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Together in Harmony

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Together in Harmony

Wesleyan's ensemble tradition finds voice in a new generation of student singers.

By KIM HILL

The Apollo Quartet was not the only male vocal group with a reunion at this year's Homecoming. Current and alumni members of Suspended, the all-male a cappella ensemble, celebrated the group's 10th anniversary with a performance at the annual Alumni Awards Lunch.

Tim Shelton '04 founded Suspended in his sophomore year. Though happy to be a member of IWU's Collegiate Choir, he says he "missed the camaraderie of the Magnificent Men, a group I was part of in high school, where we learned pop and classic men's a cappella songs. I was just hooked on a cappella music."



Current and alumni members of Suspended entertained at Homecoming. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

A cappella is Italian for "in the manner of the chapel." Describing music for solo or group singing without accompaniment, its roots date back thousands of years. Fast-forward to the 1950s, when several recording groups introduced complex jazz harmonies to a cappella performances. More recently, vocal percussion, or "beatboxing," has been added by some performers.

Suspended was started as — and continues to be — a student-led group, although J. Scott Ferguson, professor of music and director of choral activities, serves as faculty advisor. (In fact, "Ferguson's Beard" was one of the early names for the group.)

Highlights of Suspended's early years include performing on the Collegiate Choir's May Term trip to Russia in 2004 and recording a CD in 2005. And in the summer of 2007, a Wesleyan men's vocal group again visited the Pacific Rim (to read about the earlier trip, [click here](#)). This time, it was Suspended, who had been selected to be Bloomington-Normal's representative on a Sister City tour to Asahikawa, Japan. Donovan Davis '07 says that trip was the highlight of his Suspended life. "We performed at the city's main performing arts center, a high school, a college and on top of a volcano," he recalls. "We had a wonderful time."



The goosebump-experience for Davis, however, happened after they were back in the States. “Once we landed at O’Hare, we stood in a circle and right there by the bus, sang one of our most beautifully solemn arrangements, a Simon and Garfunkel medley called ‘Old Friends/Bookends.’ At that moment, we stood there reflecting on all we had experienced, while also realizing that we would all walk away into the unknown of the future.”

Touch of Class performs for an Open House event. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Today, Suspended performs alternative, pop and doo wop as well as barbershop and other styles of music. They tour high schools in the Chicago area each spring, just as the Apollo Quartet had done decades ago.

Suspended is part of the explosion of a cappella on college campuses in recent years. There are now more than 1,200 collegiate a cappella groups nationwide, offering a wide range of styles, from South Asian fusion to hard rock.

Touch of Class is the University’s premier female group and is run by the 15 members, with Professor Carren Moham serving as faculty advisor. The group performs at a number of campus events including Open House days and the IWU Council for Women Luncheon, as well as off-campus events.

President Nicole Schneider ’13, a vocal performance major and Collegiate Choir member, says she was attracted to the group because it allows her to learn a different style of music. “It’s nice to make decisions on our own,” she adds. “Plus, we perform out in the community, and I like that.”

Last year, Touch of Class was selected to compete in the International Championship of College A Cappella (ICCA) that attracts hundreds of groups each year. The group will again compete in the 2013 quarterfinals in February with a repertoire that includes older hits like the Jackson 5’s “I’ll Be There” and the Chiffons’ “One Fine Day,” as well as current fare such as Pink’s “Perfect” and a mash-up of a Jason Mraz song entitled “Somewhere I’m Yours.” Also selected to compete this year is Wesleyan’s newest a cappella group, *silenceinterrupted*.

Jennifer Burns ’15 formed *silenceinterrupted* in early 2012 after she noticed IWU didn’t have a co-ed a cappella group and “became attached to the idea of starting one.”



*Rebecca Blumer '14 takes center stage during *silenceinterrupted*'s fall concert at the Hansen Student Center. (Photo by Marc Featherly)*

“I am addicted to a cappella music,” says Burns, who listens in her car to *The Best of College A Cappella* CDs instead of the radio. She is especially fascinated by “how the human voice can imitate instruments in so many different ways.” Current faves in the group’s repertoire include “Winter White Hymnal” by the indie folk band Fleet Foxes and a new a cappella staple, “Some Nights” by fun.

The group has performed for Wesleyan’s Board of Trustees and at Family Weekend and Jazz Night. Burns says competing at the ICCA quarterfinals will be another milestone, “but our focus is more than that,” she says. “We strive for musical excellence as a group and individually.” Professor Jen Schuetz helps that process by serving as faculty advisor.

“Our motivation is having fun with the people we love to sing and be with,” Burns adds. “It’s not just about the music for me, but also the bonds we have as a group are invaluable.”

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