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Sunday, October 10, 2004

# (Habeas) Chorus is all for fun

By Neal Rubin / The Detroit News



The others say that Mike Leibson will do anything on stage. They say this with reverence, or maybe deep relief that it isn't them. If you need someone to drop his pants or dress like a woman or play DaimlerChrysler honcho Juergen Schrempp with a German accent straight out of "The Producers," Leibson is your guy.

He's also an assistant U.S. attorney. And he once slapped on a wig and impersonated Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, with Justice John Paul Stevens in the audience.

This was at a judicial conference on Mackinac Island. Stevens, 84, was in his late 70s back then, and if he was offended by the troupe of singing lawyers, you couldn't tell by the way he was dancing at his seat.

To be precise, Stevens shook his distinguished moneymaker when A (Habeas) Chorus Line sang its parody of "YMCA," a tribute to the U.S. Code, Annotated, called "USCA." During "Look at Me, I'm Sandra Day," with Leibson as Ginsburg and Judy Zorn as Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Stevens did not actually dance, but he laughed, which was even better.

(Habeas) Chorus, as in habeas corpus, is quite likely the only musical comedy act ever named for the right to challenge the constitutionality of some poor sap's detention.

Chances are it's also the only band of eight lawyers (plus one recently retired U.S. District Court case manager) to create songs about Kobe Bryant, John Ashcroft, osteoporosis and, for those times it's been booked at dental conventions, a catchy number about oral hygiene called "Liter of the Plaque."

The group came about because in 1992, the woman putting together an annual bar association dinner in Detroit wanted to make the event less boring than the last 27 bar association dinners.

She contacted Jim Robb of Birmingham, an associate dean

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and general counsel at Cooley Law School and a hugely gifted musician and arranger. Robb dialed Joe La Bella of Huntington Woods, who majored in theater before deciding to pick up a law degree.

La Bella called some people who called some people, and before long the token nonlawyer, Sara Fischer of Grosse Pointe Park, was handing the script for the show to a deep-voiced Bingham Farms litigator named Brian Figot.

“This thing was an inch thick,” Figot says. “I thought I was just singing ‘Happy Days Are Here Again’ or something.”

With lyricist Justin Klimko of Grosse Pointe Woods, nothing is that simple. Take “Walker, My Man,” about American Taliban John Walker Lindh:

*My own quirk is,  
I like my girls in burkhas.*

Klimko will sometimes let a potential subject skitter through his brain for years before he finds just the right words and tune. Most often, though, inspiration arrives when it’s timely, as with a knockoff of “Margaritaville”:

*Wasted the day again in Martha Stewart’s cell,  
Working from a full bucket of paint.  
Some people say this shade of teal is passe,  
But I know — that it certainly ain’t.*

Klimko also provides the rehearsal hall, a seminar room at Butzel Long. Robb brings one of those keyboards that can re-create any sound from a flute to a dump truck, someone else brings potato chips and M&Ms, suit jackets get discarded, and the assorted legal talents of (Habeas) Chorus start acting silly.

“One thing we don’t have that we really need, given our ages, is roadies,” La Bella says.

“And groupies,” someone suggests.

The men acknowledge that the best singers are the women — Fischer, the operatic Zorn of Rochester Hills, and Angela Williams of Highland Park. The men soldier on, carrying tunes and selling songs and trying not to dance too much like six middle-aged white guys. The combination works, a dozen or so times a year.

While most of the gigs are private, there’s a public performance Saturday at 7:30 p.m. at Adray Auditorium, part of the Mackenzie Fine Arts Center at Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn. Tickets are \$15; go to [www.habeaschorus.com](http://www.habeaschorus.com), or just show up.

They’ll sing about the president and the previous president (“Bimbo No. 5”), they’ll strut and strive to prove that lawyers

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can have just as much fun as real people, and maybe they'll even trot out Leibson again in that wig.

"It's a total outlet for them," says Fischer, the civilian. "For all of us, really. We still can't believe we get away with this stuff."

It's all in good fun, and to anyone who's truly aggrieved by their words and actions, they offer a heartfelt, "So sue me!" Unless, of course, the offended party is someone who can transfer Leibson to Anchorage, in which case they're deeply apologetic.

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