## Diversity of Song Selection

A focus on diversity may seem odd as a component piece of a larger conversation about quality. After all, does it really matter how many different things a group can do, in contrast to how well they can execute their specialties? While groups benefit from having their own niches, the greatest groups should be able to succeed in different contexts. The optimal a cappella group can just as easily sing in competition as at a formal benefit as at an arch sing. Ideally, a group should have the capacity to be serious and funny, emotionally provocative and entertaining, complex and accessible.

The majority of collegiate groups these days embrace the contemporary style, and so one dimension of diversity is playing off traditional or barbershop sounds. The Barbershop Harmony Society, Sweet Adelides, and sibling organizations prove each year that men and women alike go old school and thrive. It would seem that only mixed groups that aren't so well represented in this arena, perhaps because a cappella itself is traditionally split by gender.

When we consider gravity versus levity, I can't help turning back to the entertainment argument above. While all forms of groups are more or less equally capable of playing light-hearted versus serious, all-female groups struggle with humor, while a number guy groups thrive in that realm. Meanwhile, all forms of groups have proven themselves more or less evenly in the realm of ballads.

We can start drawing some distinctions between all-male, all-female and co-ed groups when it comes to diversity of genre. One of the more compelling parts of an a cappella show is that there is the potential for the performers to offer something for everyone—mix some top 40 with some oldies, some hard rock with some easy listening, some hip hop with some

country. A cappella groups often prove themselves as cover artists with wide repertoires.

Not all a cappella groups are created equally, though, and gender plays a role in that. I've seen all male groups execute virtually every genre successfully. The University of Rochester Midnight Ramblers provide a fine example of this—in the mid-2000s they had shows with song selections ranging from Muse's "Knights of Cydonia" to Jesse McCartney's "Beautiful Soul" to Spencer Davis Group's "Gimme Some Lovin'" to Tenacious D's "Tribute." Spanning different styles, time periods and artists, the group could take 45 minutes and demonstrate an ability to do it all.

Not every all-male group would be quite as game as The Ramblers, but there plenty who succeed with diverse genres. The same cannot necessarily be said for all-female groups. There are a few that can execute hip hop—but in general you'll be hard-pressed to find all-female acts that can consistently do rock or rap justice. This is, once again, an area in which co-ed groups benefit from having representatives from both genders. While some male groups have a harder time finding their softer side, mixed groups need only let their female soloists take the lead to accomplish that end. When they want to infuse some power rock into their sets, they have their guys ready and waiting.

Beyond genre and the question of what groups can cover, there's the very legitimate question of *who* groups can cover. The most natural and traditional answer is that all-male groups cover male artists and all-female groups cover all-female artists. The explosion of collegiate competition and more recently the ease of putting video and audio online have pushed groups to think outside the box, though, and get more experimental.

All-male groups can have a great deal of success covering women's songs. A prime example comes in the shape of two of a cappella's most prominent viral videos from 2010--University of Oregon On the Rocks covering Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" and The University of Rochester Yellow Jackets covering Taylor Swift's "You Belong With Me." In each case, the groups gambled with something different, and that gamble paid off in spades due to a surefire combination of staying true to making good music, while also splicing in comedy in such a way to offend no one and entertain the masses. This is a far cry from tasteless guys dressing in drag and putting on falsettos. These are cases of groups showing a respect for the music and making it their own.

All-female groups have, found far less success covering male artists. There are times when it has worked, such as Divisi covering Usher's "Yeah" or the Syracuse Mandarin's conjuring a haunting version of Jason Mraz's "Plane." But for every "Plane" there's another Mraz, or John Mayer, or Jack Johnson cover that removes all of the soul appeal, and comes across as a bunch of teenage girls singing their favorite songs into hairbrushes—generic, amateurish, and not entertaining.

To be fair, there is a segment of songs that only women can cover well with any consistency—primarily songs originally performed by female artists that are emotional, soft, content-oriented or simply high enough that they only really work for women. I'm thinking of The Mandarin's, once again, covering "Hail Holy Queen" from *Sister Act*, SUNY Potsdam's A-Sharps performing "You Say" by Saving Jane, or The Florida State University AcaBelles singing "Stay" by Shakespears Sister. The problem is that I haven't seen all-female groups capitalize on this dynamic often enough, far more often using material that

could just as easily (if not more appropriately) fall into the hands of their co-ed or all-male counterparts.

When we look at who a group can cover it is, once more, the co-ed groups that come out ahead. They have men to take the solos on men's songs. They have women to take the solos on women's songs. And then they always have the option to play ironic or different, and switch up genders as they see fit. It's this brand of versatility that lends co-ed groups the greatest advantage in picking a diverse repertoire of songs.

### *The verdict:*

1. Co-ed (2 points)
2. All-male (1 point)
3. All-female (0 points)

## **Group Dynamics**

In 1965, psychologist Bruce Tuckman published his theory of group development. The theory called for four core stages of group development—forming, storming, norming, and performing. Additionally, in 1977, he added a fifth stage, known as adjourning. Tuckman asserted that each of these stages were essential to group development. They are all certainly applicable to a cappella groups.

It can, of course, be difficult to look at these stages in a comparative way. Is it really fair to say that one group type does a better job of forming than others? We are, therefore, putting a creative spin on each of these stages to better suit our goal of determining which group type is best.

### *Forming*

The forming stage is all about how a group comes together and how individual members learn to work with one another. In the case of an a cappella group, the forming process begins with auditions.

In a very general sense, college-aged women tend to be more sensitive and interested in interpersonal connections than their male counterparts. It is therefore to be expected that all-female groups are more likely to consider personality types during auditions—how an auditionee would get along with the group, what she might add, why she might be hard to work with. College-aged men, on the other hand, are more likely to be invested in the bottom line—can the guy in front of us sing and does his vocal range meet our current needs?

On at least a subconscious level, personality is always going to play a role—if people like someone they are more likely to want to spend more time with that person. In the case of the audition process, though, there is more of a question of the intentional, institutionalized practices at hand. In these cases, mixed groups stand to benefit from the best of both worlds, with female leadership cognizant of picking good group citizens, while the men retain a focus on bottom-line musicality.

### *Storming*

The storming stage is all about conflict. Once a group has come together, Tuckman suggests that there is inevitably a stage during which members question their common purpose and each other's roles in it. While this stage can pass without issue, it can also be a lengthy period of conflict that involves power struggles, second-guessing, and a lot of questioning as a group finds its footing and attempts to arrive a consistent way of doing business. This stage of group development can

occur for an a cappella group at many points—as a simple consequence of spending time together and learning to work together; otherwise, it can be a result of events—a poor performance, a failure to advance in competition, drawing a small audience to a show.

Tuckman asserts that the storming stage is normal, and even necessary to group development. Groups *handle* storming in very different ways, though. Again, speaking in generalities, female communication during conflict generally veers in one of two directions. On one hand, women are much more prone to talk about their feelings and use verbal communication to express themselves with the objective of arriving at a mutual understanding. Women are also more prone to use non-verbal cues, though, and both receive and transmit unspoken meaning in ways that even they, themselves, may not intend. This tendency can manifest itself as passive aggressive behavior, and often leads to what many of us would call “cattiness,” or unnecessary fault-finding and holding grudges. Such behavior fosters further hostility and prolongs disagreements. And so, women can represent the yin and yang of conflict resolution—communicating thoroughly in such a way that should most completely resolve an issue, but also exhibiting behavior that’s likely to delay a resolution.

Men, on the other hand, tend to communicate less, but to do so in a more direct fashion when it does come time to talk. The lack of communication can be a problem because, despite relatively gruff exteriors, male college students are often just as (if not more) sensitive when compared to their female counterparts. A failure to communicate can lead to pent up frustrations which they will, in turn, express in explosive (rather than productive) ways. When things do come to a head, though, men tend to have a stronger ability to separate their personal

feelings from their work and to accept responsibility. In short, if the confrontation isn't so explosive that it comes to blows or otherwise creates an irreparable rift, guys usually benefit from short, intense, straight-forward periods of conflict.

On a first glance, it might appear that co-ed groups have the most to gain by benefiting from the strengths of both genders of their constituents. However, this is one instance in which opposites do not complement one another, but rather set the stage for epic conflict.

Consider the scenario: Kenny, the musical director, is dissatisfied because Elaine, a group member, has missed two rehearsals. He uses his manly direct style of communication to tell her exactly what she has done wrong as directly as possible and thinks the matter is done. Elaine, however, feels humiliated to have been dressed down by her peer. She does not tell the director she's upset with his insensitivity, but rather becomes sullen during rehearsals, and later tells two of her friends from the group—George and Alice—about what happened and how upset she is. George gets upset with Kenny. He resolves to set matters straight and goes to talk to the director. The two men have a short, frank discussion out of which they agree to disagree about how the situation was resolved. Kenny follows up with Elaine to say he's upset with her sharing their business behind his back. Elaine becomes even more upset that he reprimanded her again. Meanwhile, Alice is beyond fed up with Elaine forgetting to come to rehearsals, and has started talking with still more group members about Elaine's audacity to not only skip rehearsal, but then complain when Kenny calls her on it.

The situation described here is an absolute mess. Sure, there are lots of co-ed groups that function far more smoothly than this hypothetical one, but the fact remains that when



conflict happens, gender lines often do more to complicate a resolution than to simplify it.

### *Norming*

Norming is the stage during which conflicts settle out and groups begin to shape their normal functions. It's a time when groups set goals and move forward with new initiatives.

At this stage, college men have a tendency to be ambitious. Whether it's using their spring break to tour the country, or leaping into competition or forming a multi-year plan of ascension. They set their norms around achievement—around ends that a cappella will allow them to achieve.

Women, on the other hand, have a greater tendency to focus on the task at hand. Rather than rushing to arrange, learn and record a killer number in hopes of landing a place on the next Best of Collegiate A Cappella awards, women will focus on the music itself, and accept it for its own intrinsic rewards. Indeed, for an all-female group, earnestly being able to say that they sang the best version of Imogen Heap's "Hide and Seek" is more rewarding than winning an ICCA quarterfinal by singing a more generic version of the same song.

Co-ed groups may find that competing impulses temper the extremes, resulting in a more balanced norming stage. Alternatively, whoever the musical director or president is may just do the prioritizing for the group, falling into whatever male or female traps one might expect.

### *Performing*

Performing might seem like the stage we're most familiar with in a cappella groups given that performing is their very purpose. For the purposes of evaluating this factor, though, we're considering not just what happens on stage but the way

in which a group functions after auditions, the initial conflicts and goal-setting. The performing stage is all about individuals internalizing their roles and reaching a point of autonomy. It's about group members taking the time to learn their parts, listening to one another in order mesh, and synergizing each member's potential into the optimal whole.

The ability of a cappella group members to perform is, therefore, highly dependent upon individuals' capacities to commit and see a project through to its end. Although it isn't exactly equivalent, college enrollment and college graduation rates can inform which group type has the most potential. After all, being a part of a collegiate group at all is contingent on the former criterion and the latter is one of the most clear-cut indicators of success at the collegiate level. In each of these areas, female a cappella performers have moved ahead of their male counterparts. According to a 2010 study by *USA Today*, female students top male students in both areas 57 percent to 43 percent.

This disparity seems to indicate that female students are both greater in number at colleges and universities across America, and that they are proving themselves more capable of navigating college life in such a way to successfully arrive at commencement day. From these statistics, we can further extrapolate that female college students are better fit to balance their lives in such a way that will allow them to succeed at the performance stage of a cappella group development.

### *Adjourning*

The shelf life for any collegiate a cappella performer rarely stretches beyond four years. Sure, there's the odd super senior or grad student who hangs around a group, but by and large, the collegiate a cappella scene belongs to undergrads. This

means that collegiate a cappella groups are subject to constant turnover, generally seeing members leave with each year (if not semester), and probably seeing at least one or two major overhauls per decade.

The adjourning stage of group development is about how a group finishes its work. For a cappella groups, the adjourning stage is about alumni—the degree to which they stay involved, and what comes next.

In recent years it has become more and more common for alumni shows to take place for all group types. Beyond traditional alumni weekends and anniversaries, the realities of email and Facebook have made it exponentially easier for groups to stay in touch and effectively coordinate en masse for past members to return home.

It's those groups with the longest tradition that tend to be most successful at coordinating with alumni. There are The Yale Wiffenpoofs, who celebrated a centennial celebration in 2009. There are the Tufts Beelzebubs in which members reportedly communicate with alumni consistently for advice and to seek political support in bids to lead the group. Ultimately, all-male collegiate a cappella has just been around longer than all-female or co-ed collegiate a cappella, and boasts more longstanding organizations than either other group type.

### *What it all means*

By our calculations, all-male groups were tops in the storming and adjourning stages, all-female groups came out ahead for performing, and co-ed groups won out for forming and norming. Co-ed groups finish second for performing and norming for the tie breaker.

### *The verdict:*

1. Co-ed (2 points)
2. All-male (1 point)
3. All-female (0 points)

## **Accomplishments**

There are many ways in which to evaluate a group's accomplishments, and so we have elected to narrow it down to just three measuring sticks:

1. The International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA): This is the largest and most objective proving ground for live performance among collegiate a cappella groups. We'll be looking at ICCA Finals results from the competition's inception in 1996 through the latest available results at the time of writing in 2012.

2. The Best of Collegiate A Cappella (BOCA) compilation: Right alongside the Contemporary A Cappella Recording Awards, BOCA marks the best-respected, most objective proving ground for recorded a cappella among collegiate groups. We'll be looking at BOCA appearances from the first edition in 1999 through the most recent disc available at the time of writing, the 2012 compilation.

3. *The Sing-Off*: This is the highest profile, most watched a cappella competition of all-time. Though the means of earning a spot on the show and the judging criteria are arguably a bit suspect, the fact remains that there is no larger stage than this competition. We'll be looking at the three seasons of *The Sing-Off* that have occurred as of this writing in 2009, 2010, and 2011.

## ICCA's

Since 1996 there have been 16 years in which ICCA champions have been crowned. In the interest of recognizing the changing make up of groups from year to year, groups that have won more than once (The UC Berkeley Men's Octet and The University of Southern California SoCal VoCals) are counted separately for each individual championship won.

With that, we present to you the raw data:

YEAR	GROUP	TYPE
1996	The University of North Carolina Loreleis	Female
1997	Stanford University Talisman A Cappella	Co-ed
1998	The UC Berkeley Men's Octet	Male
2000	The UC Berkeley Men's Octet	Male
2001	Millikin University Chapter 6	Male
2002	The University of Michigan Compulsive	Co-ed
2003	The Binghamton Crosbys	Male
2004	Millikin University OneVoice	Co-ed
2005	The Boston University Dear Abbeys	Male
2006	Brigham Young University Vocal Point	Male
2007	Brigham Young University Noteworthy	Female
2008	The University of Southern California SoCal VoCals	Co-ed
2009	Mt. San Antonio College Fermata Nowhere	Male
2010	The University of Southern California SoCal VoCals	Co-ed
2011	Berklee College of Music Pitch Slapped	Co-ed
2012	The University of Southern California SoCal VoCals	Co-ed

By the numbers, the ICCAs have crowned just two all-female champions, seven co-ed champions, and seven all-male champions.

## BOCA

The Best of Collegiate A Cappella compilations started up in 1999, featuring the best of the songs submitted by collegiate a cappella groups. Since that time, the folks at Varsity Vocals have selected as many as 20 songs to feature on the CD. Year by year, here is a breakdown of the number of times each group type was featured in each compilation.

YEAR	ALL-MALE	ALL-FEMALE	CO-ED
1999	5	4	9
2000	7	3	9
2001	6	2	8
2002	6	4	9
2003	5	2	11
2004	7	1	10
2005	7	5	8
2006	9	4	6
2007	7	5	7
2008	9	4	5
2009	8	4	8
2010	8	5	7
2011	6	4	8
2012	9	3	6
<i>TOTAL</i>	99	50	111

And so, our results reveal that co-ed groups have most frequently succeeded in making it onto BOCA discs, followed

by their all-male counterparts, with all-female groups bringing up the rear.

### *The Sing-Off*

*The Sing-Off* is at once the least scientific, least objective gauge of success, and yet the one mainstream consumers are most likely to be aware of. It's an NBC series that, to date, has had three short seasons, airing for four episodes, five episodes, and then 11 episodes in 2011.

There were three major draws for groups to compete.

First, the prize for the winners was a substantial one—\$100,000 (and later \$200,000), plus a recording contract with Epic Records/Sony Music. Few a cappella groups ever reap these sorts of rewards over the course of their cumulative histories.

Second, there was the prestige factor. Though the criteria for the initial rounds of judging has never been explicit, and a fan vote that was open to the public determined the eventual winners, the fact remained that this was the highest profile, highest stakes a cappella competition ever, and open to groups of all different types, from contemporary collegiate to adult barbershop. As a result, groups could make the claim that winning this show earned a group the right to call itself the best a cappella group in the world. Surely, this was a part of the lure for The Tufts Beelzebubs, a group that hitherto avoided competitions like the ICCAs, presumably under the logic that, as established as they were, they had little to gain and an elite reputation to lose.

Third, *The Sing-Off* represented an unprecedented opportunity for a cappella fame. None of the groups from the show have yet matched star groups like Rockappella or Straight No Chaser in album sales, and yet there's a pretty fair argument to be made that the inaugural champions, Nota, and even the

runner-up ‘Bubs and Voices of Lee have, in terms of mainstream notoriety, accelerated to match, if not exceed established professional acts like Naturally 7 and Ball in the House.

When we take all of these factors into consideration, we arrive at the conclusion that *The Sing-Off* is a powerful entity to acknowledge its champions as major successes in the a cappella world. Since, at the time of this writing, we only have three years of data to work with, we’ll acknowledge not just the champions but the top three finishers from each year.

In 2009, all-male Nota won, the all-male Beelzebubs finished second, and the mixed Voices of Lee finished third. In 2010, all-male Committed took top honors, all-male Street Corner Symphony placed second, and The Backbeats, a mixed group finished third. Finally, in season three, mixed Pentatonix won it all, with the all-male Dartmouth Aires behind them, and mixed Urban Method in third. Therefore, all-male groups just beat out mixed groups for overall *The Sing-Off* picture.

Looking at accomplishments on the whole, the all-male and co-ed groups tied for top honors at ICCAs. Co-ed groups prevailed for BOCA compilations, with all-male groups in second. And for *The Sing-Off*, all-male groups have the lead, with co-ed groups right behind them.

### *The verdict:*

1. (TIE) All-male (2 points) and Co-Ed (2 points)
2. All-female (0 points)

## **Final Tabulations**

Using the criteria of ability to entertain, musicality, variety of song selection, group dynamics, and accomplishments, we arrive at these final point totals and this final ranking:



1. (TIE)All-male (7 points) and Co-ed (7 points)
2. All-female (2 points)

The tie should not read as an intentional cop out—the system was determined before we tabulated scores, and prior to The SoCal VoCals’ 2012 ICCA title win, just before we finished the final draft of this chapter, the all-male groups had a one-point lead. If an all-male or co-ed group takes the championship in 2013, consider that the tie breaker.

## Chapter 14: The Future of A Cappella

We've just about run out of things to say about a cappella for this book. That doesn't mean that that's all there is to say, of course—a cappella and the execution thereof is ever-evolving, and you would need to have a regularly updated blog if you ever hoped to say it all (for example, [acappellablog.com](http://acappellablog.com)).

Books are a more permanent, fixed mode of communicating information to an audience, though, and so we bring this one to a close with some consideration of the future of a cappella.

### The Sound

A cappella has transitioned from gospel to barbershop to the contemporary style—I may be over-simplifying the evolution of the genre, but these transitions demonstrate the way in which a cappella has shifted over a period of centuries. But what will be the next step? The easy answers exist outside a cappella. The next trends in a cappella will, in all likelihood follow advances in music and technology to find their next foothold.

Consider The Tufts Beelzebub's ground-breaking recording *Code Red*. Lots of people loved it. Purists hated it. In one fell swoop, The 'Bubs took a cappella recording from a do-it-yourself endeavor into a professional, high-tech frontier. You can still recognize human voices for a good portion of the CD—but then, there are other parts when it's less obvious.

In recording *Code Red* The 'Bubs took advantage of technology that others hadn't to that point, and synergized it with some of the best pure a cappella sound in the world. The CD came out in 2003, and for the decade that followed, more and more groups embraced effects that blurred voices, rounded out edges and generally smeared the line between human voices and sounds of machines. The result? The sound is less purely a cappella—less purely human, to be sure. And yet the sound is also, quite arguably, more palatable to a general audience of listeners.

Speaking of the use of technology, what about the emergence of one man bands? Can't blend with others? Can't find enough talents to build a group? Not to worry—take the route of Peter Hollens or Mike Tompkins and record your own bass line, perc, instrumentation and solo, and weave the separate pieces together for a finished recording that will rival most any multi-person a cappella group. And maybe this is the direction in which technology is taking us. Sure, one-person acts generally won't work so well live, but from a recording standpoint, why listen to the Jackson 5 when you could have five Michael Jacksons?

Taking a step away from technology, there's also the question of genre. A cappella groups have left very popular music stones unturned, but it's worth keeping mind the pioneers who reached in new directions, whether it's the R&B a cappella sound Boyz II Men brought to radio in the early nineties, or the Latino a cappella groove Nota delivered to the nation in the initial season of *The Sing-Off*. Looking at less mainstream a cappella, it's worth noting the efforts of groups like Rutgers University Casual Harmony in the mid-2000s. They weren't the only group to move in this direction, but they were one of the most high profile and most talented acts to first embrace covers of alternative rock bands like Muse and System of a Down. In

making these decisions, Casual Harmony helped blow open the gates for a cappella to be rugged and hard—traits that helped draw a new breed of singers and fans to the form.

And so, the next progressions in music will point the way forward for which genres, styles, and effects a cappella groups embrace next, while advancements in technology will help to determine methodology and just how these new developments actually sound when they reach our ears.

### Is a cappella going to get cooler?

Proponents of a cappella have rarely proclaimed the form to be cool. If anything, people tend to celebrate its nerdiness. But will a cappella ever truly be accepted in the mainstream without being cool?

Against all odds, there is an argument to be made that a cappella has grown cooler over recent years. For one thing, there are the celebrity alumni of collegiate group—cool musical acts like Sara Bareilles and John Legend—who have openly embraced their a cappella roots, as opposed to stars of yesteryear like James VanDerBeek who guffawed at the mention of his days with Drew University 36 Madison Avenue. Beyond that, you have Ben Folds recording an album with collegiate groups that covered him, then taking the next step and acting as one of the most prominent personalities on *The Sing-Off*. These celebrity endorsements not only tell the public that it's OK to like a cappella but actively sell the form.

There's also the *Glee* effect to consider. Though very little of what appears on *Glee* is actually a cappella, the show has made the public more aware of and prepared to appreciate eccentric covers and stage performances. The popular TV show's employment of the aforementioned 'Bubs as the voices of the on-screen Warblers has further cemented the cool factor of a

cappella in the context of the show—and when the show itself is as popular as it is, the world has to take notice.

Beyond celebrity and TV endorsements, a cappella itself has made a stand for being cool. Take a look at University of Oregon On the Rocks; the group's "Bad Romance" video accrued millions of view on YouTube—and that's before they appeared on national TV. Such a video transcends quirky Nintendo-themed performances, or the novelty act of one man re-dubbing the *Star Wars* theme to enter the realm of music people actively want to hear and a video people actively want to watch. People saw the On the Rocks video and, rather than stopping halfway through, watched the whole thing. Then they watched it again. Then they passed it to their friends. That doesn't happen with videos that people—everyday people, at that—don't actively enjoy. Even if for just a few-month period, On the Rocks was cool.

Anyone who followed the 2011 ICCA tournament knows that plenty of all-male acts imitated the On the Rocks game plan and arrived at varying levels of success. In doing so, they may, indeed, have made the particular idea of guys going Gaga a bit less cool. But by drawing fans and imitators, On the Rocks further established that what they were doing was cool, and that it was worth following in their footsteps.

At this point, it seems inevitable that another cool a cappella act will follow. Maybe it will be another gender inversion, or the reinvention of a popular song. Maybe it will be an innovative use of technology in recording or even live performance. Maybe it will be an act like Pentatonix making good on all of its crossover potential. Whatever the case may be, the time is ripe for a cappella to get cooler. In all likelihood, the coolness of a cappella will be necessary in order for the form to get any bigger.

## Is a cappella going to get bigger?

There is no denying that a cappella has grown bigger over the last decade. There are nearly 2,000 active collegiate groups in the US, and an increasingly large number abroad. According to a survey of over 300 groups conducted by The A Cappella Blog in 2010, 60 percent of active groups had been around for over a decade while a solid 13 percent had been around for fewer than five years. This pair of statistics combines to illustrate that a cappella groups are enjoying longevity *and* that new groups are sprouting up on a regular basis. Anyone looking for further evidence need only have attended ICCA shows on a regular basis over the last few years, and seen the average number of competing groups in a quarterfinal swell from five-or-six to eight-to-ten.

Beyond the sheer number of groups, let's consider the worldwide exposure of a cappella. MTV infamously showed up at the 2009 ICCA Finals, having struck a deal with Varsity Vocals to film there as a starting point for a series focused on the ICCAs. The appearance had the dual effect of inspiring excitement and curiosity, and deeply offending others, who felt MTV personalities had had too significant an impact on the show, and needlessly dramatized the proceedings. Further confounding, the tape never made it to air. The experience did show that there was national interest in a cappella, though—an interest confirmed a year and a half later when no lesser entity than NBC launched *The Sing-Off*.

*The Sing-Off* has accrued a sizeable audience, which justified the show getting bigger with each passing year, from four, to five, to eleven episodes (plus a Christmas special). The longstanding question of whether a cappella can appeal to a mainstream audience seemed to have been answered in

December 2010, when an estimated 9 million viewers tuned in to the season two premiere. Though, at press time, it looks like the Sing-Off experiment may be over, the impact the show has had can't be denied.

Spinning off of *The Sing-Off* you have groups like Street Corner Symphony and The Backbeats opening for Ben Folds on tour. Meanwhile Rockapella remains a viable live act for shows across the country, and Straight No Chaser has made waves on the radio and on iTunes. While you can argue they have a Christmas music niche, the fact remains that they're viable recording and touring artists, rather than a niche a cappella act.

But will a cappella continue to grow?

Many signs point toward yes, with season three of *The Sing-Off* more than twice as long as seasons one or two, and the *Glee* effect still in motion. Some argue that the a cappella explosion is a result of an economy in which people can't afford instruments. There's some dubious logic at play there, but for whatever reason, a cappella has grown and grown in recent years, and shows no signs of receding in the immediate future.

But what will it take for the growth to continue long-term?

In all likelihood, the continued growth of the form will depend on breakout stars. *The Sing Off* has celebrated, and served as a launching pad for numerous groups—winners NOTA, Committed, and Pentatonix are recording and touring; Street Corner Symphony has been on the road as well, and The Beelzebubs likely garnered the notoriety to score their gig on *Glee* through their run on the show; On the Rocks have cemented their place as one of the best known collegiate acts of all time. The ability of these acts to continue to grow rather than riding their fifteen minutes of fame will be key to the long-term success of the a cappella form.

A cappella groups still seem to fare well in more general TV talent contests (*America's Got Talent*, *America Sings*) just out of pure novelty. Ironically, as the form grows more and more established, such groups may lose their niche, or need to work all the harder to assert themselves as unique and entertaining when the vibrancy of a good a cappella group, itself, is no longer enough to wow audiences.

Like any part of music, a piece of a cappella's long-term growth rest in the hands of record executives. Though YouTube, and the Internet in general, have leveled the playing fields by many measures, a cappella's viability in the mainstream will likely remain at least partially dependent on who gets radio play and who gets featured on iTunes.

## Is A Cappella Going to Get Better?

And so, we arrive at what may be the most arbitrary question of all concerning the future of a cappella—a part of why this question is nearly impossible to answer is the variety of meanings of the word “better.” Are we talking about pure intonation? Overall stage presentation? Live performances only or recordings, too? Or are we looking at the entire package—and if so, how are we weighting the different factors?

In any walk of life, one generation leads to the next. The elders scoff at those who follow them because these young upstarts buck tradition and innovate in uncomfortable new directions. Ironically, these elders neglect that they, too, once had elders who disapproved of them, and that they represent a bridge between the “outdated” era that preceded them, and crazy kids who came after them.

In all likelihood, we'll never have an objective answer to whether a cappella is truly getting better. The form is evolving, and the continued development of both aural techniques and



technology will generate new options, and so more potential for a cappella to thrive.

At very least, we have a diverse and deep pool of a cappella talent to look forward to in the decades ahead. That doesn't sound half bad.

## Collegiate Group Directory

### **Abilene Christian University**

*Abilene, TX*

A Cappella Chorus

MIXED

### **Albion College**

*Albion, MI*

Euphonics

MIXED

### **Alfred University**

*Alfred, NY*

Noteables

MALE

Segues

FEMALE

### **Allegheny College**

*Meadville, PA*

Allegation

MIXED

### **Alma College**

*Alma, MI*

Phi Mu Alpha Men of Music

MALE

Scots on the Rocks

MALE

## American University

*Washington, DC*

Blends with Benefits	MIXED
Dime A Dozen	MIXED
On A Sensual Note	MALE
Treble in Paradise	FEMALE

## Amherst College

*Amherst, MA*

Bluestockings	FEMALE
DQ	MIXED
Madrigals	MIXED
Route 9	MALE
Sabrinias	FEMALE
Terras Irradiant	MIXED
Zumbyes	MALE

## Andrews University

*Berrien Springs, MI*

Diamouwah	MALE
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## Appalachian State University

*Boone, NC*

Enharmonix	MIXED
Higher Ground	MALE
Lost In Sound (formerly Extension Chords)	MIXED
What's Yer Pleasure	MALE

## Arcadia University

*Glenside, PA*

A Little Knight Music	MIXED
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## Arizona State University

*Tempe, AZ*

Pitchforks	FEMALE
Priority Male	MALE

## **Augustana College**

*Sioux Falls, SD*

Choirboys MALE

## **Austin College**

*Sherman, TX*

Austin College A Cappella Choir MIXED

## **Baldwin-Wallace College**

*Berea, OH*

A Cappella Fellas MALE

## **Ball State University**

*Muncie, IN*

High Five MALE

## **Bard College**

*Annandale-On-Hudson, NY*

Orcapelicans MIXED

## **Barnard College**

*New York, NY*

Bacchante FEMALE

Pizmon (with Columbia/Jewish Theological Seminary) MIXED

## **Bates College**

*Lewiston, ME*

Crosstones MIXED

Deansmen MALE

Manic Optimists MALE

Merimanders FEMALE

TakeNote MIXED

## **Bellevue College**

*Bellevue, WA*

Bellevue A Cappella MIXED

## **Bellevue Community College**

*Bellevue, WA*

Celebration!	MIXED
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## **Belmont University**

*Nashville, TN*

Beltones	MIXED
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## **Berklee College of Music**

*Boston, MA*

Pitch Slapped	MIXED
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## **Boston College**

*Chestnut Hill, MA*

Acoustics	MIXED
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Against the Current	MIXED
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BC Madrigal Singers	MIXED
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BC Sharps	FEMALE
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Bostonians	MIXED
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Dynamics	MIXED
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Heightsmen	MALE
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## **Boston University**

*Boston, MA*

Allegrettos	MIXED
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Aural Fixation	FEMALE
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BosTones (formerly Bostoniensis)	MIXED
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Chordially Yours	FEMALE
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Dear Abbeys	MALE
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In Achord	MIXED
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Kol Echad	MIXED
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Nickel & Dime	MIXED
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Suno (Hindi A Cappella)	MIXED
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Terpsichore	FEMALE
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Treblemakers	MIXED
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## **Bowdoin College**

*Brunswick, ME*

BellaMafia	FEMALE
BOKA	MIXED
Longfellows	MALE
Meddiebempsters	MALE
Miscellania	FEMALE
Ursus Verses	MIXED

## **Bowling Green State University**

*Bowling Green, OH*

HeeBeeBGs	MALE
Ten40	MALE

## **Bradley University**

*Peoria, IL*

On the Rocks	MALE
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## **Brandeis University**

*Waltham, MA*

Company B	MIXED
Jewish Fella A Cappella	MALE
Manginah	MIXED
Proscenium	MIXED
Rather Be Giraffes	MIXED
Shirley Tempos	FEMALE
Starving Artists	MIXED
Up the Octave	FEMALE
VoiceMale	MALE

## **Bridgewater State College**

*Bridgewater, MA*

Alumni Chamber Choir	MIXED
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## Brigham Young University

*Provo, UT*

Blue Cheese	MIXED
Noteworthy	FEMALE
Reprise	MALE
Vocal Point	MALE

## Brooklyn College

*Brooklyn, NY*

Ma Nishma	MIXED
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## Brown University

*Providence, RI*

ARRR!!!	MIXED
Bear Necessities	MALE
Brown Derbies	MALE
Brown Madrigal Singers	MIXED
Brown's Tones	FEMALE
Chattertocks	FEMALE
Harmonic Motion	MIXED
Higher Keys	MIXED
Jabberwocks	MALE
Kol B'Yachad	MIXED
Lip Service	MIXED
Shades of Brown	MIXED
Ursa Minors	FEMALE
With One Voice	MIXED

## Bryn Mawr

*Bryn Mawr, PA*

2Fish	MIXED
Deceptive Cadence	FEMALE
Extreme Keys (with Haverford)	FEMALE
Lavender's Blue	FEMALE
Looney Tunes (with Haverford)	MIXED
Night Owls	FEMALE

Sassafrass	MIXED
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## **Bucknell University**

*Lewisburg, PA*

Beyond Unison	MIXED
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Bison Chips	MALE
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Silhouettes	FEMALE
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Two Past Midnight	MIXED
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## **Butler County Community College**

*El Dorado, KS*

Smorgaschords	MALE
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## **Butler University**

*Indianapolis, IN*

Freshly Brewed	FEMALE
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Out of the Dawg House	MALE
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## **California Institute of Technology**

*Pasadena, CA*

Ecphonema	MALE
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Fluid Dynamics	MIXED
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Out Of Context	MIXED
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Treble Makers	FEMALE
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## **California Polytechnic University**

*San Luis Obispo, CA*

Take it SLO	MIXED
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That's The Key	MIXED
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## **California State University Chico**

*Chico, CA*

A Cappella Choir	MIXED
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## **California State University Northridge**

*Northridge, CA*

Acasola	MIXED
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Vocal Percussion Radio	MIXED
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## California State University Ponomo

*Ponomo, CA*

Accafellas	MALE
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## California University of Pennsylvania

*California, PA*

Acapella Stella	FEMALE
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California Singers	MIXED
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Vulcanize	MALE
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## Calvin College

*Grand Rapids, MI*

African Acappella	MIXED
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## Carleton College

*Northfield, MN*

A Cappellicans	FEMALE
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Accidentals	FEMALE
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Exit 69	MIXED
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Intertwining Melodies	MIXED
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Knightingales	FEMALE
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Knights	MALE
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Nightshade	MIXED
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## Carnegie Mellon University

*Pittsburgh, PA*

Counterpoint	FEMALE
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Deewane	MALE
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Joyful Noise	MIXED
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Originals	MALE
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Soundbytes	MIXED
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## Case Western Reserve

*Cleveland, OH*

Case in Point	MIXED
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Kol HaShamayim	FEMALE
Solstice	FEMALE
Speakeasy	MALE

## Case Western Reserve Medical School

*Cleveland, OH*

Docappella	MIXED
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## Catholic University of America

*Washington, DC*

RedLine	MALE
Take Note A Capella	MIXED

## Central Connecticut State University

*New Britain, CT*

Acabellas	FEMALE
Divisi	MALE
Too Good For Instruments	FEMALE

## Central Michigan University

*Mount Pleasant, MI*

Central Harmony	MIXED
Fish 'n' Chips	MALE
On the Rox	FEMALE

## Central Washington University

*Ellensburg, WA*

Nada Cantata	MIXED
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## Chapman University

*Orange, CA*

Men of Harmony	MALE
Simply Vocale	FEMALE
SoundCheck	MIXED

## Christopher Newport University

*Newport News, VA*

Newport Pearls	FEMALE
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## The Claremont Colleges

*Claremont, CA*

After School Specials	MIXED
Men's Blue and White	MALE
Midnight Echo	MIXED
Mood Swing	MIXED
Shades	MIXED
Women's Blue and White	FEMALE

## Clark University

*Worcester, MA*

Clark Bars	MIXED
Counterpoints	FEMALE
Desi Hungama	MIXED

## Clemson University

*Clemson, SC*

Impulse	MALE
Southern Accents	MIXED
Take Note	FEMALE
TIGEROAR	MALE

## Colby College

*Waterville, ME*

Blue Lights	MALE
Colby 8	MALE
Colbyettes	FEMALE
Megalomaniacs	MIXED
Sirens	FEMALE

## **Colgate University**

*Hamilton, NY*

Colgate 13	MALE
Dischords	MIXED
Resolutions	MIXED
Swinging 'Gates	FEMALE

## **College of Charleston**

*Charleston, SC*

Chucktown Trippintones	MIXED
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## **College of New Jersey**

*Lawrenceville, NJ*

Trentones	MIXED
Voice of Hope	MIXED

## **College of Saint Rose**

*Albany, NY*

Girls Next Door	FEMALE
Other Guys	MALE

## **College of William and Mary**

*Williamsburg, VA*

Accidentals	FEMALE
Christopher Wren Singers	MIXED
Cleftomaniacs	MIXED
Common Ground	FEMALE
DoubleTake	MIXED
Ebony Expressions	MIXED
Gentlemen of the College	MALE
Intonations	FEMALE
One Accord	MALE
Passing Notes	FEMALE
Reveille	FEMALE
Stairwells	MALE

## College of Wooster

*Wooster, OH*

A Round of Monkeys	MIXED
After These Messages...	FEMALE
C.O.W. Belles	FEMALE
Merry Kuween of Skots	MALE

## Colorado College

*Colorado Springs, CO*

Back Row	MALE
Ellement	FEMALE
Room 46	MIXED
The Back Row	MALE

## Colorado State University

*Fort Collins, CO*

Resonant Ramblings	MIXED
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## Columbia University

*New York, NY*

Bat Kol	FEMALE
Clefangers	MIXED
High Bias	MALE
Jubilation!	MIXED
Kingsmen	MALE
Metrotones	FEMALE
Nonsequitur	MIXED
Notes & Keys	MIXED
Pizmon	MIXED
Redline	MIXED
S'madar	FEMALE
Uptown Vocal	MIXED

## Concordia College

*Moorhead, MN*

Concordia Choir	MIXED
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Six Appeal	MALE
VIBE	MALE

## Connecticut College

*New London, CT*

Co Co Beaux	MALE
Conn Artists	MIXED
ConnChords	FEMALE
Shwiffs	FEMALE
Vox Cameli	MIXED
Williams Street Mix	MIXED

## Cornell University

*Ithaca, NY*

Absolute	MIXED
After Eight	FEMALE
Baraka Kwa Wimbo Gospel Ensemble	FEMALE
CallbaXX	FEMALE
Cayuga's Waiters	MALE
Chai Notes	MIXED
Chordials	MIXED
Class Notes	MIXED
Grace Notes	MIXED
Hangovers	MALE
Hearsay	FEMALE
Key Elements	MIXED
Last Call	MALE
Nothing But Treble	FEMALE
Touchtones	FEMALE
Ultra Sound	MIXED

## Creighton University

*Omaha, NE*

Creightones	MALE
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## **Dartmouth College**

*Hanover, NH*

Aires	MALE
Cords	MALE
Decibelles	FEMALE
Dodecaphonics	MIXED
Final Cut	MALE
Rockapellas	FEMALE
Sing Dynasty	MIXED
SuBtLeTiEs	FEMALE
X.ado	MIXED

## **Davidson College**

*Davidson, NC*

Androgyny	MIXED
Davidson Delilahs	FEMALE
Davidson Generals	MALE

## **Denison University**

*Granville, OH*

Denison Hilltoppers	MALE
Ladies Night Out	FEMALE

## **DePaul University**

*Chicago, IL*

DMaC - DePaul Men's A Cappella	MALE
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## **DePauw University**

*Greencastle, IN*

DePauwCappella	MIXED
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## **Dickinson College**

*Carlisle, PA*

D-Tones	MIXED
Infernos	MIXED
Octals	MALE

Syrens	FEMALE
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## Dickinson State University

*Dickinson, ND*

aka'Fellas	MALE
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## Drew University

*Madison, NJ*

36 Madison Avenue	MALE
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All of the Above	MIXED
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On A Different Note	FEMALE
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Shadow of His Wings	MIXED
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## Drexel University

*Philadelphia, PA*

8 to the Bar	MALE
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Shor	MIXED
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Treblemakers	FEMALE
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## Duke University

*Durham, NC*

Deja Blue	MIXED
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Lady Blue	FEMALE
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Out of the Blue	FEMALE
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Pitchforks	MALE
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Rhythm & Blue	MIXED
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Sapphire	FEMALE
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Something Borrowed, Something Blue	MIXED
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Speak of the Devil	MALE
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## Duke University School of Law

*Durham, NC*

Public Hearing	MIXED
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## Eastern Connecticut State University

*Willimantic, CT*

Tonal Recall	MIXED
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## Eastern Nazarene College

*Quincy, MA*

A Cappella Choir and Chamber Singers	MIXED
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## Elizabethtown College

*Elizabethtown, PA*

Melica	FEMALE
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Phalanx	MALE
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## Elmira College

*Elmira, NY*

Chiclettes	FEMALE
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E.C. Naturals	MIXED
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## Elon University

*Elon, NC*

Rip Chord	MALE
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Sweet Signatures	FEMALE
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Twisted Measure	MIXED
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## Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

*Daytona Beach, FL*

AcaFellas	MALE
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## Emerson College

*Boston, MA*

Noteworthy	MIXED
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## Emmanuel College

*Boston, MA*

For Good Measure	FEMALE
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## Emory University

*Atlanta, GA*

AHANA A Cappella	MIXED
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Aural Pleasure	MIXED
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Dooley Noted	MIXED
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Gathering	FEMALE
KolHaNesher	MIXED
No Strings Attached	MALE

## **Emporia State University**

*Emporia, KS*

ESU A Cappella Choir	MIXED
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## **Erskine College**

*Due West, SC*

Fleetones	MALE
Immix	MIXED
Sweet Fleet	FEMALE

## **Fairfield University**

*Fairfield, CT*

Sounds	MIXED
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## **Five Colleges**

*Amherst, MA*

Instrumentally Challenged	MIXED
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## **Florida Institute of Technology**

*Melbourne, FL*

Players in Harmony	MIXED
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## **Florida State University**

*Tallahassee, FL*

Acaphiliacs	MIXED
AcaBelles	FEMALE
All-Night Yahtzee	MIXED
Reverb	MALE

## **Fordham University**

*Bronx, NY*

B - Sides	MIXED
Ramblers	MALE

Satin Dolls	FEMALE
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## **Fort Hays State University**

*Hays, KS*

Best of My Boys	MALE
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## **Franklin and Marshall College**

*Lancaster, PA*

Chessmen	MALE
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Poor Richards	MIXED
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Sweet Ophelia	FEMALE
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## **Freed-Hardeman University**

*Henderson, TN*

Ambassadors	MIXED
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## **Furman University**

*Greenville, SC*

Bell Tower Boys	MALE
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Furman Madrigals	MIXED
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FUtones	MIXED
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## **George Fox University**

*Newberg, OR*

DaySpring	MIXED
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## **George Mason University**

*Fairfax, VA*

Soundchecque	MIXED
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## **George Washington University**

*Washington, DC*

Emocapella	MALE
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Geet	MIXED
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GW Vibes	MIXED
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Pitches	FEMALE
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Sirens	FEMALE
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Sons of Pitch	MALE
Troubadours	MIXED
Zmirnotes	MIXED

## **Georgetown University**

*Washington, DC*

Chamber Singers	MIXED
Chimes	MALE
Essence	MIXED
GraceNotes	FEMALE
Harmony	FEMALE
Phantoms	MIXED
Saxatones	MIXED
Superfood	MIXED

## **Georgetown University Law Center**

*Washington, DC*

Moral Hazard	MIXED
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## **Georgia Tech**

*Atlanta, GA*

Glee Club	MALE
Infinite Harmony	MIXED
Nothin' But Treble	FEMALE
Sympathetic Vibrations	MALE

## **Gettysburg College**

*Gettysburg, PA*

Four Scores	MIXED
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## **Gonzaga University**

*Spokane, WA*

Big Bing Theory	MIXED
Soul Catchers	MIXED
Stairwells	MALE

## Goucher College

*Baltimore, MD*

A Few Good Men	MALE
Red Hot Blue	MIXED
Reverend's Rebels	FEMALE

## Grand Valley State University

*Allendale, MI*

After School Special	MALE
Euphoria	MIXED
GV Groove!	MIXED

## Grinnell College

*Grinnell, IA*

Con Brio	MIXED
G Tones	MALE

## Hamilton College

*Clinton, NY*

Buffers	MALE
Hamiltone's	MIXED
Special K	FEMALE
Tumbling After	FEMALE

## Harding University

*Searcy, AK*

Harding University Chorus	MIXED
Tuned In	MIXED

## Hartwick College

*Oneonta, NY*

Not So Sharp	MIXED
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## Harvard/Radcliffe

*Cambridge, MA*

'Cliffe Notes	FEMALE
C-Sharp	MIXED

Callbacks	MIXED
Collegium Underground	MIXED
Din & Tonics	MALE
Fallen Angels	FEMALE
Glee Club Lite	MALE
Krokodiloes	MALE
Kuumba Brothers	MALE
Kuumba Sisters	FEMALE
Low Keys	MIXED
Mizmor Shir	MIXED
Opportunes	MIXED
Radcliffe Pitches	FEMALE
Under Construction	MIXED
Veritones	MIXED

## Harvard Business School

*Cambridge, MA*

Heard on the Street	MALE
She-E-Os	FEMALE

## Harvard Law School

*Cambridge, MA*

Scales of Justice	MIXED
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## Hastings College

*Hastings, NE*

1-2-5	MALE
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## Haverford College

*Haverford, PA*

Extreme Keys (Haverford/Bryn Mawr)	FEMALE
Ford S-Chords	FEMALE
Humtones	MALE
Looney Tunes (Haverford/Bryn Mawr)	MIXED
Outskirts	FEMALE
Oxford Blues	FEMALE

## High Point University

*High Point, NC*

Toccatones	MALE
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## Hobart and William Smith Colleges

*Geneva, NY*

Hobartones	MALE
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Three Miles Lost	FEMALE
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## Hofstra University

*Hempstead, NY*

Drastic Measures	MALE
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Sigma 'capella	MIXED
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## College of the Holy Cross

*Worcester, MA*

8-Track	MIXED
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Delilahs	FEMALE
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Fools on the Hill	MIXED
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Naturals	MALE
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Testostertones	MALE
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## Hope College

*Holland, MI*

12th Street Harmony	MALE
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## Illinois State University

*Normal, IL*

Acafellaz	MALE
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Other Guys	MALE
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Secondary Dominance	FEMALE
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## Illinois Wesleyan University

*Bloomington, IL*

A Touch of Class	FEMALE
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In Sync	MALE
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Suspended	MALE
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## **Indiana University**

*Bloomington, IN*

Allepaca	MIXED
Delusions of Grandeur	MALE
Ladies First	FEMALE
Selective Hearing	MIXED
Soulstice	MIXED
Straight No Chaser	MALE

## **Iowa State University**

*Ames, IA*

Shaggy Boys	MALE
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## **Ithaca College**

*Ithaca, NY*

IC Voicestream	MIXED
Ithacappella	MALE
Premium Blend	FEMALE

## **James Madison University**

*Harrisonburg, VA*

BluesTones	FEMALE
Exit 245	MALE
IntoHymn	FEMALE
Low Key	MIXED
Madison Project	MALE
Note-oriety	FEMALE
Overtones	MIXED

## **Jewish Theological Seminary**

*New York, NY*

Note-Nim	FEMALE
Pizmon (With Barnard/Columbia)	MIXED



## John Carroll University

*University Heights, OH*

Rhapsody Blue	MALE
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## Johns Hopkins University

*Baltimore, MD*

AllNighters	MALE
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Ketzev	MIXED
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Kranti	MIXED
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Mental Notes	MIXED
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Octopodes	MIXED
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Sirens	FEMALE
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Vocal Chords	MIXED
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## Juniata College

*Huntingdon, PA*

Those Guys	MALE
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## Kansas City Kansas Community College

*Kansas City, KS*

Standard	MIXED
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## Kansas State University

*Manhattan, KS*

Cadence	MALE
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## Keene State College

*Keene, NH*

Chock Full of Notes	MIXED
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## Kenyon College

*Gambier, OH*

Chasers	MIXED
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Cornerstones	MIXED
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Kokosingers	MALE
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Owl Creek Singers	FEMALE
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Ransom Notes	MALE
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## **Kirkwood Community College**

*Cedar Rapids, IA*

Jazz Transit	MIXED
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## **Knox College**

*Galesburg, IL*

Chamber Singers	MIXED
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## **Lafayette College**

*Easton, PA*

Cadence	FEMALE
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Chorduroys	MALE
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Quintessence	MIXED
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Soulfege	MIXED
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## **Lawrence University**

*Appleton, WI*

Conchordance	FEMALE
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## **Le College Lionel-Groulx**

*Sainte-Therese, QC*

Lionel-Groove Ah Cappella	MIXED
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Lionel-Groove Sexappella	MIXED
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## **Lee University**

*Cleveland, TN*

Voices of Lee	MIXED
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## **Lehigh University**

*Bethlehem, PA*

A Whole-Step Up	MALE
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Echoes	FEMALE
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Melismatics	MIXED
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On Tap	MALE
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## **Lewis University**

*Romeoville, IL*

Harmonic Uprising	MIXED
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## **Linn-Benton Community College**

*Albany, OR*

Blue Light Special	MALE
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Sirens	FEMALE
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## **Lipscomb University**

*Antioch, TN*

twentyfourseven	MALE
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## **Louisiana State University**

*Baton Rouge, LA*

LSU A Cappella Choir	MIXED
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## **Loyola College**

*Baltimore, MD*

Belles	FEMALE
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Chimes	MALE
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## **Loyola University**

*Chicago, IL*

Loyolacappella	MIXED
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## **Lubbock Christian University**

*Lubbock, TX*

Best Friends	MIXED
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Hallelujah Chorus	MIXED
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## **Luther College**

*Decorah, IA*

Beautiful Mess	FEMALE
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Nordic Choir	MIXED
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Undeclared	MALE
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## Macalester College

*Saint Paul, MN*

Scotch Tape	MIXED
Sirens	FEMALE
Traditions	MALE

## Manhattanville College

*Purchase, NY*

Manhattanville Sound	FEMALE
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## Mansfield University

*Mansfield, PA*

Ellison Collection	MALE
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## Marist College

*Poughkeepsie, NY*

Sirens	FEMALE
Time Check	MALE

## Marquette University

*Milwaukee, WI*

Naturals	MALE
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## Mary Baldwin College

*Staunton, VA*

Baldwin Charm	FEMALE
Madrigals	FEMALE

## Maryland Institute College of Art

*Baltimore, MD*

Shades of Grey	MIXED
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## Massachusetts Institute of Technology

*Cambridge, MA*

Chorallaries	MIXED
Cross Products	MIXED
Logarhythms	MALE

Muses	FEMALE
Resonance	MIXED
Sloan E-52's	MIXED
Techiya	MIXED
Toons (With Wellesley)	MIXED

## McGill University

*Montreal, QC*

Effusion	MIXED
Soulstice	MIXED
Tonal Ecstasy	MIXED

## Miami University

*Oxford, OH*

Cheezyies	MALE
Misfitz	FEMALE
Remnants	MALE

## Michigan State University

*East Lansing, MI*

Accafellas	MALE
Capital Green	MIXED
Ladies First	FEMALE
Men's Glee Club	MALE
Spartan Dischords	MALE
State of Fifths	MIXED

## Middlebury College

*Middlebury, VT*

Bobolinks	MIXED
Dissipated Eight	MALE
Mamajamas	MIXED
Mischords	FEMALE
Mountain Ayers	MIXED
Paradiddles	FEMALE
People Get Ready!!!	MIXED

Stuck in the Middle	MALE
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## **Millikin University**

*Decatur, IL*

5one	MALE
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Disarranged	MALE
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OneVoice	MIXED
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## **Mississippi Valley State University**

*Itta Bena, MS*

T.H.I.S.	MIXED
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## **Missouri State University**

*Springfield, MO*

A Cub Bella	FEMALE
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Beartones	MALE
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## **Monmouth College**

*Monmouth, IL*

Scotsmen	MALE
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## **Mount Holyoke College**

*South Hadley, MA*

Cornerstone	FEMALE
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Diversions	FEMALE
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M&C's	FEMALE
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Nice Shoes	FEMALE
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Victory Eights	FEMALE
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Voices of Faith	FEMALE
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## **Mount Marty College**

*Yankton, SD*

Smooth Benediction	MIXED
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## **Mt. San Antonio College**

*Walnut, CA*

Fermata Nowhere	MALE
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## Muhlenberg College

*Allentown, PA*

AcaFellas	MALE
Chaimonics	MIXED
Dynamics	MIXED
Girls Next Door	FEMALE
InAcchord	MIXED

## Nazareth College

*Rochester, NY*

Call4Backup	FEMALE
Fermata Thin Air	MIXED
Note to Self	MIXED

## New York Medical College

*New York, NY*

Arrhythmias	MIXED
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## New York University

*New York, NY*

Ani V'ata	MIXED
APC Rhythm	MIXED
Cleftomaniacs	MIXED
Mass Transit	MALE
N'Harmonics	MIXED

## New York University School of Law

*New York, NY*

Substantial Performance	MIXED
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## North Carolina State University

*Raleigh, NC*

Acappology	MIXED
Grains of Time	MALE
Ladies in Red	FEMALE
No Strings Attached (Anno Domini)	MIXED

Packabelles	FEMALE
Wolfgang	MIXED

## North Dakota State University

*Fargo, ND*

Alterior Motiv	MALE
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## Northeastern University

*Boston, MA*

Accidentals	FEMALE
Bassix	MALE
Distilled Harmony	MIXED
Downbeats	MIXED
Nor'easters	MIXED
Treble on Huntington	FEMALE
UniSons	MALE

## Northern Arizona University

*Flagstaff, AZ*

Elevation	MIXED
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## Northwestern University

*Evanston, IL*

Asterik	MALE
Aural Fixation	MIXED
Bottom Line	MALE
Brown Sugar	MALE
Catatonics	MIXED
Extreme Measures	MIXED
Five Minutes of Fame	MALE
Freshmen 15	MALE
Harmony in Spirit	MIXED
Kelloggarythms	FEMALE
Klein Four Group	MALE
Melisma	CO-ED
Purple Haze	MIXED



ShireiNU	MIXED
Significant Others	FEMALE
Thunk	MIXED
Treblemakers	MIXED
Undertones	MIXED
X-Factors	MIXED

## Oakland University

*Rochester, MN*

Gold Vibrations	MIXED
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## Oberlin College

*Oberlin, OH*

Nothing but Treble	FEMALE
Obertones	MALE
Offbeats	MIXED

## Occidental College

*Los Angeles, CA*

Accidentals	FEMALE
Cadence	MALE

## Ohio State University

*Columbus, OH*

Buck That!	MALE
InChant	MIXED
Johnson Hall	FEMALE
MeshugaNotes	MIXED

## Ohio University

*Athens, OH*

Leading Tones	MALE
Section 8	MALE
Tempo Tantrums	FEMALE
Title IX	FEMALE

## Ohio Wesleyan University

*Delaware, OH*

Jaywalkers	FEMALE
OWtsiders	MIXED
Pitch Black	FEMALE

## Olin College

*Needham, MA*

PowerChords	MIXED
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## Oregon State University

*Corvallis, OR*

Divine	FEMALE
Outspoken	MALE

## Pacific Lutheran University

*Tacoma, WA*

HERmonic	FEMALE
PLUtonic	MALE

## Penn State University

*University Park, PA*

4-The-Glory	MALE
Blue in the FACE	MIXED
Dreamers of Phi Mu Alpha	MALE
Grace Notes	MIXED
The Statesmen	MALE
None Of The Above	MIXED
Pennharmonics	MIXED
Rhythm of Faith	MIXED
Savoir Faire	FEMALE
Shades of Blue	MIXED

## Pepperdine University

*Malibu, CA*

Won by One	MIXED
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## **Plymouth State College**

*Plymouth, NH*

Mixed Emotions	FEMALE
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Vocal Order	MALE
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## **Point Loma Nazarene University**

*San Diego, CA*

Pointless	MALE
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## **Portland State University**

*Portland, OR*

Green Note	MIXED
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## **Princeton University**

*Princeton, NJ*

AFM	MIXED
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Culturally Yours	FEMALE
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FireHazards	MIXED
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Footnotes	MALE
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Katzenjammers	MIXED
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Kindred Spirit	MIXED
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Koleinu	MIXED
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Nassoons	MALE
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Roaring 20	MIXED
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Shere Khan	MIXED
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Tigerlilies	FEMALE
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Tigertones	MALE
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Tigressions	FEMALE
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Wildcats	FEMALE
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## **Providence College**

*Providence, RI*

Anaclastic	FEMALE
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Special Guest	MALE
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Strictly Speaking	MIXED
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## Queens College

*Flushing, NY*

Tizmoret	MIXED
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## Regis College

*Weston, MA*

Upscales	FEMALE
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## Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

*Troy, NY*

Partial Credit	MIXED
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Rensselyrics	MIXED
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Rusty Pipes	MIXED
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## Rhodes College

*Memphis, TN*

Lipstick On Your Collar	FEMALE
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Woolsocks	MALE
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## Rice University

*Houston, TX*

Lager Rhythms	MIXED
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Philharmonics	MIXED
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## Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

*Pomona, NJ*

Stockapella	MIXED
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## Rider University

*Lawrenceville, NJ*

'Til Further Notes	MIXED
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Rider Vibes	MIXED
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Vocalmotion	MIXED
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## Roanoke College

*Salem, VA*

Looking for an Echo	MALE
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Mainstreet	FEMALE
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## **Roberts Wesleyan College**

*Rochester, NY*

Sirens	FEMALE
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Vocal Infusion	MALE
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## **Rochester Institute of Technology**

*Rochester, NY*

Brick City Singers	MALE
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Eight Beat Measure	MALE
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Encore	FEMALE
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Surround Sound	MALE
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Vocal Accent	FEMALE
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## **Rowan University**

*Glassboro, NJ*

Reverb	MALE
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## **Russell Sage College**

*Troy, NY*

Sagettes	FEMALE
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## **Rutgers University**

*New Brunswick, NJ*

Casual Harmony	MALE
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Deep Treble	MIXED
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First Light	MIXED
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Kol Halayla	MIXED
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Orphan Sporks	MIXED
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RAAG	MIXED
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Shockwave	FEMALE
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## **Saint Joseph's University**

*Philadelphia, PA*

54th & City	MALE
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City Belles	FEMALE
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## **Saint Michael's College**

*Colchester, VT*

Sleepless Knights

MIXED

## **Salisbury University**

*Salisbury, MD*

Squawkappella

MIXED

## **San Diego State University**

*San Diego, CA*

Sunset Clefs

MIXED

## **Sarah Lawrence College**

*Bronxville, NY*

Treble in Paradise

FEMALE

Vocal Minority

MALE

## **Seton Hall Law School**

*Newark, NJ*

EsqChoir

MIXED

## **Siena Heights University**

*Adrian, MI*

Acapelicans

MIXED

## **Simmons College**

*Boston, MA*

Sirens

FEMALE

## **Simon's Rock College**

*Great Barrington, MA*

Free Trial

MIXED

## **Skidmore College**

*Saratoga Springs, NY*

Accents

FEMALE

Bandersnatchers

MALE

Drastic Measures	MIXED
Dynamics	MIXED
Sonneteers	FEMALE

## Smith College

*Northampton, MA*

Crapappella	FEMALE
Groove	FEMALE
Noteables	FEMALE
Smiffenpoofs	FEMALE
Smithereens	FEMALE
Vibes	FEMALE

## Snow College

*Ephraim, MN*

Phenomenon	DELETE
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## Southern Virginia University

*Ashland, OR*

Fading Point	MIXED
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## St. Ambrose University

*Davenport, IA*

STAMVOJA	MIXED
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## St. Bonaventure University

*Buffalo, NY*

Vocallusion	FEMALE
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## St. John Fisher College

*Rochester, NY*

Measure 13	MIXED
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## St. John's College

*Santa Fe, NM*

BarberShop Mafia	MALE
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## **St. John's University**

*Collegeville, MN*

Johnnie Blend	MALE
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## **St. Lawrence University**

*Canton, NY*

Singing Saints	MALE
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Singing Sinners	FEMALE
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## **St. Louis University**

*St. Louis, MO*

Bare Naked Statues	MALE
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Beyond All Reason	FEMALE
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Decadence	MIXED
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## **St. Mary's College of Maryland**

*St. Mary's City, MD*

Interchorus	MIXED
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Nightingales	FEMALE
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SMC Men	MALE
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## **St. Olaf College**

*Northfield, MN*

Cantus	MALE
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Limestones	MALE
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## **Stanford University**

*Palo Alto, CA*

Counterpoint	FEMALE
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Everyday People	MIXED
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Fleet Street Singers	MALE
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Harmonics	MIXED
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Mendicants	MALE
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Mixed Company	MIXED
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Raagapella	MALE
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Talisman	MIXED
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Testimony	MIXED
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## **Stephen F. Austin State University**

*Nacogdoches, TX*

A Cappella Choir	MIXED
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## **Stonehill College**

*Easton, MA*

Girls From The Hill	FEMALE
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Stonehill Chieftones	MALE
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## **Suffolk University**

*Boston, MA*

Ramifications	MIXED
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## **SUNY Albany**

*Albany, NY*

Earth Tones	MALE
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Serendipity	FEMALE
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## **SUNY Binghamton**

*Binghamton, NY*

Binghamtonics	MIXED
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Crosbys	MALE
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Harpur Harpeggios	FEMALE
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Kaskeset	MIXED
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Koinonia	MIXED
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No Strings Attached	MIXED
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Rhythm Method	MIXED
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Treble Makers	FEMALE
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Vibrations	MIXED
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## **SUNY Buffalo**

*Buffalo, NY*

Buffalo Chips	MALE
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Royal Pitches	FEMALE
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## **SUNY Fredonia**

*Fredonia, NY*

Fredonia Voicemale	MALE
Much More Chill	MALE
Premium Blend	MIXED
Some Like It Hot	FEMALE

## **SUNY Geneseo**

*Geneseo, NY*

Between the Lines	MIXED
Exit 8	MIXED
Hips n Harmony	FEMALE
NARD	MALE
Southside Boys	MALE

## **SUNY New Paltz**

*New Paltz, NY*

Absolut A Cappella	MIXED
MALE CALL	MALE

## **SUNY Oswego**

*Oswego, NY*

Boys Down the Hall	MALE
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## **SUNY Plattsburgh**

*Plattsburgh, NY*

Minor Adjustments	MIXED
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## **SUNY Potsdam**

*Potsdam, NY*

A Sharp Arrangement	FEMALE
Pitches	MIXED
Pointercounts	MALE

## **SUNY Purchase**

*Purchase, NY*

Choral Pleasure	MIXED
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## **SUNY Stony Brook**

*Stony Brook, NY*

High C's	MALE
Stony Brook Vocalists	MIXED

## **Susquehanna University**

*Selinsgrove, PA*

Chord Kings	MALE
Jeweltones	FEMALE
Rhapsody	MIXED

## **Swarthmore College**

*Swarthmore, PA*

Black Coffee	MIXED
Cantatrix	MIXED
Chaverim	MIXED
Doppler Gang	MIXED
Grapevine	FEMALE
Mixed Company	MIXED
Oscar & Emily	MIXED
Sixteen Feet	MALE
Sticks and Stones	MIXED

## **Sweet Briar College**

*Amherst, VA*

Sweet Tones	FEMALE
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## **Syracuse University**

*Syracuse, NY*

GrooveStand	MIXED
Main Squeeze	FEMALE
Mandarins	FEMALE
Orange Appeal	MALE
Oy Cappella	MIXED

## Temple University

*Philadelphia, PA*

A Choired Taste	FEMALE
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Broad Street Line	MALE
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## Texas A & M University

*College Station, TX*

Apotheosis	MALE
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HardChord DynaMix	MIXED
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## Thomas Jefferson University

*Philadelphia, PA*

Arrythmia	FEMALE
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Histones	MALE
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## Tiffin University

*Tiffin, OH*

Higher Ground	FEMALE
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Up in the Air	MIXED
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## Transylvania University

*Lexington, KY*

TBA (TU Be Announced)	MALE
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## Trinity College

*Hartford, CT*

Accidentals	MALE
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After Dark	MALE
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Dischords	MIXED
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Pipes	MIXED
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Quirks	FEMALE
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Trinitones	FEMALE
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## Troy State University

*Troy, AL*

Glasshouse (formerly, the Stallmen)	FEMALE
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## Truman State

*Kirksville, MO*

Minor Detail	FEMALE
Sweet Nothings	MIXED
True Men	MALE

## Tufts University

*Medford, MA*

Amalgamates	MIXED
Beelzebubs	MALE
Essence	FEMALE
Jackson Jills	FEMALE
Shir Appeal	MIXED
sQ!	MIXED

## Tufts University Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy

*Medford, MA*

Ambassachords	MIXED
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## Tulane University

*New Orleans, LA*

Green Envy	MIXED
THEM	MIXED

## Union College

*Schenectady, NY*

Dutch Pipers	MALE
Garnet Minstrelles	FEMALE

## University of Akron

*Akron, OH*

Femmata	FEMALE
Nuance	MALE
Rhythm & 'Roos	MIXED

## University of Alaska Anchorage

*Anchorage, AK*

AK Chill	MIXED
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## University of Alberta

*Edmonton, AB*

Ensemble de la Rue	MIXED
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## University of Arizona

*Tucson, AZ*

CatCall A Cappella	MALE
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EveryMan Jack & Jill	CO-ED
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Noteriety	MIXED
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UAVJE	MIXED
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Vocal Ease	FEMALE
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## The University of Bristol

*Bristol, UK*

TUBBS (The University of Bristol Barbershop Singers)	MIXED
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## University of California at Berkeley

*Berkeley, CA*

Artists in Resonance	MIXED
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Cal Jazz Choir	MIXED
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California Golden Overtones	FEMALE
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DeCadence	MIXED
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Dil Se	MIXED
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For Christ's Sake	MIXED
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Noteworthy	MALE
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UC Men's Octet	MALE
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## University of California at Davis

*Davis, CA*

Afterglow	MALE
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Liquid Hotplates	MIXED
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Lounge Lizards	MIXED
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**University of California at Irvine***Irvine, CA*

Circle of Fifths	MALE
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**University of California at Los Angeles***Los Angeles, CA*

Awaken A Cappella	MIXED
Bruin Harmony	MALE
Medleys A Cappella	MIXED
Random Voices	FEMALE
ScatterTones	MIXED
Shir Bruin	MIXED
Signature A Cappella	FEMALE
YOUTHphonics	MIXED

**University of California at San Diego***San Diego, CA*

Beat	MIXED
DOTS (Daughters of Triton)	FEMALE
Frequency	MALE
Tritones	MIXED

**University of California at Santa Barbara***Santa Barbara, CA*

Brothas from Otha Mothas	MALE
Naked Voices	MIXED
Vocal Motion	FEMALE

**University of California at Santa Cruz***Santa Cruz, CA*

Acquire	MIXED
Cloud 9 A Cappella	MIXED
Hightones	FEMALE
Isang Himig	MIXED

## University of Central Arkansas

*Conway, AR*

A Cappella Mafia	MALE
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## University of Central Florida

*Orlando, FL*

Crescendudes	MALE
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Gemini Blvd	MIXED
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Key Harmony	FEMALE
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So Noted	FEMALE
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## University of Chicago

*Chicago, IL*

Chicago Rhythm & Jews	MIXED
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CMAC - Chicago Men's A Cappella	MALE
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Golosa	MIXED
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MaJ'N	MIXED
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Men in Drag	FEMALE
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Ransom Notes	MIXED
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Shircago	MIXED
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Voices in Your Head	MIXED
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## University of Colorado

*Boulder, CO*

All Rights Reserved	FEMALE
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Buffer Zone	MALE
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Buffoons	MALE
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Extreme Measures	MIXED
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In the Buff	MALE
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Mile 21	MIXED
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On The Rocks	FEMALE
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Something Greek	FEMALE
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UCD 6	MIXED
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## University of Connecticut

*Storrs-Mansfield, CT*

A Minor	MIXED
Chordials	FEMALE
Completely Different Note	MALE
Conn-Men	MALE
Extreme Measures (Ex-M)	MIXED
Rubyfruit	FEMALE

## University of Delaware

*Newark, DE*

D Sharps	FEMALE
Deltones	MIXED
Golden Blues	MIXED
Meludees	MIXED
Overtones of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia	MALE
Vision	MIXED
Vocal Point	MIXED
Y Chromes	MALE

## University of Florida

*Gainesville, FL*

No Southern Accent	MIXED
Sedoctaves	FEMALE
Staff	MALE
Tanin	CO-ED

## University of Georgia

*Athens, GA*

Accidentals	MALE
Camerata	CAN'T FIND
Noteworthy	FEMALE
With Someone Else's Money	MIXED

## University of Hartford

*Hartford, CT*

HartAttack	MIXED
Hawkapella	MALE
L'Shir	MIXED
Uharmonies	FEMALE

## University of Houston

*Houston, TX*

Men of Moores	MALE
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## University of Illinois

*Urbana-Champaign, IL*

Chai Town	MALE
Girls Next Door	FEMALE
Illini Chandani	FEMALE
No Comment	MIXED
No Strings Attached	MIXED
Other Guys	MALE
Rip Chords	FEMALE
Xtension Chords	MALE

## University of Iowa

*Iowa City, IA*

Intersection	MALE
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## University of Kansas

*Lawrence, KS*

Genuine Imitation	MIXED
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## University of Maine at Farmington

*Farmington, ME*

Sole Expression	MIXED
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## University of Maine at Orono

*Orono, ME*

Bear Vocals	MIXED
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Maine Steiners	MALE
Renaissance	FEMALE

## University of Mary Washington

*Fredericksburg, VA*

BellACappella	FEMALE
Invoice	MALE
Symfonics	MIXED
Una Voce	MIXED

## University of Maryland

*College Park, MD*

Anokha	MIXED
DaCadence	MIXED
Faux Paz	MIXED
Generics	MALE
Kol Ish	MALE
Kol Sasson	MIXED
Mezumenet	FEMALE
Mockappella	MIXED
PandemoniUM	MIXED
Rak Shalom	MIXED
TrebleMakers	FEMALE

## University of Maryland - Baltimore County

*Baltimore, MD*

Cleftomaniacs	MIXED
Mama's Boys	MALE

## University of Massachusetts

*Amherst, MA*

6-Minutes	FEMALE
Doo-Wop Shop	MALE
Dynamics	MIXED
Kolot	MIXED
Vocal Suspects	MIXED

Wicked Pitch	MIXED
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## University of Miami

*Miami, FL*

Above the Keys	MALE
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BisCaydence	MIXED
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## University of Michigan

*Ann Arbor, MI*

58 Greene	MIXED
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Amazin' Blue	MIXED
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Compulsive Lyres	MIXED
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Descant	MIXED
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Dicks and Janes	MIXED
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Friars	MALE
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G-Men	MALE
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Gimble	MIXED
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Good News	MIXED
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Harmonettes	FEMALE
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Headnotes	MIXED
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Kol Hakavod	MIXED
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KopiToneZ	MIXED
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Sopranos	FEMALE
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## University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

*Minneapolis, MN*

7 Days	MIXED
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## University of Missouri

*Columbia, MO*

Add 9	MALE
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Mizzou Forte	MIXED
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Naturelles	FEMALE
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## University of Missouri - St. Louis

*St. Louis, MO*

Vocal Point	MIXED
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## University of Nebraska

*Lincoln, NE*

Bathtub Dogs	MALE
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Rocktavo	MALE
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Varsity Men's Chorus	MALE
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## University of New Hampshire

*Durham, NH*

Alabaster Blue	MIXED
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Milling Around	MIXED
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New Hampshire Gentlemen	MALE
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Not Too Sharp	MALE
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Notables	FEMALE
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## University of North Carolina

*Chapel Hill, NC*

Achordants	MALE
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Cadence	FEMALE
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Clef Hangers	MALE
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Funkappella	MIXED
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Harmonyx	MIXED
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Loreleis	FEMALE
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Psalms 100	MIXED
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Tar Heel Voices	MIXED
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Vision	MIXED
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Walk-Ons	MIXED
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## University of North Carolina Asheville

*Asheville, NC*

All Girl Staff	FEMALE
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## University of North Carolina Charlotte

*Charlotte, NC*

49th Measure	MIXED
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## University of North Carolina Greensboro

*Greensboro, NC*

Sapphires	FEMALE
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Seraphim	FEMALE
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Spartones	MALE
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## University of North Dakota

*Grand Forks, ND*

Absolute Zero	MIXED
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## University of North Texas

*Denton, TX*

Green Tones	MIXED
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## University of Northern Colorado

*Greeley, CO*

Northern Colorado Voices	MIXED
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## University of Notre Dame

*Notre Dame, IN*

Big Yellow Taxi	MALE
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Halftime	MIXED
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Harmonia	FEMALE
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Undertones	MALE
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## University of Oregon

*Eugene, OR*

Divisi	FEMALE
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Mind the Gap	MIXED
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On The Rocks	MALE
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## University of Oxford

*Oxford, UK*

Gargoyles	MIXED
Out of the Blue	MALE

## University of Pennsylvania

*Philadelphia, PA*

ATMA	FEMALE
Chord on Blues	MALE
Counterparts	MIXED
Dischord	MIXED
Full Measure	MIXED
Inspiration	MIXED
Off the Beat	MIXED
Penn Masala	MALE
Penn Pipers	MALE
Pennchants	MALE
Pennsylvania Six-5000	MALE
Penny Loafers	MIXED
PennYo	MIXED
Quaker Notes	FEMALE
R'nanah	MIXED
Shabbatones	MIXED

## University of Pittsburgh

*Pittsburgh, PA*

C Flat Run	MIXED
Heinz Chapel Choir	MIXED
Overtones	MIXED
Pitt Pendulums	MIXED
Sounds of Pleasure	FEMALE
VoKols	MIXED

## University of Redlands

*Redlands, CA*

Those Guys!	MALE
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## University of Rhode Island

*Kingston, RI*

Afterhours	MIXED
Artists Unknown	MIXED

## University of Richmond

*Richmond, VA*

Choeur du Roi	MIXED
Octaves	MALE
Sirens	FEMALE

## University of Rochester

*Rochester, NY*

After Hours	MIXED
Mazel Tones	MIXED
Midnight Ramblers	MALE
Trebellious	MIXED
Vocal Point	FEMALE
Yellowjackets	MALE

## University of South Carolina

*Columbia, SC*

Cocktails	FEMALE
SoundCheck	MALE

## University of Southern California

*Los Angeles, CA*

Asli Baat	MIXED
Khoir Practice	MIXED
Reverse Osmosis	MIXED
Sirens	FEMALE
SoCal Vocals	MIXED
Trojan Men	MALE
Troy Tones	MIXED



## University of Southern Maine

*Portland, ME*

Northern Lights	FEMALE
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Perfect Octave	CAN'T FIND
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## University of Southern Oregon

*Ashland, OR*

Dulcet	MIXED
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## University of Texas

*Austin, TX*

Hum	FEMALE
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Novis	MIXED
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Ransom Notes	MIXED
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## University of Texas Medical Branch

*Galveston, TX*

Syncope	MIXED
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## University of the Free State

*Bloemfontein, South Africa*

Marjolein	FEMALE
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## University of Toronto

*Toronto, ON*

Onoscatopoeia	MIXED
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Strandzas	MALE
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TBA - Tunes Beats Awesome	MIXED
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Varsity Jews	MIXED
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## University of Utah

*Salt Lake City, UT*

Infrared	MIXED
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Octappella	MALE
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## University of Vermont

*Burlington, VT*

Cat's Meow	FEMALE
Hit Paws	MIXED
Topcats	MALE

## University of Virginia

*Charlottesville, VA*

Academical Village People	MALE
Blue Notes	FEMALE
CHoosE	MIXED
Ektaal	MIXED
Hoos in Treble	FEMALE
Hullabahoos	MALE
New Dominions	MIXED
O'Tones	MIXED
ReMix	MIXED
Virginia Belles	FEMALE
Virginia Gentlemen	MALE
Virginia Sil'hooettes	FEMALE

## University of Virginia Medical School

*Charlottesville, VA*

Arrythmics	MIXED
Spinal Chords	MALE

## University of Waterloo

*Toronto, ON*

Water Boys	MALE
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## University of Wisconsin

*Milwaukee, WI*

Audacious	FEMALE
Fifth Element	MALE
Fundamentally Sound	MALE
Girls Night Out	FEMALE

Impromptu	MIXED
Innocent Men	MALE
Madhatters	MALE
Melodylicious	MALE
Redefined	MIXED
Tangled Up In Blue	FEMALE

## **Ursinus College**

*Collegeville, PA*

Bearitones	MALE
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## **US Air Force Academy**

*USAFA, CO*

In the Stairwell	MALE
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## **US Coast Guard Academy**

*New London, CT*

Idlers	MALE
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## **US Naval Academy**

*Annapolis, MD*

Anchormen	MALE
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Cleanshaves	MALE
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Skivs	MALE
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## **Utah State University**

*Logan, UT*

Chorduroy	MALE
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## **Valparaiso University**

*Valparaiso, IN*

VuVox	MALE
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## **Vanderbilt University**

*Nashville, TN*

Dodecaphonics	MALE
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Melodores	MALE
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Swingin' Dores	FEMALE
Taal	MIXED
Variations	MIXED
Victory	MIXED

## Vassar College

*Poughkeepsie, NY*

Accidentals	MALE
Alive!	CO-ED
Allegories	MALE
Devils	MIXED
Matthew's Minstrels	MIXED
Measure 4 Measure	FEMALE
Night Owls	FEMALE
Renaissance Singers	MIXED
Vastards	MIXED
Zimriya	DELETE

## Villanova University

*Villanova, PA*

Haveners	FEMALE
Minor Problem	MIXED
Nothing But Treble	FEMALE
Sirens	FEMALE
Supernovas	MIXED
Villanova Spires	MALE
Vocal Minority	MALE

## Virginia Commonwealth University

*Charlottesville, VA*

Notochords	MIXED
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## Virginia Polytechnic Institute

*Blacksburg, VA*

Juxtaposition	MALE
Mixed Emotions	MIXED

Naturally Sharp	MALE
Sensations	FEMALE
Soulstice	FEMALE

## Wagner College

*Staten Island, NY*

Dischord	MIXED
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## Wake Forest University

*Winston-Salem, NC*

Chi Rho	MALE
Demon Divas	FEMALE
Innuendo	MIXED
Minor Variation	FEMALE
One Accord	FEMALE
Plead the Fifth	MALE

## Washington and Lee University

*Lexington, VA*

General Admission	MIXED
JubiLee	FEMALE
Southern Comfort	MALE

## Washington College

*Chestertown, MD*

2 In Front	MIXED
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## Washington University

*St. Louis, MO*

After Dark	MIXED
Amateurs	MIXED
Aristocats	MIXED
Deliverance	MIXED
Greenleafs	FEMALE
More Fools Than Wise	MIXED
Mosaic Whispers	MIXED

Pikers	MALE
Staam	MIXED
Stereotypes	MALE
Sur Awaaz	MIXED

## Wellesley College

*Wellesley, MA*

Awaken the Dawn	FEMALE
Blue Notes	FEMALE
Toons (with MIT)	MIXED
Tupelos	FEMALE
Widows	FEMALE

## Wells College

*Aurora, NY*

Chamber Singers	CO-ED
Henry's VIII	MIXED
Whirligigs	FEMALE

## Wesleyan University

*Middletown, CT*

Cardinal Sinners	FEMALE
Mazeltones	MIXED
Mixolydians	MIXED
New Group	MIXED
Onomatopoeia	MIXED
Quasimodal	MIXED
Slavei	MIXED
Vocal Debauchery	MIXED
Waiting in Line	MIXED
Wesleyan Spirits	MALE

## West Chester University

*West Chester, PA*

A Cappella Chorus	MIXED
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## Western Washington University

*Bellingham, WA*

Undefined MALE

Woman & Children MIXED

## Westfield State College

*Westfield, MA*

Night Owls MIXED

## Westminster Choir College

*Princeton, NJ*

Deaftones MIXED

## Wheaton College

*Norton, MA*

Blend MIXED

Gentlemen Callers MALE

Voices United To Jam MIXED

Wheatones FEMALE

Whims FEMALE

## Whitman College

*Walla Walla, WA*

Schwa MIXED

Sirens of Swank FEMALE

TestosterTones MALE

## Willamette University

*Salem, OR*

Headband MALE

## Williams College

*Williamstown, MA*

Accidentals FEMALE

Elizabethans MIXED

Ephlats MIXED

Ephoria FEMALE

Good Question	MIXED
Springstreeters	FEMALE
Williams Octet	MALE

## Wittenberg University

*Springfield, OH*

Just Eve	FEMALE
WittMen Crew	FEMALE

## Worcester Polytechnic Institute

*Worcester, MA*

Simple Harmonic Motion	MALE
Technichords(No Fella A Cappella)	FEMALE

## Yale University

*New Haven, CT*

Alley Cats	MALE
Baker's Dozen	MALE
Bluedogs	MALE
Duke's Men of Yale	MALE
Living Water	MIXED
Magevet	MIXED
Mixed Company	MIXED
New Blue	FEMALE
Out of the Blue	MIXED
Proof of the Pudding	FEMALE
Redhot & Blue	MIXED
Russian Chorus	MALE
Shades	MIXED
Society of Orpheus and Bacchus	MALE
Something Extra	FEMALE
Spizzwinks(?)	MALE
Whiffenpoofs	MALE
Whim 'n Rhythm	FEMALE



## **Yale University Law School**

*New Haven, CT*

Habeas Chorus	MIXED
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## **Yeshiva University**

*New York, NY*

Kol Shira	FEMALE
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Maccabeats	MALE
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## **York College of Pennsylvania**

*York, PA*

Rhapsody	MIXED
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## **York University**

*Toronto, ON*

Kol Neshama	MIXED
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WIBI	MIXED
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## **Young Harris College**

*Young Harris, GA*

Compulsive Lyres	MALE
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Southern Harmony	FEMALE
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## About the Authors

### Mike Chin

Mike Chin co-founded The A Cappella Blog in January 2007. He continues to share leadership responsibility for the site, overseeing columns, reviews and features as the content manager.

Mike grew passionate about collegiate a cappella during his own undergraduate years at Geneseo State. He conceived of The A Cappella Blog in partnership with co-founder Mike Scalise in spring 2006. Outside of The A Cappella Blog, Mike has worked in student affairs at Syracuse University and in gifted education at Johns Hopkins University. He is currently working toward a graduate degree in creative writing.

Mike won The Ambassador Apartments Scholarship for Excellence in Journalism, and earned placement in the Mary A Thomas and C. Agnes Rigney writing contests. He has published short fiction and poetry in journals including *Stymie Magazine*, *The Broad River Review*, *The Floorboard Review*, *CaKe: A Journal of Poetry and Art* and *The New Sound*. He devotes a portion of his free time to the Baltimore community, including volunteer projects such as the Writing Outside the Fence ex-offender writing workshop, The Remington Homework Club, and Puppets Enabling Active Community Engagement.

## Mike Scalise

Mike Scalise co-founded The A Cappella Blog in January 2007. He continues to share leadership responsibility for the site, overseeing site design, utilities and functionality as the production manager.

Mike grew passionate about collegiate a cappella during his undergraduate years at Nazareth College, and conceived of The A Cappella Blog in partnership with co-founder Mike Chin in spring 2006. Outside of The A Cappella Blog, Mike has worked as an applications developer at an industrial supply distributor and currently serves as the senior programmer/analyst at Nazareth College. He has earned an MS in Management and is Microsoft-certified in database development. As a result of his professional achievements, he has presented at numerous conferences, including the Astra Schedule Users' Conference, Technology @ Naz (T@N) Conference, and Datatel Users' Group (DUG) Conference.

Mike was a recipient of the Small Business Council Scholarship and nominee for the Simon Early Leaders Award. His personal interests include weight training and travel.