



# A Cappella Goes to College

By Martha Gershun

Photo: Suzanne Kowala

There's music coming from deep in the basement of the University at Albany's Lecture Center complex, at the heart of the main campus. It wafts around the ducts and pipes, and gets louder the deeper you go. Finally, the mystery is explained — you've arrived at SUNYTunes, the University's professionally equipped recording studio. And student singers are warming up to record their next CD.

Last May, two groups were recording CDs: Serendipity and Earth Tones, UAlbany's female and male *a cappella* singing groups. *A cappella* singing is without any instrumental accompaniment; only voices and hands are used to produce bass beats, undertones and melody. They sing high and low, show tunes and hip-hop, and mimic instruments like guitars, drums, and trumpets. "We can do pretty much anything," says Christina VonFricken, B.A.'03, who is now a graduate student member of Serendipity. The results can be enthralling. How do they do that?

The two *a cappella* groups are relatively new on campus. Earth Tones, with 13 singing members, was founded in 1998 by three freshmen, Eric Hekler, B.A.'02; Mike Kanevsky, B.S.'02, and Dave Pellingra, B.A.'02, who organized the first auditions and started rehearsing in the Performing Arts Center. Their first "gig" that year was the president's brunch, which has since become an annual Earth Tones venue. The

competed successfully in the annual International Competition of College A Cappella (ICCA), reaching the quarter- or semifinals in 2003 and 2004.

A *cappella* may be new to the University, but student singing groups are an established tradition. According to archivist Geoffrey Williams, students entertained each other during the 19th century with programs of literary readings that frequently included musical interludes. From the 1920s to the 1950s, there were numerous glee clubs and choruses on campus, including the Troubadours, who disbanded around 1935, and the Statesmen. None of these groups sang exclusively without instruments (for instance, there doesn't seem to have been a barbershop quartet), and no records have been found of any all-female singing groups. So Serendipity and Earth Tones are completely new and original to UAlbany, and are creating their own styles and traditions.



Photo: Courtesy of University Archives

## The Statesmen of 1964

**At the World's Fair:** The Statesmen, a men's singing group at the State University of New York at Albany, as UAlbany was then known, performed at the World's Fair in New York City on University Day, May 9, 1964.

group has performed more than 500 times, on campus and throughout the Northeast and eastern Canada, including the Clearwater Music Festival in the Hudson Valley and the Rainbow Room in New York City.

Serendipity, created in 1999 by Tonya Hansen, B.A.'02, and Jessica LaFex, B.A.'03, has 17 members. Although the group's name means "making fortunate discoveries by accident," its success is no accident. It's the result of talent, determination and hard work. Like Earth Tones, Serendipity has performed extensively on campus and throughout New York State. Both groups have

Nationally, a *cappella* is one of the hottest trends on college campuses today, with over 900 groups across North America in existence and more forming every semester. Last Feb. 28, the University at Albany hosted the northeastern regional semifinals of the International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella. Groups competing at UAlbany's Performing Arts Center were the Chordials (Cornell), Downbeats (Northeastern University), Octopodes (Johns Hopkins University), Sixteen Feet (Swarthmore), Spur of the Moment (Brandeis), and Vocal Suspects (UMass-Amherst).

Thought to have been around for at least 100 years, college *a cappella* probably originated with the famous Whiffenpoofs of Yale. Many prominent Americans have sung college *a cappella*, from Cole Porter (a Whiffenpoof) to actress Mira Sorvino (Harvard's Veritones) to broadcast journalist Diane Sawyer (Wellesley's Blue Notes). It is estimated that more than 20,000 singing college students across the country perform in styles that range from Bach to the Beatles to Dave Matthews.

Auditions for UAlbany's *a cappella* groups are competitive, and places coveted. In addition to performance and singing ability, entrepreneurship in marketing, fund raising and promotion is required, with self-produced CDs the usual main source of revenue. Both groups are student-run. They recruit, organize and maintain their membership, and select and arrange their songs. But they also appreciate the support they have received. "We couldn't do it without the help of the University," says Earth Tones co-head Bill Hance, B.A.'04, explaining that the President's Office and the Office of Student Affairs have been particularly supportive.

Each group includes a few music majors, but that's not a prerequisite. Last year's Serendipity president, Angela Ruiz, B.S.'04, is a physics and math double major who plans to apply to law school. "I sang in high school,"

## Serendipity



Photo: Suzanne Kowala

# A Cappella singing is finding a home at UAlbany with two new groups: the Earth Tones and Serendipity.

she recalls, "and performed a few times in musical theater. But I had never sung *a cappella* before." Music majors Christina VonFricken and Pamela Crockett, a sophomore, have been arranging much of Serendipity's music, but other members of the two groups are majoring in a wide variety of fields, including criminal justice, social work, biology and political science. "We have only one music major in Earth Tones. We're a very diverse group," says Tim Quill, B.A.'04.

"I had never sung on stage in my life," says Bill Hance. "But my grand-

parents were opera singers who sang around the house all the time. When I heard Earth Tones, I knew I wanted to try out." Hance planned to move to Los Angeles and try to become a rock star. Quill, who performed in musicals in high school, is going to law school.

There's variety in their repertoire, too. Both groups can perform an assortment of material, from singer/songwriters such as The Police, U2, Alanis Morissette, Billy Joel, and the Dixie Chicks. They practice eight to 12 hours a week, and sometimes perform together. Last year, they had their first joint show. "We had opened for Earth Tones before," says VonFricken, "but now we're equal." Both groups will be performing on campus this fall.

Why join an *a cappella* group? It's not just about the music. "It's about having fun," says one Earth Tones member. Since each group's current repertoire includes more than 30 songs, and ranges from pop to hip-hop, and from Broadway to rock, they spend a lot of time practicing. Their ties are strong. "Serendipity is a family of 17 members," says Pamela Crockett.

A *cappella* singing requires close harmony — and many talents. As the students sing, their bodies sway, their fingers snap and tap, and their mouths emit tones, twangs and clicks. The recording studio seems to be filled with a full chorus and orchestra — but it's really a small group of UAlbany's *a cappella* singers and their amazing vocal instruments.

## The Earth Tones

**From left:** Chet Millet, Bill Hance, Larry Post, Larsen Eisenburg, Ryan McMahon, Steve Meyer, Asa Hersh, Jeff Miller, Ben Kinberg, Ben Reijester, Tim Quill, and Sean Gardner. **Missing:** Ben Anderson. **Above:** members of Serendipity get into the music.



Photo: Mark Schmidt