

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY SINGERS: *Faith.*
Hope.
Laughter.
Love.

By Sam Chenoweth





Faith, Hope, Laughter, and Love are the four pillars of one of the country's eldest collegiate show choirs, the Ball State University Singers. Now in their 52nd year, the organization known as "University Singers" continues to be at the forefront of the collegiate show choir genre. Although this art form is often left behind upon high school graduation, a small group of students at Ball State University thrive every year in the opportunity to sing, dance, play, and make memories together.

52 Years and Counting

Like many show choirs, the history of the Ball State University Singers is full of stories. Every year, before the new members are welcomed into the cast, the organization comes together for a version of this history as told by one of the group's founding members, Jan Richard. An elementary teacher for 40 years, she reminds everyone that, "Every good story begins with 'Once upon a time...'" The story she shares on that night goes something like this...

University Singers was founded in 1964 by Don Neuen. At its inception, the ensemble was simply a "swing choir"; little did Neuen know that his ensemble would go on to thrive for over five decades. He would eventually move on to work at Julliard and end his career as an Endowed Chair at UCLA.

Glitz and Glamour

Larry Boye came to University Singers in 1968. While enhancing the visual design and intricacies of shows, he also began the organization's reputation for international travel. Upon his departure from Ball State, Boye became the director of "Kids Of The Kingdom" for Walt Disney and later served as Director of "The Young Americans."

Dr. Fritz Mountford was next in line for the role of Director. A student and contemporary of Fred Waring, Mountford took aim at bringing the organization's focus back towards vocal production. To assist, he introduced the concept of individual headset microphones, a concept that University Singers still utilizes today. He also brought about the "show business" production model.

Continuing Tradition

After one year under Dr. Michael Davis (currently with the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir), Dr. Jeff Carter spent several years leading University Singers and continued to uphold the values for which the group was known. International travel was an important aspect of his tenure before leaving the university to become Director of the School of Music at Webster College in St. Louis, MO.

The current Director of University Singers, Dr. Alan Alder, is in his 8th year with the organization. After being involved with University Singers during his graduate studies, he began the organization's foray into competition, including performances in the World Choir Games and other international festivals. Dr. Alder has also worked to enhance the vocal quality of the ensemble in a new and exciting way that marries proper vocal technique with popular music.

Is this Just Like a High School Choir?

One of the most common questions that a University Singer receives from a prospective student is "Will this group be exactly like my high school show choir?" While this seems to be a rather simple question, there are many different elements that play into the answer.

University Singers is based on the same concepts as every show choir—singing and

dancing. The singer-dancers learn vocal selections, a broad range of choreography and put on a show accompanied by a live band. How could this be any different from a competitive high school group?

Fundamentally, the difference between the high school show choir genre and University Singers is the massive amount of performance content. Many high school ensembles work to perfect one or two 15-20 minute sets of music throughout the year, culminating in a fully polished competition show.

However, University Singers strives towards their annual Spectacular, a two and a half hour production that brings together much of their work from throughout the year. This show typically equates to upwards of four competition shows plus several solo and small group numbers. University Singers participates in choral events through Ball State University and makes several annual holiday appearances as well.

Cultivating Leaders

Surprisingly, there are many other things about the Ball State University Singers that are quite different from students' high school counterparts. At the top of this list is the fact that the organization is student-run. This means that not only are students performing the show, but they also have different leadership roles within the context of the organization.

For example, the Show Publicity Heads are in charge of creating and disseminating all promotional materials—programs, posters, social media coverage, and Facebook events. Those involved with the Outreach department take charge of recruiting, attending high school show choir competitions throughout the winter and spring and coordinating annual auditions. An Equipment Manager is in charge of all aspects of the set, including its transportation to and from outside performances. These are only a few of the many roles that provide the organization's student-run designation.

It is important to note that Glee-Club members, who are the singer-dancers of the group, hold all the aforementioned positions. However, the organization also contains another group of leaders that are not a part of the performing ensemble. A group of Sound Technicians work to set up a full sound rig, including 22 wireless headset microphones, for every performance. Similarly, the Wardrobe Manager takes care of all of the Glee Club's costumes, including any alterations or changes that must be made throughout the year.

All of these roles make up what the organization calls its "Production Staff." Keeping in mind that not all members of University Singers have chosen to study music at Ball State (in fact, more than half have not), the opportunity to work in these capacities provides valuable life and/or career experience.

The advertisement features five photographs of women in formal dresses. On the far left is a pink dress with a beaded belt. Next to it is a woman in a teal dress with a beaded bodice. In the center is a large photo of two women in purple dresses with ruffled skirts; one has her arms raised. Above them is text: "READY TO WEAR & CUSTOM DESIGN". Below the central photo is the brand name "dornink" in a stylized font, followed by "men & women show choir apparel" and contact information: "www.dorninkshowchoir.com" and "515.255.7528". The background of the central photo shows a crowd of people, some with their mouths open as if singing.

A New Era

Ball State University Singers' golden anniversary in 2014 also meant the beginning of a new era. The group continues to embrace change and implement new and innovative techniques.

One example of this is an increased visual intensity that is quite new to the organization. Led by students of some of the country's best choreographers and show designers, University Singers has begun to more closely align itself with "contemporary show choir" as opposed to a theme park show or theatrical production. This is demonstrated through an increased level of difficulty of movement, an expansion of choreographic style and new costuming and set selections that appeal to a new generation of performers.

Another noteworthy aspect of the organization's recent history is the increase in student leadership. The Production Staff has continued to grow, now including committee members to oversee each facet of the organization's work. More students are being given opportunities to become well-rounded leaders and excel beyond their on-stage performance.

In addition to these changes, University Singers is becoming more visible to

prospective students across the country. In the spring of 2015, University Singers hosted and performed at the FAME Show Choir National Finals in Chicago, a role they will reprise in 2016. The organization will also perform for the second consecutive year at the Indiana Music Educators state conference.

More Than a Show

As much as University Singers prides itself on performance quality and the cultivation of leaders, there is one aspect of the Singers experience that tops all—the invaluable memories and family bond that cast members share. Whether it comes from a formal trip or just another day in rehearsal, the impact that this group has on its members runs deeper than just their four years in college. This bond truly lasts a lifetime.

In spite of all of the refinements in recent history, as "Indiana's Official Goodwill Ambassadors," the Ball State University Singers still maintains a reputation of excellence that spans more than five decades. They work to create experiences and a product based upon the same pillars as years ago: Faith. Hope. Laughter. Love. And a whole lot of fun.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sam Chenoweth is currently studying music education at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. He serves as the Production Assistant and Choreographer of the Ball State University Singers, as well as Assistant Director of Show Choirs for his alma mater, Fairfield City Schools.

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MUSIC



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For more information about the Ball State University Singers, contact Alan Alder at alalder@bsu.edu.

Tuned In.

Andrew Crow, Director of Choral Activities

Kerry Glann, Assistant Director of Choral Activities

Alan Alder, Director of University Singers

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