

A CAPPELLA

WITH PASSION



TONIC SOL FA

Perhaps there were a few standout acts at this year's IACEP convention in Las Vegas, but certainly in the top of those would be Tonic Sol-Fa. A four man a cappella troupe, this award winning act has the experience, knowledge, talent and charisma it takes to be a big hit in the corporate, association and theatre markets.

"We are a contemporary vocal group and sing everything a cappella," says Shaun Johnson one of the four who make up the group. "So everything comes from our mouth or some other part of our body."

The group has been performing together for a while now, so you can be sure they know what they are doing and are capable and professional together. "We all met while attending college at different schools and got into it. Many people ask us 'Why a cappella?' and I think the answer to that is we all loved to sing and wanted to perform, but we loved so

many different styles of music, this is the only way we could think of to blend them all together. We also wanted to be extremely entertaining and not just sing the highest chords or the lowest notes we could. All of us had the common belief that a cappella was natural, a good fit for us and something that we could either go sing at a radio station or in front of 25,000 people."

A cappella is limited to almost no musical style outside of instrumental only tracks, and the influences of Tonic Sol-Fa's members make up an eclectic array of influences. "I think when we started, we

wanted to try to grab all the influences from each guy in the group. If you start with our bass, he really grew up listening to blues and gospel music. Another guy only loves 70's and 80's music. I personally like country and the other guy in the group listens to R&B and pop. So, to fuse those together, we took each one and tried to add it in one way or another to each song we do, not mangling the original tunes, but giving them our own unique style. So, our bass Jared, may bring a certain rhythm to a song that we like."

Shaun says that despite their best intentions to be all inclusive of all their

favorite styles, there were initially naysayers who claimed they lacked enough direction. "People would tell us in the beginning that we kind of had to pick something. When we did our first major label release, they said 'OK, you have to be all pop, or all country; it has to be uniform and appeal to a certain demographic. It is interesting how much that has changed now with shows on TV like "Glee" or the "Great American Sing Off". Different people are opening up for Michael Bublé now and there are vocalists that cross genres that are backing up famous artists. The scheme has changed so much that now, all of a sudden, we fit in perfectly."

Shaun explains that at the beginning, this band's goal was not only to be successful, but to get out there and play gigs. Never were they worried so much about the big break around the corner that they didn't take every opportunity they could to sing; no gig was too big or small. "We thought to ourselves that since we would be performing at festivals, our own shows in theaters, corporate events, etc., we better have a wide repertoire because every one of those audiences is different. In the same way, each of us is different within the group. We thought it would be a cool way to represent our respectively diverse audiences by also honoring the musical styles each one of us cared about. We place it all within our own arrangements and put our Tonic Sol-Fa spin on it, but besides some original material we can do upon request (including custom messaging for corporate clients) we perform everything from 40's swing and big band to current popular music. We try to match it to what we think the crowd will like and what the people putting on the show know about their audience. It really works for us. Rather than picking polka or whatever the record execs wanted us to pick, we do some of everything."

Though Tonic Sol-Fa may seem to be in the right place at the right time now, when they were starting out nearly 15 years ago, they had to figure out where they were going to carve their niche. "I think when we started, we thought that if we were really going to do this right from the beginning, we didn't want to just do it on weekends. All of us had different career paths that we were in the middle of. We were in various degrees of college and were on separate paths. One of us was going to be a biology teacher, one a music teacher, I was in law school and so, I think we were very serious in the commitment of foregoing our studies and careers in pursuit of this dream. We took out loans from our friends and family and found an agent right away who told us he wouldn't represent someone just standing on stage singing; we had to be entertaining. That was a great light bulb moment for us and we quit college and/or jobs and jumped in head first."

The group decided to place themselves on a two-year probationary period, at the end of which they would evaluate their progress and determine their next steps. "We worked really hard; we are always the first to tell people that our success never came down to having any phenomenal or meteoric talent, we pounded the pavement. We worked very

hard to put together the best shows we could for our audiences and perform them to our utmost. I think the fact that we all get along so well and have such a great work ethic has truly been the key."

If there were one entertainment buying segment of the industry that would be a barometer for the up-and-coming in the talent world, it would certainly be the college campuses who buy the newest and best. "We did every college in America when we started and literally traversed the country over and over. Part of that was to build expertise in the stage and partly to build our name. We just did every showcase we could around the late 90's."

The band found great success in the college market, climbing into awards spots and maintaining a position as one of the top a cappella acts available. "After a while we were nominated for many awards including contemporary artist of the year and entertainer of the year and were one of the few a cappella acts to do so at the time."

Shaun explains that even throughout this rise, the guys in this band never let their heads get in the way and never believed they were any better than they really were. "I think the reason we were doing well wasn't that we were just so amazing. I think we were consistently getting better and were a great act, but what brought us along more than anything was learning to really connect with audiences and grow into our own as performers. Then, of course, it came down to the work."



Now, when we are talking about work, we're not just speaking of doing every gig they could get their hands on (which they did), but actually putting in effort above and beyond and going the extra mile. "When you go to a date, you show up a couple of hours early to set up and sound check, but whenever we could we would try to get there like eight hours early and find the person who had hired us and have them take us around to every residence hall on campus. We would sing in the hallways, knock on doors, whatever we could to generate a buzz. The programmers would always say 'Oh we have you on our big traditional Tuesday night event and always have 100 people show up.' So, we always sought to increase that, whether we were in El Paso or New Jersey or in the middle of Montana. Some people had us come in to do official teasers which would go okay, but we found that when we really took the initiative and got out there and knocked on doors, the crowds were always over capacity. We were generating two or three times the amount of people they normally got and the booker of the event would say 'Wow, you guys are the most popular act we've ever had!' Maybe and maybe not but we sure did everything we could to make it look that way (laughs)."

Shaun goes on to describe months on the road, citing one year with 310 dates and one September with 50. Needless to say the guys have been forged in the fires of experience.

This brings us around to the capable and incredible job they currently do for corporate and special events clients. "We got to a place where we were trying to slow it down a bit and move on to the next level. We weren't sure exactly what to do – if you have a few hits you can go back to the same colleges

and do ticketed events, but at that point we did not. That is when we started to diversify. We still do colleges, but now we do corporates and festivals and performing arts theaters."

The corporate market opened up for Tonic Sol-Fa around the twin cities. "We are all from the Midwest and settled in Minnesota. We started out doing many smaller things. As you do theater shows, people see you and say 'Oh hey, can you play our annual soybean meeting?' or whatever the case may be. After a while, these shows fed others and we continued to build a presence in the other markets. We get recommendations, do showcases and generally get a lot going now based on word-of-mouth."

The philosophy that keeps them moving up the ladder is one of complete service, not just going on and off stage. For example their full-service approach turned a performance at a small regional event for General Mills into a recurring slot at their National Sales Meeting. "I think for every group we play for, we try to do more than just a show. For example with that General Mills event, it turned into a nationwide sponsorship and we did it for many years. Then other people start seeing us like 3M, etc."

They've grown their reputation into a respectable career and are now at full tilt in these markets. "Before we were kind of beating down doors, hungry to get a hold of every show we could. Sometimes you find that you really need some professionals on your team (laughs) because none of us were business major and we were getting so

busy we were getting in over our heads. We have learned a lot as we have gone on, but we have had some wonderful people supporting us now, like Donna Buttice. She has her own agency and agreed to take us on. I think she looked at our success and track record and knew she had an act she could work with in these markets. We knew when we got together with her we could do all of this in an even bigger way, because the truth is, most people don't know about us in the corporate market. So, we are very excited to be working with her."

The band has done performances all over TV, including a PBS special, "The Today Show," "A Prairie Home Companion" and others. They have recorded six CDs including original music selling collectively over a million copies.

Their list of accomplishments is long and impressive and they are perfect at catering to a client's custom needs on the corporate side, or putting together a spectacular public performance on the theater side. With professionalism, great demeanors, tons of experience and a lot of talent to boot (despite Shaun's humility), this is one band that you can't go wrong with at your next event.

BOOK IT! For more information on bringing Tonic Sol-Fa to your next event, contact Donna Buttice with TCO Speakers Mgmt. at (702) 697-1615. For virtual links, go to our website at americanentertainmentmagazine.com