



The Bobs provide rhapsodic fun at the Opera House

By L. PIERCE CARSON, Register Staff Writer

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Not exactly what you'd expect to find in an opera house, the Bobs do, however, use the voice to get their message across.

Combining vocal mastery with irreverent humor, this quartet of Bay Area musicians is, without doubt, at the top of the list of a cappella ensembles performing and recording in America today.

If there is a single group that really helped jump start the a cappella movement -- as well as give new perception to the genre -- it's the Bobs. Using self-deprecating humor -- and with tongues planted firmly in cheeks -- the Bobs have been packing venues for more than two decades with programs that feature clever cover songs and a wealth of outrageous originals.

An eclectic a cappella quartet launched in Berkeley 25 years ago, the Bobs have delighted a loyal group of fans (and earned many new ones) with their witty fare, which includes audacious covers of such classics as Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" and Cream's "White Room."

Having performed only once previously in wine country -- as part of the madcap Monday night concert series booked by Richard Miami at Domaine Chandon -- the Bobs returned to the Napa Valley last Saturday night in support of their latest recording, "Rhapsody in Bob."

While the a cappella hipsters did launch a rhapsodic episode at the Napa Valley Opera House with a George Gershwin classic, it was the quartet's menu of rock 'n' roll classics -- such as the Coasters' "Searchin'" and Sam "the Sham" & the Pharaohs' "Little Red Riding Hood" -- and deliciously clever originals -- the bumpersticker-inspired "Kill Your Television" and a new singalong favorite, "There's a Nose Ring in My Soup" -- that prompted the loudest cheers at the nearly sold-out Napa Valley Opera House.

While two of its founding members remain -- resounding basso profundo Richard (Bob) Greene and puckish Matthew (Bob) Stull -- the ensemble benefits these days from the talents of Amy (Bob) Engelhardt, a Berklee School of Music grad who's held down the femme-Bob slot since 1998. The group's newest -- and tallest -- member, Dan (Bob) Schumacher, was recuperating Saturday from a bug that laid him low. A fine replacement was another long drink of water, Eric Bradley, on loan from the O.K. Chorale.

Performance highlights included a brilliant original from the ensemble's early days, "Through The Wall," a cogent take on urban living; Greene's rousing bass voice on a gospel-tinged song, "Pounded on a Rock," about love and laundry; and a madrigal setting of the Doors' "Light My Fire."

The evening's featured work was Gershwin's celebrated "Rhapsody in Blue." Featured guest for this reading was pianist Bob Malone. The Bobs performed all the orchestral parts as well as sight gags, like having Engelhardt serve as page turner for the pianist. If you can imagine Jerry Lee Lewis banging out this Gershwin classic, then that's the impression one came away with. The Bobs did quite well as instrumentalists, particularly in the work's final passages. This was, as the Bobs remind us, "fun with music."

Malone opened the evening with several Randy Newman soundalike songs. Unfortunately, Malone's a deft pianoman who fancies himself a singer.

The Bobs are truly in a league of their own. Getting reacquainted with this exceptional vocal ensemble made for a most enjoyable evening.