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Singing down the house

Rockapella's Texas debut to bring eccentric music style to Reed Arena

By David Shakelford
THE BATTALION

The term "a capella" may conjure images of the classic sounds of barbershop quartets and 1950s "doo-wops" where finely tuned voices stand alone. But with its flawless vocal duplication of clicks, claps and booms and an array of instruments including guitar and piano, the five-member vocal group Rockapella proves that a capella doesn't have to sound like its stereotype.

While experiencing the vocal exploits of the band, listeners have had to remind themselves that they are hearing unaccompanied human voices.

Michelle Police, a senior finance major, said that when the beats produced by the vocal percussionists falls upon her ears, she often does a double-take.

"When I first heard (Rockapella), it was hard to imagine the drum sound coming from a person," Police said. "And the fact that the overall sound is made up of voices just amazes me because there is so much going on."

The group began as a quartet in the late 1980s, lending harmonies to New York street corners for dinner money. Since then, Rockapella's assembly of rhythm and blues jazz, rock, gospel and hip-hop has been heard on several advertisements, including Folgers Coffee, Budweiser and Taco Bell. The group's most popular performance though, is its contribution to the Public Broadcasting Service quiz show, "Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?" on which it renders the theme song.

Vocal percussionist Johnathan Thacher said Rockapella has sold out its Wednesday show and expects a similar turnout for the second show. He said the group expects to draw more crowds through nostalgia.

"A lot of college kids watched 'Carmen Sandiego' back when it was on, so that has really boosted our recognition," Thacher said.

This assumption holds true for some Aggies, including Police.

"I remember its name from watching Carmen Sandiego," Police said. "That show was big. Everybody at least knew about it and could sing a jingle from the theme song."

In a style where cover songs dominate, Rockapella offers originals. Thacher said tenor and main soloist Scott Leonard composed and arranged the majority of tracks on the band's last few albums. The members of Rockapella aren't strangers to covers, however. Their vocal-reconstruction selections include tracks such as "Dock of the Bay," "Stand By Me" and "Pretty Woman."

"The past decade has been an evolutionary process (for us)," Thacher said. "From a clever cover group (we have developed) a distinct sound.

Doing original music is more rewarding. You're truly fulfilled unless you write your own music.

Rockapella's 2002 release, "Smilin'," is the best of a thick stack of albums on different labels. As with most of its work, the album is upbeat, complex arrangements and innovative beats effects add up to an organic marvel.

Police said she hopes Rockapella's live performance will satisfy what has become a habit sense of skepticism.

"I'm so curious to find out how they pack those sounds into their voices," Police said.

Thacher said the live playlist is divided into equal portions of original material and cover songs. He said the members' individuality brings variety and color to the shows.

"We have our own personalities and tastes that gives a good flavor to the group," Thacher said. "We're not tastelessly loud and big, but we have what we call the 'wow' factor."

Thacher said that "wow" factor emerges in the fancy vocal guitar and drum solos delivered to astonished audiences.

"Scott (Leonard) is our main soloist, but we all have solos," Thacher said. "I have lengthy drum solos."

Reproducing the sound heard on records requires communication and collaboration, Thacher said. "The mix of tunes and sounds must articulate."

"Everyone feels great when we communicate well. We have our stuff together," Thacher said. "Then we can be inventive and powerful."

Rockapella's two performances, which start at 7 p.m. on April 14 and 15 at Reed Arena, will be its Texas debut. The performance is hosted by the Menzies Student Center OPAS.

Steve Lewis, Rockapella's co-manager, said the band's two performances will be a long-awaited Texas debut.

"For a while fans in Texas had been sending us about a dozen emails a month," Lewis said. "Rockapella is widely known in the college circuit through groups like Glee Club. We like universities as venues because the theaters are better quality."

Despite this debut and the band's past commercial success, Thacher said Rockapella remains humble in its quest to grab a wider audience.

"We take opportunities even if they won't lead directly to fame," Thacher said. "We do it like a business, but our main concern is that what we're doing makes us happy."

Musicals

what: Rockapella

where: Reed Arena

how much: Prices vary

doors open: April 14th at 7 p.m.

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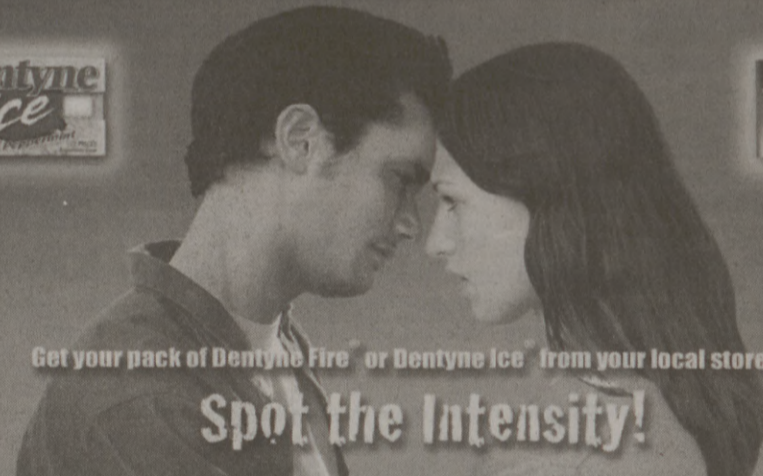
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