

The Essentials hits town on a high peak: A cappella group performs at Registry Theatre while enjoying a No. 1 album

BY JOEL RUBINOFF, RECORD STAFF

After almost two decades of dutifully reviving a cappella rock classics for an audience of seasoned devotees, The Essentials find themselves — mid-career — poised for their largest success to date as TV megahit *Glee* elevates the art of choral crooning to a whole new level.

Scoring the first No. 1 album of their career — the heavy-on '70s covers *Nothing But Blue* — they recently hired a female vocalist to pad their three-man harmonies and, as the pop culture pendulum swings toward unadorned vocals wrapped around boomer classics, find the average age of their audience going, *gulp*, down.

"We used to not market to anyone under 25," notes Joe Oliva, the London, Ont. native who patterned the group after a cappella predecessors The Nylons. "But we found younger people are buying tickets now, right down to teenagers.

"And it's affected our album sales. We cracked the top 100 in Canada for the first time, and we're No. 1 in Toronto. There's a greater acceptance of vocal music at this point in time."

He hesitates to credit TV's *Glee*, while conceding its impressive reach, offering a more philosophical explanation for the band's popularity surge.

"I think people are going through a period where they want to participate again," he notes, pointing to the proliferation of homemade YouTube videos.

"I think that, believe it or not, coming out of a recession, it's like it's time to just put your worries aside and celebrate a little bit — it's the mood of the moment.

"People really do want to dance and sing along with what we're doing. You can see them mouthing the words."

Songs like *I Can See Clearly Now* — a '70s chestnut reworked with a slick, modern vibe — is a good example, he says, and appeals to people from all generations.

"Older people remember that song as nostalgia, but an 18-year-old thinks "I like this — it's kind of like *Glee*!"

"Really, I know every act wants to think everybody loves their music, but our fan base isn't just young, old, male or female — it really *is* everybody!"

Not, to be clear, that he's crediting *Glee*.

"The instant *Glee* came out, our manager said 'We've got to ride this and get it on our poster!' " he laughs. "But really, things happen at the pace they happen. You can only ride it so much."

What's really changed, he says, is a new informality among band members — a sense of fun not present in the old days — that makes their vocal harmonies more accessible to a wider audience.

"Over the years, we took ourselves too seriously — we were a little too stiff and scripted," points out the 30-something bass, who shares vocal duties with Janet Turner and brothers Thom and Dan Speck.

"We don't do that anymore. We take music seriously, but we don't take ourselves seriously."

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BOX INFO

The Essentials

Friday and Saturday (Nov. 5 & 6), 8 p.m.

Registry Theatre, 122 Frederick St, Kitchener

Tickets \$25 at 519-578-1570

or online at www.centre-square.com

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Publicity
A cappella group The Essentials will perform Nov. 5, 6 at the Registry Theatre in Kitchener.