



# News Notes

Four Freshmen Music Foundation, Inc. – [www.FourFreshmenMusicFoundation.org](http://www.FourFreshmenMusicFoundation.org)

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## THE BARBOUR BOYS

Performers know that “Timing is everything.”

As one of the founding Four Freshmen, Ross Barbour realized the importance of timing. The set-up of a joke, the sequence of songs and the words spoken between songs all had to be timed out to make a great show. Ross timed the length of each show to meet the expectations of the venue. Night clubs usually wanted two 40-minute shows, but some preferred three shorter sets. Colleges and concert halls required a longer show with an intermission. And when the Freshmen worked with other bands and singers, such as The Stan Kenton Orchestra with June Christy, they would plan together to make a well-timed show.

Ross was still in high school when his older brother, Don, returned home from the war. In an instance of perfect timing, they both packed up and left home to begin their freshmen year at Butler University attending the *Arthur Jordan Conservatory School of Music*. The same was true of Hal Kratzsch, who had recently returned from serving in the military. Ross met Hal in *Music Theory* class and they became fast friends.

Hal, Ross and Don formed a group called “Hal’s Harmonizers” and they began singing together with another classmate. They knew they had a good thing, but it wasn’t quite right. In the summer of freshmen year they brought in Cousin Bob Flanigan, who, as luck or timing would have it, was between gigs. He began singing the high part and things really came together. They became The Toppers and later, the Four Freshmen.

Don and Ross Barbour shared a bedroom on their family farm in Bartholomew County, Indiana, where they lived with their parents, Harold and Maude. They attended a one-room school for their primary education together in the same room each day and night. When it was time to attend high school, they had to go “to town” in Columbus, Indiana.

Don played guitar through high school. After high school Don went off to the service. He was stationed in North Africa with the Air Force during World War II. He spent his free time listening to music and playing his guitar.

Ross was one of those people who was liked by everyone, and he liked everyone right back! His mother used to say, “He was born sunny side up.” He was all about seeing the good in things. Don was more reserved, the strong silent type. But as different as they were, the Barbour brothers had one common denominator: the love of music coursing through their veins. Their musical talents were surely inherited from and nurtured by their mother. Maude Fodrea Barbour was warm and genial. She was one of twelve children. There were ten sisters and two brothers and they all loved to sing together. Many of them played an instrument, as well. The girls often sang in trios and quartets for town functions, church or school events, and sometimes they traveled to neighboring towns to perform.

When they were youngsters the whole Fodrea family would gather and harmonize together with full-throated joy. Even as children, the boys were inspired and thrilled by these harmonies. Young Bob Flanigan was one of the cousins, son of one of Maude’s sisters, standing around listening. His veins must have been full of that same “magic” blood. It’s no wonder they grew up loving music and harmonizing. They really couldn’t help themselves!



*Young Don, Bob and Ross on their grandparents’ farm*

Don could sing with that broad full-throated sound that thrilled audiences. He had the widest range of all four men. Don could have sung the bass part as easily as he did the second part. But it was his solos that impressed the crowds.

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He could belt out a song or practically whisper it. He had a vivid imagination which he eloquently conveyed with his voice. The songs he chose transported the listener to a different place and time. His interpretations of songs like "Holiday," "Malaya" and "Circus" took the listener along on a musical journey with his sense of the dramatic.

Ross sang solos, too. His were usually fun songs, sung fast and furious! His performance of "Them There Eyes" is one example of his solos - so full of energy. He put his whole body into performing; when he would leave the stage, he would nearly have to wring out his tuxedo.

Ross was a bit shy as a child. But as he grew, he taught himself a way of talking by using the air in the side of his cheek. It was a little chirping voice which he named "Leroy." He had a lot of fun with it as a boy. Later, he would sing using his "Leroy" voice to delight audiences around the world. He also entertained his own children and grandchildren and all the neighborhood urchins with his little voice.

He incorporated "Leroy" into the show by choosing songs that were simple and well known. In the early years Leroy sang "Sweet Lorraine," "Paper Doll" and "Once in Love with Amy" among others. Later he sang "Winchester Cathedral," made famous by Tiny Tim and "I've Got a Brand-New Key," which was a hit recorded by Melanie. It's odd that neither of those performers used their last names, just like "Leroy."

Once, a doctor asked Ross to be filmed and scientifically analyzed while using the Leroy voice. The idea was that people who had lost the power of speech due to medical issues could possibly speak using this technique. Ross jumped at the chance to be helpful and was proud to be part of the study although it is unlikely that many people were able to learn this technique. He made it look easy, but it isn't.

Don and Ross were both very inventive, which was a trait inherited from their father. In the early years on the road, Ross played his drums standing up. It was just the snare, a cymbal, a high-hat and of course, the cow bell! He played trumpet

with the group too. He invented a drum stand which held his small set of drums. This "custom" stand also had places to park the trombone, trumpets, mutes and extra equipment, as well as extra drumsticks, mallets and brushes. In this picture of group three, an early version of his invention is visible, which he improved upon over the years. Eventually he played a full set of drums.



Drum Stand (group three)

Don invented an adjustable tailpiece for his guitar and had it fabricated. It provided a mechanism to adjust the length of each string individually. This is better for harmonics. Guitar makers took the idea and ran with it. The guitars of today still include this feature. And while in the Air Force, he devised a way to automate the generators for which he was in charge - This invention made his assignment so much easier it gave him more time to play...guitar that is.

One night, while performing with the Freshmen, Don transformed the group's sound by capitalizing on a twist of fate. They were mid-song when his 'low E' string broke. Making a quick decision he replaced it with what he had on hand, a high 'E' string. It worked so well with their sound - he strung his guitar that way from then on.



The origins of "Hal's Harmonizers" Don, Hal and Ross

Don didn't like public speaking and Bob was a natural at cutting up, so Ross took on the role of Master of Ceremonies for the group. He introduced the songs and planned their shows. He wrote out the order of songs, stuck it on his drumhead and called them out for the others as the crowd applauded. That's show biz!

By the end of the 1950s, Don was feeling the pressures of being on the road and wanted to try a solo career. It would be hard on the group; Don had been such a driving force. He was the most musical of the four. He was a key factor on many of those first arrangements, they were from the mind and the ear of Don Barbour. Nevertheless, the group made plans to bring in a new member. They had done it before, but this time was different. For the first time ever, Ross and Don would not be making music together. The Barbour Boys were breaking up.

Certainly, going solo was a risk for Don too, but he could work at a

reasonable pace and spend more time at home. All the guys had children by then and the families had settled into homes in southern California. Don began working on his first solo album in June 1961. The Four Freshmen had already returned to the road with Bill Comstock, who played guitar and sang the second part.

In October 1961, just a few months after he finished his first (and only) solo album, Don was killed in a car crash. A road crew was beginning to do some night roadwork. They were setting out the caution cones but didn't get them out soon enough. Timing truly is everything. The album was released later that same year. Ross and Bob along with Ken Albers and Bill Comstock continued as group four for the next 13 years.

From the late 1960s to the late 1970s, Ross published a newsletter for Freshmen fans called "The Fifth Freshman" which he sent out as often as he could. He also answered the fan mail for the group. If you ever sent a fan letter to the Four Freshmen, chances are Ross wrote you back. He loved meeting fans and felt a real responsibility to them. He made so many wonderful friends through his letters. Even twenty years after he had left the group, he received "fan letters" and he still answered them.

Ross retired from the Four Freshmen in the summer of 1977. Once retired, Ross was happy to have time to spend with his wife and family. He and Sue welcomed friends from all over the world into their home. He also wrote a book about the early adventures of the Four Freshmen, *Now You Know*, published in 1995. About 12 years later, the book was repackaged in hard cover, with more photos and updated material. Ross and Sue worked hard adding, editing and finding more pictures. But his health was failing. Ross died in the summer of 2011. Sue finished the book. He didn't get to see the expanded book completed, but he was so excited to know it was in the works. At his memorial service a longtime friend and neighbor said, "When Ross Barbour entered a room – the room got brighter." Sunny side up indeed!

Ross and Sue had three children and four grandchildren. Don and Dolores had one daughter and three grandchildren. Sadly, Don never got to see his little girl grow up or meet his grandchildren. The Barbour family has kept in close contact and all the Barbour grandchildren have attended recent Four Freshmen Society conventions. Don's daughter, Donalyn and Ross' daughter, Kathy are both active with the Four Freshmen Music Foundation.



"Homage to Hoagy"

#### Take note...

If you ever find yourself in Carmel, Indiana, be sure to stop by the corner of City Center Drive and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue SW. There you'll find a roundabout which features "Homage to Hoagy" - a large sculpture by artist Arlon Bayliss, pictured here. The sculpture, which looks like a giant gramophone is inspired by Carmichael's timeless work and features moons, stars, musical notes and even a skylark popping up from the horn of the base. The structure is illuminated by colored lights and complemented by two interactive information kiosks. The gramophone-styled kiosks feature crank handles that activate digital recordings of Hoagy Carmichael's compositions by famous artists, including The Four Freshmen! Other notable artists featured include Ella Fitzgerald, Michael Bubl , Bette Midler and Louis Armstrong.

Hoagy Carmichael was one of Ross and Don's favorite composers. He is also from Indiana, just like the four original Freshmen. The Four Freshmen performed many of his songs. In the early years, Don sang a soulful solo rendition of "Baltimore Oriole." Together they sang "I Get Along Without You Very Well" and "The Nearness of You." Later, group 22 performed an amazing arrangement of his masterpiece, "Skylark."



Artist Arlon Bayliss

**On a sad note...**

Nancy Albers, the widow of Ken Albers, died on May 31<sup>st</sup> after a bout with Covid-19. She was a lovely lady and will be missed by all who knew and loved her. Ken and Nancy met while the Freshmen were playing in her hometown of Detroit. She and Ken had three children and six grandchildren.

## FFMF CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

**JULY 2021**

What are you doing the rest of your life? This great lyric to a song I've always liked brings to mind where we find ourselves these days. Looking back is not particularly rewarding, given all that has not been happening since March 2020. Instead, let's look ahead to what we can expect in the coming months: the Four Freshmen performing live across this country! I know you're excited as am I to know the lockdowns and mask wearing are being eased and, in some cases, eliminated. The rest of our lives should be much rosier than the last many months. And, as of now, we can look forward to gathering in Bay City, Michigan in June 2022 for a grand reunion at the Four Freshmen Society convention!

Are you wondering what the difference is between the Four Freshmen Society (FFS) and the Four Freshmen Music Foundation (FFMF)? Easily explained, the FFS is a fan club, organized to follow the music and lives of the Four Freshmen. As a fan, or "groupie" as we're sometimes called, you may join the FFS by paying annual dues. These dues are not tax-deductible. When you become a member, you receive a quarterly newsletter that helps you track where the Freshmen will be performing, details about upcoming appearances and conventions, and access to the FFS Music Mart. More information is available at [www.fourfreshmensociety.com](http://www.fourfreshmensociety.com).

The FFMF is an educational foundation, organized to help students of all ages learn about and sing the unique harmonies of the Four Freshmen. This mission is carried out by awarding grants and scholarships. The FFMF has founded a permanent Four Freshmen Special Archive for Freshmen recordings and memorabilia at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. There are no annual dues. When you donate money (in whatever amount you choose and as often as you wish) to the FFMF—which

is fully tax-deductible—you become a member. You may also donate items to the Special Archive, which are also tax-deductible. The FFMF publishes a semi-annual newsletter to present historical, legacy articles about the Four Freshmen as a group and as individuals. Highlights of recently awarded grants are included. More information is available at [www.fourfreshmenmusicfoundation.org](http://www.fourfreshmenmusicfoundation.org).

"No one missed me." These words were recently told to me by a recording-artist friend who decided to leave the music business and seek, instead, a career in writing. I immediately thought of the Four Freshmen and why the Four Freshmen Music Foundation was formed. The pandemic has caused all kinds of chaos for the Freshmen and their music careers. For them to abandon this profession would be monumental. Would they be missed? Of course! By a dedicated base of fans? For sure. If the Four Freshmen disappeared from the concert stage forever, the FFMF exists to ensure their legacy lives on! This takes on many forms, but that's why we're here and why our work is ongoing. The Four Freshmen have given this world an enormous gift filled with goodness—a library of unique harmonies, a treasure chest of musical memories, and a challenge to those musically-called talents who are rising up behind them. Thank you for helping the FFMF as we work together to support the Four Freshmen!



*Trudy Feigum chairs the board of directors of FFMF*

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