



Rock-A-Pella

Madison Project alumnus Mike Minarik tours the country with "The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber."

This group of laid-back guys in wrinkled dress shirts and khakis slung low on their hips don't seem high-energy enough to have brought a national trend to JMU. Or to already have a CD under its belt and another scheduled for release. The all-male a cappella Madison Project appear simply to be having too good a time.

But Madison Project has been performing to sell-out crowds on and off campus since it was started by Dave Keller ('96) and J.R. Snow ('99) four years ago. The guys have traveled to high schools and other colleges all over the state, won hundreds of fans, and sold more than 1,700 copies of their first CD, *Talkin'*.

Kicked off in the 1990s by Top 10 hits like *Don't Worry Be Happy*, *Kiss Him Goodbye* and *It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday*, the a cappella singing of Madison Project is part of a nationwide resurgence, according to the Contemporary a cappella Society of America.

"A cappella," an Italian phrase that translates literally to "in the style of the chapel," refers to choral music without separate instrumental accompaniment. To most people, however, the term means music created solely with the human voice - and not necessarily just classical choral songs.

In the spring of 1996 during the height of this national trend, fraternity brothers and music education majors Keller and Snow, "felt that there was more than enough talent at JMU [for a group to be successful,]" says Snow. "I announced the idea at a fraternity meeting and [Keller] immediately offered to help."

Still, says Keller, now a band director for Wise County Public Schools, success was not guaranteed.

"I wasn't sure what the campus response would be," says Snow, "but I knew that if I never took a chance, then I would never get to make the ideas in my mind become reality." Madison Project ultimately drew 14 members and performed its first concert almost a year later.

The group has come a long way. "The last couple of years we've had between 30 and 50 people try out," says senior Jason Snow, the co-musical director and the younger brother of the co-creator. Despite the large numbers of people auditioning, Madison Project maintains a steady number of about 16 singers, some with no prior musical experience. "We've had plenty of people that have never sung or can't read music at all," he says.

The Madison Project performs a variety of pop favorites from the 1960s to the 1990s ranging from U2's *With or Without You* to Kenny Loggin's *Footloose*. "We try to keep the selections varied and give the audience songs that are popular while at the same time give them songs they may not have heard before," says Jason Snow.

Members have established close friendships, though that bond has sometimes caused problems. "[Our relationship is] so good sometimes it's hard to stay focused in rehearsal because we are joking around the

whole time," adds Snow. "We try to plan extra times outside of rehearsal for the whole group to hang out."

Yet the group isn't limited to just fun and games. In September, The Madison Project performed at a concert to benefit breast cancer awareness and in November it sang at a benefit concert for the Sheetz Family Christmas, a program that takes underprivileged area children shopping for presents. "We enjoy raising money for other groups," says Jason Snow. "It's our way of doing what we love and at the same time raising money for causes we support."

All of this exposure has led to some amount of fame for group members. Once while walking across campus, some of the members were pointed out to a tour group even though none of the guys knew the tour guide. "At times you kind of feel like a rock star," says Jason Snow. "But none of the guys let it get to their heads."

Following the national trend, Madison Project's success has spurred the growth of four other JMU a cappella groups.

The fall of 1997 saw the formation of the Overtones, the only co-ed a cappella group at JMU, by senior Allie Weitberg. She transferred into JMU that fall, after having sung in an a cappella group in high school.

At the time of the group's creation, there was no outlet for female a cappella singers. "I wanted [the Overtones] to be coed because ... you can do a wider range of music and you can perform music that can go a lot lower and a lot higher than single sex groups, giving a lot more arranging freedom," she says.

After advertising the new group around campus, Weitberg auditioned more than 100 singers over the course of three days and finally selected about 17 members. Yet over time, the auditions have become even more competitive with about 80-100 people battling for two or three spots. Of the current 16 members, "Almost everyone has singing experience," says Weitberg. "But what's cool about a cappella is that you don't have to be a music major to be good at it."

During its first year, the group performed primarily in dorms, however now it's moved up a notch to Wilson Hall and Grafton-Stovall Theatre along with frequent tours at other universities. In addition, The Overtones reached its first major goal last fall with the release of its debut CD, (un)necessary details... recorded in February and March of 1999.

The group will take on its next musical challenge this spring with a tour through New England. Members are also hoping to be selected by CASA to compete with other college a cappella groups across the country.

One year after the creation of the Overtones, two more a cappella groups, Note-Oriety, an all-female group, and Exit 245, an all-male group, got their starts.

Kelly Myer and Bonnie Estes, now seniors, formed Note-Oriety in the fall of 1998 through the help of The Madison Project and the Overtones. "Rob Kaylin from the Project knew we both wanted to start an all-female group," says Myer about how she and Estes met. "He got us together At that time, there was an all-male group and a coed group, but no all-female group."

"The Madison Project and the Overtones have been blessings," says Estes. "They've helped us out immensely. They took us under their wings and taught us how to organize and start a group."

The Madison Project even landed Note-Oriety its first gig, a co-performance with that group and Exit 245 to benefit Camp Heartland, on Halloween of 1998. "It was the first time any of us had done anything like that," says Myer about Note-Oriety's performance. "We had no idea what we were doing, but we did it together." Whatever they did, they did it well. "We got a standing ovation," added Estes.

In a little over a year, Note-Oriety has had a total of 17 members chosen from well over 100 hopefuls, and, like the other groups, has performed all over campus and at other schools. However, the group has recently been toning down its number of performances in order to focus on the production of its first CD, scheduled to be released next spring. All recent contributions have gone toward the creation of the CD.

"We're hoping in the next few years we can send in something to BOCA," says Estes. BOCA, or the "Best of College A cappella," is an annual CD compilation of some of the finest collegiate a cappella groups in the United States and is produced by CASA and Smokin' Fish Records.

Exit 245, so named because it seemed the most appropriate way to designate where the group came from (JMU is off I-81 exit 245), was formed at about the same time as Note-Oriety by a former member of The Madison Project. "Project auditions got such a large response that 98 percent of auditionees, many of whom were excellent singers, were being cut," says Danny Ozment, now a senior. "I wanted to give others that chance."

Though Exit 245 auditions have become just as competitive with often 50-60 men vying for only one or two spots. "We don't discourage anyone," says Ozment, "because there is always someone out there who never thought they could sing and just needs to give it a shot."

The group, which is delving into more classical choral literature after focusing on mostly pop songs, recently released its first CD in September. With over 600 copies already sold, group members are reaping the benefits of over 200 hours in the recording studio and numerous designing and rehearsal hours.

Most recently, the all-female 14-member BluesTones was founded in February 1999 by senior Susie Gaskins and Laurie Wright ('99).

"There is an incredible amount of interest in a cappella and singing talent on the JMU campus," says Gaskins about why the group was created. "With only two groups that girls qualified for on campus, maybe six out of 100 girls trying out had a chance to make it."

The BluesTones was off with a flash with its first performance, held before a crowd in Wilson Hall auditorium. "It was the most nerve-wracking and exciting [experience] because we had no idea whether we had pulled off anything that was remotely entertaining," says Gaskins. "But people ended up loving it, giving us the confidence we needed to push ahead and work hard."

Despite the group's youth, it has already nailed down a rapidly growing repertoire of songs, traveled for performances as far away as the University of Pittsburgh, and performed with nationally recognized groups, such as the Beelzebubs of Tufts University who were guests on David Letterman's Late Show last spring. The BluesTones also has plans to put out its first CD this summer.

Quite unlike the trend at other colleges with multiple a cappella groups, these five groups have a close relationship and often depend on one another. "At other schools there's stiff competition between the groups," says Estes. The JMU groups attend each other's concerts, listen to each other's songs and make suggestions for improvement, and spend time together outside of performances and rehearsals at "a cappella parties."

Though there isn't rivalry on stage, there may be some off. "Well, [Exit 245 is] going to beat The Madison Project in football," says Ozment, "But other than that we have a supportive relationship with the other groups."

The creation and success of The Madison Project, started the a cappella movement rolling at JMU and encouraged other students to start their own groups. "The Madison Project took the first step, always the most difficult, in establishing a cappella as a popular form of entertainment at JMU," says Gaskins. "They took the risk not even knowing whether it would fly or not."

And the fruits of its labors were much worth the effort. "I really can't believe what has happened [to The Madison Project,]" says J.R. Snow. "These gentlemen are some of the finest and most talented people I have ever had the opportunity to work with and when you put aside the talent, it is truly the lifelong friendships we have made with each other that has allowed this group to exude excellence with everything that they do."

by Kara Carpenter ('00)