

It Was A Very Good Year

by Greg Stegeman

"When I was 17, it was a very good year." I was graduating from high school, my beautiful girlfriend just got accepted to the Royal Academy of Arts in London to study viola, and my father drove us from Carmel to L.A (a 7-hour trip in those days) to see the Four Freshmen. Their impact upon me was so strong that I had already completed singing all 4 parts in the arrangements available from them: Love Lost, The Freshman Year, etc., into a Sony "sound-on-sound" reel to reel tape recorder. How I had the guts to ask the Freshmen to listen to this tape can only be attributed to my reckless youth. To my astonishment all 4 guys listened to this entire recording of at least 5 songs. They sat patiently all the way through "Tom Dooley," Dick Reynold's complex acappella chart. Bob simply said, "That's excellent ear training." I still have the enlarged photo taken that evening - a geeky kid with a smile a mile wide between Ross, Bob, Bill and Ken. After that night my path was clear.

I was now serious about music. I attended the Stan Kenton Clinics for 3 summers, began writing big band arrangements after studying with Kenton staff writer, Willie Maiden, and earned a scholarship to the Famous Arranger's Clinic in Las Vegas where I continued my studies with Billy Byers, Marty Paich, Oliver Nelson, Dee Barton and other Hollywood writers. At Cal-State Hayward I absorbed Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, Copland, and Richard Strauss as well as the entire jazz scene. My appetite for music was voracious and eclectic.

Fast forward to 1989. After 20 years of studying, writing, performing and "paying dues," I finally got the call that fulfilled my destiny. For 12 years I had the privilege of performing the music of The Four Freshmen all over the world. It's an experience that continues to enrich my life. There was only one problem: as ex-Freshmen Ray Brown put it, "What do you do after you've fulfilled your life's ambition?" I happened to have a few arrangements I had written for the group that we didn't get around to, and since I didn't feel comfortable pushing them on the excellent current group, I thought maybe the Society members would enjoy hearing these Freshmen-styled charts one day. I didn't want to make a recording for Freshmen fans where I simply sang and played my horn on some standards. I still love and admire this very specific sound so I decided to come full circle and attempt a recording of multiple vocal parts in the Freshmen idiom. This decision was based on practicality rather than vanity. I simply don't have the time and money to find, rehearse and record 3 other singers who really understand Freshmen concepts. Any Freshman will tell you that it usually takes weeks for a new arrangement to "settle in," so I knew that accurate vocal phrasing (as an example) would be cost-prohibitive. What I'm hoping is that the listener gets past the "gimmick" of one person recording multiple parts and simply hears what sounds like the Four Freshmen. The following is a description of what you'll hear on my album (with guitar, bass and drum accompaniment) and all new arrangements:

I Only Have Eyes for You - a Latin version of the standard also featuring a 4-piece trombone section (yours truly)!

Yellow Days - Tony Bennett sang the definitive version of this Spanish ballad on an album called "Something" (highly recommended). Beautiful melody and lyrics.

The Touch of Your Lips - Nat King Cole's recording inspired this homage to Dick Reynold's writing.

The Shining Sea - the most requested song from fans of the "Still Fresh" album was "Where Do You Start?" Here's another great Johnny Mandel melody with lyrics this time by the legendary Peggy Lee.

Someone to Light Up My Life - Antonio Carlos Jobim was bossa nova. Here he collaborates with Gene Lees on a gorgeous tune.

Away, Away, Away - Bobby Troup was both a fabulous songwriter and great friend of the Freshmen. Every time we saw Bobby he asked if I'd looked at his piece. It obviously meant a great deal to him and that was reason enough for me to arrange it. Orchestrated to leave you in tears....

My next 4 arrangements feature a 16-piece big band that includes Freshmen Brian on piano, Vince on bass and Curtis on 4th trumpet:

At Last - a harmonically rich interpretation of the standard ballad with my solo vocal.

Walking My Baby Back Home - the current Freshmen have all agreed to sing (as special guest artists) on a new big band accompaniment to my vocal chart. Curtis will play the trumpet solo.

More Love - Bob Ferreira made a lasting impression with his solo voice on this underrated song from "Still Fresh." This time he'll have 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, 5 saxes and a rhythm section behind him.

Unforgettable - If there's one arrangement I've received the most attention for, this is it. This is based on my vocal chart from "Still Fresh" but orchestrated this time for full band only.

Thanks to Society members, Bob and Karen Sebo, and the support of the Society itself, this ambitious recording is becoming a reality. Half of this material is already recorded and should be available ahead of this year's convention in Orlando. For those of you who appreciated my work with the Freshmen and fans of this new group, 2003 will indeed be "a very good year." They will be releasing a new live recording from both Holland and New Canaan, CT, that proves that they are worthy of international stardom. Look for that album in time for the convention, too.

Well, dear Freshfans, now that you've heard (and will shortly continue to hear) more from me than you ever wanted, let me just say in closing that I hope you embrace my new recording in the spirit in which it is intended: a loving tribute to the greatest vocal/instrumental group of all time and a gift to those who adore it.