

BIGGER THAN LIFE (continued)

He was the fire, he was the SWING.

Let's break it down: starting from what usually gets the least attention, I submit that Bob was even an underrated bass player. Bill Wagner, the Freshmen's manager through their most successful years, sent me bootleg tapes of the original group with Bob playing full chorus bass solos on tunes like *Street of Dreams* that were really well conceived. Listen again to his bass chops on Ross's *My Heart Stood Still* from *Voices in Modern*. The *Freshman Year* album also contains two outstanding bass solos from Bob on *Show Me the Way to Get Out of This World* and *It's Only a Paper Moon*. Years later his electric bass/vocalese was featured on *What Now My Love* from the *Live in Tokyo* recording.

The Trombone:

It's no secret, too, that Bob was a Stan Kenton fan of biblical proportions. It didn't matter that he was blowing this difficult brass instrument in front of just three other guys — he played it as if he WERE the lead bone in Stan's 22-piece orchestra. And even though we think of him as having this aggressive approach to the trombone, there are examples of his tenderness as well: *While You Are Gone* from *Voices in Love* and *I'm Getting Sentimental Over You* from *The Freshman Year* just to name a couple. His trombone solos became as famous as the group vocal sound and it's difficult really to separate them. It was all coming from the same source: the love of musical performance. Maybe that explains why Bob considered *Voices in Fun* with Billy May his favorite Freshmen recording.

The Voice:

Here's where Bob Flanigan stands alone. NOBODY ever did or will sound like him. I've said this many times but I think it's worth saying again: For warmth and beauty, you can't beat the sound Bob got on all the "oooo" acapella intros on the *Love. Lost* album. Those little gems are priceless. I could listen to them every day and not tire of it. When it came to the swing idiom, he had no equal. He could swing as hard as Mel Torme but do it in a much higher key to accommodate the brilliant harmonies below him. Who else could do that? Clark Burroughs of the Hi-Lo's was an incredible lead voice, too, but he had more of a classic tenor sound with an obvious break when he ascended their chords. There was no break in Flanigan's voice. For me, the best example of this is his solo line at the beginning of *Polka Dots and Moonbeams*. He somehow literally morphs from a natural male register to a beautiful, bell-like falsetto even before Ross, Don, and Ken enter. I've never heard anything quite like that from ANY singer.

Fast forward to 1989:

Some dreams do come true. After almost 30 years of performing and training, I finally got what was for me, the brass ring. I became a member of my favorite group and found myself trying to sing Ross's part with Bob Flanigan on stage. It was almost surreal. Is this really happening? After more than 40 years of THE ROAD, Bob, already in his 60s, was still the life force of the Freshmen but naturally his abilities were declining. I certainly had no intention to eventually replace him — I wanted to sing a harmony part. But fate intervened and I found myself suddenly in this new role. I knew instinctively that it wouldn't work for anyone to attempt an "impersonation" of Bob but since he laid that part down for 44 years, I had a pretty good idea on HOW his part was meant to sound. I had some good moments in my seven years as the top voice in the Freshmen but as they say, "Tough act to follow.....".

It's also worth noting that Bob was a good boss. We were on salary (almost unheard-of in the music business) and got our paychecks every Friday, 52 weeks a year regardless of how often we were booked. It wasn't a lot but we could count on it and since I had two young sons to consider, this was crucial and greatly appreciated. Bob made sure we were taken care of and when that happens, you're ready to do anything for that person.

On the road, I was Bob's driving partner so you can imagine the stories I'd love to tell you but most of them are not appropriate for publication. There are a handful of other things that Bob said to me that were so kind and generous that still make my heart soar. Just a few days before he passed, I got a chance to spend an hour alone with him at a hospice in Las Vegas. Flan was not big on sentimentality so I kept it light. Just hours before he left us I conducted Rod Henley's eight-piece trombone choir at Bob's bedside with his entire family and few friends surrounding him. He lifted his hands to conduct the ending of "Blue World" and we were all just a mess after that.

Yesterday's memorial in Las Vegas was an extraordinary event, too. I'm sure there will be several articles from FFS members who attended. Hopefully, a video will surface that will be shown at the upcoming Toledo convention. Rod Henley deserves a medal for putting the whole affair together that included not only the current Freshmen but a 12-piece trombone choir as well.

We all knew this was coming but somehow I just can't imagine a world without that powerhouse character. Suddenly, it's quieter and duller. But guess what? We can listen to him and the rest of the Freshmen anytime we want. How lucky can you get?



Autie and Bob

Toledo, Ohio at Fiar Tucks,
October 1987



Kirk Marcy