

Just the Tonic

Tonic-Sol-Fa has the cure for holiday blues

By Tim Gallagher

Shaun Johnson has a high school teacher to thank for his career. And the Christmas holiday. For it wasn't too long ago that Johnson was more interested in sports than music. In stepped a teacher at Bishop Garrigan High School in Algona, Iowa. Terry Voss boldly suggested Johnson sing one verse of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" at the school's holiday concert.

One verse?

"That's all it took," says Johnson, now part of the foursome that makes up Tonic Sol-Fa, the a cappella group now finding its own voice nationwide."

I would have rather played sports at the time," he recalls. "But Mr. Voss forced me to sing this one verse and that lit the fire. The next day at lunch I had upperclassmen, mostly girls, asking me to sing duets with them for concerts. I thought that maybe this singing thing was OK."

OK? Tonic Sol-Fa, which performs at 2:30 p.m. Sunday in a holiday concert at the Orpheum Theatre, is being featured throughout December on NBC's "Today" show. The group taped one song in its entirety for a Christmas "Today" show; other songs are shown in clips. Tonic Sol-Fa has also inked a national recording contract which will culminate in the release this summer of a CD yet to be named.

Word has it that Michael McDonald, formerly of The Doobie Brothers, may join Tonic Sol-Fa on the album in a version of "Takin' It To The Street."

OK? Sounds like Johnson and Tonic Sol-Fa have arrived.

"It's been an interesting few months," Johnson says.

Tonic Sol-Fa, which visited Sioux City a year ago for the 2003 holiday concert, features a strong local tie as one member of the quartet, Mark McGowan, was born and raised here. The other members are Greg Bannwarth of Sioux Falls, S.D., and Jared Dove, a native of Green River, Wis.

The recording contract represents a jump nationally, especially considering the group didn't sacrifice its sound to land the deal. "We've had offers for national albums before, but we've always refused because they always want to add instruments to our music," Johnson says. "We want to stay the same, keeping it a cappella."

The group might be the first true a cappella group to land a national deal without adding instrumentation (beyond percussion).

The group also signed with manager Ken Kragen, who represented Kenny Rogers for more than 28 years, worked for other stars such as Lionel Richie and Burt Reynolds; and created "We Are The World."

"We're honored and excited that someone of his stature would take a chance on us," says Johnson.

The summer CD will showcase 12 songs, some being fine tuned now by the group in stops like Sioux City. Otherwise, concert goers will see much of the same holiday fun Tonic Sol-Fa has created in three previous Yuletide tours.

"We brought back a few songs people have requested heavily," Johnson says. "We'll involve the audience in a different way, and we're bringing back Plastic Santa in a big, new way."

Johnson says this time Santa's running for election. He won't divulge the returns, though.

"You've got to come to the show to see if he wins," says Johnson of the Santa bit, a routine started by Bannwarth when he spotted the plastic lawn ornament on the side of a stage at a Wisconsin show four years ago.

As for Johnson's holiday season? He'll spend much of it with the group, traveling and delivering holiday cheer. He'll wind down Christmas Eve by making oyster stew for himself (he's the only bachelor of the group) at home.

Is oyster stew a sign of showbiz stardom?

Nope. It's Johnson family tradition.

"On Christmas Eve, we always had oyster stew at home," he says. "I wasn't home the last two years, so I made it myself. I remember calling my mom and asking her about how much butter I should be adding."

How did the stew turn out? Much like his singing career, which started at Christmas many years ago: Not bad. Not bad at all.