

All together now: Whiffenpoofs of Yale at TACAW

FRIDAY, JANUARY 7, 2022

Andrew Travers

America's oldest collegiate a cappella group headlines a reopened Arts Campus at Willits

The Whiffenpoofs of Yale University are the longest-running collegiate a cappella group and the most prestigious, setting a standard since 1909, but until just four years ago it was a boy's club open only to men in their senior year.

That changed during Syd Bakal's freshman year and inspired the first-year econ major to audition for the competitive group.

"When I applied to Yale, I didn't even know that being in the Whiffenpoofs would be a possibility," Bakal said in a phone interview from home in Illinois. "My first year, I saw the performance that was their first time having a woman in the group. And I was just completely blown away by how talented she was and how incredible the community the group seemed to be."

The usual camaraderie and creativity of making music in a college a cappella group are a draw, of course, but the Whiffenpoofs offers more — traveling the world on tour, going to every member's hometown for a tour stop at their high schools, entry into the entertainment industry.

After the holidays, the group met up in Denver on Wednesday to embark on a short Colorado tour, staying in a Vail-area home owned by a Yale family as they perform at the Newman Center Villar Center in Beaver Creek on Friday, Jan 7 and at the Arts Campus at Willits on Saturday, Jan. 8,



The 2022 Whiffenpoofs of Yale on tour. The collegiate a cappella group will play the Arts Campus at Willits on Saturday. (Courtesy photo)

hoping to score some lift tickets and ski while they're here.

The Whiffenpoofs program allows students to devote an entire school year to the group — touring and performing and running both the artistic and business sides of the institution (Bakal is the group's business manager). All 14 members are due to begin their senior years in the fall.

"It's an opportunity that I don't think exists at most other universities," Bakal said. "For a lot of us, this kind of travel wouldn't be possible without the experience of the Whiffenpoofs."

They play major music halls and on television for audiences in the millions (the advent of televised reality singing contests has been a boon for the group, appearing most recently "The Sing-Off"). But some of the most memorable experiences, Bakal said, are the most intimate.

Bakal recalled performing recently on the hometown tour with the Whiffs, at musical director John Paciga's family home for a small collection of friends and family in New Jersey: "It was really fun to just sing with our full hearts and not necessarily be worried about, you know, 'Are we impressing the audience?'"

Performing with the Whiffs can be life-changing, by all accounts — it's a cross-disciplinary experience for creative students who may have an interest or talent in pursuing music, but whose academic tracks are elsewhere. Bakal, for instance, is now majoring in ethics, politics and economics, while writing and performing as a singer-songwriter on the side. Some members of the group may use the Whiffs experience as a launchpad into a performing arts career, but most do not.

"Folks are thinking about auditioning to go on to Broadway or film, or solo careers of that kind of thing," Bakal said. "But there's only one music major in the whole group. Most of us are actually not. We do other things."

The pandemic's disruptions have, of course, made for an unusual experience for the past three classes of Whiffs. Tours have been canceled and gone virtual, including the vaunted annual world tour, and the 2020 group had the recording and release of the latest Whiffs album delayed (the 17-track "Whiffs On Ice" was eventually released in September 2021).

On this winter tour, in hopes of avoiding omicron infections, the students will be avoiding bars and restaurants while taking precautions to keep themselves and audiences safe. But they're committed to performance.

"Something that we've kind of come to realize is that we have to just take as many precautions as we can, but also the world has to keep going," Bakal said. "We're all boosted and vaccinated, and we perform for vaccinated and masked audiences most of the time."

As has been tradition since 1909, the students decide what to perform and how. There's no faculty director calling the shots. The famed "Whiffenpoof Song" and the group's formal stage dress may be the only things that have remained consistent through the decades.

Bakal's cohort have added new a cappella arrangements to the repertoire, including Prince's "1999" and Olivia Rodrigo's "Good For You" arranged by PJ Frantz.

"We sing a little bit of pop and some of the classic songs, we've been adding some more contemporary music to our repertoire as well," Bakal said. "It's been exciting. We've learned a lot of the classic repertoire and now we're starting to add on more of our own arrangements."



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IF YOU GO:

What: The Whiffenpoofs

Where: The Arts Campus at Willits

When: Saturday, Jan. 8, 7:30 p.m.

How much: \$35-\$45

Tickets & more info: tacaw.org