

# FORTY-ONE YEARS ENJOYING THE FOUR FRESHMEN

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It was a cold, snowy, Wichita, December night in 1972. The local newspaper reported The Four Freshmen were going to be the opening act for Glen Campbell Saturday night at Wichita University.

Being a jazz drummer and loving the 1972 recording of The Four Freshmen with Stan Kenton at Butler University, I had to go hear them in person. My wife had watched a young Glen Campbell singing Wichita Lineman on TV and thought he was darling. So, I bought tickets and we went.

That Saturday night, four young college students from Indiana ran out onto a stage in the round and opened with Poinciana. The crowd liked them.

A handsome, dark-haired Ross Barbour was their drummer and spokesman. He was playing an unusual assortment of percussion items that appeared to be set up by a drunken sailor.

The first thing I noticed was his drum-set only had one, tall tom-tom. As he balanced his body on his left leg, he kept time for the group by stomping on a pedal that hit the bottom of his drum. Simultaneously, he made circles with his brushes atop his tom-tom to create swishing rhythms in the background. In addition, when the music swelled, he would use his brushes to attack a small, splash cymbal hanging above his drum. I had never seen anything like him on his drum set in my life.

When the applause died down, Ross asked the tall, baby-faced, bassist, Bob Flanigan, a question. Flanigan had left his drum set alone on the first number and instead, scraped up and down on something that looked like a petrified egg-plant. Ross asked, "What's that 'gourd-looking' thing you're scratching?"

Acting drunk, Flanigan replied, "That's my Guiro. I'm playing it with my room key from the Holiday Inn. If any of the ladies are interested, I'm staying in room 217 after the show."

Ross feigned shock for the crowd and replied, "You are terrible. You can't say that!" The crowd roared. Early in the show, a heavy set, Nordic-Viking-looking Ken Albers on Flugelhorn took an incredible solo on a slow arrangement of After You. His range and subtle intonation showed him to be a master of a difficult instrument to play.

In the middle of their set, a smaller, shy, Spanish-looking Bill Comstock stepped up and filled the pauses between vocal phrases beautifully on guitar. He was playing rich Stan Kenton chords on a smoldering arrangement of *Angel Eyes*.

Bob Flanigan surprised everyone when he put down his stand up base and strapped on a bass guitar. The group began the slow ballad, A Beautiful Friendship. Flanigan stepped up to the microphone and played accompaniment to himself as he sang the high solo part with magnificent clarity and tone. The crowd hushed so that they could hear him better.

Flanigan leaned back with his guitar still hanging around his neck, picked up his trombone and played the melody with full rich tones as pure as any I have ever heard.

Tingles ran down my spine. I realized that I had witnessed an exceptional musician sing beautifully while he played the guitar, and solo on trombone all during one song. I leaned over to my wife and said, "Is there anything Flanigan can't do?"

For the next forty-one years, I made it a point to travel from my home base in Wichita to hear The Four Freshmen any time they appeared within driving distance.

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It's the evening of December 7, 2013. I'm in the historic McPherson, Kansas, Grand Opera House. "Snow is on its way," the weatherman had said earlier on TV. I thought to myself, "The weather is just like that the night in 1972 when I saw The Four Freshmen perform for the first time."

The most-recent troubadour incarnation of The Four Freshmen came out onstage at exactly 7:00pm. They're all wearing matching dark slacks, checkered jackets and brightly-colored silk ties. Bob Ferreira, the group leader for twenty-two years, identifies each member of the group by telling where they are from and the color of their tie.

Bob Ferreira is playing drums and singing bass. He is the substitute for the original Ross Barbour as he wears a beautiful, blue, silk tie and adds to Ross Barbour's unusual drum-set. Bob uses his hands to play intricate Latin rhythms on an added conga drum head without the benefit of the drum below. I began wondering, "What have these guys got against a normal drum set."

To Bob Ferreira's left is Brian Eichenberger, who is the current electric bass player, song arranger, and lead vocalist. He wears a beautiful, golden silk tie and sings the high part with wonderful sincerity. I wish the original Freshmen were still around to watch him perform.

To Brian Eichenberger's left is the new lead guitarist and vocalist, Stein Malvey. Stein is a tall, slender man wearing a beautiful, red, silk tie. He plays background chords to fill in pauses and solos and jokes around with the other Freshmen with ease. Displaying his own musical style, he is the new Freshmen member helping on the "Freshmen sound."

On the far right is the formidable Curtis Calderon doing vocals, playing trumpet, and flugelhorn. He's wearing a beautiful, pink, silk tie and jokes with the crowd by announcing he is going to play an egg filled with lead shot on Latin American numbers. During the group's rendition of *Graduation Day*, Curtis startled the audience by blating his trumpet when they sang, "...she gave her BLAT to me..."

Toward the end of the concert, The Four Freshmen came out to the front of the stage without their instruments and did their acapella version of *Their Hearts Were Full of Spring*. Everyone in the audience seemed to stop breathing at the end.

Then the crowd exploded into appreciative applause.

The original four college students from Indiana were amazing musicians and performers, and that was sixty-five years ago.

The latest Four Freshmen are dedicated musicians who work hard and share their music with the world as they carry the "Freshmen sound" into the future.