

# Essentials' joie de vivre infectious

By: Harry Currie (The Record)

## WATERLOO

The Essentials returned to the Waterloo Stage Theatre on Monday for what has now become an annual Christmas event. Well, to be precise, three fifths of The Essentials returned, and two fifths were there for the first time as part of Canada's leading a cappella group.

The changes occurred when long-time member Bob Van Gieson left the group to pursue other interests, and the decision was made to expand back to their original configuration of five singers, though they'd worked with only four for some years.

Five voices gives them much more flexibility, of course, for when one voice is singing solo there are four voices behind the lead to give a complete chord backing, and in the ensemble work the chords can be richer with five parts.

Making these changes, though, requires a lot of readjustment. The voicings change, and where one part had a certain line in the four-voice configuration, the same singer might have quite a lot of different tones in the five-voice arrangement. Consequently, not only are the two new guys working with new material, the three old guys are adjusting to new parts, and it takes months to rebuild the repertoire again.

Considering all that, this performance by the "new" Essentials was remarkable in its scope and length, though they all admit that for some time they're going to be a work in progress.

There were enough of their old favorites in the program to make the large audience feel comfortable that things haven't changed that much, but these tunes were spiced by several new ones and by the Christmas songs were included.

Old favourites included "One Fine Day", "Heartbreak Tonight", "Run-around Sue", "Dream", "Brown Eyed Girl", "Two Silhouettes", and "Some Kind of Wonderful", and the Christmas tunes included "Joy to the World" (both the carol and the Three Dog Night versions), "Jingle Bell Rock", "Frosty the Snowman", "Rocking around the Christmas Tree", "Rudolph" and "Silver Bells", the latter done unplugged and off-stage right down in the audience.

It's interesting to hear the subtle change in sound the new guys have contributed.

Mike Ferfolia and Thom Speck are certainly going to fit well. They both have the style and the moxie to be part of this fun-loving group, and both have voices that work well in this latter-day doo-wop genre. Ferfolia did a great lead in "Stand by Me" and "Duke of Earl", while Speck rocked around the Christmas tree in great style.

Speck's brother Dan is one of the long-time members of The Essentials, along with Joon Nah and Joe Oliva. Oliva's rock-solid bassline is one of outstanding characteristics of this group, and because of the part he never gets a lead, but the group has remedied this in one arrangement, "That Loving Feeling", and Oliva gets to actually sing the words for a change.

One of the great strengths The Essentials have always had is their infectious stage personality, both as a group and as individuals, their chatter and patter and the obvious good time they're always having on stage, and this carries over into the audience.

The show repeats at Waterloo Stage Theatre tonight at 8:00pm. Tickets are \$31.

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