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Legal eagles seek parody with Habeas

By TARA GOCI , Special to The Oakland Press

07/23/2003



A (Habeas) Chorus Line performs at a radio telethon at O'Toole's in Royal Oak
 The Oakland Press/JOSE JUAREZ

July 23, 2003

When lawyers perform, their stage is a courtroom. Right? Not quite.

Not since 11 years ago, when a group of metropolitan Detroit-area legal eagles started performing in front of a different kind of jury - live audiences.

If this sounds far-fetched, then you may not have met Habeas Chorus, a musical parody group whose offbeat appeal starts with its name, a quirky blending of "A Chorus Line" with the legal term "habeas corpus." Latin for "you have the body," it is used to determine the legality of custody. Though the group's full name is actually A (Habeas) Chorus Line, its nickname, Habeas Chorus, seems to fit better.

"We do in-your-face kind of stuff, but we're amateurs, so it's not slick," says 47-year-old Birmingham resident James D. Robb, the group's musical director, who's also associate dean and general counsel for Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing. "What's fun for us is that it's always better than people expect it to be."

Members take turns stepping out for solos as they perform parodies, songs whose lyrics have been changed to convey funny, and often satiric, messages. But the group's secret weapon is 47-year-old Justin Klimko, a corporate transaction attorney who writes the parody lyrics.

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Whether lampooning sports, politics, or just plain human nature, good parody should "have a bit of an edge to it," says the Grosse Pointe resident. "It has to say something."

For instance, Klimko transforms Paul Simon's 1973 hit "Love Me Like a Rock" into a political statement on war and politics with his "Love to Fight Iraq."

To perform it, Detroit resident Mark Lezotte slips into the persona of George W. Bush, crooning, "When I was a younger man," while the rest of the group chants "not yet the president." Just moments into song, the audience knows it's in for a wild ride through two presidencies.

Klimko isn't shy about parodying local news events, either. In his hands, golden oldie "Runaway" by Del Shannon becomes "Conaway," a skewed view of the bankruptcy mess left by ex-Kmart chairman Chuck Conaway. Other subjects get similar treatment. Often, parodies in the group's repertoire can be customized to suit a particular audience.


Habeas Chorus first came together in 1992, performing what it thought was a "one-shot deal" at a local bar association's annual dinner. Within a few years, the group was performing not only for bar associations, but also for non-lawyer clubs, companies and trade associations. During the past year, it has staged a dozen hour-long shows throughout Michigan and the Midwest, usually for club or company annual meetings.

For those who've never experienced Habeas Chorus, the group plans an open-to-the-public show for October and will soon release a new CD.

In addition to Robb, Klimko and Lezotte, the group includes district court case manager Sara F. Fischer of Grosse Pointe and U.S. assistant attorney Michael Leibson of Oak Park as well as attorneys Brian D. Figot and Joseph M. LaBella of Huntington Woods, Judy Zorn of Rochester Hills, and Angela R.C. Williams of Highland Park.

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