

The Rise and Rise of Australian a Cappella

By Amelia Alder

Contemporary *a cappella* is on the rise all over the world and has been making waves down under in Australia! Not only are new groups forming every day around the globe, but they have also begun to break through the glass ceiling and reach the mainstream music market. The rapid growth of the *a cappella* scene in Australia is creating a buzz of excitement throughout the community and is inspiring both established ensembles as well as newly formed groups to work harder to take the local scene to the next level.

Australia is producing internationally-award-winning *a cappella* ensembles, such as The Idea of North, Suade, Coco's Lunch and The Australian Voices, that have paved the way down under during the last two decades in a variety of contemporary styles of singing. With only a few international groups touring to Australia during those years, Australia's geographical isolation limited opportunities for local audiences to observe a variety of world class *a cappella* groups. This in turn delayed the development of the next generation of *a cappella* singers in Australia, but this has started to change within the last few years. The national *a cappella* scene is now reaching new heights with the support of Vocal Australia.

Formed five years ago, Vocal Australia, Australia's national contemporary *a cappella* hub, is dedicated to providing education, events and resources for singers all over the country, by fostering communities both online and in person. Modelled on similar organisations such as CASA and Vocal Asia, Vocal Australia has presented highly successful events such as the GET VOCAL Festival, AUS-ACA National A Cappella

Championships, as well as regular showcases and workshops. These events have supported the massive growth in singers' participation in contemporary a cappella over the last few years, and, by encouraging groups to network, support and learn from each other, the community has stepped up, not only in quantity but also, in quality.

Like most success stories, what may seem like an overnight success to an outsider has in reality taken many decades to achieve. Over the years contemporary *a cappella* organisations such as the Contemporary A Cappella Society of America, Vocal Asia, European Vocal Association, the UK Vocal Festival, and African A Cappella have formed to provide a place for groups to find performance opportunities, network and learn from the world's best performers and clinicians in their respective specialities, regions and nations; an important key to the growth of the community both locally and internationally. These developments within the scene have culminated in new *a cappella* festivals appearing all over the globe, national championships expanding from the new booming interest, and the number of singers participating in *a cappella* reaching new heights.



The Australian Voices (dir: Gordon Hamilton)

With the evolution of the *a cappella* scene, it's no surprise that TV and movie producers have been taking note! The arrival of Fox's *GLEE*, NBC's 100% *a cappella* TV show, *The Sing Off*, and the hit movie *Pitch Perfect* (and soon to be released *Pitch*

Perfect 2) have cast a spotlight on a *cappella*, featuring it front and centre on both the silver screen and in our lounge rooms. This recent surge has exposed the world of a *cappella* to the mainstream media and general population in ways we have never seen before and has inspired young singers around the world to join their schools' and universities' vocal ensembles.

There are a few key reasons why a *cappella* is on the rise worldwide. First and foremost, musical instruments can cost as little as \$2 through to as much as \$2 million, but there is one instrument that is free for everyone to use: the human voice and body. All the strange and wonderful noises it can make are immediately available to everyone. As well as providing a forum to develop valuable skills as a musician, a *cappella* also offers something that few other forms of music can – total and unrestricted inclusion and accessibility. There are no limitations to participation. It costs nothing to get started, requiring no more than time and passion. All you need do is grab a few friends and start singing. More specifically, the popular repertoire used in contemporary a *cappella* has caught the eye of many singers. Some singers feel that they have the ability to better connect with current, contemporary songs, as they are more often relevant to their lives and musical interests. Their passion is opening the doors to introduce performers and their audiences to a variety of other styles and also further their involvement in music as their love of singing grows.



The Idea of North (Australia)

Prior to recent global technological advancements, Australian groups were unaware of the development and standard of contemporary a cappella concerts worldwide. However, with the widespread use of the internet, these previously isolated Australian singers are now able to keep up-to-date by viewing performances of international groups on YouTube, digitally downloading their albums and following the progress of their favourite groups on their social media pages and on their websites. Groups can now access countless demonstration videos via YouTube or DVDs to improve their specific vocal skill sets such as vocal percussion or beatboxing, both of which are highly popular in the *a cappella* world. This has also assisted Australian groups, such as Suade, in developing an international fan base providing the opportunity to expand their own international touring schedules.

Technology has seen the Aussie *a cappella* scene grow to the point where the world's best groups can build a market in Australia before they land on our shores. With an Australian fan base ready and raring to see them perform, international groups can now find viable ways to justify touring to the other side of the world. A perfect example of this is American *a cappella* superstars, Pentatonix, who sold out concerts in just a few minutes for their first tour to Australia; something that would not have been possible 10 years ago.

Plenty of ground-breaking *a cappella* compilation albums are now available online, such as SING, GET VOCAL and BOCA to name but a few, so there are no shortage of options to introduce your singers to a variety of different styles. As *a cappella* is not a genre in its own right but instead encompasses a large array of styles of music through its form of delivery, there is bound to be something for everyone. Take a listen to tracks from the world's best *a cappella* groups, including Take 6 and Naturally 7 (jazz), Fork and The House Jacks (rock), The Kings' Singers and The Swingle Singers (classical influences)

and the Musical Island Boys and Vocal Spectrum (barbershop) to discover some exciting new sounds.

You can also learn more about contemporary a cappella by supporting your local *a cappella* community and organisations by attending an a cappella event so they can continue to support singers just like you. Jump online and grab some arrangements for your group and give it a go! Deke Sharon, vocal producer for NBC's *The Sing Off* and *Pitch Perfect*, has a massive catalogue of *a cappella* arrangements in a variety of styles, voicing and levels of difficulty to get your group started.

Contemporary *a cappella* is on the rise not only in Australia but also all across the globe. You will not want to be the one left behind when it takes over your school, university, community, and conversations with your friends. The Aussie *a cappella* revolution is happening right now and it is an exciting time to join your *a cappella* community and be a part of history in the making. A Cappella: Get On It. Get Vocal.