The Man Responsible for the Resurgence of A Cappella

A cappella has become more popular than ever, thanks to Deke Sharon. He is the vocal producer of the a cappella competition TV show “The Sing-Off” and musical producer of “Pitch Perfect and “Pitch Perfect 2.” So, how did he manage to take a cappella from barbershop quartets to the Barden Bellas? Read on to hear his remarkable story and how he became “The Father of Contemporary A Cappella.”

Born in San Francisco, California, Sharon began singing in choirs at age five and began performing professionally at age 8 where he toured North America performing operas with the likes of Pavarotti. During his four years at San Francisco University High School, he sang and directed a barbershop quartet. While in college at Tufts University and the New England Conservatory of Music, Sharon directed the collegiate a cappella group, the Tufts Beelzebubs, and created a revolutionary sound using intricate vocalizations and vocal percussion. He also founded the Contemporary A Cappella Society, which is responsible for many a cappella programs, including the CARAs (Contemporary A Cappella Recording Awards, ICCAs (International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella), BOCA (Best of College A Cappella Compilation), and the first contemporary a cappella conferences (the A Cappella Summit).

Determined to make a career of a cappella, Sharon moved back to San Francisco after graduation with some members of the Beelzebubs and formed The House Jacks, often heralded as the “Rock Band Without Instruments.” The group has released eight albums, toured internationally dozens of times, and performed with Ray Charles, James Brown, Run DMC, and LL Cool J. In additional to The House Jacks, Sharon is a prolific vocal arranger, having arranged over 2,000 songs and produced dozens of award-winning a cappella albums.

In 2009, he acted as an arranger, coach, and consultant for “The Sing-Off,” America’s first a cappella reality show competition. The program was hosted by Nick Lachey (98 Degrees) with judges Ben Folds, Shawn Stockman (Boyz II Men), and Nicole Scherzinger (Pussycat Dolls), later replaced by Sara Bareilles and then Jewel. The program also featured special guest performances by Bobby McFerrin, Natasha Bedingfield, Neil Diamond, Flo Rida, and Jay Sean. The show had five seasons airing from 2009-2014.

Most notably, Sharon served as music director and vocal producer for Universal’s “Pitch Perfect” (2012) and “Pitch Perfect 2” (2015). The two films follow Barden University student Beca (Anna Kendrick) and her adventures with the Barden Bellas, an all-female a cappella group thriving on covers of female pop songs and their good looks. With her DJ skills, she is able to give the group a contemporary sound and remains competitive with the male campus a cappella group, the Treblemakers. With Beca’s guidance, the Bellas win the Nationals and the Worlds, but not without many hilarious antics along the way. Both films have become huge successes for Sharon, with the first film achieving $65,001,093 in domestic ticket sales and the second $183,785,415.

“The Sing-Off” and “Pitch Perfect” franchise have created a resurgence in a cappella, especially on college campuses. “Twenty years ago, there were about 200 collegiate a cappella groups in the U.S., and now there are more than 3,000” said Sharon in an interview. This can be seen right here on Michigan State University’s campus, where there are six a cappella groups: The Accafellas, Capital Green A Cappella, Ladies First, RCAHpella, The Spartan Dischords, and State of Fifths. Tyler Ekizian, member of the Spartan Dischords, has noticed the resurgence of a cappella at Michigan State.

Questions to ask a cappella member:

Have you noticed an increased interest in a cappella following the release of the “Pitch Perfect” movies, along with the TV series, “The Sing-Off?”

Why should students join a cappella groups?

What do you enjoy the most about a cappella?

See the magic of a cappella live at Wharton Center’s Cobb Great Hall with Vocalosity: The “Aca-Perfect” Musical Experience on January 26, 2016 at 7:30pm. Vocalosity captures the excitement of a cappella live on stage with twelve performers in limitless combinations exploring styles ranging from Gregorian chant to contemporary Top 40 hits. With Deke Sharon serving as artistic director, music director, and co-creator, this fast-paced and exhilarating performance is sure to be aca-awesome! For more details about the performance and to purchase tickets, please visit whartoncenter.com or call 1-800-WHARTON.