

Let Their Voices Be Heard

Varsity Men's Glee Club celebrates 125 years of music and camaraderie



In April, the Varsity Men's Glee Club will mark 125 years on the Illinois campus. The group, presently headed by Barrington Coleman (above), boasts a lengthy history of blending music, tradition and travel, including a meeting with Pope Paul VI (bottom left) during a trip to Rome and the penning of the Morrow Plots song, which advises, 'You can't throw shade on the corn.'

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Photo courtesy of Marjorie Olson

On Christmas Eve 1895, 400 alumni gathered at Central Music Hall in Chicago for the University of Illinois Glee and Mandolin Club's first concert in the city.

They weren't disappointed. One newspaper reported: "The glee was by no means confined to the stage. For more than two hours it was epidemic, seizing every individual in the auditorium, and while late Christmas shoppers trudged through the ill-natured weather on the outside the good-natured audience on the inside thoroughly enjoyed an excellent programme."

The concert was an early step in the ensemble's growth as the University's musical ambassador. Founded in 1886, the group – now Varsity Men's Glee Club – predates the football team and the Illio. Among musical organizations, only the University of Illinois Band is older.

After 125 years, Men's Glee remains a vibrant part of campus life, maintaining a balance between evolving musically and preserving the traditions that its estimated 1,500 living alumni hold dear: a repertoire

combining time-honored favorites and new additions; a selective membership blending voices from across the University; and a legacy of performing Alma Mater's songs on campus and beyond.

Friends, family and traveling troubadors

For Andrew Goldberg '97 LAS, it's hard to imagine what life was like for the club's founders. But, he says, "if we were to meet some of those guys from 125 years ago, we would have something in common.

"We'd have a love of this great men's choral singing and for this camaraderie."

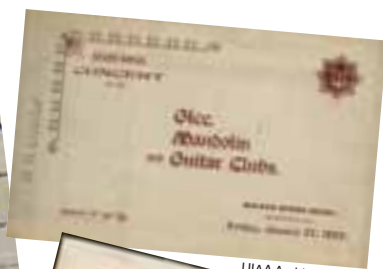
Indeed, for many years the club's concerts have started with "Gaudeamus Igitur." Sung in Latin, its opening line translates, "Let us rejoice, therefore, while we are young."

Bruce Johnson '70 MEDIA, MS '72 MEDIA, calls the phrase "the spirit of the Glee Club, summed up in a few words."

"It's just a wonderful, joyous experience to be in a group like that and be able to experience really good music-making," says Johnson, who is a found-



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William Olson, at right in photo above, led the Men's Glee Club for nearly three decades; here he is shown conducting a rehearsal in 1990. At left, concert programs commemorate the club's 1892-93 and 1905-06 seasons, while the cover art of "The Errant Engineers" illustrates a musical-comedy sketch written expressly for the Glee and Mandolin Clubs in their 1910-11 year. A Men's Glee Club reunion, including an alumni choir, will take place on campus April 26-29.

ing member of The Other Guys, the club's popular a cappella group.

"For many of the guys who passed through the University and were in the Glee Club, it was ... the highest-quality musical experience that they'll ever have," he says. That's particularly significant because from the beginning, most members – despite their singing talents – haven't been music majors.

Perhaps that openness serves as the reason behind the multi-generational aspect of Glee Club membership. The annual fall concerts have provided chances to honor those ties, which can reach far into the past – for example, at the 1969 concert, Johnson introduced his great-uncle, Esley Johnson, Class of 1910. (Bruce's brother, Jeff '68, also was a Men's Glee member.)

For **Scott Williams '76 LAS, MS '78 MEDIA**, senior director of the Alumni Association's EXPLORERS travel program, family connections drew him to the University in the first place.

His father, the late Robert C. Williams '40 BUS, had been in Glee Club and had steeped his children in Illini lore. ("He had [us] singing U of I songs on family vacations in the station wagon," Scott recalled.) Both he and his brother **Robert '78 BUS** followed their father's footsteps and joined the Glee Club while on campus.

At Scott's first Dads Day concert as a student, he remembers singing "Big Ten Medley," a beloved mash-up of school songs, with his father in the audience.

"That was the most moving experience I ever had at the University of Illinois," Williams says. "He's responsible

for my appreciation of music, and there we were – appreciating it together."

While the Dads Day concerts are a highlight of the group's calendar, Men's Glee has carried tunes beyond the confines of campus ever since 1893, when the club performed in nearby Danville. In the 1950s, the "Singing Illini" began playing to even wider audiences, appearing in 1955 on the "Toast of the Town" television show (the original name for "The Ed Sullivan Show"). At the Brussels World's Fair in 1958, the club served as official representatives of American culture.

That event launched another tradition that would take hold: European tours. Subsequent club trips featured performances at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome (with some bringing appreciative nuns to tears), Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and Omaha Beach for the 60th anniversary of D-Day.

Time to celebrate

A key period in club history began in 1968, when William Olson '59 FAA, MS '67 FAA, became director. Leading the ensemble for the next 28 years, he would serve as its longest-tenured conductor.

"He was one of the guys," said Goldberg. "At the same time, he took music incredibly seriously, and he demanded the best out of us."

When Olson stepped down in 1996, some 200 club alumni attended his retirement concert, which featured a surprise song composed by former members **Marty Sirvatka '80 FAA, MS '81 FAA**, and **Mike Ferguson '89 FAA, MS '92 FAA**.

Of the tribute, Olson's wife, **Marjorie Stucke Olson '58 FAA**, said, "I'm

not sure there was a dry eye in the house."

Current director Barrington Coleman is leaving his own mark on the club – holding on to tradition as well as commissioning songs, introducing more jazz and gospel, and arranging collaborations with soloists, jazz trios and even the Marching Illini.

Coleman wants to take Men's Glee to new places, musically and geographically, hoping to tour countries such as China or Japan, where, he says, "men's ensembles are unheard of."

The Urbana campus will hear Men's Glee in force this spring, when a celebration of the club's 125th anniversary takes place the weekend of April 26-29.

Among the alumni planning to attend is **Ben Jones '06 LAS**, a member of Chanticleer, a Grammy-winning men's singing group.

Like most members, Jones hadn't majored in music in college. But the UI ensemble's diverse repertoire – and private lessons with Coleman – prepared him for a professional singing career.

"My college experience was Glee Club and The Other Guys and studying voice with Dr. Coleman," Jones says. "All of the friends I keep in touch with from Illinois I either knew before I was there or they were in those ensembles. There's just nothing else."

– Dan Petrella

Petrella '06 MEDIA, '06 LAS, MS '10 MEDIA, is a freelance journalist in Urbana.

Editor's note: Information on the anniversary celebration will be posted at www.mensglee.org/alumni