

Bob Watts reflects on what made the Four Freshmen a legend. The first tailored suits the Freshmen owned were purchased in Chicago by a woman who owned a Calumet City night club in which they had been performing. Years later, the woman fell on hard times and the Four Freshmen, by then nationally known, returned to Calumet City and did a week of shows at the club, accepting no pay except for homemade Italian meals she prepared for them.

The Freshmen met when they were students at Butler University's Arthur Jordan Conservatory. Although they could read music, Watts said they couldn't transcribe their original arrangements into written music. "They would work out a song in the morning, but not be able to repeat the arrangement at night," Watts said. "A lot of arrangements were lost because they couldn't remember them."

One of Watts' favorite stories is of the time the Freshmen were traveling with Kenton to a concert date in Canada. While they were stuck at the border, waiting to go through the line of vehicles at the checkpoint, jazz pianist George Shearing, who was blind, joked that he would like to drive into Canada. They put him behind the wheel of the bus and, with one guy holding his foot near the brake and another watching the ignition key in case they needed to stop the bus suddenly, they coached Shearing as he drove across the border. Watts said they nearly convulsed with held-in laughter as Shearing interacted with the border guard. Kenton, Watts said, mentored the group and give them one piece of advice that worked well for them throughout their career. "Stan Kenton told them to get a key chord and stick with it," Watts said. "And they did."

Watts attributes the Four Freshmen's enduring success to the fact that they created a sound people loved and never strayed from it. "They wanted to make it by singing pretty music - love songs, pretty ballads with some jazz - and entertain the audience," Watts said. "People fall in love to the music of the Four Freshmen."

At one point, Watts said, Four Freshmen albums were the largest sellers on the Capitol Records label, their sales surpassing those of Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole. "They built their reputation, never snubbed anybody, just loved what they were doing," he said. "We weren't that crazy aggressive."

He said the Freshmen lived by a strict code of professionalism, never drinking on stage and never appearing on stage drunk. "They never did any dope," Watts said. He said the Four Freshmen let their appeal hinge on their sound, not on such gimmicks as hiring women to scream and swoon at their performances. "No one ever ripped the buttons off their shirts," Watts said.

Watts called the Freshmen "a force in the music business" even though they never made The Ed Sullivan Show. The group was scheduled to appear on The Arthur Godfrey Show," Watts said, but when Godfrey heard how they planned to jazz up his theme song, he became furious and ordered them out of the studio.

Watts said the Freshmen were popular with their neighbors after moving to Simi Valley, CA where the kids in the neighborhood flocked to their houses to listen to their rehearsals. "They knew when we were home," Watts said. The performers always insisted on being home for Halloween. "Halloween was a big time for them," he said. "They loved to scare the kids half to death."

Watts' most thrilling memory was actually singing with the Freshmen in Evansville, Ind., after one of the singers scratched his throat on a fish bone before the concert. The singer appeared on stage and lip-synched the lyrics while Watts sang his part from behind the stage curtain.

Watts still loves the sound he heard in that Detroit night club. "I'm so thrilled they developed this sound - it's going to live forever," he said. Watts predicts the Four Freshmen will remain a part of the American music scene for generations to come. "Capitol is remastering their songs and putting them on CD," Watts said. "People still want to hear good music."

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Details to be announced**

