

When The Essentials perform, it's hard not to have a good time

By Harry Currie Record staff

Last Friday evening an outstanding vocal group began a six-week return engagement at Conestogo's Black Forest Inn. Their three-week run in the fall was sold out and the management very wisely booked them to come back.

The group is called The Essentials, and experiencing their performance has got to be one of the most satisfying, pleasurable and fun-filled evenings of music one could ever hope for.

Small wonder. At the a cappella summit in New York last year they were named one of the best vocal groups in the world. They have drawn audiences of 2,000 in huge outdoor venues, but working to smaller, interactive audiences is their preference.

The Essentials have been a five-man group for most of their existence, but last fall one of the five left to work on his own in the U.S. After much deliberation, the remaining four decided to re-work their arrangements and keep the four-man configuration. The difference is almost imperceptible.

What makes the group so good? Start with the voices. Each one has training in vocal production, so the singing has a quality which the average group could never attain. This shows in their intonation, balance and dynamic range.

Couple this with musicianship, an acute sense of presentation, a careful choice of material, natural movement, great arrangements, a waggish sense of humor and you get the picture. Most of all, they're having fun, and it shows.

While The Essentials' style is sort of retro '60s doo-wap, the voicings are subtlety more complex than any of the arrangements by the original groups, giving them far more musical interest without losing the style. Even when they do more recent tunes you'd swear you must have heard them back in the '60s.

The upper three voices are Bob Van Gieson, Daniel Speck, and Joon Nah.



The Essentials are back at the Black Forest Inn by popular demand.

All three share the leads in various tunes, each with a distinctive style, and each with a voice which is wide-ranging, flexible, and confident. Joe Oliva is the bass, and he doesn't sing leads, for in this type of a cappella singing the bottom voice is the anchor, pushing out both the beat and the bass line. Oliva is one of the best—he never misses, never runs out of breath and the lowest notes are almost out of sight.

Audience participation comes naturally to The Essentials, so be prepared to be serenaded as part of the act—all in good fun and good taste.

The group has two CDs out—Oh What a Night is the first, and the second is... and then some. At last report

the first one is completely sold out.

Both of the albums were produced by Canadian recording legend Jack Richardson. There is a rumor that they may do a live CD during their engagement at the Black Forest Inn.

The group came together in London, Ont., though only one of them actually calls London home—that's Oliva. Van Gieson is from Teaneck, N. J., Speck from Hamilton, and Nah from Seoul, South Korea.

The Essentials are at the Black Forest Inn in Conestogo on Friday nights as part of a dinner show package until the end of February. For up-to-date information and reservations call 664-2223.