

# Mountain Blue

## Singing Towards the Heavens

ARTICLE BY DAVID LAYTON | PHOTOS COURTESY MOUNTAIN BLUE

WEB: [MOUNTAINBLUEHARMONY.COM](http://MOUNTAINBLUEHARMONY.COM)





*This unique a cappella group, formerly known as Blue Cheese, sprung up on BYU campus in 2003.*

## **Making it Unique**

“How many bluegrass, a cappella, southern gospel, LDS groups do you know of in the West?” asks Todd Horne.

“Or anywhere?” adds Julia Sanders, laughing.

This is Mountain Blue, a Utah-based a cappella group born in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. The four-part ensemble consists of Drew Norton at tenor, Todd Horne at baritone, Spencer Whitham at bass, and Julia Sanders at alto. With a blend of genres that creates intricate harmonies with a gospel message, these four musicians have established themselves as one of Utah’s premier and most unique a cappella groups.

Back in the fall of 2003, Adam Monteith and Karen Magleby, two choir directors at BYU, were “the original instigators of the idea of this group, and they had originally done it as a joke,” says Todd. “There were all these pop groups auditioning for the annual A Cappella Jam at BYU, and there was no bluegrass out there because you usually only hear that with instruments—mandolin, banjo, and stuff. Karen had had a bluegrass band down in Texas, and she’d always wanted to name it ‘Blue Cheese,’ and they would never let her. She came up here and kind of threw the idea at us.” Standing out in the quad in Brigham Square, Adam and Karen pulled Todd aside after a rehearsal and asked if he could sing bluegrass. “Adam pulled out some sheet music from Blue Highway called ‘Some Day.’ I sightread it on the spot.” Todd must have done a good job, because he says the other fellows trying to get in the group “were let off the hook,” and Todd snagged the baritone position. “I was fortunate to





get in when the group was just beginning,” says Todd. “That’s pretty much the roots of it. It started right here in Brigham Square.”

Blue Cheese continued to grow, performing in several A Cappella Jams at BYU, as well as at firesides, dances, and other venues around Utah. They have since branched out, opening for A Cappellastock in Ogden (2009), and they will be performing at venues on the East Coast in October of 2010. The group released their first two CDs (*Gospel Train* in 2005 and *Roll Back the Stone* in 2007) as Blue Cheese, and a third album (*Mountain Blue A Cappella*) as Mountain Blue in 2008.

Over the years, Mountain Blue has had several members, each bringing a unique vocal quality to the group. “Every single member is building upon the shoulders of the former members,” says Todd. “Everyone’s added a significant part to this group. It’s not about us—it’s not about the members. It’s about how we worship the Savior and it’s about how we honor and adore him. Really, the arrangements are designed to bring the Spirit into our lives and help us resonate more with the Savior and his life, who he is, and who we can ultimately become.”

Todd, Drew, and Spencer all followed similar paths; being members of choirs throughout their junior high, high school, and college careers. Drew states that he “always felt drawn towards more challenging groups.”

Todd jokes, “I probably started listening to tri-tones and stuff by humming to the vacuum, growing up cleaning the house. I hope I’m not crazy in that. You know, you go up and down the scale and say, ‘Yeah, this is cool.’”

Julia, however, took a less conventional route to join Mountain Blue. “I guess I’ve always been singing my whole life. My mom always had me and my sister in little singing and dancing groups when we were little, but I’ve never liked the dancing portion and I never really liked the gymnastics. I would always just sing. I started taking lessons when I



was eleven, and it's probably the only thing that I've been able to stick to. I love performing, but I was never in the choirs or anything in high school. I liked performing by myself, mainly. I went to Utah State and did vocal performance up there, and then I came back down and was in a rock band [and did country]. I took more classical training because I wanted to be more rounded. I wanted to be able to sing all different kinds [of music] and could never decide which I liked most. I realized probably around the time that I was twenty that what I needed to do was sing in the church industry. I started pursuing that more actively and directly, and it's amazing that when I work at something, things just kind of fall in my lap like this. Just like being in this group." Julia skipped a bridal shower to audition for Mountain Blue. A week after being accepted into the group, and never having really practiced with them before, Julia went for the first time to listen to Mountain Blue. They were at a CD signing at

Deseret Book, and two former members weren't able to make it, so she sang with them.

"That's how we initiate new members," jokes Todd. "Performance is their first practice."

There are some things that are truly unique about this group; the first being that Mountain Blue is a bluegrass, southern gospel, LDS, a cappella group. "You hear that 'everyone is doing it'?" asks Spencer. "Like, everyone's not doing this."

When Adam Monteith called Spencer to see if he wanted to join the group, he was a little tentative about singing southern gospel bluegrass music, like that from the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. "I was a little hesitant, but then when I showed up and we got to singing, I immediately recognized the quality of everyone's voices in the group and the feeling that was in the music," Spencer says. "There's been several times that I've had other things that I could just get up and do, but there's something that

always just brings me back to this. For its uniqueness, for the sound, for everyone in the group that I get to sing with—I've never had a singing experience like it."

"I've always been intrigued by harmony," says Julia, "But this was not something that I'd ever done before or even really considered doing. I love tight, unique harmony, and every song we have has a tight harmony. It blows me away that some of the songs that are my favorite are ones where we're all singing together and nobody's really soloing. There have been times when all of us at the end of the song are like, 'Whoa, that was awesome.'"

"The sound is good and of course, a lot of that is credited to the lyrics and music, but a lot of it is Adam Monteith's talent at arranging music," says Spencer. "You come, sing, and it sounds amazing, and you leave. We come back, and I'm blown away again. It's just so much fun to sing with all of them. I don't like practicing even if one person's gone, because there's just something missing."

"It is fun to sing in such close harmony. You think a cappella and you think, 'Oh, well, they don't have background music,' and you feel like something would be lacking, but it's not, and I even feel like it's so much more powerful," says Julia. "It also doesn't hurt that I'm the only girl in the group."

That's another fact that makes Mountain Blue unique: it's comprised of three males and one female. "I think it surprises people," says Julia.

"I hear that all the time, ever since I've joined the group," says Spencer. "One thing that I did find interesting was that I always liked singing with guys. But this group has proven me wrong with the arrangements because, if we did it with four guys, it wouldn't sound the same. It has to be the way it is. I don't know why. It just does."

Todd explains their unique sound: "The main reason is that there's color that's involved in the timbre of people's voices. And yeah, we could have four guys, but first of all, it would

be difficult to find a tenor that could sing unbelievably high in that register; and the other thing, people wouldn't come to our shows if there wasn't a female. One of the biggest challenges is blending a female and three guys—not having the female stand out above the rest. We've had to find the right timbre, vibrato, and color of sound, and be able to mesh it in a way that gives the full spectrum of sound that we're looking for. It's really kind of unique, and I think it adds a lot to the group to have a female voice there because nobody else is doing it."

## Testimony through Song

When discussing the name "Mountain Blue," Todd says, "Mountains are very majestic. They point you toward heaven. All of our music is about the Savior. And blue is a peaceful color; it's just a color of serenity. A lot of our music is very indicative of the peace we find in the gospel."

All members of the group responded that firesides were by far the most enjoyable projects that Mountain Blue works on. "As far as firesides go, the Spirit that we feel there and the opportunity to sing a song and then share a testimony about it—I just really love it," says Spencer.

Julia says, "I feel also that in firesides, the purpose of the group is really felt. I feel like that's where people really hear the music and can hear and feel the message of it and feel the Spirit so strongly. It's fun to have people like your music, but when people really get what you're saying and feel the Spirit because of something that we're able to convey... That's what's awesome about being in this group."

"Having the opportunity to bear your testimony in word and song, combining those two elements into one really brings the Spirit strongly in meaning," adds Todd. "Having those sacred venues—like Julia said, really having people understand what you're singing about, that it's not about us, it's not about the music. It's about the Savior. Every one of these songs ties back to him. If people can develop a

relationship with the Savior in a new way or see him in a different light, that's kind of the whole purpose of the Church. It's just a vehicle to bring people to Christ. That's our goal."

"What I've found interesting," says Spencer, "is since I've been in the group, the phrase you mentioned, 'It's all about the Savior and it's not about us,' has become more than a phrase; when you're singing, you actually *feel* like it really is about the Savior. To feel it is pretty awesome."

Julia was considering a mission but felt strongly that she should stay home. "This is my mission. Being part of this group and pursuing a career in the LDS music industry is why I need to stay home. It's been since October that I made that decision, and it's already made itself known to me time and time again that this is why I need to be home. It's almost funny to me that I considered leaving. Being part of this is not something that I'd want to give up any time soon. We can reach people through music who I wouldn't be able to reach personally, and I've had several people say that to me since I made the decision. So maybe this is why. No, this is why. There's no *maybe* about it."

Spencer says, "The one icon I had growing up all the time as far as a real big spiritual experience was when I'd go to seminary or go to church and someone would perform a musical number that would just stir things up in me that had never been there. It wasn't the words, and it wasn't just the regular song; it was the spirit of the music, the power that is conveyed through good gospel music. I was a DJ for thirteen or fourteen years, and I've been in tons of different environments of different types of music. The feeling that comes from the music... there's no comparison. It almost doesn't need to be said."

"There's so much secular music out there and so much music just driven purely for entertainment purposes alone," says Todd. "This music is kind of unique in the fact that it's fun, it's energetic, and we have such variety.

Half our music we could do in sacrament meeting, and the other half we could do in an cappella stock show. But the cool thing with this music is it's not just entertaining. It's educational and it's spiritually uplifting. It actually changes people's lives. In a world where it's increasingly difficult and full of uncertainty, this music can bring hope, peace, comfort, uplift, and joy into our lives. There's something that strikes a chord in my soul when I hear the human voice interacting harmoniously with other voices. It can and should be more natural to live in harmony with each other and there are living principles that are taught through music. Robert Shaw said, 'In these days of political, personal and economic disintegration, music is not a luxury, it's a necessity; not simply because it is therapeutic, nor because it is the universal language, but because it is the persistent focus of our intelligence, aspiration and goodwill.' That's what it's all about." 🎵

