

Congressional Chorus – 25 Years of Great American Songs

BY EMILY CLARK

If you stay too long at a Congressional Chorus rehearsal, you risk becoming a hopeless groupie or worse, a wannabe singer (lacking only talent and sight-reading ability). Such is the infectious camaraderie that governs the group, now celebrating its 25th year.

But scratch the surface of this party atmosphere, and you find serious, dedicated musicians brought together by their love of singing and their devotion to American music of all types.

Clubbing it at the Atlas

Chorus director David Simmons puts the singers through their paces, preparing for the upcoming cabaret performance in March. This year's show, with the theme of "Shake, Rattle and Roll," highlights music from the 1950s, including rock and roll, country and early folk-revival songs, as well as movie tunes.

This is the sixth year for the cabaret show, and the past few years, every performance has sold out, even with added shows. Each year, Simmons said, "we step it up a notch." The show features costumes, sets, choreography and cabaret tables to create a club-like atmosphere.

Brittany Thompson and Jessica Ault, both sopranos and section leaders, are relatively new to the Congressional Chorus, but are huge fans of the cabaret show and the dancing they get to do.

"Before I joined the chorus, I came to a cabaret



Last year's cabaret: "Stompin' at the Savoy"

performance that was 60s music, and absolutely fell in love with it," Thompson recalled, adding that she will "look for any excuse to sing."

Ault also noted that "most of my friends are here and we hang out together outside of the chorus."

The rehearsal (and, in March, performance) space is the hip, refurbished Atlas Theater on H Street NE, where there is lots of room and a great piano. Simmons—who has a near-encyclopedic knowledge of music history—leads the group through wordless "na-na-na" singing of classics like "Hey, Good Lookin'," "Love Me Tender" and "At the Hop." The four-part harmonies flow like water, and there's a lot of foot-tapping and humming in the audience.

Singin' on the Hill

The spacious Atlas is a far cry from the early years, when a small group of Congressional staffers who liked to sing formed the Congressional Cho-

rus as a creative outlet and stress reliever.

For the first year, the chorus' eight members had to pay \$10 a week to roll the one piano available on the Hill into their rehearsal room in the Dirksen Senate office building. They sang at lunch and often had to rush back to the Hill for business.

David Capes and Louise Buchanan have been with the Congressional Chorus since its beginnings, watching it grow by a factor of ten into the 80-member group it is today.

Capes, who still works at the Senate's Office of the Sergeant at Arms, recalled the early years under the late director Michael Patterson.

"We wrote a charter, solicited support in the House and Senate and put on two or three concerts a year," he said, adding that part of the original mission was "to focus on American music and use the Congressional Chorus for community service."

In the early days, the Congressional Chorus sang at nursing homes, homeless shelters and inner city schools.

"We sang at a high school where a student had been murdered the week before," Buchanan said, "And before it was over, the students were singing with us."

In its second year, however, the Congressional Chorus burst into the spotlight when it was one of two groups chosen to sing at the inauguration of President George H.W. Bush.

"We sang 'America the Beautiful' as the presidential motorcade drove up," Buchanan said, smiling at the memory.

Buchanan, formerly a staffer with the late Congressman Jack Kemp, said that today the three-year-old American Youth Chorus is the chorus' main education arm. That group of middle-schoolers has performed at the White House and will do a jazz concert later in the spring.

A Loss and a Gain

The Congressional Chorus nearly disbanded in 2006, distraught over the sudden death of Michael Patterson. Luckily, they decided to carry on



Artistic Director David Simmons



DINING COUPONS

and hired Simmons after he answered their ad for a director.

Simmons himself is a musician and performer who took a circuitous path into full-time music education. He did a stint on the Hill as a staffer for the late Senator John Heinz and later practiced law for years before returning to his passion for music. In addition to directing the Congressional Chorus and the American Youth Chorus, he teaches music at a Maryland high school.

Besides rehearsing for the cabaret shows, the Congressional Chorus is also preparing for its 25th anniversary concert in June, which will feature two new commissioned works. One of the composers, Chris Urguiaga, a 20-year-old Eastman Conservatory student from Maryland, attended the recent rehearsal.

Urguiaga was a fill-in accompanist for a Chorus winter concert when he happened to mention that he also wrote music. By happy coincidence, Simmons was looking for a young composer for the June concert and wanted a piece with a positive message.

Urguiaga's piece, which he calls "an evolving work in progress," is set to three Langston Hughes poems.

The other commissioned work, by Joan Szymko, is based on the poem "Whereas," which speaks to the power of music to effect social change and is written in the form of a Congressional resolution.

Tickets for both cabaret and 25th anniversary concerts are available at the Congressional Chorus website (www.congressionalchorus.org). The silver anniversary concert is June 2nd at National City Christian Church. Cabaret tickets for performances March 22-25 at the Atlas Theater are also available through the Atlas box office (www.atlasarts.org). But don't wait, as most shows sell out quickly. ★



TRY OUR NEW MENU
La Loma
Mexican Restaurant

BEST MEXICAN FOOD IN TOWN

20% off the check
1 coupon per table
Expires 02/29/2012

Book your private events with us!!!

316 Mass, Avenue, NE
202-548-2550

Cater Your Party With Us!
Gift Certificates Available

Buy One Entree
Get 1/2 OFF
Second Entree



La Lomita
Mexican Restaurant
King of the Hill

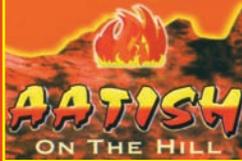
1330 Pennsylvania Ave. SE
202-546-3109

Exp 02/29/2012

Fine Indian & Pakistani
Tandoori Charcoal Cuisine
"The Master of Tandoori on Capitol Hill" *Washingtonian*
"Excellent Pakistani Food" *Washington Post*
"A wonderful dinner..." *Hill Rag*
"Great value, great food" *City Paper*
"Best Tandoori Trip" *Shuttle Sheet, Delta Airlines*
JUMBO LUNCH BUFFET \$9.95, 11:30AM-2:30PM

Lunch: 11:30am-2:30pm daily • Dinner: Su-Th 5-10pm • Fr-Sa 5-10:30
609 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, Wash. DC 20003 • 544-0931
www.aatishonhill.com

Buy One Entree,
Get the Second
One HALF OFF
*of equal or lesser value
dine-in - dinner only



One block from the Eastern
Market Metro Station

Expires 02/29/12

Buy 1 Burrito Get
2nd at 1/2 Price
(Equal or lesser value)



BURRITO BROTHERS
205 Pennsylvania Ave., SE
(202) 543-6835
Now Open on Sundays 11-7pm



Try any of our protien smoothies or shakes, and get 50¢ off
(Valid only at Pennsylvania location. Not good with any other offer)


THE OLD SIAM
Thai Cuisine
(202) 544-7426
406 Eighth Street, SE Washington, DC 20003

New Deluxe Lunch Special Menu!!!
Appetizer Choices \$5.95:
- Crispy Trio: Curry Puff, Crab Wonton, and Golden Triangle
- Trio Special: Larb Gai, Spring Roll, and Tom Yum Chicken

Entree Choices \$10.00:
- Salmon Delight - Chicken Thai
- Pad Thai Combo (Shrimp + Chicken)
- Noo - Curry (Spaghetti Topping with Green Curry Chicken + Shrimp)
- Kaprow Chicken with Fried Egg
- Fried Rice Combo (Shrimp + Chicken)

*** Every Lunch Entree and Lunch Special Entree comes with Complementary Iced Tea *** Dine-in Only ***



7th St and Pennsylvania Ave, SE • 1718 14th St. NW
www.peregrineespresso.com

