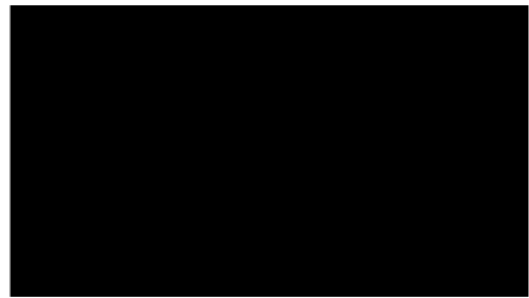
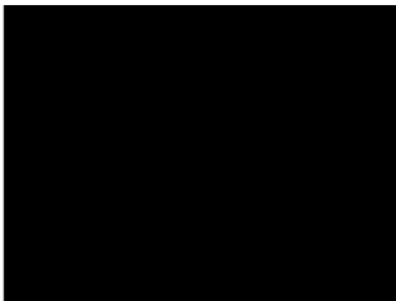


## Zero to Hero

ACappellaFest 2013  
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## Who am I?

- Started singing in barbershop
- Auditioned for a cappella groups in college
  - REJECTED!
- Joined Voices in Your Head in fall 2007 when I started grad school
- Every group starts from humble beginnings



## Collegiate A Cappella

- ~1000 collegiate groups
- >200 compete in ICCAs
- >100 submit to compilations / CARAs

## How can groups get recognition?

- There are a number of structured annual programs which make it relatively straightforward (but not easy) to get noticed
- Live performance competitions
  - International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella (ICCA)
  - CASA festivals (SoJam, LA-AF, BOSS, ACF)

## How can groups get recognition?

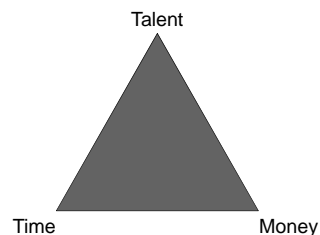
- Albums
  - Contemporary A Cappella Recording Awards (CARAs)
  - Compilations
    - BOCA
    - SING
    - Voices Only
  - Recorded A Cappella Review Board (RARB)

KNOW YOUR GROUP

## Know your strengths and weaknesses

- Every group has strengths and weaknesses
- Ego is the enemy of improvement
  - Both the North Southeastern Kentucky State University AcaTones and Pentatonix have room for improvement
- Be honest and humble!
- Strengths have context
  - “Awesome” for your campus might only be average nationally

## Know your resources



Any deficit in one area must be compensated in another to prevent a loss of quality

DEFINE YOUR GOALS

## Have a vision

- Dream big!
- Expect little!
  - Sometimes the best laid plans fail
  - Whatever you achieve will be a success
- Get the whole group on board and involved
  - Everybody can contribute in some way
    - Use their strengths to determine their roles!
  - Major philosophical dissent leads to dysfunction

## Strong leadership is essential

- At least one leader must be a visionary
- Great groups have both effective creative and administrative leadership
  - Too much for one person to handle
  - At the same time, total democracy is chaos
- Ideal leaders need to be reliable, independent, passionate, accessible, objective, open-minded, creative, and tenacious
  - A healthy dose of obsession and paranoia

## Make a plan

- Set specific, *realistic*, short-term goals
  - Use the strengths and weaknesses you've identified
- Relatively easy incremental successes add up over time
- Achieving smaller goals makes larger goals more accessible

## Focus on the art

- If you produce great art, accolades often come naturally
  - If not, you still have something to be proud of
- If instead, you focus on the awards, you can only succeed if you win
  - There are more quality artists than there are awards
- This will also make you far more liked and respected by your peers

## How do you stand out?

- Be unique!
- It's hard to be unique if you don't know what other groups are doing
  - Watch successful ICCA videos on YouTube
  - Listen to BOCA, SING, Voices Only
- Even if being great is out of reach, being unique isn't
  - Unique and mediocre is still much better than cookie-cutter and mediocre

## LIVE COMPETITIONS

## Pros & cons

- Pros
  - Relatively inexpensive
  - Great networking opportunity
  - Competition preparation forces you to be your best live
    - Translates to your performing in general
- Cons
  - Only sing ~3 songs for 1-3 months
  - Very rehearsal intensive
  - No guarantee of something tangible

## The basics

- Know the rules!
- Find out details about the venue well in advance
  - How many mics will you have?
  - What are the dimensions of the stage?
- Take advantage of the competition format, rules, and resources when crafting your set

## The basics (cont'd)

- Consider selecting a set outside of your existing repertoire
- Create an outline / map of your set before you start arranging
- Identify memorable moments!
  - The vast majority of songs don't have them
  - Plan these early in the arranging process
  - Have moments to start and end your set

## The basics (cont'd)

- Song choice!
  - Pick songs that play to your strengths
    - Identify your 2-3 best soloists, and pick songs that fit their voice – don't pick songs you like and worry about the soloist later
    - Choose songs that fit your group's style / personality
  - Avoid overdone songs
    - Search YouTube / use common sense to know what other groups are doing

## Arranging

- Be creative!
- Songs need to have an arc
  - Again, many songs don't have one
- Write parts specifically for your singers
- Use a wide range of tools
  - Dynamics (roaring louds to total silence)
  - Texture, tone, density, range
  - Effects
- Consider the sound system

## Visual performance

- Choreography should complement, but not distract from the music
- If your group can't dance, don't try to dance, but still move
- Always look engaged, regardless of specific choreography
  - Everyone can do this with the right encouragement, but many groups don't
- Especially important to visually support musical "moments"

## The sound system

- Use microphones well!
  - Assign microphones strategically
    - Use them to bring out important parts
    - If you have enough, mic one singer per part
    - Mic your "best" singers (tuning, tone, consistency)
    - Handoff mics as necessary between (or even during) songs to most effectively use them
  - Use proper technique
    - Hold perpendicular and close to face
- If you have effects available, use them
- Provide information about your set to the engineer

## Final polish

- Plan your entrance and exit
- Rehearse song transitions
  - Dead time between songs is bad
  - Seamless transitions are awesome and still somewhat unique
  - Practice microphone handoffs
  - Give pitches discreetly and efficiently
    - Consider using a pitch peanut (PocketTones)



## STUDIO RECORDING

## Pros & cons

- Pros
  - Regardless of accolades, you have a product
  - Opportunity to carefully craft nuanced art
  - Transcend live performance
  - Recognition at a distance
  - Potential income
- Cons
  - Expensive (~\$5,000 - \$15,000)
  - Can be very time consuming

## Opportunities for exposure

- Compilations
  - BOCA
    - 1 disc, collegiate only
    - More focused on broad appeal
    - Submission deadline: November 1st
  - SING
    - 1 disc, collegiate and professional
    - Focus on a cappella as art, risks rewarded
    - Submission deadline: late September
  - Voices Only
    - 2 discs, collegiate only
    - Allows many groups to be featured
    - Good first goal for a group just starting to record seriously
    - Submission deadline: June 15th

## Opportunities for exposure (cont'd)

- Reviews
  - Useful for feedback
  - Discusses album as a whole
  - Recorded A Cappella Review Board (RARB)
    - Well-known, somewhat authoritative as reviews go (if there is such a thing)
  - CASA articles
  - Other a cappella blogs

## Opportunities for exposure (cont'd)

- Contemporary A Cappella Recording Awards (CARA)
  - A Cappella Grammys
  - Comparative - puts your album in context
  - Often the historical reference for the impact of an album
  - Deadline: December 31st

## The basics

- Many of the same concepts to succeed in live competitions apply
- Identify your (realistic) goals early
  - Know which tracks are likely to be your best, and put more effort into them
- Record only your best songs
- Be creative
- Consider doing originals
  - Not many groups do this yet, it's an easy way to stand out

## The basics (cont'd)

- Song choice is especially important
  - Make sure soloist / style is a good fit
  - Be as unique as possible
    - Search RARB to see what has been done and what feedback was received
    - Especially avoid songs that well-known groups have covered which received critical acclaim
    - For groups that aren't experts at recording, avoid comparisons
      - Can you do an album where none of the songs have been covered before?

## Phases of production

- Planning
  - This step is often overlooked
- Arranging
  - Studio editing of arrangements
- Recording (weeks – years)
- Editing (~4 weeks)
- Mixing (~1-2 weeks)
- Mastering (~1 week)
- Replication (~4 weeks)

## Production

- Who you choose as your producers will make or break your album
  - Hire an a cappella specialist!
    - Absolutely crucial! Most local studios have no clue how to produce a cappella
  - Do research, identify albums you like, and hire those producers
- Book time with producers well in advance

## Production (cont'd)

- Give your producers flexibility
  - You're paying good money for a reason, if they think you need to change something, don't let politics / ego get in the way
- That said, it's your album, so do what you want but realize that what you think you want might not be compatible with the goals you've set
  - Prioritize

## Production (cont'd)

- Self-production is an option to save money and take more time to get things exactly how you want
  - The necessary equipment costs <\$500, much less than hiring someone
- There are drawbacks
  - An outside ear is immensely useful
  - Most groups don't have people with sufficient musical / technical expertise
- Don't overestimate your internal abilities

## Planning

- Develop a schedule
- Work on track order as early as possible
- Try to make your album coherent
  - Sonically
  - Thematic / concept
  - Song transitions
- If a track ends up not working, don't be afraid to cut it
  - Mediocre / bad tracks detract from and dilute great tracks

## Arranging

- Aim to make your cover more compelling than the original
- Have a clear plan / goal for every track
  - Somewhat transcriptive
    - Backgrounds must be as effective
  - Creative reinterpretation
    - More freedom, but still must be effective

## Arranging (cont'd)

- What works live might not work recorded
  - And vice-verse
- Studio edit your arrangements
  - If you're not sure how, have your tracking engineer do it in advance of the recording session
  - Bass parts often need this the most
    - Roots

## What works really well?

- Nuances
  - Arrangement texture
- Tonal shifts
- Rapid dynamics

## What doesn't work so well?

- Broad dynamics
- Loud but plain
  - Live rhythmic syllables are often not compelling

## Recording

- Make sure your singers are prepared for recording sessions
  - Being buried in the music will result in a less compelling performance, and will take more time (you lose quality and spend more money)
  - Don't party the night before recording
    - Except for basses. Basses should party hard
  - Coach your singers in advance
- Don't be afraid of changes in the studio

## Editing

- Pitch correction
- Rhythm alignment
- Anyone with good musicianship and taste can learn to edit
  - Caveat: Overediting – takes practice
  - Opportunity to save money
  - Technical knowledge is nice but not necessary
  - Consider leaving VP editing to the pros
- Melodyne Studio

## Mixing

- Definitely hire an outside producer
- If you disagree with a mixing choice, get an outside ear's opinion
  - Often groups shoot themselves in the foot
    - Especially applies to effects
      - E.g. no effects on a transcriptive pop track might fit with your recording philosophy, but no one in the a cappella community will want to listen to it.

## Mixing (cont'd)

- Comments for revision should focus on the big picture
- Especially detailed comments aren't worth it (and can be counterproductive)
  - E.g. "I can't hear the tenors for one measure when the soloist is really loud"
  - They cost you a lot of money and no one will notice the difference besides you
  - That said, producers will be happy to take your money

## Mastering

- For most people, the least well understood production stage
- Controls volume
  - You don't want your listener diving for the volume control
- Impacts overall sonic aesthetic
  - Makes your album sound coherent
  - Putting the last bits of icing on the cake

## Replication

- Production of physical copies
- Make sure your album art is ready well in advance of the replication start date
  - Art needs to be on specific templates for the replicator

SELF-GENERATED  
EXPOSURE



## Use the internet!

- You should have a website, facebook, twitter, tumblr, etc.
  - Update them regularly
  - Don't just use them to robotically promote, let your personality come through

## Network!

- When you're around other groups, spend time talking with them
  - Not just small talk
  - Discuss what you / they are doing, share ideas, etc.
- Maintain relationships
  - Guest groups for concerts

## PRESERVE THE HERO

## Collegiate turnover

- Most collegiate groups are entirely different every ~4 years
- Pass on not just what works, but why
- Also convey what hasn't worked
- Preserve historical information
  - Group google account
    - Gmail, docs, calendar, music, etc.
- Develop a vibrant alumni network

## Don't stagnate

- Too many groups get good and become content with their awesomeness, only to be totally left in the dust by some fresh group
- You can always improve
- You can always find new, exciting ideas to try
- Stay open-minded and ambitious

## QUESTIONS?

## Resources

- Contemporary A Cappella Society (Broad resource, festivals, CARAs, SING): <http://casa.org/>
- Recorded A Cappella Review Board (RARB): <http://rarb.org/>
- Varsity Vocals (ICCA & BOCA): <http://varsityvocals.com/>
- Voices Only: <http://voicesonly.com/>