

# THE ALLEY CATS

## *Holiday Top Ten*

**Art Form: Music**

**Style: 50s Era A Cappella Vocals**

**Culture: United States of America**

### MEET THE ARTIST:

**The Alley Cats** are a perfect blend both vocally and personally. *Royce Reynolds*, whose solid bass vocals create the Cats' musical foundation, and *Mando Fonseca*, the second tenor always ready with a pun or quick quip, have an easy familiarity which makes their camaraderie and vocal play radiate from the stage. Talented baritone *Juan Del Castillo*, whose smooth, rich vocals charm audiences the world over, and *Sean Devine*, re-creator of all those soaring first tenor lines of the 50s, bring their freshness and talent to a solid foundation of a cappella tradition. The Alley Cats joined as a group in 1987 at Fullerton College in Southern California, and began their musical journey with Disney's "Blast to the Past" salute. The Cats have appeared at fairs and festivals around the country and have been featured performers on stages at Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm, and at the White House. The Alley Cats' first disc of 50s classics, *The Cat's Meow*, and their newest release, *Strike 3*, continue a tradition of Doo-Wop at its best.

### ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

This joyous holiday performance features the The Alley Cats singing 10 of the most well-known and enduring American Christmas songs. Presented in contemporary Doo-Wop style, these traditional songs capture the sentiment and fun of the season. This program is the result of research documenting the top 25 American holiday songs of all time. The following 10 songs were selected because they best suit the group's four-part harmony. They include: *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer*; *White Christmas*; *Jingle Bells*; *Feliz Navidad*; *Little St. Nick*; *Winter Wonderland*; *Blue Christmas*; *Deck the Halls*; *Let It Snow* and *The Chipmunk Song*. Narration between the selections gives background information on each song's history, arrangement or vocal styling. Tight harmonies, humor and dynamic a cappella energy make The Alley Cats one of America's premier doo-wop groups. This festive seasonal celebration is sure to delight audiences.



### PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

A *cappella*, meaning singing without musical accompaniment, is the oldest form of music. Tribal Chant, Gregorian Chant, Gospel, Jazz, Barbershop, Doo-Wop, and Contemporary music all trace their roots to a cappella. During the 1950s, young men and women began forming singing groups in their neighborhoods. Street corner singing soon became the hits of the day and Doo-Wop was born. Doo-Wop is a type of rhythm and blues popular in the 1950s and 60s using nonsense syllables in intricate, harmonic arrangements. Classic examples are "Earth Angel" by the Penguins and "Sh-Boom" by the Chords. The groups eventually helped establish Motown. The first real boy bands, before N'Sync and the Backstreet Boys, were Doo-Wop groups like the Del Vikings, and Dion and The Belmonts, and in the Motown era, The Temptations, Four Tops and Miracles. These groups laid the foundation for the music we hear today.

The fifties were a happy time in America; World War II was over, and *I Like Ike* was the phrase of the time. People felt safe and secure. The music of the fifties is still enjoyed by many people of all ages; it is truly timeless. Today Doo-wop is more widely known as oldies and rarely is heard in the a cappella form. The music is enjoyed all around the world.

Early on, what we called doo-wop music embraced the grand tradition of nonsense lyrics. Taking their cue from Dizzy Gillespie's 1947 be-bop song, "Oop Boop Sh'Bam," vocal groups sang "Sh-Boom," "Oop Shoop" and "Bip Bam," all using meaningless sounds to fill the beats and create background chants. But perhaps the most common nonsense syllable was "doo," which has always been useful in popular songs. Over 150 years ago, composer Stephen Foster used "doo-dah, doo-dah" to fill out the verses of his "De Camptown Races" (1850). A hundred years later a

black vocal group called The Sliders crooned "doo-doo-da-doo-doo" behind Savannah Churchill on her "When You Come Back to Me." The first hit record showcasing "doo-wop" came in 1955 with The Turbans' Top 40 recording of "When You Dance."

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What was your favorite song from the show? Explain why it was your favorite.
- When did you realize there were no instruments other than the human voice and body percussion?
- What feelings did you have when listening to this traditional, seasonal music?
- If you could add other seasonal songs to this program, what would they be?
- What did you find the most interesting about the Doo-Wop style of singing? How is it similar or different to songs you listen to today?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - HISTORY/SOC. STUDIES:

Think about some of the holidays that are celebrated during the winter season. These might include Chanukah, Ramadan, Christmas, Kwanza, the Winter Solstice, and New Year's. Discuss some of the special traditions that are associated with each one. Then assign different groups one of the holidays and have them research the history and traditions of the holiday found throughout the world. The following are some questions to guide their research:

- What is the original idea of the holiday?
- When and where did the holiday begin?
- What are some of the traditions?
- Where in the world is this holiday celebrated?
- What are some of the songs, music, dances or stories associated with the holiday?
- What are the types of food prepared and eaten?
- Have the traditions changed through time?
- Do students in the class celebrate this holiday? If so, interview them to find more about their cultural and family traditions.

Have groups report their findings, and if possible share recordings, visuals, video clips, or a short story about the holiday. Chart the results of the research; compare and analyze the answers. Discuss the aspects of the research that students found most interesting or that surprised them.

- Legend:
- Artistic perception
  - ❖ Creative expression
  - ▶ Historical & cultural context
  - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
  - \* Connections, Relations, Applications

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ❖ Select one or more of the songs that you heard in the performance and learn to sing it as a group. You can use audio tapes, CDs or the Internet to find the words and tunes, or ask parents and friends to help.
- As a class, select three of your favorite holiday songs to learn and perform together or share with another class. Sing *a capella*, but add accompaniment and sound effects using simple percussion instruments. (bells, shakers, triangles, drums, wood blocks, etc.)
- ⇒ Several of the songs in this performance included snow. See if you can identify which songs these were. (*White Christmas, Jingle Bells, Winter Wonderland, Let It Snow*) Discuss why people associate Christmas with snow and then think of

the things that are more seasonally relevant to a Southern California Christmas or winter holiday. Create song titles that describe Christmas or another holiday in your neighborhood, e.g. Blue Sky, White Cloud Christmas; Palm Tree Magic; Traffic Jam to Grandma's.

- ⇒ Select a song that the class knows well. Sing the song at three different tempos (medium or normal, very slow, fast). Then sing it as you clap a basic rhythm or add percussion instruments. Finally, write one original verse as a small group or class.

These three ideas, tempo, rhythm and lyrics, are important to composing and interpreting songs. This is why we might prefer one singer and style over another, even though they sing the same song.

- \* Think about your favorite seasonal holiday from any time of year. Recall the food, activities, songs, games and traditions that go with this holiday. Write a paragraph about one holiday time that was special to you. Describe what you did and how you felt.

## VOCABULARY:

Look up the following words and their definitions. Share and discuss them with the class.

|            |         |        |
|------------|---------|--------|
| A cappella | rhythm  | tempo  |
| harmony    | fifties | pitch  |
| baritone   | bass    | tenor  |
| doo-wop    | music   | lyrics |

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Rhino Records, *Doo-Wop, Collections 1, 2 and 3*  
*New Holiday Songs for Children: A Creative Approach*. Beth R. Mochanck. 1988. Available from Amazon.com.

