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A review of "The Chromatics"

by Steve Johnson

This newsletter does not normally carry concert reviews. But I think you'll agree that this one is definitely on-topic for astronomy enthusiasts. Sure, there are other concerts under the stars, and other concerts with laser shows. But how many concerts . . .

. . . Include lyrics telling us that the sun's equatorial region rotates in 25 days, but the polar regions take 36 days?

. . . Name the astronomer Edwin Hubble and the physicist Hans Bethe?

. . . Include a song all about an upcoming gamma-ray and X-ray astronomy satellite (the SWIFT mission)?

. . . Include a slide show showing you the lyrics together with educational pictures of solar-system and deep-sky objects?

. . . Take place inside a planetarium?

. . . Feature performers who are real, live rocket scientists and astrophysicists?

Believe it or not, these were all part of the concert by the Chromatics on March 23 at the Montgomery College planetarium. The Chromatics are an a-cappella singing group of 3 men and 4 women. From their web page:

This group of techies (engineers, scientists, computer geeks, and NASA employees) performs pop and rock covers and original songs inspired by our modern world. The World Wide Web, television, and fast food—they're all subjects of Chromatics originals. The Chromatics have also written astronomically-correct a cappella songs to be used in classrooms for a project called AstroCappella.

This free concert had the Chromatics standing and crouching around the projector in the middle of the planetarium, inches from the nearest audience members, and maybe 12 feet from the farthest ones. The laser show consisted of an electronically modulated HeNe laser—sort of a junior, junior Laserium show—superimposed on the star field on the dome. So we mostly heard the Chromatics—we didn't see them much.

Their original songs are very educational as well as entertaining. They cover a wide range of astronomical topics, from the Doppler Shift, to the Solar System, to specific NASA missions. They also include covers of some pop songs, such as one of the Beatles' Eastern philosophy songs, and Sting's "Synchronicity." At a previous concert (not devoted to astronomy), they included Rush's "Subdivisions" and Right Said Fred's "I'm Too Sexy." You know you're at a Chromatics show when you see a real, live NASA astronomer (and bass singer) strut across the stage singing that he's "too sexy for your party."

One thing you won't hear at a Chromatics concert is musical instruments—acoustic, electronic, or percussive—only the sounds produced by the singers' vocal chords

How many concerts name the astronomer Edwin Hubble and the physicist Hans Bethe?

and hands. It's amazing how many rhythms, sound effects, and harmonies can be produced by a good a-cappella group. The Chromatics perform in a high-energy, versatile style I would call "modern pop a-cappella," which you can also hear from groups like Rockapella, The Bobs, and another local quartet, DaVinci's Notebook.

The Chromatics have recorded 2 CDs with all their educational astronomy-oriented original songs. Their latest is called AstroCappella 2.0. Besides playing 13 songs in an audio CD player, this CD-ROM also includes html files with the lyrics, images, Powerpoint shows, and movies about all their astronomy-related topics. For example, there's an MTV-style video, showing a fast driver getting stopped by a policeman, which demonstrates the Doppler effect. As cars whiz by, their sounds decrease in pitch; and the radar gun of course determines her speed using Doppler.

For more information, including dates of future performances, see the Chromatics' web site: www.thechromatics.com. *