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A Joyful Noise

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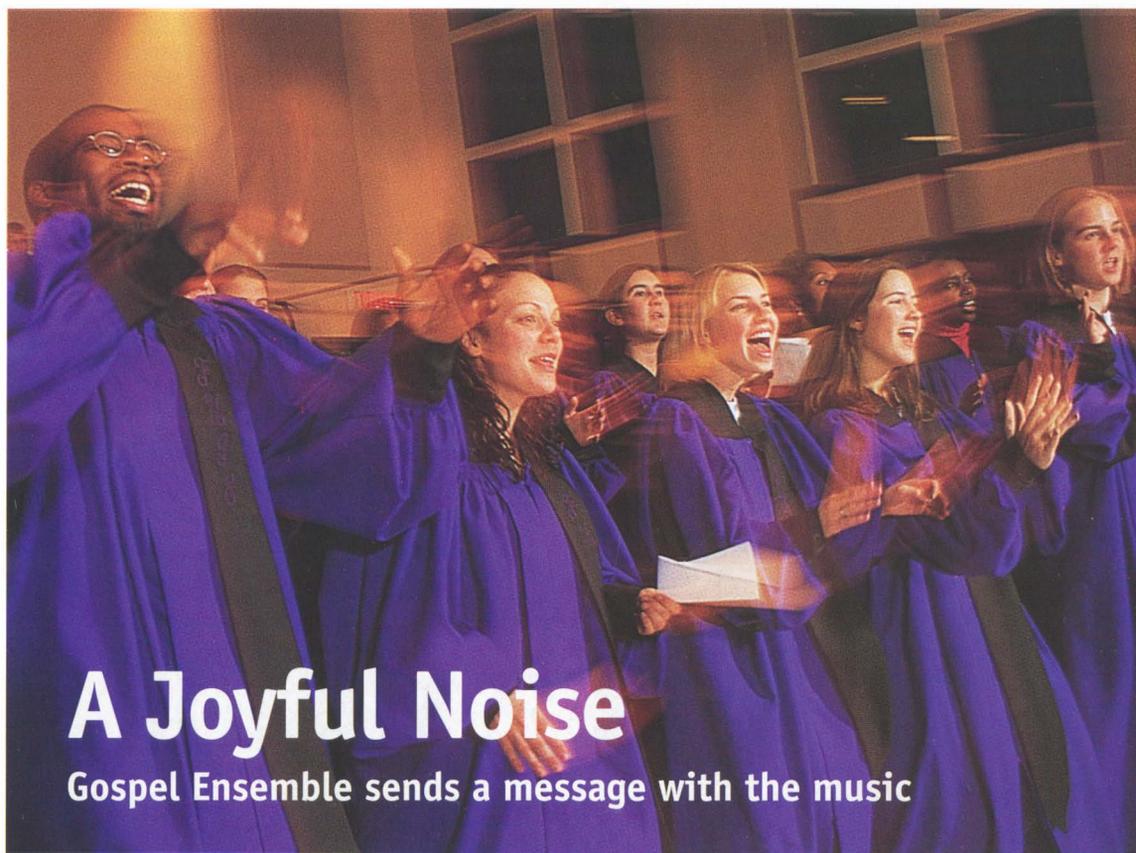
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The Gospel Ensemble's spirited performances have garnered rave reviews. Director Gwendolyn Johnson (below) credits the infectious spirit of the music.



A Joyful Noise

Gospel Ensemble sends a message with the music

GWENDOLYN JOHNSON IS FOND OF RECOUNTING HER FIRST PRACTICE SESSION WITH THE FURMAN UNIVERSITY GOSPEL ENSEMBLE.

The year was 1994 and Johnson, a Clemson native and human resources coordinator for the Department of Transportation in Greenville, had just been named director of the 15-member singing group.

"They had a lot of individual talent but lacked unity," says Johnson, who likens the ensemble's development to a sports squad. "They needed someone to help them work as a team."

If the ensemble were indeed a sports team, then Johnson's office should be adorned with more than a few coaching accolades. For during the past six years the group has grown into a chorus of more than 100 members, and in the process has become one of Furman's largest and most diverse student groups.

The Gospel Ensemble's reputation and popularity have risen with its numbers. Its joyful sound and enthusiastic style have raised its profile and drawn many requests for performances from local churches and civic groups. In fact, the group is becoming so well known that it now declines more invitations than it accepts.

A selection of the ensemble's performances has been aired on "The Challenger's Gospel Time," a local

television program. Its first CD, "It's Not About Us," will be available later this year.

Johnson, who formed her first gospel group in 1983 at the age of 16, credits God, youthful energy and the music for the ensemble's rise in popularity.

"Other students began to see that we were having fun on the stage, and they wanted to be a part of that," says Johnson. "We perform with such enthusiasm that it is contagious to both the audience and other students. The music has a spirit that's infectious."

While the ensemble's soulful, hand-clapping music is rooted in African-American culture, the group attracts students of all races to its ranks. "One of our greatest strengths is our diversity," says Johnson. "It has been a real blessing for me to watch the choir develop and grow."

Robyn Brewer, a junior biology major and president of the group, says, "As a freshman I went to my first ensemble meeting and was really surprised. I thought I was in the wrong place. About half the people there were white.

"But the music isn't about color. It's about praise and worship. As a group we have a lot of spirit, perform upbeat songs and have a good time. Our audiences seem to enjoy it, too."

To Brewer and the other singers, though, the ensemble is more than a group



of musicians. It is a second family. Before rehearsals, the students often pray or read Bible verses together.

Rehearsals are held once a week in the Nan Trammell Herring Music Pavilion, and the music offers relief from the daily grind of papers, studying and exams.

"I don't go to church at Furman, so this is my church," says sophomore Gretchen Dietrich. "This music is uplifting. It energizes me. I feel good when I leave here."

— John Roberts