

The Twenty-Two Freshmen Continuous Harmony

Lee Mergner, Jazztimes November 2003

Every musician or group should have a fan club, but few in fact do. And most of the active fan clubs are for musicians no longer on the physical plane, as it were. (Death has its perks.)

Of the living-artist fan clubs, few are more active and vociferous than the Four Freshmen Society, which currently numbers over 3,000 strong. It publishes a newsletter (fourfreshmen.com) and hosts a convention drawing attendees from all over the globe.

For those unfamiliar with the Freshmen, the vocal quartet was formed in the late '40s and released a succession of increasingly popular records in the 1950s, culminating with "Graduation Day." A major influence on modern-jazz vocal groups such as the Manhattan Transfer and New York Voices, the Four Freshmen are more famously credited with influencing the Beach Boys by providing a model for unconventional yet sweet high harmonies.

Another thing the Freshmen and the Beach Boys share in common is their lack of most or all of their original members. Brothers Ross and Don Barbour, Hal Kratzch and Bob Flanigan began the Freshmen, with Flanigan being the Mike Love of the group, lasting until the '90s with a succession of replacement players before retiring. Yet the Freshmen live on. (It makes you wonder where all the old Freshmen go. Do they become Sophomores, Juniors or Seniors? Or do they become Beach Boys or just retire to Palm Springs?)

The latest Freshmen lineup is the 22nd in its history. Don Boland, Northeast Communication Director for the Four Freshmen Society and a member since 1991, acknowledges the departure of the original members, but says that he thinks the original question is moot. **"I always say the Four Freshmen are the original group, with changes made throughout the years. Are (today's) Philadelphia Phillies the original team or group?"** The Four Freshmen never had a ghost band on the road. There has never been anyone who left and formed a group and did a tribute to the Four Freshmen."

With an average age of 28, many of the group's current members weren't even born when the group was formed. We have no statistics on the average age of a Freshmen fan club member, but I can assure you that it's got to be at least twice that figure.

I asked 27-year-old Brian Eichenberger, a current Freshmen, how it feels to be entertaining people two or three times his age night after night. "It's definitely different, but it's great. They love the music, and I get so much energy back from them. Even though they're my parents' or grandparents' age, it's a great experience because they do love it so much. I would rather play for an audience that, no matter what age they are, they're listening and they care about it. If they were younger, and they were not into it, it wouldn't be as fun."

It is indeed a fanatical bunch. Several years back the membership engineered a campaign to ensure that the Four Freshmen showed up in the vocal-jazz group category of the readers' pools of the U.S. jazz magazines. Buying up copies (thanks for the sell-through, folks) and photocopying forms (most of which contained votes in only a few categories), the membership made its voices known, very loud and very clear. At least the Postal Service made some money from it all. Boland says his efforts to promote the group these days are entirely legit. And it's obvious that a group that works about 150 dates a year is doing pretty well without recognition from magazine polls or coverage in the mainstream media.

How does a group like this maintain its popularity? Asked to pinpoint the appeal of the group, Eichenberger points to the group's sound beyond the notes on the page. "The way that we sing harmony is different than what you can hear anywhere else. There's something about four guys being really in tune with each other, not only in a musical sense. The word you use to describe those things in music is the same - harmony. These guys are connected to each other."

But Eichenberger doesn't feel like he's part of a nostalgia act. "It's purely a musical experience for us. It's not nostalgic for us because we weren't around then. We love it for the same reason they love it. There's just 40 years difference, just like when the fans heard that wall of sound and harmony for the first time in 1952, it's just addictive."

The jazz/not jazz question has dogged the group for many years. Boland, a very serious and knowledgeable jazz fan, thinks it's all hogwash. "Are they (like) Wayne Shorter? No. Are they (like) John Pizzarelli? Yes. They're in a gray area. They're not pure jazz or not pure pop. Rosemary Clooney became a jazz artist when she went to Concord Records. And she sang the same then as she sang on Columbia!"

Asked for group's perspective, Eichenberger laughs and says, "It's kind of a spectrum. If someone can step up and really define what jazz is, then we can tell if we are or not."

Jazz or not, there's no doubt about the group's unusual bond with its audience. "The four of us are celebrating the same thing, which is this music," Eichenberger says. "It's not like fans coming together to celebrate us, but all of us are celebrating the sound they created and the music they've done. It doesn't feel like we're stars or anything. We're the guys on stage and they're the people in the audience, but we're talking about the same thing."

How many jazz artists can say that?

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