

# REFLECTIONS (continued)

the Freshmen, on the bill were the Ted Heath Orchestra, June Christy, and Nat King Cole.

After the show, I bypassed the adoring throng that surrounded Nat Cole and elatedly helped the Freshmen pack up in the auditorium and roll their equipment out to the bus. My conversation with Ross Barbour and the rest of the Freshmen just about bubbled the starch out of my khaki uniform. I even got to meet June Christy, who called me “a cute soldier!”

Performing one night stands, the tour would continue across the endless highways of Texas. In a publication I discovered called “Variety,” I would read about that famous “Road Show,” and follow their schedule across Texas and the Deep South. I was envious of their opportunity to travel almost everywhere they had a waiting devoted audience while my passion for adventurous artistic freedom was still restricted. Years later, I mentioned this story to Bob Flanagan who still remembered me and his words were: “Oh, God, back then I thought we’d never get out of Texas.”

After my military service, I explored the country in various jobs and tried out my singing and vocal impersonation skills at every potential opportunity while I visited the cities to catch the Freshmen performing thus acquiring new repertoire. Eventually, I found myself a student at Los Angeles City College and later at L.A. State where I occasionally sang with the college bands. Always in possession of my collection of Freshmen singles and albums, this was the time Jim Pike was interested in me as a member of his newly forming group “The Lettermen.” Slowly, I was being taken seriously, and the musical director at State told me I sounded very much like the up-and-coming much talked about jazz guitarist and singer Frank D’Rone. When I learned that Frank was a regular performer in San Francisco, I made frequent trips up to see him. Though unknown to Frank then, he was a great inspiration and my secret vocal mentor. Over time, my determination and rising self confidence paid off with my own musical talent seeking its own audience. With my new bride Suzy, we set sail for Europe to hone this talent.

I worked there for years as a musician and singer in various clubs, hotels, casinos, military bases and European tourists’ resorts in Spain and North Africa. I was often invited to perform in the Soviet bloc countries. My repertoire included songs in German and Italian. Meeting with Soviet students there, I found a great hunger for western style jazz and music and discussed Willis Conover’s jazz program on “The Voice of America Radio.” The Freshmen were a regular feature in Europe on the Armed Forces Radio and Radio Luxemburg, sandwiched between the new British Pop, Motown and a rising clamor for American Country music. The adventure of this business to

pursue a “gig” regardless of where it was offered had me accepting offers to perform in the Far East and some exposure to their growing color TV industry. In time, I was producing my own shows and booking reviews far and wide. Returning home, I toured Alaska and then down to South America.

After all, I chose this career to experience the world, and often more than 25 years of performing on the road, cruise ships and as master of ceremonies, entertainment director at holiday resorts I reviewed the wisdom gained from my whirlwind encounters. Eventually, I relished some domestic stability, taking less demanding work to administer performing arts. I changed careers.

My biggest regret is that period of time when I lost touch with the Freshmen as they changed personnel and recording labels and the industry technology changed. Then years later, the Capitol Collectors Series was released and I found out about the great work of John Bangs and the FF AS. There was the tremendous support of the FFS staff and friends of the Freshmen who were always eager to extend themselves. Our dedicated Chick Trafford would call my home whenever the Freshmen were quickly scheduled in the area. I was teaching ESL in China and contacted Yas Ichiura in Japan asking him to send me a hard to find CD and he came through. When I couldn’t find any CD recordings on Frank D’Rone, the FFS put me in touch with the incomparable Paul Halac, who has everything ever recorded by Frank along with a priceless collection of Americas favorite artists. From Paul, I learned to my delight that Frank still performs in the Chicago area.

Looking back at my own life, it was indeed the music of the Freshmen giving me my first experience of discovering and exploring on my own, their unique style and musical expression which nonetheless continues to influence so many artists and vocal groups. I never forget that I was one of them. Two of my sons continue my legacy with their own groups: One performs in California and on occasion Las Vegas, while the other performs in Vermont and the eastern region.

Now as a teacher and historian, I operate motor coach tours all over the country and Canada. You can be sure whenever I have the appropriate crowd and the moment presents itself, I slip in a Freshmen CD and there is always someone who can start up an exciting conversation of our favorite group. Sometimes we all lapse into a memorable sing-a-long. Ross would be proud!

I still applaud the guys who found the “sound” and the new Freshmen who continue this great American musical heritage. Now you know.

(Note) The author Rod Dayton was a Performing Arts Director for NYC with Mayor Koch’s office for four years.

## Editor’s Note:

This article is an updated and expanded version of a piece included in the January 1995 issue of *Fresh News*, now adding to the influences and legacy of the Four Freshmen.