

Bobs' session notes 20 years of harmony

By Larry Nager

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The Bobs are known as the world's most manically eclectic, non-jazz, a cappella vocal group. But to paraphrase another San Francisco band: What a long, strange, non-instrumental trip it's been.

The quartet, which traces its beginnings to the Great San Francisco Singing Telegram Depression of 1981, is celebrating its 20th anniversary in Cincinnati this weekend.

The current quartet — founder Matthew "Bob" Stull (a former telegram singer), Richard "Bob" Greene, Joe "Bob" Finetti and newest member, Amy "Bob" Engelhardt — will sing in WCET studios Saturday. Their performances will be taped for a Valentine's Day broadcast at 9 p.m. Wednesday on WCET

Channel 48. They'll also appear at noon Sunday at Joseph-Beth Booksellers, Rookwood Pavilion, Norwood (396-8960).

Vocal groups growing

The past two decades have seen an a cappella explosion, Mr. Stull says. "There are more (vocal groups) now than there've ever been," he says by phone from his home in Seattle, where he's just returned from judging an a cappella competition.

"There were 35 high school vocal jazz groups, just from the Oregon/Washington area. And that's probably not even all of them. There are tons more in junior high school, private school, colleges. I'm like, 'Wow, that's a lot of a cappella singing. Why aren't we selling more records?' But that's 'cause we're not doing

If you go

What: The Bobs Sing! (And Other Love Songs).

When: 4 and 8 p.m. Saturday.

Where: WCET Channel 48, 1223 Central Parkway, across from Music Hall.

Tickets: WXU-FM, 458-3115 for 4 p.m. show only, available in a two-ticket package with CD, dinner reception with the Bobs and a bottle of wine for \$240; WCET, 345-6535 and www.wcet.org for 8 p.m. show, \$15 admission only, \$25 admission plus CD; \$35 ticket, CD and concert videotape from Bobs' 1998 20th Century appearance.

jazz. If we were doing jazz, we'd be the new Manhattan Transfer. But that's OK. Somebody already did that."

No one had done vocal harmony the way the Bobs approached it. The group's debut, *The Bobs* (featuring since-departed members Gunnar "Bob" Madsen and Janie



The Bobs, clockwise from top left: Joe Finetti, Richard Greene, Matthew Stull and Amy Engelhardt.

"Bob" Scott), includes a wild version of the Beatles' "Helter Skelter" that earned the Bobs a Grammy nomination.

Their newest disc, *Coaster*, continues the tradition with a Bobs-edelic take on "Light My Fire." The disc also includes such Bobs origi-

nals as "Let's Adopt a Highway," "Fluffy's Master Plan for World Domination" and "Hidden Bonus Track." The last, of course, is not stuck at the end of the 18-song CD, but somewhere in the middle.

300 songs, 100 gigs

Mr. Stull, who was born in Columbus and attended Ohio University, says the Bobs have about 300 songs in their repertoire.

The group plays about 100 dates a year and has found something of a home in Cincinnati, where local Bobs mega-fan and corporate media producer James Rosenberger books the quartet as often as he can. (He booked their 1998 show at the 20th Century and is helping to produce this one.)

Another sponsor of this week's trip is Maisonette

owner Nat Comisar, who met the group on their last appearance here.

"He came to the show and he told us he loved it, he handed me his card and said, 'Listen, if you guys are free for dinner, come down to the restaurant, it's all on me.'"

Not knowing anything about "the restaurant," Mr. Stull thanked him, but didn't give it much thought.

The next day, the group was sitting around Mr. Rosenberger's house when conversation turned to dinner. "And I said, 'Oh, we got an offer to go eat at this, I don't know, La Maisonay or something.'"

"And he (Mr. Rosenberger) said, 'What! You got what! . . . This is like the best restaurant in the Midwest, it's got one of the highest ratings in the country.' And I'm thinking, 'Huh? In Cincinnati?'"