‘50 Years of Fun Through Song’ audio-visual chronicle of Bubs history

By Claire Felter

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Jumbos are pretty accustomed to seeing the Tufts Beelzebubs belting their hearts out in Goddard Chapel or putting on “Bubs in the Pub” in Cohen Auditorium, but students can now see the accomplishments of the Bubs in a less likely locale: This semester, the Tufts University Art Gallery is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Beelzebubs, Tufts’ oldest all-male a cappella group, by showcasing an exhibition entitled “Tufts University Beelzebubs: 50 Years of Fun Through Song.”

The exhibition in the Remis Sculpture Court, which will be on display through May 27, is set up to allow viewers to move back in time. The first segment, at the bottom of the gallery’s stairs, presents Bubs history from the years 2001-2012. The focus of this era was the Bubs’ television fame that started with the group’s near-win on NBC’s a cappella competition show “The Sing-Off” in 2009, followed by the Bubs’ being invited to make recordings for the hit television show, “Glee.” This segment, as with those for other time periods, contains a listening station equipped with built-in iPods and headphones to allow viewers the opportunity to see what the Bubs are truly all about. The iPods contain all the albums produced by the Bubs during that particular time period, providing exhibition-goers dozens of tracks to choose from. While the Bubs have favored rock ballads like Styx’s “Come Sail Away” or The Who’s “Who Are You” and pop hits like Flo Rida’s “Right Round” during the past decade, the listening stations hold some unexpected tunes such as “Timshel” by Mumford & Sons and U2’s “Running to Stand Still.” Other pleasant surprises include Bubs covers of fellow Jumbos, as with Guster and its songs “Either Way” and “Ruby Falls.” In addition to the listening stations, there are viewing stations with video from each time period post-1971. Here, gallery visitors can check out videos of Bubs performances in Goddard Chapel or on the “Sing-Off” stage.

The segment showcasing the years 1989 to 1999 quickly proves that the Bubs of yesteryear had a different sound than their present-day counterparts, but their repertoire is no less entertaining. They performed covers of songs like Paul Simon’s “Kodachrome,” Simon and Garfunkel’s “Cecilia,” Elvis Costello’s “Alison” and other music spanning the earlier years of the decade. An
amusing cover of Blackstreet’s “No Diggity” from 1999 begs the question of whether or not the Bubs version was the inspiration for the song that made it onto the soundtrack for “Pitch Perfect” (2012), last year’s film loosely based on a book of the same name in which the Bubs are a principle focus.

The 1972-1988 segment brings out several Bubs covers of Beatles songs like “Ticket to Ride” and “Blackbird” as well as fan-favorite show tunes like “The Lady is a Tramp” and “Memory” from the musical “Cats.” This wide variety in song choice — which can be heard over all five decades — would allow any visitor to enjoy what the Bubs have produced, if their talent as vocalists somehow weren’t enough.

The final segment, chronicling 1962-1971, provides its audience with a few recognizable tunes like “Moon River,” made famous by “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” (1961) and “The Wizard of Oz’s” (1939) “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” sung in a barbershop style, though the majority of songs from the Bubs’ first decade together are unfamiliar to a modern audience. This segment’s attraction lies in the story of Landon Vaill teaming up with Miller Hall dormmates Neal Robison and Barrie Bruce to found the group’s original incarnation, Jumbo’s Disciples: The Beelzebubs.

“50 Years of Fun Through Song” was curated by Danny Lichtenfeld (LA’93), the first five-year member of the Beelzebubs and the Bubs’ musical director when the group won first place in the National Championship of Collegiate A Capella. Lichtenfeld’s strong connection with this Tufts institution is apparent throughout the entire exhibition. It translates into a scrapbook of memories complete with dozens of performance and audition flyers going back decades and newspaper clippings displaying the Bubs’ achievements. For the musically knowledgeable, there is also an entire binder filled with various arrangements by Bubs musical arrangers Andy Cranin (A ‘79), Gene Blake (A’73), Marty Fernandi (LA ‘85), Deke Sharon (LA ‘91), Todd Herzog (LA ’94), Ed Boyer (LA ’04) and Lichtenfeld himself. Finally, a wall of photographs, which span the Bubs’ beginning to present-day, captures the same sense of brotherly love that the Bubs exude in their live performances. The photographs also surround a list of all the Tufts “Bubalums.”

“50 Years of Fun Through Song” is deceiving; while it may not look as though there is much content, gallery-goers could potentially spend hours in the sculpture court with headphones on, toes tapping. The exhibition is a heartfelt chronology of the Bubs’ journey over the last five decades and what isn’t there in visuals is there — more importantly — in audio. Those who go will leave singing — that is a guarantee.