

REFLECTIONS

of the Four Freshmen

by Roderick Dayton, FFS Pennsylvania

A few years ago while attending the FFS Pittsburgh Convention and partaking in Ross's Freshmen Wannabes, the lady next to me politely turned and said, "You really know all their songs?"

"Well ma'am, I've been a Freshmen Fan for most of my life and how about you?" That nice lady turned out to be Sue Barbour, Ross's wife. They both embraced me with Frosh anecdotes for the remainder of that convention.

The following year in Indianapolis after seeing Ross and Sue, I made available a copy of my Fresh News story - published almost 20 years ago - on how I became a Freshman Fan. After a good review they sent it back asking me to revise it for re-publication. So, with some changes to the original this is how the Freshmen greatly influenced my life and my own music career.

It was a July afternoon more than 50 years ago, and I was counting the days to when I'd be leaving the Dominican Sisters in their convent/children's home in the suburbs of New York City. I'd spent all of my childhood there, and upon approaching my 17th birthday, I looked forward to my enlistment in the Air Force. Listening to the radio while mopping the convent's dormitory floor, a song came on with an interpretation I'd never heard before. The music so moved me that I actually dropped the mop and put my ear to the speaker to hear the rest of "Day by Day" as I habitually took interest in an unusual and distinguished musical score. The early memories of my mother's beautiful singing voice, being a choir boy and over the years with many school performances, song sessions with the other convent kids along with playing bugle in the fife and drum band had consumed me with a love of music.

"Day by Day's" new sound with the Latin arrangement was so original that I was disappointed when the DJ didn't announce the name of the group. The song stuck with me for days as I longed to hear it again. My early exposure to Latin rhythms was the hushed singing of the convent's homesick Latino kids pining for their homes and families. Whenever the band equipment was distributed, the instrument tune-ups turned into a whimsical impromptu Latin music session on those very elementary instruments. That is until the convent prefect shouted, "OK you guys cut that out, this ain't Puerto Rico, fall into your marching positions."

Back then, Latin rhythms were rarely heard on mainstream radio. Now the Samba, Rhumba, Mambo, and exciting Latin rhythms were being introduced to a wider audience. Trumpets, conga drums, cow

bells, and artists like Perez Prado, Tito Puente and others were changing the sounds that were expanding American popular music. This was how I took note of that catchy Latin sound and those harmonic voices in "Day by Day" that hooked me. When finally I heard the song again the announcer mentioned the group as the "Four Freshmen." The other convent kids hadn't heard of them yet, but you can believe I made sure that the record would be put on the jukebox's waiting list in the diner where we all gathered after caddying on weekends. Unfortunately, I joined the Air Force before I would ever hear it played there.

During my basic training at Sampson Air Base, I got my first weekend pass for Rochester, NY. Waiting for the Greyhound bus, I heard the jukebox blaring out "Day by Day," and I rushed back to play it again and again. Missing my bus and having to wait three hours for the next bus, the ticket attendant wasn't too pleased after hearing that song for the tenth time in the now empty station. Upon arrival at the Rochester USO, the hostess was giving out tickets for the evening events. I mentioned to her the song I'd heard by the Four Freshmen. She told me how she too loved the group and that they sang a song in a movie that was playing in town called "Lucy Gallant." You can imagine where I spent my first evening! In the film I heard the flip side of "Day by Day" called "How can I tell her." The soft vocal harmony on this song was also a new exciting discovery for me.

Until then, I had no personal outlet, for every moment of my life had been a demanding regimen restricted and accounted for to the authorities in the convent/home and now the military. This was a landmark day when I could determine my own artistic interpretation and a search for music that would shape my future. Afterwards, sharing my enthusiasm with my service buddies I would learn for the first time the great catalogue of music that had bypassed me in my early life. Subsequently, I was to learn the Four Freshmen had been around for some time.

My next assignment was Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas for Tech School. There I was able to buy my first record player, and "Day by Day" was my first record. The music store in town carried several other Freshmen singles including "Blue World" and "Voices in Modern." The sales clerk ordered an album in the EP version to fit my record player, the just released "Four Freshmen and Five Trombones." That album, with its extraordinary musicianship, captivated me forever to the Freshmen sound which had expanded my musical tastes, and where in a very short time I learned the words to every song. I held a secret passion to be an entertainer and now studied the ever increasing Freshmen discography and their musical discipline as a guide for my own budding profession. In the service, I was probably viewed as something of a nuisance as I tried out my singing talents at every opportunity where a band was setting up or on stage. Obviously, I lacked a musical business sense but nobody told me I shouldn't try and more often I was asked to sing. There were also those service club talent shows where I harmonized with Freshmen-style Wannabes and other vocal groups.

During this period, there was an introduction of so many new promising vocal groups. I still remember The Tattle Tales, The Hi-Lo's, the Kenton Presents Series with Al Belleto Sextet, even the Mexican group "Los Tres Ases" and other groups that slip my memory right now.

That was the time of the "Elvis Spring," especially in Texas. Now, there was a cross section of music if ever there was one! Both Elvis and the Freshmen came to Wichita Falls that spring, albeit weeks apart. Well! My first concert ever was some experience for this 17-year-old former convent kid. Along with