

Booklist

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Pitch Perfect: The Quest for Collegiate A Cappella Glory.

Rapkin, Mickey (Author)

Jun 2008. 288 p. Gotham, hardcover, \$26.00. (9781592403769). 782.5.

Designating unaccompanied singing, a cappella literally means “like the chapel,” appropriately since the form, Rapkin says, began with Gregorian chant. In the prologue, Rapkin cheerfully clanders through a cappella’s roots and varied branches, from shape-note singing and call-and-response singing to barbershop and the folk-pop hit “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” and gospel classics by the Soul Stirrers with Sam Cooke. Yet a cappella has come fully to life on college campuses. While the phenomenon’s “gold standard” remains the Whiffenpoofs, founded in 1909 at Yale, there are now more than 1,200 collegiate a cappella groups in the U.S. A cappella is the opposite of cool, Rapkin concedes, yet such now-famous folk as Diane Sawyer, Art Garfunkel, and Osama bin Laden (!) once sang in a cappella groups. The bulk of the book examines three current groups—the University of Oregon’s all-female Divisi, the Tufts Beelzebubs of Tufts University, and the University of Virginia’s Hullabahoos—as they compete against one another in a scenario that makes American Idol look rather tame. A fascinating, behind-the-scenes look at an underappreciated musical subculture.

— *June Sawyers*