

# HERE WE COME, READY OR NOT!

The beginning of the vocal group known as the Four Freshmen was unpredictable and haphazard at best, but the resulting incarnation was nothing short of amazing! The durability of their sound and the lasting loyalty of their fans are undeniable.

While attending their first year of college, the four young men; brothers, Don Barbour and Ross Barbour, and classmates, Hal Kratzsch and Marvin Pruitt, started singing Barbershop arrangements together. Eventually they began stretching the boundaries and breaking the mold for four-part harmony, adding their own ideas and building a new modern sound.

By the summer break, Marvin decided to go in a different direction, leaving the group without their high voice. The other three went home to Columbus, Indiana where they continued to perfect their sound, singing together whenever and wherever they could. Most of their rehearsals were in the back room of the gas station where Hal was working. When they couldn't all sing together, the Barbour brothers continued to practice their harmonies while working as tree trimmers; harmonizing while hanging in the trees. That summer, they concentrated on their sound and brought in the group's key components: Bob Flanigan's recognizable high voice and the instruments.

Bob Flanigan's mother and Ross and Don's mother were sisters who came from a very large, very musical family. The cousins had been singing together with their family since childhood. Ross and Don knew that Bob could sing the high part, but would he do it? They contacted Bob, who was working in Florida for the summer crating oranges. He was not sure he wanted to get involved. There was no guarantee that anything would come of it. But, he confessed, "It sounds better than packing oranges." So, he came back to Indiana for rehearsals. Once they all began singing together, their blend was nothing short of amazing. [Bob Flanigan continued to sing with the Four Freshmen longer than any of the other original members and became the iconic voice that fans loved.]

So, after much persuading by Hal, they left their dismayed parents behind, piled into Hal's car and 'hit the road.' The plan was simple, play any and all types of venues. It's a good thing Hal was so persuasive. If not for Hal Kratzsch, the group might never have begun at all. Once they took off, they just kept going, ready or not.

In the late 1940s, vocal groups sang with big-bands or orchestras. In those days, as a rule, singers didn't accompany themselves. While they each could play an instrument and read music, putting instrumentation together with the singing was a real challenge. They were all fans of the Stan Kenton Orchestra and took inspiration from the sound of his band. In fact, it was Stan Kenton himself who told the young Four Freshmen they should not sing with a band but rather be their own! They would have the freedom to work smaller venues and travel where they chose. It was another innovation by the upstarts, which influenced a generation of singer/musicians going forward.

Because they didn't need to go where a big band was playing, the Four Freshmen could tour all over, playing venues too small to hold an orchestra. And so, they did! [Through the years the group has performed in many interesting places: on the back of a truck, in a cave, in a basement, cruise ships, county fairs, jazz festivals, a winery and a bowling alley, to name a few]

They had a formidable band already; Don played guitar, Hal and Ross both played trumpet and Bob played trombone and bass. Hal could also play bass, when needed, but they had no percussion section. That's when Ross began keeping time with a set of brushes and a high-hat. He used the metal end of the brushes for loud songs, and the brush end for softer sounds, often mixing the two. For a full sound, he also played trumpet on some songs with one hand and drums with the other. Later, he added a snare drum, a cymbal and a cowbell! This unique self-taught drumming style became a part of their unprecedented new sound and made them a complete band.

Of course, Ross wasn't the only one who picked up an instrument out of necessity. Bob Flanigan had played trombone for years, but he learned to play a stand-up bass while in the Army so he could have a place in the Army band. Apparently, the Army already had enough trombone players. During Four Freshmen shows, Bob often switched back and forth between trombone and bass within the same song. Bob would also sing a "duet" with his stand-up bass, which was a very cool jazz talent... But it was his trombone solos that attracted fans and fueled hit songs like *Candy* and *Day by Day*.

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**This is Group One with Hal Kratzsch on Trumpet, Ross Barbour on high-hat, Don Barbour on guitar and Bob Flanigan on bass**