

## WHIFFENPOOFS:



# The sound of Yale

## A capella ensemble brings pitch-perfect style to The Kate

By Lisa Reisman  
lisareisman27@gmail.com

**OLD SAYBROOK** » Unlike governments, corporations, or other prominent institutions that have lasted over 100 years, the Yale Whiffenpoofs, which will perform at The Kate on the afternoon of Sunday, May 1, have never slumped or fallen out of favor.

So said Dennis Cross, president of the Yale Whiffenpoof Alumni, on the occasion of America's oldest and best known a cappella group on its 100th anniversary in 2009.

Seven years later, the ensemble, named for a mythical fish that comes squawking to the surface when baited with a bit of cheese, shows no sign of a downward trend.

Which is extraordinary, and not just because the Whiffs continue to be a self-sustaining, student-run organization entirely independent of Yale.

For the 14 singers "tapped" during open auditions from other a cappella groups on campus, it's a year-long gig, one that is open only to seniors; membership is entirely new each year.

"The whole idea is to pick the 14 best singers you can find in a single class year and then let them have at it," said Nicholas Agar-Johnson who, along with his 13 cohorts, follows in a long line of distinguished Whiffs that includes Cole Porter and U.S. Sen. Prescott Bush, father of 41 and 43. While those chosen are required to take a year-long leave of absence from their studies to go on the road, the benefits are considerable: the opportunity to perform in some of the most celebrated venues in the country, including, in addition to their home base at Mory's, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, and the Rose Bowl.

Not to mention appearances on such television shows as Jeopardy!, The Today Show, and Saturday Night Live, as well as 60 Minutes,



The Whiffenpoofs of 2013 on set at Paramount Studios with the cast of Glee, after filming for the finale of season four.

The West Wing, and Glee.

The so-called "gentlemen songsters off on a spree" have also brought their velvety harmonies of smoky ballads and uptempo swing numbers to the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, and every U.S. president since the 1900s.

(When the group performed at one inaugural ball, they handed the president a note to sign. It read, "Dear Teacher, please excuse the Whiffenpoofs from class today as they are all sick." The president, amused, signed.)

Which goes to prove that, as alum Dennis Cross put it, "it never seems to fail that Whiffs singing and those listening to them are immersed in infectious fun."

And not just on the stage. A former Whiffenpoof recalled a local fan in Tokyo asking one of its members how he liked "singing in jail," apparently referring to the university.

The incident in Tokyo wasn't an aberration. Since 1983, each class of Whiffenpoofs has embarked upon a grand world tour each sum-

mer, singing in embassies, palaces, and 5 star hotels, in addition to rural churches, tiny pubs, one room schoolhouses, and the smallest of villages across six continents over 13 weeks.

The globetrotting, which this year included Brazil, Ecuador, and Machu Picchu, perpetuates another tradition: the group's role as ambassadors of Yale.

Indeed, given its longevity and reach, the New York Times has suggested that "the group is the pre-eminent symbol of Yale."

Arguably, that's only natural, with characters like Dr. Frederick Frankenstein in the Mel Brooks musical "Young Frankenstein" referring to himself as a former Whiffenpoof. And Lou Grant in the "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" describing a newsman's relationship with his wife as having "more reunions than the Whiffenpoofs." Then there's Barney Miller quoting a line from the famed Whiffenpoof Song.

It's safe to say that song, the ensemble's signature ballad,

which has been performed by each class of Whiffenpoofs at the end of every concert as a celebration of brotherhood and tradition since 1909, will reverberate through The Kate on Sunday afternoon.

Of course, there's more than just traditional numbers at a Whiff concert, said Agar-Johnson. With a catalog of more than 600 songs, the nattily attired ensemble can croon everything from barbershop to show tunes to pop and rock n' roll in elegantly blended voices that combine sounds, textures, and rhythmic bounce.

It's the lullaby strains of the Whiffenpoof Song, though, that make time imprecise and misty, evoking memories of crisp, colorful, New England autumn football afternoons, with leaves turning, and blue and white banners waving against a hazy October sky.

Quite simply, Whiff alum Dennis Cross said, "it's the magic of our singing that elevates and enlivens us, casting its spell over singer and audience alike."