

“... the quartet remains one of those very few vocal groups that offers real musical justification for ‘its existence.’”⁴ “To state that this album is long overdue is perhaps to pinpoint the basic reason for the lack of acceptance of the Four Freshmen in jazz circles and by jazz critics. The complaint has always been: ‘Perhaps they can get into a legitimate jazz groove, but they don’t.’ With this album, the beef has been squared. Welcome to jazz, fellas.”⁵

The criticism found fault with the quartet’s weak intonation—often rightly so—which possibly had its origin in the complexity of the musical phrases. However, their persuasive presentation and progressive style of arrangements—clearly stamped with jazz harmonies—was obviously valued more highly by the public or, more likely, was noticed more than occasionally unclearly sung chords.

“This group has good ideas but poor intonation.”⁶ “They’re an exceptionally energetic-sounding quartet who likes to fool around with voicings and blends, but who, unfortunately, just don’t have the vocal equipment to carry through what they’re attempting.... They show off fine ideas much better than their intonation.”⁷ “... there are moments of the weirdest intonation.”⁸

In the mid and late ‘70s the Four Freshmen produced more records. However, Bob Flanagan (sic/Flanigan) remained the only member of the earlier successful group. The quality, the selection of songs, the style of the arrangements and the intonation of these later recordings did not compete successfully with the earlier ones. In an editorial reference by DB the impression was given that the Four Freshmen were still “the old Four Freshmen.” After only four previous changes in personnel which became “two personnel (sic) changes,” ... “The Four Freshmen report they are still doing the old songs in their own way”⁹

4.2.2 The Musical Style

The Four Freshmen built upon the close harmony style of those vocal groups (Modernaires, Pastels, Pied Pipers) which sang with the big bands. At first they adopted the style which can be heard in the recording of *It’s A Blue World*.

Later they oriented themselves more strongly toward the more progressive big band arrangements of, e.g., Woody Herman, Claude Thornhill, Artie Shaw and most of all on Stan Kenton’s orchestral style, as well as on his use of complex jazz harmonies. “Kenton ... introduced an enriched harmonic palette (sic), a powerful use of brass, ... and a sort of dramatic approach to orchestral jazz that have been imitated ever since”¹⁰ “Too many chords.”¹¹

On account of their musical phrasing The Four Freshmen achieved a modern, progressive sound which clearly distinguished itself from the other vocal ensembles, the rhythm quartets and the average close harmony groups: “... to sing complex and difficult arrangements that the average vocal group would not attempt.”¹²

Alongside the phrasing technique, above all The Four Freshmen sound was given its distinctive character by the high, sometimes falsetto voice of Bob Flanagan (sic). As can be heard on numerous recordings, all four singers were also jazz instrumentalists, which had an advantageous effect on their musical expression and

phrasing. Their joy in playing music, their musicality, and freshness of ideas were in clear contrast to contemporary vocal ensembles and made up for the lack of vocal execution. “The ability of The Four Freshmen as musicians may be the real basis of their sound, in that their singing arrangements are as much orchestral as vocal.”¹³

Appreciation

The Four Freshmen developed their style out of the tradition of mixed close harmony groups. With their self-willed choral arrangements, as a male quartet they brought a new quality to multi-part singing. To be sure, they also utilized epigonic/inherited instrumental phrasing techniques, but they were one of the first groups to find new ways out of the constructions of the close harmony style without thereby fully breaking with the tradition.

The Four Freshmen along with The Mel-Tones belong to the first vocal groups which did not bind themselves to a particular big band and were thereby able to be stylistically as well as financially independent. The thereby underlined the self-reliant character, the aesthetic and artistic claim of multi-part vocal jazz. At the same time they decisively shaped the styles of the ensembles which succeeded them.

The male quartet The Hi-Lo’s can above all only be understood as taking up and continuing the musical ideas of The Four Freshmen (the first development of the close harmony style; a capella introductions and inserted, unaccompanied segments; emphasis on the singing and de-emphasizing the instrumental portion of progressive jazz harmonies). ...

Part II . . .

4.1 The Four Freshmen¹⁴

To begin with The Four Freshmen adopted the close harmony style of the vocal groups of the swing era, as the arrangement of their first hit from the year 1952, *It’s A Blue World* shows.

Shortly thereafter the quartet oriented itself stylistically to Stan Kenton’s or else to Pete Rugolo’s orchestral style of arranging. Both arrangers introduced an enriched harmony into big band jazz, which, coupled with powerful brass-wind passages, brought a dramatically novel element into the music. Ross Barbour of The Four Freshmen confirms this:

“I was a fan of Stan’s ... when I finally saw the band for the first time. All of us were changed, all Four Freshmen. So devoted were we that we copied The Pastels every way we could. (How can four guys sound like five, with a girl on top?) Our instrumental stuff was borrowed from Kenton’s sound. Borrowed? We stole every morsel we could copy.”¹⁵

“Stan Kenton says that The Four Freshmen sound like the Kenton orchestra, or vice versa; certainly there is a similarity in the musical concept that both have employed, and both have left an indelible mark on modern music.”¹⁶

The Four Freshmen adopted two (particular musical techniques from Kenton) for their choral arrangements, which is why the literature always alludes to the quartet sounding like Stan Kenton’s orchestra.

Footnotes

¹ Berendt 1956: 150.

² DB 19 May 54, 4.

³ Lupi 1986: 140.

⁴ DB 11 Jun 59.

⁵ DB 20 Dec 62, 34, review of “The Swingers.”

⁶ ME June 53, 29.

⁷ ME Oct 54, 28.

⁸ ME Aug 59, 26.

⁹ ME 25 Oct 73, 11.

¹⁰ Lees 1987: 64.

¹¹ Alvino Rey cited from Lees 1987: 95.

¹² Audree Coke: liner notes to “live at Butler’s (sic) University.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ A series of Four Freshmen arrangements were published by the UNC Jazz Press.

¹⁵ Cited from Lee 1980: 141.

¹⁶ Audree Coke in the liner notes to Live at Butler University.

Editor’s Note: Up until the ME article dated 25 Oct 1973, there were a total of five configurations of The Four Freshmen.

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