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# "PITCH PERFECT"

## RUN SILENT, RUN GEEK

By WILLIAM GEORGIADES

June 1, 2008 -- Finally, a journalist with the courage to investigate the cutthroat world of collegiate a cappella.

"There are more than 1,200 collegiate a cappella groups in the United States alone," writes author Mickey Rapkin, and yet a cappella "is topic non grata." A "subculture," Rapkin claims, and not a cool one.

A cappella "is Italian for 'like a chapel,' and it describes perhaps the oldest form of music, the kind made without any accompaniment at all," Rapkin explains. Being an editor at GQ, he plays up the connection between celebrities and a capella to sex things up. He tries to claim relevance for the groups by dint of associations like Jessica Biel, who was rejected by Tufts Amalgamates; John Legend, who sang with the Penn Counterparts; and James Van Der Beek, who sang with Drew University's 36 Madison Avenue. Still, Rapkin acknowledges, that even in the world of cool nerds, a cappella is deeply uncool.

Rapkin tells the tale of three a capella groups, drawing on a vast reservoir of anecdotes that remind the reader that these performers are first and foremost college students. He followed the University of Oregon's all female group Divisi, the University of Virginia's all male Hullabahoos and The Beezlebubs from Tufts for a season.

An early entrance at Lincoln Center by Divisi ends with a judge's snub that causes the polite crowd to boo but later, when their tour van is pulled over for speeding, they sing "Happy Birthday" to the officer and it works. "We just sang our way out of a speeding ticket!" one of the women exclaims.

The Hullabahoos turn out to be a very funny mix of frat-boy goofiness and earnest artists. They perform at the President's Dinner at the Washington Convention Center, where they meet President Bush, who tells them, "My little brother Marvin Bush went to the University of Virginia." One of the performers, Patrick, whispers to the president: "Dude, seriously, I feel really bad for you right now." The singer recalls the president's response: "He pulls me back in closer, looks me in the eye and goes: 'Don't feel sorry for me. I knew exactly what I was getting into.'"

The Hullabahoos show up five minutes late to the Staples Center in Los Angeles to perform the National Anthem in front of 12,000 people. And their misery is compounded when they pull up to the Playboy mansion and are denied entry despite, a "Hail Mary bid to prove their worth . . . they sang "One," into the intercom . . . regardless the gates did not open."

The Beezlebubs, meanwhile, can charge up to \$3,000 for a 30-minute concert at a prep school. They often play with the Boston Pops and have recorded an album that cost \$30,000 to produce, at the same recording studio the Rolling Stones rehearsed in. Still, they aren't cool. Rapkin describes their appearance on "Late Show with David Letterman." "It is both amazing," he writes, "and impossibly embarrassing. They're dressed, almost uniformly, in ill fitting Tufts sweatshirts tucked into khakis."

Things come to a head when the Hullabahoos and the Beezlebubs meet in a parking lot at the University of North Carolina after both perform on stage, (the Hullabahoos sang U2's "One," and the Beezlebubs performed Gnarl's Barkley's "Smiley Faces.") "It's as if the Backstreet Boys and "N Synch had met in some deranged battle of the boy bands," Rapkin claims. A member of the Hullabahoos pees on the Beezlebug tour van, and a contest that could



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only exist amongst college nerds ensues.

Rapkin has the perfectly bemused and giddy tone to tell these stories with the reverence they deserve. "The problem arises when you take a cappella out of the context of college," he observes. "Then what is it, really? A cover band. With no instruments."

Comic actress Elizabeth Banks recently acquired the rights to "Pitch Perfect" and it's easily see why Hollywood would respond to the sheer, giddy joy that Rapkin captures in this sub-culture.






Pitch Perfect

The Quest for Collegiate A Cappella Glory

by Mickey Rapkin

Gotham Books

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