

The Austin Carolers: Straight Out of a Charles Dickens Novel
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The Austin Carolers, which consist of Mady Kaye, Libby Hart Barnes, Paul Spikes and Art Kidd, invited me to their first practice of the season (during one incredibly warm night, making Christmas feel even further away), and welcomed me like four grandparents would. They fussed over me, asking me questions about myself and demanding sweetly that I eat some chocolate cookies. Only unlike my grandparents, they then sang me carols while dressed in Charles Dickens-esque caroling costumes.

The Austin Carolers have been an Austin tradition for 14 years, regularly singing at Central Market, Christmas parties and tree-lighting ceremonies. While the quartet had performed with each other in some capacity prior to forming Austin Carolers, some since the 1970's, the idea for the group sprang from a mutual respect and love for one another.

"We wanted to work together and do something different," Spikes says. "We had been working together for years, and together we were perfect," Kaye chimes in. Spikes also admits that as a musician, "it was getting harder to book holiday parties, and this would be a lot of fun. We were more interested in the personalities than perfect singers."

Their personalities (and incredible voices) definitely do shine. As the den mother, Kaye is lively and spunky. Barnes is shy and sweet, while the men are more mischievous and quick to crack jokes. Each of them expresses their deep love of working in the quartet and singing holiday songs, both traditional and not. Although they do dress in traditional caroling garb with long skirts, hats, gloves and coattails, the group loves to mix and match the songs in their repertoire and infuse a bit of Austin in some of them. "Here in town, it's a-frostin', this is rare 'cause it's Austin," Kaye, with her beautiful soprano voice, gives an example of their Austin-centric lyrics.

Austin Carolers is different from most carolers because they arrange their songs so that they sing four-person parts instead of a four-person melody, enabling them to harmonize and improvise, which gives their tunes a jazzy, poppy feel. And although they have 50 songs in their repertoire, the group says that kids always ask for the "big four" – "Frosty the Snowman," "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Jingle Bells." These songs, while not the most challenging for their lovely voices, are always fun to sing because "singing for kids gives us the most joy," according to Kaye.

When asked what is their favorite song, Spikes immediately answers "Lo How a Rose E'er Blooming," which he says, "is an old song that has some surprisingly modern features." Kaye adds: "When everyone is singing perfectly in harmony, the sum is bigger than the parts." Sounds just like the Austin Carolers themselves.

Catch the troupe at their regular Chez Zee gig this holiday season... See what Spikes means when he says, "our music evokes joy and generosity in the spirit of Christmas."