

## **Q. HOW DO WE GET YOUNG PEOPLE INTERESTED IN THE FOUR FRESHMEN?**

### **A. CLINICS!!!**

The question posed above is probably the most frequently asked at Freshmen conventions and ultimately, significant to the group's continued longevity. This unique position in American music should not dissolve with its original core audience. As we all know, the Four Freshmen's success was built largely due to its original core audience and its college performances around the country during the 50's and 60's. One must be realistic about the evolution of our culture and realize that the college listeners of 2009 are not generally embracing the music of their grandparent's generation (with some obvious exceptions). However, when the current Freshmen appear at a college and are asked to conduct a clinic, you can bet that they instantly acquire new (and young) fans. Frankly, the group's chances of appearing on late night variety shows, for example, are remote because they aren't signed to a major record label, have no "concept" video, and are still perceived as representing nostalgia associated with the 1950's. Yes, they're all young and supremely talented, but The Four Freshmen name, as iconic as it is, will always be linked to that era.

My point here is that mass popularity as a result of major media coverage (TV in particular) is unlikely given the type of groups that are booked on these "talk" shows. We can cry foul all we want about how the Freshmen are 100 times more musical than the average band getting that national coverage, but the reality is that not only are the people who book these shows ignorant of anything but current music, they really don't care. They react to the pressure from their affiliates to provide "contemporary" entertainment, regardless of their actual talent.

The Four Freshmen's appeal has always been their musicality, warmth, and showmanship. To put it bluntly, it's for people who get it. The world of pop music is littered with mediocrity and always has been. Some people really crave sounds that engage them with harmonic sophistication. Others want something bland out of their radio in the background. That's not us. My point here is that it doesn't matter what we do, there will always be young ears that accidentally stumble over the recordings somehow. Will it be enough to sustain a working Freshmen unit into the future? How can we possibly know? What I DO know is that the young musicians who show up at these clinics are transformed, especially after they can see and hear what the group has to offer right before them. Am I saying that the future audience can only be comprised of music students? I hope not. We can always ask the "original fans" to convince their sons, daughters, and grandchildren to check out the young Freshmen group in concert. We all know that even if someone didn't know a thing about them, you're a fan by the time the show ends. We have to hope that they have the courage and motivation to express their enthusiasm to their friends who have never heard of them. Yeah, some young folks won't get it but there will also be some, like me, who say, "Wait a second, play that again."

On February 11th of this year the Freshmen came into Roseburg, Oregon for a concert and clinic at Umpqua Community College. The group has performed in the area many times over the years under the sponsorship of long time FF Society member and Portland convention head, Gil Peterson. Gil made sure that the guys were well taken care of despite Brian's ill health at that moment and we even had an informal hang at Gil's house where Marcus Harbaugh, the fine young piano player from the Indianapolis convention and I got a chance to sing Freshmen charts with Vince and Bob. Brian and Curtis tolerated us and it was great fun. Marcus is from the Salem, OR area but perhaps I should explain what I was doing there.

I mentioned to Gil at the Portland Convention that both my sons were moving to Portland and to please let me know if there might be any opportunities in that area. A couple of months ago Gil called to convince me that there were some teaching and musical opportunities in Roseburg (about 3 hours south of Portland). I managed to play a few gigs and work steadily as a substitute teacher on the Monterey Peninsula in California but with no immediate family in the area, despite growing up there, I didn't feel compelled to stay. Thanks to Gil, I've settled in the Roseburg area, obtained an Oregon teaching license and accepted a transcription project from the Freshmen for the upcoming Atlanta convention. Dr. Jason Heald, the jazz professor at Umpqua College who booked the concert/clinic, asked me also to be a clinician for the day long session featuring vocal jazz ensembles from many high school and colleges in the county. The Freshmen were only available for an hour the day after their show due to traveling considerations but still managed to offer an effective performance and workshop for the students. I worked with all the other kids from 8 A.M. to 4 P.M.

The Freshmen's portion of the workshop is for them to open with a few tunes so the students can witness what they're about and how musical and professional they are. Then they listen to that school's vocal group and offer comments, sometimes getting specific with a few bars in a particular arrangement. Before anyone knows it, the hour is up and they have to catch a plane to the next job. My approach was somewhat different in that I was the Lone Clinician so I didn't have a band to perform with. Generally, each school's group would perform 3 or 4 pieces and I was allotted roughly 10 minutes or so to critique and offer ideas on how to improve. The first thing I tell each group is the importance of LISTENING. Not just to themselves but to the recordings of the of the great jazz vocal groups, i.e. The Four Freshmen, The Hi-Lo's, The Singers Unlimited, Manhattan Transfer, New York Voices, and Take 6. I admonish them to absorb these recordings ON HEADPHONES.