

Audience in awe of a cappella artists

Written by Joe Hall

There was a master class held at Holyoke High School auditorium last Thursday night, March 8 as the six-member group, Street Corner Symphony, schooled an enthusiastic audience in the ways and means of a cappella singing. And masters they were!

The Nashville-based group, fresh off a second-place finish on season two of the NBC hit show *The Sing Off* grabbed the crowd from the opening chords and class was in session. Vocal harmony and rhythm were the curriculum for the evening, and the audience was all ears.

There was no need to take notes. This was learning by absorption. The sextet of young gentlemen laid out the beat and the music soared from incredible heights to subterranean bass that shook the concrete floor. They had the class' undivided attention.

It was hard to believe there wasn't a full band, complete with bass and drums, on stage. All musical duties were handled by the vocalists. Jonathan Lister, one of three brothers in the group, laid out the rhythmic foundation with his vocal percussion or "beat box," while Adam Chance rumbled the house with his deep bass voice.

Jeremy and Richie Lister, tenor and baritone voices respectively and brothers to Jonathan, handled many of the lead vocals and inner harmonies. John Martin sang the high tenor voice with some of his notes ending in the stratosphere. Mark McLemore rounded out the group with his smooth baritone voice on lead and harmony.

Audience participation was an expectation from the start on Train's "Hey Soul Sister" and Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire." The crowd sang and clapped along with the infectious music.

The sextet briefly morphed into a nonet on The Tokens's classic '60s hit "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," when audience members Penny Dawkins, Lauren Herman and Mark Phillips took the stage and belted out the familiar lines "Ee-e-e-um-um-a-weh..." The crowd roared its approval.

A rousing barbershop quartet version of "Yes Sir That's My Baby" took the group back to an

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early style of four part a cappella singing.

Street Corner Symphony has deep roots in gospel music. The Lister brothers are grandsons of legendary gospel tenor Bill Shaw who was a member of The Blackwood Brothers for over 20 years. Five out the six members of the group are sons of preachers—raised and trained in the school of church music.

Singing a cappella is extremely challenging. Every vocalist must be spot-on with their intonation. If a single voice drifts off-key it can cause the entire song to come crashing down like a house of cards. Each vocalist must match pitch, phrasing and tone simultaneously with the other singers. Martin is the pitch-giver for the group using a tuning fork to derive the starting note for each song.

Though there were many remarkable moments during the evening, the highlight was a brilliant off-microphone performance of the ageless American folk song “Shenandoah.” While reducing the group to a quartet the singers moved to the edge of the stage, and relying solely on the acoustics of the auditorium and the power of their voices to project the sound, they sang the story of a westward-bound pioneer longing for the home he left behind. “Away... I’m bound away, cross the wide Missouri.”

This is the way music came to us. Voices singing acoustically—no electronic technology—and to slip back into that time for a moment was perfection.

The group brought the evening to a close with a rocking version of Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Down on the Corner,” which kept the listeners hands busy clapping in rhythm. The audience sprang to their feet for a thunderous standing ovation bringing the group back on stage for Leonard Cohen’s haunting “Hallelujah” as an encore.

After the concert the group held court in the commons area selling and autographing CDs, posing for photos with excited fans young and old alike and answering a myriad of questions about their music and themselves. The Street Corner Symphony master class was a huge success and everyone passed with flying colors.

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This was the final concert of the 2011-2012 season for the Phillips County Arts Council. The PCAC appreciates the members' support and hopes everyone will check out their exciting 2012-2013 concert series starting later this year. Watch for the membership drive coming in the next few months. It only takes a little effort and commitment to enjoy these wonderful moments of music and the celebration of the arts in the community.

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