

## CAMPUS LIFE

# Tuning In to College a Cappella

A new book spotlights the glamour of going instrument free

By Lucia Graves

In the past 25 years, college a cappella has become a huge hit, with more than 1,200 college groups nationwide and 200,000 alums. Once merely considered a destination for choir geeks, collegiate a cappella has achieved an aura of glamour, moving from college campuses to bigger (and more varied) stages, like *The Late Show With David Letterman* and the Republican National Convention.

In his new book, *Pitch Perfect: The Quest for Collegiate a Cappella Glory*, GQ editor (and a cappella group alum) Mickey Rapkin explores the starry-eyed and often hilarious subculture of campus a cappella. Rapkin followed three a cappella groups—the Tufts University Beelzebubs, Divisi from the University of Oregon, and the University of Virginia Hullabahoos—around the country to document their musical escapades.

“It was sort of like [the film] *Almost Famous*,” he says, “but with collegiate a cappella.” Excerpts from his interview with *U.S. News*:

## So is a cappella glamorous or goofy?

When you're an adult and you mention a cappella—if you dare mention it—people think of Rockapella, that group from the *Folgers* commercial. There's that sort of stigma attached to it. But on college campuses it's the complete opposite: It's cooler than being in a band.

I'd go see the Beelzebubs in concert, and there'd be 500 people there. The Hullabahoos just did their big show and sold out the downtown theater in Charlottesville.

## Where did you get the idea to write this book?

It was twofold. It was in the air—there

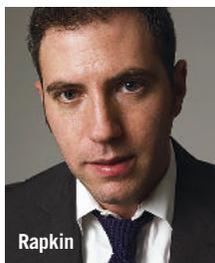


JEFFREY MACMILLAN FOR US&WR

Students are hooked on a cappella groups like the Hangovers from Cornell.

was an a cappella subplot in *The Office* and a joke on *30 Rock*, and musicians like Sara Bareilles who had sung in collegiate a cappella groups were coming up on the radio. Even Osama bin Ladin was mentioned as having sung in an a cappella group in *The Looming Tower*, that Lawrence Wright book that won so many awards. People were talking about it in strange places and in strange contexts.

And I also sang in an a cappella group myself when I was at Cornell, and I just always thought there was this bigger story to tell—this heartwarming, bizarre, and exciting story about what amounts to these collegiate rock stars.



Rapkin

## Why did you pick the three groups you did and not more established ones, like the Yale Whiffenpoofs or the Harvard Krokodiloes?

The Whiffenpoofs and the Kroks have rich histories, but they were born on third base. There's less of a challenge there. I wanted three groups that would show really different experiences.

The Tufts Beelzebubs really set the standard for collegiate a cappella albums, and I wanted to follow them as they recorded a new one. It was a follow-up to their last few albums, which are so

amazingly produced that you can't tell the difference between the a cappella recordings and the originals.

Then I wanted a girls group, and Divisi, the group from Oregon, had this incredible story. [In 2005] they were competing in the International Championship of Collegiate a Cappella and were the favorites to win, but ended up taking second place. They were really upset, blaming the judge from Juilliard for blackballing them. When I met them they were going back to the championships, wanting to prove they were the best in the country.

And I wanted the third group to be a lot of fun, because so much of collegiate a cappella is just about being stupid with some of your best friends. So I found the UVA Hullabahoos, who make some great music but are also known as the frat guys of collegiate a cappella.

## How much did you travel with the groups?

I took probably 20 weekend trips over the course of a school year. I flew to Los Angeles with the Hullabahoos when they were going to sing the national anthem for the Lakers game. I went up to New Hampshire with the Beelzebubs when they were recording their album. And I flew out to San Francisco to see Divisi compete. I'd go on road trips. It was a lot of tagging along, of being the guy on the bus.

## Do you think that any of the students in *Pitch Perfect* will continue on to sing professionally?

It's hard to say. There's a guy in the Hullabahoos, Patrick Lundquist, who has an enormous voice. From Divisi there's Marissa Neitling. These people are really talented, but who knows how the stars will align? You never know. Most people unfortunately just go on with their lives and don't have the opportunity to sing like that again. Your priorities change as you grow older: You have work, you have a family, and you don't really have time to go out on a Wednesday night for three hours and—I don't know—learn how to sing Rihanna's “Umbrella” without instruments. ●



Videos of some student a cappella performances are online at [www.usnews.com/education](http://www.usnews.com/education)