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**Their voices are instrumental**

**High school chorus does rock without the metal**

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Imagine heavy metal without wailing guitars and pounding drums, or Coldplay's music without Chris Martin's percussive piano.

Now try to imagine rock `n' roll without any instruments at all – just voices, singing not only the words but also the accompaniment. That's what New Jersey's RockNRoll Chorus does, with a repertoire that encompasses Def Leppard, Coldplay, Bon Jovi and even "The Star-Spangled Banner."

The chorus is made up of 32 high school students from across the state. It was started by Joe Cantaffa, the entertainment technology instructor in the Freehold Regional High School District's Performing Arts Center at Howell High School.

"We're all in high school, but instead of going to summer camp or, you know, going on vacation, we come and sing," said Melissa Rivera of Middletown, one of the members.

The chorus will perform Saturday at the Morris County Fair in Chester. Other New Jersey appearances this summer are scheduled in Red Bank, Long Branch and Asbury Park.

The chorus also records a CD each year for sale at performances and through the website [rocknrollchorus.com](http://rocknrollchorus.com).

Cantaffa chooses the repertoire and arranges the music for the group.

"I grew up on rock `n' roll," Cantaffa said. "I am a huge fan of Rockapella and I started an a cappella group at the college level." He also started an a cappella rock group called Rebel Yell at Howell High School six years ago.

In addition to his duties at the high school, Cantaffa is the manager of the New Jersey All-State Women's Chorus and production manager for the New Jersey All-State Mixed Chorus, All-State Orchestra and All-State Jazz Ensemble. He started the RockNRoll Chorus last year.

"I had some kids inquiring about getting involved in a capella pop music with me and my project at Howell High School, where I teach, but they went to different high schools so they weren't allowed to do that," Cantaffa recalled. "So one of the kids approached me and said, `Could we do something in the summertime?'"

He said 97 of the 150 singers in the All-State Women's Chorus said they would audition for a summer tour.

This year, Cantaffa auditioned 200 singers for the chorus. The group has rehearsed on Sundays since the end of May and spent a week in "boot camp," rehearsing from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, after school ended in June. The chorus also recorded its upcoming CD, "Take a Second Look," at Shore Fire Recording Studio in Long Branch.

"We're all from different places, but we all have that common thread of singing, which is really special," said Joe Turner of Freehold.

Cantaffa does not expect the students to mimic musical instruments when they audition. Instead, he considers whether a singer's voice would be good for a piano part or a bass.

"I don't expect kids to come in with the experience to manipulate their voices that much," he said. "Most of the kids are trained to sing vocal music. The concept of using your instrument to sound like something other than a voice is a new thing for them."

That was what Ashley Ronco of Kinnelon found when she was chosen for the group. "I did not realize I could sound like a piano or a snare drum," Ashley said. "This is a completely different experience than singing in a chorus. You are not singing lyrics, you are imitating instruments. If you don't sing in the right key or the right rhythm, you can throw off the group."

Terrance Stradford of Morganville, an original member of Rebel Yell, is one of the two beat boxers of the RockNRoll Chorus. "I love making sounds like the guitar and making the perfect drum noise," he said. "I learned by practicing in the shower, listening to rappers and watching videos."

The RockNRoll Chorus has been on tour since July 10 and will perform a total of 28 concerts this summer. The cost of gas forced Cantaffa to cancel several planned stops, including tour dates in Nashville and Los Angeles.

Each singer must pay \$2,750 for the summer to cover travel expenses, including the bus and hotels. Cantaffa will not be compensated unless there is money left over after the bills are paid. "In the meantime," he said, "it is a labor of love."

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**PHOTO CAPTION:** 1. Shigeshi Stewart records his vocal percussion segment for the chorus' new CD at the Shore Fire Recording Studio in Long Branch. 2. The chorus draws an audience outside Jenkinson's Aquarium in Point Pleasant. 3. Mel Rivera, center, leads the RockNRoll chorus in "Walkin' on Sunshine" on the Point Pleasant boardwalk. **CREDIT:** 1. NOAH K. MURRAY/THE STAR-LEDGER 2. ANDREW MILLS/THE STAR-LEDGER 3. ANDREW MILLS/THE STAR-LEDGER