

Perfect Tone, in a Key That's Mostly Minor



Patrick Andrade for The New York Times

DOO BE OR NOT DOO BE? The Harvard Krokodiloes, happily, if relentlessly, a cappella.

By MICKEY RAPKIN
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MIDWAY through Jonathan Coulton's wedding reception in 2001, someone asked the band to stop playing. In a suddenly silent hall in Boston, Mr. Coulton turned to his bride, Catherine Connor, and in the company of some 100 friends and family, began to serenade her.

Multimedia

▶ 'One of Us' Sung by the University of Pennsylvania Counterparts With John Legend (mp3)

▶ 'My Romance' Sung by the Harvard Krokodiloes Live at Sanders Theatre at Harvard University (mp3)

▶ 'Sunny Side of the Street' Sung by the Harvard Krokodiloes (mp3)

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He sang a few songs, including Gladys Knight and the Pips' "Midnight Train to Georgia," which Mr. Coulton performed without any musical accompaniment, save for a handful of fellow Yale graduates harmonizing behind him on a refrain of "doo bee doo bee doo."

"This was not planned," said Mr. Coulton, 37, a musician who lives in Brooklyn, "though the singing was assumed." As a senior at Yale, he had been a member of the Whiffenpoofs, the all-star singing group that performs a cappella and recruits its roster from other campus teams that also sing unaccompanied. "Get a couple of Whiffs together," Mr. Coulton said, "and try to stop us."

He does not often talk about his past as a member of a collegiate cappella group. "There is a stigma associated with a cappella," he said with a laugh, adding that he admits to this bit of his résumé only "when someone outs me."

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PIPES AND DRUMS A cappella groups like the Tufts Beelzebubs perform on their own strings, adding backup percussion as needed.

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Patrick Andrade for The New York Times
The Harvard Krokodiloes.

Collegiate a cappella is a tradition that goes back to the early days of the Whiffenpoofs, founded in 1909; it now includes more than 1,200 groups on campuses from Appalachian State to the [University of Oregon](#), according to the Contemporary A Cappella Society. It is a curious genre, one that makes sense under an ivy-strewn archway only to become inexplicable upon graduation.

For some, a cappella may be a gateway to a career in the performing arts (as it was for Anne Hathaway, [John Legend](#) and Art Garfunkel). It can also be a lingering embarrassment to those who cannot grasp how a dozen or so singers making drum noises with their mouths might look to an outsider.

“There’s something about a cappella that rubs a lot of people the wrong way,” said Mr. Coulton, who performed on world tours with the Whiffenpoofs and on an album called “Take a Whiff.”

“When you’re in it,” he said, “you do think you’re a rock star. But you have to ignore the majority of the population who don’t want you singing jazz standards at their dinner.”

For alumni of these singing groups, membership is a lifelong obligation. “It’s like being in a fraternity, but not,” said Peter Lerangis, 52, a children’s book author and an alumnus of the Krokodiloes, a [Harvard](#) a cappella group, who continues to edit the group’s alumni newsletter, Nunc est Cantandum (meaning “Now is the time to sing”). “It’s like being on a sports team, but not. The bond of music is just different.”

Other veterans aren’t as eager to admit to evenings spent in jacket and tie, singing [Madonna](#) covers without instruments. “A cappella — I thought it might catch up with me,” said James Van Der Beek, the “Dawson’s Creek” star and former member of 36 Madison Avenue, a singing group at Drew University.

“I couldn’t play an instrument well enough to be in a band, so I thought, O.K., this sounds like something I should look into,” Mr. Van Der Beek said. And yes, membership had its privileges. “A girl heard me sing ‘Englishman in New York’ and I got to, like, go to her dorm room to give her our CD.” But now, he seemed less enthusiastic about those exploits. “I can’t believe I’m talking about this,” he said.

Whenever a cappella is mentioned in pop culture (see the comedy “The Break-Up,” in which Vince Vaughn is beaten up by an a cappella group; the bio for [Stephen Colbert](#)’s broadcast persona, which claims that he performed a cappella in a Dartmouth group called the Sing Dynasty; or the recent dismissal from “American Idol” of Luke Menard, who also sang a cappella), it is almost always a shorthand for rampant geekiness. On the NBC sitcom “The Office,” the grating Andy Bernard, a character played by Ed Helms, often reminds co-workers that he once performed with a [Cornell](#) group called Here Comes Treble.

Mr. Helms said the show’s satire of a cappella was all in good fun, though he still bears the scars of his own brief encounter with the art form: in 1993, he said, he quit the Oberlin Obertones after one semester because of a personality clash with the group’s music director. “I decided smoking pot was more important than extracurricular activities,” he said.

Taken to an extreme, dislike and mistrust of a cappella has even led to violence: a 2007 fight outside a New Year’s Eve party in San Francisco — instigated, allegedly, by an



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impromptu performance of the national anthem by the Baker's Dozen, a men's a cappella group from Yale — sent several members to the hospital.

But many alumni eventually learn to embrace their musical identities. When Bruce Cohen, an Oscar-winning producer of “American Beauty,” graduated from Yale in 1983, he was certain he had made a clean break from the Baker's Dozen and would never return for its shows, or jams. “In my day,” he said, “you kept in touch with your friends, but you wouldn't be caught dead going back to the B.D. Jam. You went on with your life.”

In January 1992, Mr. Cohen received a call from a friend who told him their old group was performing in Pasadena, Calif. “This was shocking to us,” Mr. Cohen said. “That the B.D.'s could afford a plane trip in our day was unimaginable. We went to Florida — and we drove! From Connecticut! In vans!”

When the group returned to the Los Angeles area in 1993, Mr. Cohen invited it to perform at his annual Christmas party, as he has done every year since.

He maintains a strict no-talking policy during the annual concert, and regularly wangles celebrities like [Jim Carrey](#) and [Marisa Tomei](#) into attending. “When they get here and they go into the bedroom and get a private concert from the B.D.'s, they're loving it,” he said. “[Hilary Swank](#) fell in love with them.”

There are now increasing numbers of post-college outlets for enthusiasts who aren't ready to stop snapping their fingers in unison with friends. Last August Deke Sharon, founder of the Contemporary A Cappella Society, created a league for recovering singers, with some 25 groups across the country. “Five thousand collegiate a cappella singers graduate every spring,” he said. “What are their options? Church choirs and karaoke.”

Sara Yood, 26, an alumna of the [Washington University](#) Amateurs, continues to perform with a women's group called Treble.

For Ms. Yood, who discovered the group four years ago while searching for “a cappella” on Craigslist, it is more a social outlet than a way to make money. “In college, a cappella was about competing and recording and rehearsing three nights a week,” she said. “But this is low key. We all have lives.”

The collegiate groups expect the occasional teasing that comes with their brand of entertainment. “There will always be people who say a cappella is stupid,” said Alexander Koutzoukis, 20, music director of the [Tufts](#) Beelzebubs. “We like to think what we do is different.”

He and his group had just performed a short set (including a medley of [Kanye West](#)'s “Stronger” and [Christina Aguilera](#)'s “Fighter”) at the Chelsea offices of EMI at the invitation of a Beelzebubs alum, Marty Fernandi, who works in the company's music resources department.

The EMI staff had, of course, experienced its share of live music. But the Bubs, as they call themselves, still managed to impress with their manic energy. “After the show, the C.O.O. told us this was one of the best performances he'd seen in that setting,” Mr. Koutzoukis said proudly. “And they're used to seeing the original artists.”

Indeed, some performers who make peace with their pasts in a cappella go on to become respected artists in their own right.

On a recent Friday night, two hours before a show at the Beacon Theater, Sara Bareilles, the writer and performer of the pop hit “Love Song,” sat in her cluttered tour bus. As Ms. Bareilles, 28, took a swig from a bottle of Corona, her guitarist, Javier Dunn, recalled the first time he saw her perform. It was years ago, he said, at a U.C.L.A. student talent show called Spring Sing, where she appeared with a campus group called

Awaken A Cappella.

“Sara sang that George Michael song ‘Freedom,’ ” Mr. Dunn said, not quite concealing a smile. “The girls all wore leather, like a biker chick thing.”

“Be honest,” Ms. Bareilles said. “You hated it.” She said that Awaken A Cappella had played a crucial role in her coed life. “It’s so goofy,” she said, “but I felt like I’d found my family at school.”

Mr. Dunn continued his inquest. “When I think of a cappella I picture drama students and nerds,” he said.

Ms. Bareilles shook her head. “You love action figures!” she said to Mr. Dunn. “Why can’t you let us sing and be happy?”

Mickey Rapkin is the author of a forthcoming book on the history and traditions of collegiate a cappella singing.

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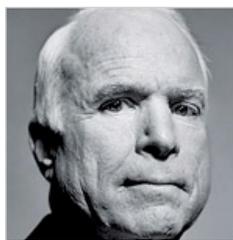
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