

# Singing *in the* Spotlight

Part of a vibrant a cappella scene at Rochester,  
the YellowJackets find fame on a national stage  
while giving back locally and internationally.







**HOMEcoming:** With their guests Pentatonix—the a cappella group that won last fall’s NBC television competition *The Sing-Off*—members of Delilah—a group that was also on *The Sing-Off*—and children from Rochester’s World of Inquiry School No. 58, the YellowJackets sold out two shows at Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre in December.

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INTH-GRADER QUINTERRA ROBINSON had no idea who the YellowJackets were last fall when the group first arrived to help mentor her and her fellow Rochester city school students who were interested in singing.

Then she and her classmates from World of Inquiry School No. 58 saw the Rochester student ensemble on

*The Sing-Off*, a national TV show that pitted 16 a cappella groups in a competition to win a Sony recording contract.

The YellowJackets opened the show with their rendition of “Wavin’ Flag” by Somali-born musician K’naan.

“When they did the first song,” Quinterra says, “I was like, ‘Wow, those guys are amazing! Wow!’”

Consider Quinterra a fan. And count in her classmate Erika Tryon. And Jahlil Bell, a fourth grader in the music program at World of Inquiry. Add to them the 5,000 people who packed Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre in December for two sold-out shows organized by the group to raise money for their outreach efforts.

They, like many in the University and Rochester-area communities, have been bitten by the YellowJacket bug.

And don’t forget the emails from admirers around the world, the marriage proposals proclaimed on Twitter, the key to the city, and all the other stop-you-in-the-street moments that come with being in the national spotlight.

“We had no idea what was coming our way,” says Aaron Sperber ’11, ’11E, a KEY student and a former director of the YellowJackets. “This year has changed our lives. It hasn’t just changed the shape of the YellowJackets, it has changed our lives, personally and as a group.”

Not since the Men’s Glee Club from the former College for Men made a national television appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1960 have fans of Rochester’s vibrant a cappella culture had so much to cheer about. The YellowJackets’ performances on *The Sing-Off* were “must-see TV” for many on campus and among the University community this fall. Finishing in *The Sing-Off*’s final set of seven groups, the YellowJackets remained favorites among the show’s fans, winning first place in NBC’s online vote after each performance and landing in the Top 10 for online sales on iTunes.

The show’s judging panel of Sara Bareilles, Ben Folds, and Shawn Stockman had high praise for the YellowJackets’ musicianship, camaraderie, and social outreach, as exemplified by the group’s musical exchange with a village in Kenya. But ultimately, the group Pentatonix won the 2011 season of *The Sing-Off*.

The YellowJackets say they hope to parlay their experience on *The Sing-Off* to further their musical and outreach efforts. In addition to working with the children of World of Inquiry School, the group began a musical exchange last spring with children in the village of Maseno in Kenya. They’re working on a documentary—scheduled to be released later this year and titled *United We Sing*, the film follows their African exchange—and are hoping to put together more touring opportunities.

*The Sing-Off* is opening doors—as well as ears and hearts, says Sperber.

“We came in as musicians with a lot of passion and a lot of heart,”



he says. “What *The Sing-Off* helped us to do was to channel that and to focus it and make it not just about how much heart we were feeling, but finding ways to use music as a tool to share and communicate that heart with our listeners and have people feel what we’re feeling.”

Sperber is not alone in the College in his passion for music and its power. While the YellowJackets, which were founded in 1956 as an offshoot of the Glee Club, have the longest history, the group

## A Chorus of A Cappella

See profiles of the College’s a cappella groups, **page 33.**

is one of four supported by the College’s student government. The three others—the all-male Midnight Ramblers, the all-female Vocal Point, and the coed After Hours—all have a loyal fan base, regularly produce CDs,

and perform widely on campus, at alumni and University events, and in regional and national competitions.

As many as 60 students routinely try out for only a handful of openings in each of the groups each year.

Jamie Wilson ’13, the music director for Vocal Point, says she’s seen interest in cocurricular vocal music grow over the past three years. The popularity of television shows like *Glee*, the Fox comedy that follows the travails of a fictional high school musical performance group, and *The Sing-Off*, the NBC show that completed its third season this fall, have helped spur that interest, she says.

“I knew there was a big a cappella environment here,” says the music major from Levittown, N.Y., “but since my freshman year





**IN TUNE:** Vocal students from World of Inquiry School No. 58 (above) shared the stage with their mentors at a ceremony during which the YellowJackets received a key to the city from Mayor Thomas Richards. Scan the code below to see a video of the ceremony.



compilation *Best of College A Cappella 2011*, produced by the International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella. The Ramblers turned up on TV last spring on the game show *The Price Is Right*, serenading host Drew Carey and the studio audience after Rambler Aaron Michalko '14 was selected to participate on the show.

the popularity of a cappella has spiked tremendously.”

Jared Suresky '12, the publicity director for the Midnight Ramblers, was also looking for a campus awash in music when he arrived at Rochester from Goshen, N.Y., and he's found a “second home” at Rochester with the Ramblers. He enjoys being able to pursue an interest outside his major of economics and says a cappella groups reflect the wide-ranging academic, social, and cultural endeavors of the Rochester student body as a whole.

“We're composed of many different people with many different backgrounds, majors, interests, and perspectives,” Suresky says. “But we're also a bunch of goofy River Campus students who like to sing.”

The Ramblers, too, have found success and some time in the spotlight. Their version of “Fireflies,” by the group Owl City, was selected to be included on the 2011

The group had made an impromptu decision to attend a taping while on a spring break performance tour in Southern California. And this winter, former Rambler Chris Aguilar '10 was a winner of a national Austrian TV singing competition (see age 48).

Such an experience—of performing in the pressure-cooker atmosphere of a nationally televised competition—is enormously beneficial for a group of musicians, says Jamal Moore '12E, a vocal performance major at the Eastman School and director of the YellowJackets.

Musically, the group has matured by leaps and bounds because of *The Sing-Off*, says Moore, who, as the 2011-12 William Warfield Scholar at Eastman, has sung at some storied campus venues.

“We've grown to a whole new level as far as our musicality,” says the Augusta, Ga., native. “We've developed a really professional approach and attitude now.”

And while the group's success on the show has altered the course of their careers, the YellowJackets almost passed on the chance to try out for the show. Asked to audition last May after the show's producers heard the group's most recent album, *Bad Bromance*, the request came during finals week. And it came during the whirlwind of planning the trip to Kenya and getting ready to leave the country.

But, after a performance at the George Eastman House, the group drove overnight to New York City for the audition. When band members said that they couldn't return for a round of callbacks, the producers

asked them to do their callback right there, Moore says.

After returning from Kenya, the group flew to Los Angeles where *The Sing-Off* started taping in July.


When band members returned to campus in the fall, Sperber asked them to work with him on a Kauffman Entrepreneurial Year project with World of Inquiry School. For two hours a week, the YellowJackets met with the schoolchildren, leading the younger group in performance and music lessons.

“We're pretty passionate about how music can bring people together, help kids who might feel alone at certain times in their lives to feel not so alone,” Sperber says. “It can also be not just an outlet, but a place to learn, where maybe kids don't even realize they're learning, but they're learning about the importance of acceptance and respect and collaboration and especially hard work. And even the music itself—I think music can be the thing that gets kids to school in the first place.”

The group's social outreach represents a desire to give back to Rochester and to others who have helped support the YellowJackets and their music over the years, says Sperber, who grew up in the Rochester suburb of Pittsford.

“We're not just the 15 guys that you see on stage. We're now plus 91,” he says, referring to the schoolchildren, “plus the thousands of people in Rochester who have helped us along the way and really have made us who we are.”

Moore agrees.

“We've realized that our music can help shape the lives of people all over the world.” 



## YellowJackets

The longest-running male a cappella group is finding new fame.

**IN STEP:** The YellowJackets (left to right) are Michael Pittman '13, Simon School graduate student Matt Francis '11, Ross Pedersen '13, Simon School graduate student Jonathan Greenhalgh '09, Matt Carlin '14E, Warner School graduate student Christopher Young '11, Jordan Fontheim '13, Galen Dole '13, Simon School graduate student Abhishek Sharma, Nick Wiggins '11, '11E, Jamal Moore '12E, and Aaron Sperber '11, '11E, '12 (KEY) (not pictured: Kiernan Kriss '12, Aden Brooks '14E, and Danny Rubenstein '11).

**YellowJackets Online**  
[www.jackets.org](http://www.jackets.org)

Jamal Moore '12E admits he was unfamiliar with a cappella music when he arrived at Rochester as a freshman at the Eastman School to study opera performance.

In the four years since then, he's not only come up to speed with the genre, but he's taken a leadership role in helping shape the current edition of the YellowJackets as musical director. And he's discovered that he's become part of a rich tradition of musical performance at the University.

"It's not just a performance ensemble," says the senior from Augusta, Ga. "It's like a brotherhood. These are 13 or 14 of my best friends."

Moore, who is the Eastman School's William Warfield Scholar for 2011-12, says the close bond is a key element in the group's success—both historically and as new members are welcomed into the group each year. As YellowJackets, the members spend a lot of time together, rehearsing as many as 8 to 10 hours a week along with performing several times.

Founded in 1956 as an offshoot of the Men's Glee Club, the YellowJackets are the longest-running male a cappella group on campus.

Moore says interest in the ensemble has skyrocketed since the group's performance last fall on the NBC reality competition *The Sing-Off*, and he says he and the YellowJackets are trying to balance their newfound fame with their lives as students and their commitment to social outreach projects, including working with schoolchildren in Rochester and in Kenya.

Is it a lot of work?

It is, says Moore. "But it's so rewarding that, in the end, you don't worry about that."





## Vocal Point

The University's only all-female a cappella group charts its own course.

**IN HARMONY:** Vocal Point features (back row) Cory Robinson '14, Jamie Wilson '13, Da Hye Oh '12, Lindsey Garrison '11, '12 (T5), and Amanda Page '13; (front row) Sophie Fishbein '15, Baily Gripshover '13, Lindsay Forbes '13, Eliza Barnes '15, and Hannah Silver '12; (not pictured: Sun Hae Park '15, Gillian Friedman '12, Claire Crowther '13, and Allison Eberhardt '14).

**Vocal Point Online**  
[www.uvocalpoint.com](http://www.uvocalpoint.com)

For someone interested in composing and in music education, Jamie Wilson '13 says, Vocal Point is the perfect group.

Founded in 1969 as a women's ensemble with accompaniment, Vocal Point officially joined the a cappella community in the early 1980s. Since then, the group's members have prided themselves on arranging nearly all the music that they use in performances.

"Ninety percent of our repertoire is arranged by a current member or alumnae members," says Wilson, a music major from Levittown, N.Y., and the musical director for 2011-12.

A member of the group since her freshman year, Wilson has watched interest in a cappella music grow during her time on campus. As many as 60 women audition each semester for as few as two or three open spots in the group.

Once in, the members commit to more than six hours a week of rehearsal and four to five performances a month. Vocal Point is in the midst of recording a new album that they hope to release in late April. They also will compete in the International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella competition in February.

Planning to pursue a career in music education, Wilson says Vocal Point—and the University's broad support for cocurricular a cappella—have been extraordinary complements to her musical interests.

"It's a really great environment now for different types of people who can be united by music," she says. "It really becomes a community."





# Midnight Ramblers

Founded in 1998, the group considers campus its home.

**AT HOME:** The Midnight Ramblers are (left to right) Noah Berg '12, Andrew Tomich '14, Daniel Slavin '14, Kevin Layden '13, Matthew Watman '12, Gregory Corrado '14, David Keener '15, Eric Quesada '15, and Aaron Michalko '14; (kneeling) Jared Suresky '12.

**Midnight Ramblers Online**  
[www.midnightramblers.org](http://www.midnightramblers.org)

Fourth-year Midnight Rambler Jared Suresky '12 says the all-male a cappella group likes to keep its repertoire as "all over the board" as the wide-ranging nature of the majors and interests represented by the group's members.

But, Suresky says, the ensemble has one main interest when it comes to performing.

"Our priority is the campus and student community," says Suresky, an economics major from Goshen, N.Y., and publicity director for the group. "Our roots are here at the U of R."

And while the group travels widely—a trip to Southern California to perform at charity events turned into an impromptu appearance on the TV game show *The Price Is Right* last spring—the group prides itself on collaborating and interacting with fellow student organizations. "Improvapella," an annual show featuring the student-run improv group In Between The Lines along with the Ramblers, is an example.

Founded in 1998 as a group dedicated to performance and innovation, the Ramblers have become a campus mainstay. The group's ninth studio album, *Revival*, was released last November. In addition to three two-hour rehearsals a week, often late at night when group members are more likely to be free, the Ramblers perform six or seven times a month and schedule two major shows, one each semester. As many as 60 students audition over the course of the year, and the group takes in, on average, three new singers each year.

Suresky says that while he doesn't plan to pursue music professionally after graduation, he's learned important lessons about working with a large group of people whose perspectives often differ from his own. And he's learned about working toward a goal.

"It takes focus and determination," Suresky says. "It's not always going to be easy but to get the results you want, you have to work hard, and you have to be persistent."





## After Hours

The coed group brings a contemporary sound to campus.

**ALL TOGETHER:** After Hours features (clockwise from left) E.J. Kim '15, Liana Buniak '12, Alex Murray '13, Alaina Sawyer '13, Rohini Rege '14, Caitlin Mack '12, Natalia Wannan '13, Quinlan Mitchell '13, Tad Bezerra '13, Ben McCormack '13, Jalon Howard '15, Rei Ramos '15, Caroline Sterling '15, and Ethan Lobenstine '12. (Not pictured: Maddie Freeman '15)

**After Hours Online**  
[www.urafterhours.net](http://www.urafterhours.net)

Ethan Lobenstine '12 is pretty clear about the role that the After Hours a cappella group plays in his life on campus.

"After Hours has been the defining force of my college career," says the music major from Rochester, who joined After Hours as a freshman and has been with the group ever since. He serves as musical director this year.

"We are essentially a group of friends who love music and who love performing together," he says of the group that includes students from a wide range of majors and interests, both academic and cocurricular.

Founded in 1998, the ensemble began life as a vocal jazz group, but within a few years had transitioned into rock and pop music and is now known for its contemporary repertoire.

Each year, the group presents two major campus shows—one each at the end of the spring and fall semesters. During the year, After Hours performs as much as one show a week—whether on campus, in Rochester, or traveling to other campuses and cities in the Northeast.

Add to that at least six hours of rehearsal time each week along with other duties that come with being in a large group, and the commitment adds up. But Lobenstine says the members wouldn't have it any other way.

"We don't just sing," he says. "We're very much friends."