



*Bob Flanigan  
Antie Goodman  
Gary Rosenberg  
Mike Beisner*

# The Four Freshmen

1948

*Bob Flanigan  
Hal Kratzsch   Ross Barbour  
Don Barbour*

An interview with Bob Flanigan  
by Gene Aitken

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**T**he Four Freshmen, under the leadership of Bob Flanigan, have endured the road longer than any vocal group . . . 40 years. Although there have been numerous personnel changes, the style and the sound have remained the same. The Four Freshmen not only sing the music of today, but the music that was popular when they first started in 1948. Arrangements such as "It's A Blue World," "What A Difference A Day Made," "Solitude" and others have proven their worth because they have withstood the test of time.

The Freshmen have had a significant impact on the educational process. In addition to bringing pleasure into the lives of musicians and non-musicians alike, they have been in part, a major influence on the vocal jazz movement that exists in public and private schools today. The Four Freshmen were one of *the* groups to listen to and to identify with. No other pop or jazz vocal group has existed for that length of time nor enjoyed the worldwide success and popularity.

It all began at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, when a group of four individuals, Bob Flanigan, Don and Ross Barbour and Hal Kratzsch, decided to get together and sing barbershop quartets. After some local success in this style, the group began listening to different kinds of harmonies, those of the Pastels and Mel Torme and the Meltones. With a new style and concept under way, the Freshmen decided to leave school for a year and go on the road, then return and finish their degrees and teach. The latter never happened.

To have enough material for their shows, the Freshmen lifted songs off

records and arranged their own tunes . . . by ear. From 1948 up through 1953 all the Freshmen arrangements were put together by this process, even the well-known songs such as "It's a Blue World," "The Day Isn't Long Enough," "Poinciana" and many others. The group would sing one chord at a time, make some changes until the harmony was what they wanted, remember it, then go to the next chord. A lengthy task by anyone's standards. After 1953, the major contributor to the Four Freshmen library, 14 albums worth, was arranger Dick Reynolds, trombonist with the Ray Anthony Band. Although Reynolds was never a member of the Four Freshmen, he understood their voices and their style.

The first big break for the Freshmen came when Stan Kenton heard them in a nightclub in Dayton, Ohio, in 1950. Kenton was so impressed by what he heard, that he had the Freshmen come to New York and record a demo with Pete Rugolo. Kenton, who was one of Capitol Record's key recording artists, took the recording personally to the president of Capitol Records to hear. Shortly thereafter the Freshmen signed with Capitol.

**What were your impressions the first time the Freshmen performed with the Stan Kenton Orchestra?**

We did several tours and several recordings with the Kenton Band. In those days, monitor systems were non-existent. Can you imagine the sound that came out of that Orchestra? To compound the problem we all had to gather around and sing on one microphone . . . no multiple vocal microphones in those days. It was a frightening experience to say the least! Even at their lowest dynamic level, they were loud. It was a chore just to try and find our notes.

**What individual tunes or albums were hits that resulted in bringing the Four Freshmen recognition?**

"It's A Blue World" was the first single. We recorded it in 1950 but it wasn't released until 1952. That was followed by "Day By Day" and "Graduation Day." These three tunes were the big sellers. The albums that sold a lot were *Voices in Modern* and *The Four Freshmen With Five Trombones*.

**How many albums have the Four Freshmen recorded and are they still available?**

We originally recorded 36 different albums. The record companies since then have produced additional albums by taking tunes from different albums and giving the new product *The Best Of* . . . name. Most of the 42 albums are not available anymore. We've tried, as Stan Kenton did, to lease the catalog from Capitol Records, but they don't even want to talk about it. It's something I just don't understand. The masters, both the Capitol and Liberty recordings, are just sitting there gathering dust. Pausa did re-release some recordings but that company has since gone out of business.

**How have the Four Freshmen managed to maintain the same sound over the years?**

Over the years I've sung the lead and in any group that part is an easily identifiable part. However, with the first couple of replacements, we had to teach the singers to sing like the Four Freshmen, but now, anybody that sings has probably heard us. So they know the sound, the style and just about everything we know.

**Do you feel that today's young singers are better prepared to sing with groups like the Four Freshmen than singers of 20 years ago?**

Definitely. Teachers in the vocal jazz field like Phil Mattson and Frank DeMiero are taking the young singers to a level of complexity far beyond what we are doing. Although our music is not as technical as the Gene Puerling or Clare

Fischer charts, I think we still have a niche. The music that is being sung today is excellent ear training. Students hear and know what the part is supposed to sound like and what that note is in the chord . . . extremely important in ballads.

**Do the Four Freshmen rehearse anymore?**

We do and we can. The problem I have with adding new material is that pacing wise, we must perform tunes that people associate with the Four Freshmen . . . the "Blue Worlds" and the "Day By Days." So you can't change the whole thing every time you go out. If we didn't perform our standard literature, no one would come and hear us. Besides, being on the road as much as we are it's difficult to find the time to rehearse. Likewise when we get back home, the last thing I want to do is call a rehearsal . . . we want to get away from singing for awhile. This kind of singing is a business and it has to be treated that way.

Over the past 40 years you've obviously seen some changes in the music business in traveling on the road. What are some of those changes?

Today you can travel distances that weren't even thought of back then. This past summer we performed in Finland. It took us 11 hours to get over and 12 hours to return. When we first started it would have taken 24 hours to get there and 36 hours to return. From 1952 to 1964 we worked about 2500 colleges and universities. We'd fly 110 hours a month on piston airplanes, many times performing twice a day in gymnasiums with basketball sound systems. Performance areas in the 1980's are much improved and of course the sound systems and the sound engineers are outstanding.

When tours are setup these days, we'll book key dates and areas, fill-in around them, then fly home. In 1986 we performed over 200 dates and in 1987 around 190. This year won't be quite that



*A casual reunion at Bob Flanigan's home in September, 1988, brought together present and former Freshmen. L-R, Ross Barbour 1948-1977, Autie Goodman 1977-present, Bob Flanigan 1948-present, Gary Rosenberg 1988-present, Mike Beisner 1980-present, Bill Comstock 1960-1972.*

many although it's hard to tell. We are out for short periods of time compared to the six months at a time in the past. Our schedule now is much easier.

**Has the emphasis in vocal jazz education in the United States helped to provide the Four Freshmen with a new type of audience?**

We now have the opportunity to work with and perform for students who are singing our style of music. It's a learning experience for us and it's awesome to hear what vocal jazz groups at Lake Washington High School, University of Kansas and the University of Northern Colorado are doing. It's phenomenal! It makes you want to go out and do something.

**With just a few working professional groups such as the Four Freshmen, The Ritz, 2 + 2 Plus and Take Six, what does the future hold for the aspiring young vocal jazz student?**

First of all, I don't think students could sing those arrangements unless they really enjoyed them. The kids are obviously having fun! It's a shame, but they will face the same problems as horn players, where are they going to play or sing after graduation? Many students have gone into studio singing and are doing quite well. But even in this area, there are a limited number of opportunities. Another outlet for these singers will be in the community vocal jazz groups that seem to be starting up in the United States . . . much like the community jazz bands or workshop bands . . . an opportunity to get together and socialize as well

as sharing a very special style of music. Singing vocal jazz music is a great discipline . . . and a great high!

The Four Freshmen have had a tremendous impact on the vocal jazz movement today. Can you compare what you first heard with what is happening now?

The first time we heard any vocal jazz was at Mt. Hood Community College in Gresham, Oregon. It was obvious at that time that most of the groups were singing the

notes, but that didn't know *what* the notes were all about. As the vocal jazz movement has progressed through listening, experience and good education, we've seen a marked improvement. Today, these students *know* what the music is all about. Also, vocal jazz seems to have progressed much faster than its instrumental jazz counterpart. It hasn't been all that long ago that the vocal jazz movement started.

**There has been some controversy that singing vocal jazz music negatively affects good vocal production.**

Nooooo! I'm 62 years old and I can sing higher now than when I was 21, so I don't want to hear about that at all! How's it going to affect your voice . . . I don't understand. Whoever said that (chuckle), have them call me! I'll straighten 'em out!

**In your travels to other parts of the world, you've come in contact with other vocal jazz groups. Are any of these groups really outstanding?**

There are several good professional vocal jazz groups in Europe and even behind the Iron Curtain, as well as in Japan and the Philippines. But the one group that really is impressive is a vocal jazz group in Tokyo called Time 5. These five singers are very popular in Japan and have quite a following. We've heard them live and on records . . . they are not only gracious people, they're incredible singers.

**It's exciting to see a group that was so popular 40 years ago still on top today.**

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## FOUR FRESHMEN

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With a recent Grammy Nomination and a video with Manhattan Transfer, I think the group is better than it's ever been. We're doing a lot of different things and a lot more difficult things. We have better players in the group . . . when you have a Mike Beisner around, you're in deep trouble . . . he plays everything in the group better than anybody else in the group. The outstanding high school and college vocal jazz groups also help to give us that extra "boot" to get going. My real reward though is after the concert when the parents of students come up and tell us they really enjoyed hearing the Four Freshmen . . . that's all I need.

Is there any advice you have for young musicians today who wish to pursue singing in a solo or group situation?

The first thing you have to have if you're going to sing professionally or teach is to have an awful lot of love and dedication for the particular area you go into. It will be tested everyday. The music business is a very strange animal. You'll have to go without breakfast sometimes in order to make it. But with love and dedication, and a certain amount of luck, music will be a very fulfilling and rewarding experience.

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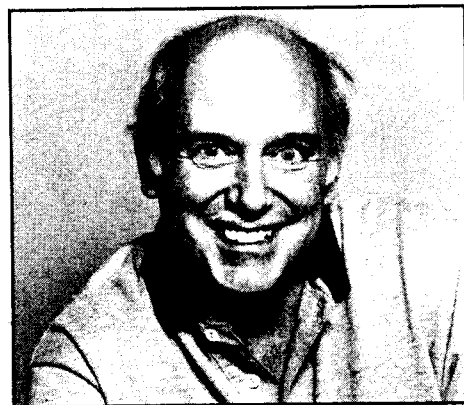
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Gene Aitken, Director of Jazz Studies and Associate Director of the School of Music at the University of Northern Colorado is one of the most exciting, energetic clinicians available today. His enthusiasm never fails to captivate both performers and audiences. Under his direction, the jazz ensembles have attained national and international prominence in educational and professional performance arenas. With 48 *doubeat* awards, a Grammy nomination, a \$50,000 grant for program excellence from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education and citations by *Big Band Magazine*, the National Association of Jazz Educators and a host of other organizations, UNC's Jazz Studies Program ranks as one of the finest in the United States. Vocal Jazz chairperson for NAJE from 1980-1988, he is author of scores of articles, arrangements and compositions including the *Gene Aitken Vocal Jazz Series* published by Kendor Music, Inc.