

An analysis of the Four Freshmen “Sound” from 1992

by John Modschiedler

A few years ago Palle Christensen (FFS-Denmark) brought an interesting publication to the attention of FFS member John Modschiedler (a professor at the College of DuPage in Illinois). The work in question, by Matthias Becker, was apparently originally written as a doctoral thesis in Germany.

Subsequently it has been published in book form titled: *Chormusik Im Jazz*. Schulz-Kirchner Verlag. Idstein 1992

As with many Freshmen fan stories, Palle and John both followed up. In the summer of 1992, John and his wife traveled to Germany and contacted Matthias Becker to get his permission to translate his reference to The Four Freshmen so that English-speaking fans could share his splendid work.

What follows is John Modschiedler's translation: Becker, Matthias. *Chormusik Im Jazz (Choral Music in Jazz)*

Idstein, Germany: Schultz-Kirchner, 1992. ISBN 3-8248-0066-7.

Part I ...

4.2.1 The Four Freshmen

As the Four Freshmen began their musical career, the public's demand for big band dance music had significantly declined. The prosperity of the big band epoch belonged to the past, and the number of close harmony groups had been correspondingly decimated.

The Four Freshmen, along with the Mel-Tones, belong to the few quartets of the post-swing era who sought their success without being dependent upon an instrumental ensemble.¹ After an approximately 15-year dependence upon the big bands, the final emancipation of choral singing--it was actually a symbiotic relationship--was brought about by these two vocal groups.

In 1947, under the leadership of Ross Barbour,* the Four Freshmen got together as first year students (Freshmen) at the Arthur Jordan Conservatory of Music of Butler University in Indianapolis. They sang under the name of The Toppers Barbershops, in close harmony style, and sought to emulate the famous Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots.

Fresh News Editor's Note: According to Ross Barbour the leadership in 1947 was actually provided by Hal Kratzsch. But perhaps that's just Barbour modesty.

In September 1948 the quartet made its way to Chicago as numerous vocal ensembles had also done before them, for that is where the lure of big booking agents was, and numerous radio stations were looking for innovative musicians. However, the Toppers (The Four Freshmen), with their epigonic/inherited singing style, were not able to offer any musical innovations with the result that they were at first rejected by music agents. In spite of these painful experiences they began to pursue their professional career path; on the 20th of September they made their debut at the Club 113 in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and thereafter went on tour for two years with little success.

In 1950 Stan Kenton² heard the quartet at the Esquire Club in Dayton, Ohio, and recommended them to Capitol Records for whom Kenton produced and recorded his own record albums. There had already been a previous verbal agreement by the Four Freshmen regarding a future collaboration with Woody Herman and his orchestra, but the record contract promised the quartet more independence, and the negotiations to cooperate with Herman were broken off. Moreover, Kenton brought a ray of hope: "We were ready to break up when he (Stan Kenton) came to see us. We had already made up our minds that we were going to go another five or six months and then give up."³

There was such little public demand for the first recordings that Capitol already considered terminating the relationship. However, in 1952 the song title *It's a Blue World* brought about the commercial breakthrough.⁴ Beginning in 1953 the quartet gave innumerable concerts in colleges and universities and thereby won people over to this kind of singing arranged for several voices.⁵ "The reason we have stayed around as long as we have is that from 1953 to 1964 we played at more than 2,000 colleges and universities."⁶ The Four Freshmen thereby followed the example of Stan Kenton, Dave Brubeck, and other musicians. "Kenton was the most powerful force in the development of the stage band movement in colleges and universities.... It has undoubtedly raised the level of American and ultimately world musicianship."⁷

Footnotes

¹ Not taken into account in this case are the bebop vocal groups who accentuated other things with their solo singing and scat improvisations.

² Stan Kenton collaborated again and again with different vocal groups. Cf. The Pastels, The Modern Men.

³ Bob Flanagan (sic) on 19 Apr 89 in an interview with Lillian Arganian after a concert in Columbus, Ohio. File of unknown origin at (Rutgers University).

⁴ Cf. the analysis on p. 171 (of the original, PART II below).

⁵ Certainly not only on the basis of these activities are the universities and colleges still important fertile ground for vocal groups (e.g., The Axidentals, New York Voices, The P.M. Singers, Take 6) and the education of an interested audience.

⁶ Bob Flanagan (sic), cited from John S. Wilson in The New York Times, 23 Feb. 79.

⁷ Lees 1987; 64.

With their tours in Europe, Asia, and the USA, regular television, radio, club, and film appearances (Lucy Gallant; Rich, Young and Pretty), as well as almost 40 long-playing records, The Four Freshmen belong to the few jazz, and jazz-related popular music, vocal ensembles actually known around the world.

The record albums with an instrumental section and a rhythm group: five trombones, five saxophones, five trumpets or five guitars, as well as the recordings with the Stan Kenton orchestra, earned special attention because in them the jazz-like vocal style especially stood out. The greatest credit was due to the head arranger for the Stan Kenton Band, Pete Rugolo, the undisputed magician of sound of modern big band jazz.¹ He also wrote some of the vocal arrangements for The Four Freshmen.

They won the DB Readers Poll 1953-56, as well as 1958, and occupied top spots in the following years. They also won first places in the publications ME, Billboard and Playboy. With their entertaining and audience-pleasing presentations, as well as the quality of the vocal arrangements (Pete Rugolo, Dick Reynolds, Ken Albers), The Four Freshmen belong to the influential vocal groups.

"Their presentation now is an effective mixture of ballads, mild humor, and modern jazz. But their group vocal work is still the most important part of their act."² "L'intelligenza dei Freshmen sta nel fatto di essersi aggiornati nel repertorio, in modo da trovarsi sempre alla ribalta con i successi del momento / Freshmen hanno rappresentato un'epoca del canto corale."³

"[The intelligence of the Freshmen is in the fact of having updated their repertoire, so as to always be in the limelight with the successes of the moment The Freshmen have represented an era of choral singing]"³

The discussion in the media regarding their musical style, which to this day has not concluded, interested the quartet, but they did not enter into it and kept their distance from it. In this regard DB observed: