

Essentials looking for a change

A CAPPELLA GROUP WANTS TO ADD INSTRUMENTS

By PAUL MORDEN
The Observer

The members of The Essentials are in song-hunting mode. The Toronto-based a cappella quartet, that includes Forest native Dan Speck, has released three albums over the last decade and it has plans for making a change when it records its upcoming fourth disc.

"Up until now," Speck said, "We've remained all a cappella; no instruments to back us up. Now we're writing original songs with instruments in mind."

But it will be light instrumentation, Speck added. "And then thick vocals — not straying too far from what we've become good at." Which is, he said, harmonies and intricate singing.

"We're just looking for something a little different."

Speck grew up in Forest where the high school music room was his second home and he played in garage bands with friends and future fellow professional musicians Dane Sterling and Emm Grayner.

After graduation, he studied musical theatre at Sheridan College and, soon after that, successfully auditioned to fill an opening in the then London-based Essentials.

That was about eight years ago. "We've done the a cappella thing for a long time," Speck said. "We still like it. But, there's a bit of a cap, I find, on a cappella music. It's not as radio-friendly as maybe it should be."

When the group and its management talk to radio about playing the songs, the responses often hit the same note. Speck said a few stations play their songs but many programmers tell them, "You need some instruments behind it to



Observer file photo

Members of the Essentials perform songs for an audience at Hiawatha Racetrack Slots in this May 2002 file photo. They are from left Dan Speck, Bob VanGieson, Joon Nah and Joe Olivia. The Toronto-based a cappella group is returning to Hiawatha March 10.

make it a little more radio-friendly for our listeners."

The band will be at Hiawatha Racetrack Slots for two shows March 10 but it has been keeping a light performing schedule recently to take time to write songs, record demos and search for material from other songwriters.

"Two of our guys and our manager just got back from a songwriting trip to Nashville," Speck said. They spent the time searching for material among the publishing houses that

have made that city a mecca for all kinds of music, not just country.

It's a mixed approach to finding the right material for the next album that even includes members of The Essentials co-writing with people outside of the group.

"We're just looking for great songs," Speck said. "If we can't come up with them ourselves, we're open to submissions."

The band's most recent album was a live recording released in 2000. So, Speck said,

it's time for a new one.

They're looking for about 15 good songs at this point.

"The first three or four we're going to try and release as singles to create some radio interest and some record company interest," Speck said.

The band has been releasing its albums independently.

"That seems to have worked so far," Speck said, "but if you want bigger markets, if you want to release across Canada and into the United States, you really have to get involved with

a label."

When they do have the fourth album ready to go, Speck said the band hopes it will also help them attract some major label interest.

Nailing down exactly what style of music The Essentials sing is a little difficult, according to Speck.

Contemporary pop might fit, but he added, "It's a mix of a few different styles."

"We're based in the doo-wop era. We started out learning a lot of 1950s and '60s music

because that's where the great harmony comes from."

From there, they've added their own personal influences. "It's pop with a bit of rock edge, I suppose," Speck said.

"The sound we're going for on the next album will not deviate from that too much. We've developed this big audience base and we certainly don't want to lose them."

The Essentials perform two shows March 10, 2 p.m. and 6 p.m., at Hiawatha Racetrack Slots. Tickets are available from Hiawatha.