

The Essentials bare it all for their fans



Bob Klanae

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On Sunday, December 5, The Essentials present a CD release concert at Central Elgin High School in St. Thomas — \$2 admission (proceeds to St. Thomas Christmas Care). On Monday, December 6 they'll be on *New Day* (7-9 a.m.), the *New PL's* morning show. The Essentials will perform another CD release concert in London on Tuesday, December 7 at Yuk Yuks — \$5 admission. TV viewers can catch the boys on Wednesday, December 8 in the CBS Movie: *A Holiday Romance* starring Andy Griffith, Naomi Judd and Gerald McRaney.

The Duke did it. A little bit of boredom too, but really it was The Duke. No, not The Duke you're thinking of. I'm talkin' about the repetitive mantra that opens Gene Chandler's doo-wop classic, *The Duke Of Earl*. One person starts it and the rest just have to jump in. The Essential's vocal bass Joe Oliva knows it well. Some years back the teenage Oliva was sitting idly with his fellow Central Singers (London's Central High showcase choir) waiting for the music teach to finish up with the female vocal section when the spirit of The Duke appeared in their midst. They "Duked" so well that they got a feature slot in the concert. Someone with a connection to a local ice cream parlor heard them

night in early September rolled the tapes at a concert in Sault Ste Marie. A mere two months later *Bare*, the definitive Essentials live document, is on the shelves at all HMV and Sam's stores coast to coast.

A capella is a music loved by most, but it rarely finds a home on the charts. And that is the crux of the problem for The Essentials. It's tough being the keeper of the a capella doo-wop flame when you're basically the only game around. All of which explains why they are thinking very hard about mixing things up a little in the future. "We are not averse to instruments," Oliva offers carefully. "We don't hate them."

"On the next album," Oliva says matter of factly, "we are considering adding instrumentation and going with all original music. I've always been a fan of harmony. I'm not a huge Backstreet Boys fan or anything, but I do like specific songs that they sing. That's kind of the direction that the band is taking."

But before The Essentials enter the studio in an attempt to expand beyond their a capella roots, they'll be hunkered around the boob tube on Wednesday, December 8. That's when this vocally gifted quartet will be checking out their thespian talents on CBS's *A Holiday Romance*.

It seems the Toronto producers of this CBS holiday fare needed (wait for it) a couple of male a capella singers. "Yeah, what are the chances?" laughs Oliva. Only problem was that as the group understood it, the roles called for two males of roughly high school age. The late twenty-ish Essentials gulped collectively. "We thought 'there's no way we are going to get this,'" scoffed Oliva. The casting director didn't want them to sing together but as Oliva puts it "we said 'well we're doing it anyway



SINGIN' FOR THEIR SUPPER: London's Essentials harmonize on the national anthem at a recent Raptors' game. Unlike the players, these guys don't dribble on the court.

and wanted them to croon a tune or seven next to their sundae menu. "So we added some songs and we just never stopped. It was kind of bizarre the way it started out I guess," muses Oliva.

A capella is a lot of fun to listen to and sing but it's no way to make your way in the music business. Refreshingly, no one seems to have told The Essentials that. For the past five years the four doo-wop denizens have been winning converts with their passionate live performances and two studio albums produced with élan by Canadian music legend Jack Richardson (Guess Who, Alice Cooper, et al.).

The release of their new coyly titled disc, *Bare* was prompted by the positive vibes they generated during their live shows. "There was a demand from our fan base for songs like *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* and *Some Kind Of Wonderful*. Our audience kept saying to us, sending us e-mails saying, 'When are you going to do it?'" So they did some prep and one

because to be honest we really don't care if we get the part or not.' We didn't think we had a hope in hell," he confesses with a chuckle.

In the end they got the parts — all four of them. "The director liked us and said 'I want all the Essentials to be in this movie.'" As for the age thing, they had misread the script — they're all high school graduates. Joe's the mechanic, Dan the gas station attendant, and so on. "It lasts about a minute and a half," Oliva adds.

Before London sees the small-size version of The Essentials, the full-size models will be out and about plugging *Bare* via any number of events. "We just take it one album at a time and one step at a time," insists Oliva. "Our main focus is that fourth album. If nothing happens with it we can always walk away from the business and say we recorded four albums. Most bands don't last more than two years."