Bissell, Sarah: The Geneseo A Cappella Community

Research Proposal:

The origins of collegiate a cappella are challenging to trace. Groups emerged throughout the 20th century, and now, there are over a thousand groups in the United States alone (Van Camp 1980). The genre of a cappella in general is founded in the principles of singing "a capella" or, "in chapel style" - the modern definition being "without instrumental accompaniment" (A Cappella). The genre brings voices together to recreate the sounds instruments and synthesizers make, to replicate a song one might hear on the radio, though some groups take it much further and compose their own music or recreate other genres.

In high school choir, we performed a great deal of our musical selections a cappella - in its classical form. When I arrived at college, I looked for an opportunity to be engaged in a musical community which was different from my previous experience. I've learned a great deal in my 4 years in Exit 8. The structures governing a cappella groups are different from other organizations in that our musical direction also comes from students. Our compositions are completed by students. My goal is to explore the process an a cappella group takes from beginning of a concert season to the end - what that process entails and how the group behaves at different points in time. First, I'd like to focus on arranging pieces - the process an individual takes to listen to a piece and put it on paper. Then, I'll explore how a group learns a piece, and what sort of direction they have. I hope to follow the process to a performance. Throughout the process, I plan to set up a camera (or multiple) in locations around the classroom to capture everything at once, hopefully from different angles. At certain points, I hope to sit down to have members of the group watch the film to discuss their perspectives and explanations regarding what happens in the film. I also plan to engage members of other collegiate a cappella groups on our campus and beyond to build perspectives of how other groups work as well. In film editing, I plan to incorporate recordings of the group singing, perhaps in the background of interviews, sometimes for reference. Looking to Heider, it seems that "sound is desirable because of the way it reinforces the visual image" (1976).

Film: Geneseo A Cappella: Exit 8 Ethnography

Interview Questions:

1. What got you interested in joining a cappella at Geneseo?
2. Can you tell me about the social life of the group?
3. What do you think is the social identity of the group as a whole?
4. What makes Exit 8 unique from other a cappella groups on campus?

Reflexive Statement:

I believe it to be quite important to my project to indicate my connection to this community and the level with which I am engaged. I have been part of Exit 8 A Cappella since September 2014, my first year of college. In my second year, I became the treasurer, third year Vice President, and in my fourth and final year, I have been serving as the President.

Film Description and Explanation:

A Cappella is a term which moved to the United States from Italy in the late-18th century. The phrase is Italian for "in chapel style" or "in choir style" (A Cappella). Throughout history, a cappella has shifted from purely sacred text to encompass a vast array of musical genres. In recent years, a cappella as a genre has erupted as a result of the internet and popular media avenues. The television show on NBC called The Sing-Off aired in December 2009, and there was an even greater surge of popularity to follow (The Sing-Off). This took the form of new a cappella groups being created, and even more people attending shows for a cappella groups already in communities and on college campuses (Rabinowitz 2013).

The Geneseo A Cappella community consists of 5 unique groups, forming over the course of the past 27 years - each with their own style and niche. Exit 8, Between the Lines and Emmelodics are the co-ed groups, Hips N’Harmony is the all-female group and Southside Boys is the all-male group. Southside Boys was the first group formed at SUNY Geneseo in 1991 (Southside Boys). Exit 8 is the first co-ed a cappella group at SUNY Geneseo, having formed in September 2003 (Exit 8). Since then, the group identity and musical style have evolved each year. The film Geneseo A Cappella: Exit 8 Ethnography was created in order to explore the life of the a cappella group as a whole from the beginning of a "concert season" up to the performance which marks the end of that season. This process included rehearsal, social gatherings, and performances. Each of these categories has subcategories which emerged over time while filming.

For the ethnographic film, I chose to interview 2 members of the group and explore what the current social culture of the group has become to the point it is now. One of the interviewees also affirmed that she would be willing to explain some of the elements of the rehearsals.

Each semester, a cappella groups experience two different concert seasons. The first includes auditions, integrating new members, rehearsing and performing at a concert. Sometimes, there are smaller performances interspersed. The concert season I focused on for my research was the second, meaning it began after the first concert was held. On a week-to-week basis, the group holds two rehearsals - one on Monday and one on Wednesday. There can be anywhere from 10-15 rehearsals in a concert season.

These rehearsals serve not only to solidify the music which the group produces, but also offers a social gathering for members in the group. Saige, one of my informants, described the culture and social action of the group including getting meals together and other various "hang-outs", but she also mentioned the social value of coming to rehearsal. The time spent in rehearsal brings members into a shared experience - strengthening relationships among members of the group - a common trait with social cognition and relationship affirmation (Hardin & Conley 2001). In their book, "A Cappella", Deke Sharon and colleagues Ben Spalding and Brody McDonald (2015) outline key elements for a well-rounded a cappella group. They explore history of a cappella, concepts for arranging, vocal percussion, recording, etc. Specifically, they point to group dynamics as something important to learn how to manage well for the group setting awkward sentence. They explain that "one of the most important parts of any successful a cappella group...is how well the members get along" (Sharon et al. 2015). This doesn't mean everyone needs to be friends, but rather that there is a shared understanding of being "in it together" (Sharon et al. 2015). Exit 8 engages in this by sharing humor during rehearsals, going through the process of learning music alongside one another, and engaging one another outside of group rehearsals.
Involvement in the group also serves as a way to engage in a passion for music outside the academic sphere. The a cappella subculture at Geneseo emerges as a community of those who are passionate about music while investing in other various academic pursuits. I use subculture with the intended definition of “student groupings formed around particular expressive values” (Kipnis 2001). Those involved in Exit 8 seek to engage music in a non-academic context and are passionate about the genre of music the group tends towards while choosing songs. In a way, Exit 8 and the broader a cappella community can also be considered to be counter cultural towards the academic system of musicianship at the collegiate level, specifically at Geneseo. Kipnis defines counter-culture as “subcultures whose expressive values critically dismiss schooling and academic virtues” (Kipnis 2001). The a cappella community at Geneseo has historically shown examples of verbally discussing its existence as an alternative to academic musicianship. The dismissal of academic virtues is not always aggressive, however, the existence of the a cappella community displays a deviance from traditional musical involvement in a college setting.

Well, done overview of the issues

References Cited:

A Cappella. Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster

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Duchan, Joshua S

Exit 8. Facebook.

Gluckner, Valentine Righthand

Hardin, Curtis D, and Terri D Conley

Heider, K.

Kipnis, Andrew

Peteraf, Margaret, and Mark Shanley

Sharon, Deke, Ben Spalding, Brody McDonald, and Ben Folds
2015 A cappella. Alfred Music, Van Nuys, CA

Southside Boys. Facebook.

Van Camp, Leonard
Reflection on Filmmaking:

Reflecting on my original proposal for this research, my goal was to capture the experience of a cappella from start to finish. I decided that the process of arranging wasn’t something that would be vital towards understanding the social nature of the group. Instead, I collected footage of the group doing vocal warm-ups, learning parts for a song, doing a performance, listening to playback, and simply spending time with one another.

Something which inspired my technique was the discussion early in the semester regarding constructive strategy and staging. I wanted to remove myself from the process as much as possible. I decided to model my film after the concept of showing film to people to watch and filming their authentic reactions. I asked one of my interviewees to explain in detail what was occurring at each point. I utilized this technique as a result of my desire to show as much authentic film as possible, to show the right amount of an activity to understand what happened, and to get exposure to the normal routine of the group. The technique of showing the film while hearing her explanations helped to visualize and understand the activities the group experienced and hear a deeper explanation than one might gather from the surface level, while actually being communicated by a member of the group rather than reading subtitles or hearing from the “voice of God”.

I believe the combination of these techniques lent themselves well to giving a comprehensive overview of the a cappella experience from the beginning of a rehearsal, learning music all the way to the final performance once songs have been learned. The Wiki background discussion gave an opportunity to dig deeper into the social implications of being a part of a group on a college campus, specifically something musical, and determine where a cappella is situated as a subculture in the greater college atmosphere. Overall, I believe the Wiki discussion provided a means through which I was able to discuss each element of the process for a cappella and bring it into a social focus.