

"FRESH" MEMORIES

By Glenda Sanders - The Villages Daily Sun



Bob Watts, center, spent 20 years managing the Four Freshmen and touring with the group across the United States beginning in the 1950s.

Watts and his wife, Marilyn, recently became year-round residents of the Villages after having wintered here in previous years.

In 1990, Bob Watts met a teacher at the Tiffin, Ohio, school where he was substitute teaching. He was immediately interested in her and pulled out all the stops to romance her. When she mentioned that she was a fan of the Four Freshmen and had heard that he'd had "something to do with" the legendary quartet, Watts got tickets to a nearby concert where he introduced her to the singers so she could get an album autographed.

Watts' association with the Four Freshmen had begun nearly 40 years earlier, again when he was on a date to hear the quartet perform. Watts fell in love at the Crest Lounge in Detroit that night - not with the girl he was with, but with the music he heard.

The Four Freshmen had literally turned traditional chords topsy-turvy, giving the melody line to the tenor at the top of the chord instead of to the voice in the middle. That allowed them a flexibility to "play" with the chords, creating a new sound in harmony. "When they were singing, you'd swear there were five voices, sometimes six, singing," Watts said. "I done-did fall in love with the sound and how they did things, how they did their harmony." After falling in love with their unique sound, Watts couldn't get the Four Freshmen and their new style of harmony out of his mind.

Two years earlier, jazz great Stan Kenton had heard the Four Freshmen and had been so impressed by them that he called Capitol Records on their behalf. When Watts heard the quartet in Detroit, they had just released their first single, "It's a Blue World."

The group had a following in Detroit and they were working regularly, but Watts believed they had not yet reached the

audience their talent deserved. He also suspected they were not earning what they should be earning. "I had a crazy idea," Watts said.

Watts, who had been drafted straight out of high school and enrolled at Michigan State Univ. after returning home following World War II, had just received his degree at Michigan State Univ. and was working in sales for Scott Paper Company. "I wasn't in the music business and I didn't have any intention of getting in the business," Watts said. But he couldn't let go of his "crazy idea" that he could help the Freshmen find the audience they deserved. He was convinced that if he could get them to East Lansing, in the heart of the student district, good things would happen. Watts' confidence wasn't without foundation. For a paper salesman, Watts had quite a bit of experience booking musical talent. Always a music lover, he'd been disappointed by the talent booked for university-sponsored activities. During his junior year, he'd mustered the courage to go to the dean, Tom King, about the situation. He recalls telling King that he had "lousy taste in music." King responded by enlisting Watts' help in booking bands for student activities during his final two years of school. The talent he'd booked had proven popular with the students and he and the dean had become good friends.

Unable to shake his conviction that he could help the Four Freshmen, Watts finally went to the quartet and asked two questions: What were they making in Detroit and what would it take to get them to East Lansing? The singers, predictably, were skeptical about being approached by a total stranger talking about money. They were making \$500 a week in Detroit, a respectable living for singers in that era. To consider giving up their proverbial bird in the hand, they said they would have to have \$500 a night. Watts went to the owner of the Coral Gables in East Lansing and did a hard-sell. The club owner agreed to give the Freshmen a shot, for the requested \$500, if they could play the Sunday after the Michigan State-Notre Dame game. The Sunday date worked well. The Four Freshmen were usually off on Sunday, so they didn't have to jeopardize their standing booking in Detroit to go to East Lansing. If they bombed with the college crowd, they still would walk away with a week's pay for the one night. Their appearance at the Coral Gables was such a hit with the student audience that the owner made them an offer they couldn't refuse: \$600 a night plus a percentage of the profits.

Watts had invited King, the dean he'd accused of having "lousy" taste in music, to the Sunday show, hoping King might want to book the group at Michigan State. A few days later, King called a meeting. He, also, had an offer too good to refuse. Using his contacts in the university community, he had mapped out a tentative concert tour for the group: 31 stops at 31 universities, each within 250 miles of the other. Each concert paid \$1000. The Four Freshmen agreed to the tour and asked Watts to come along. Watts accepted the invitation, little suspecting that "a while" would last more than 20 years or that his involvement with the Four Freshmen would throw him into the middle of the burgeoning music business, putting him in the company of such music and show-biz personalities as Stan Kenton, Buddy Rich, Bob Hope, the Glenn Miller Band, Jane Powell and Vic Damone.