

How I Met The Four Freshmen

By Keith E. Murray

I was brought up in a Northern English town listening to Mills Brothers, Ink Spots and Deep River Boys vocal groups. However life changed for me aged 16 one evening in 1960 when listening to BBC Radio 'In Town Tonight' from London. A visiting American vocal group, called The Four Freshmen were interviewed and sang a new a cappella ending to their arrangement of *Polka Dots and Moonbeams*. Those Freshmen sounds changed music for me.

In 1961 The Four Freshmen performed at Newcastle City Hall and I dared to take the big step of traveling into the Big City. The Freshmen wowed the audience with their musicianship, their exciting harmonies and their interaction with the audience which was novel at that time. I was enthralled. The following weekend I went with my saved pocket money, to Jeavons Record Shop in Newcastle and asked for Four Freshmen records. "We don't have them in stock but we will order one for you." I wanted to hear what I had heard on stage so ordered the Freshmen Year LP with the group singing some of the City Hall program while playing their own backgrounds.

The following weekend I went to collect my LP. What is this? The second voice was sung by Don Barbour, not Bill Comstock whom I so admired playing guitar on stage. When I got home to my mother's Dansette Major record player, I quickly accepted Don Barbour's second voice and guitar playing. So began a life-long love affair with the sound of The Four Freshmen.

I started to collect Four Freshmen LPs from local record shops whenever I could afford to do so but I also got interested in other vocal groups such as the Hi-Lo's! and the Clark Sisters. Around 1966 I bought my last new issue Freshmen LP '*Got that Feelin*' and was told that the Freshmen were no longer in the record catalogues! That record was not what I expected from the Freshmen.

So I had to search clearance sales in the record stores, and second hand shops feeling that I was the only Four Freshmen fan in the whole world. In 1972 my wife, Hazel, saw a small advert in the local newspaper. What? The Four Freshmen were appearing at a small nightclub, The Top Hat Club in Spennymoor about 20 miles from Newcastle. I immediately rang the Top Hat to enquire about the Freshmen. My questions were - are they Americans? - are they men and not teenagers? - do they play instruments? - are they good? The telephonist replied yes to all my questions but I still did not believe her. The Four Freshmen in Spennymoor? So on the evening of the show Hazel and I drove out to Spennymoor to search out the Top Hat Club. On our third search along the High Street we spied the Top Hat above the now defunct Fish and Chip Shop.

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I parked the car and went to the reception. As we arrived, two teenage girls were being evicted for causing trouble. A great start! We paid our £1.00 cover charges and were informed that this was the first time that an entry fee had been charged for the Top Hat. We went up the stairs to the stage and dance floor area. My heart sank at the sight of about 200 teenagers singing and dancing to Cliff Richards' song *Congratulations*. I said to Hazel, we have been cheated because there is no chance on earth of The Four Freshmen appearing here.

We sat down at a table with my heart crushed. Then to my astonishment I saw Kenny Albers peer around the stage curtain. At least one of them is here! The MC then announced that it was cabaret time so 200 teenagers immediately left the dance floor and crowded round the bar at the far end of the hall. Around 20 people sat around the stage apron and a young couple joined us at our table. As we applauded the House Band the leader said that in all the years they had played here that was the first time that they had ever been appreciated!

The band left the stage and the curtains opened to reveal Bob Flanigan, Ken Albers, Ross Barbour and new man Ray Brown who had only been in the group a few weeks after Bill Comstock retired. The Freshmen sang and blew their hearts out whilst the 200 at the bar ignored them completely. I was in heaven and kept saying to the young couple at our table "You will enjoy this song, just listen to the harmonies and the instrumental solos." They said nothing? At the interval we learned that they were Jørgen and Betty Bjørno and that they had driven from Denmark to attend the concert. Hallelujah! Because I had thought I was the only Freshmen fan in the world and now I had found another! We sat together through the second part of the concert and I kept advising Jørgen about the music that he was hearing. During the a cappella ending to *Polka Dots and Moonbeams*, a man walked across the stage and between the Freshmen carrying three pints of beer. All four pairs of Freshmen eyes opened wide in disbelief until he cleared the stage.

The concert ended to rapturous applause from the 20 fans around the stage but to the complete indifference of the 200 around the bar. As we recovered our composure and chatted to our new friends from Denmark, Ross Barbour came out from behind the curtains and sat at our table embracing and talking to Jørgen and Betty. I was so embarrassed I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me after I had tried to teach Jørgen about Freshmen music. I can't remember if I even said one word to Ross Barbour. Once Ross had left, Jørgen and I discovered that we both sang in quartets and exchanged addresses so that we could keep in touch. I was in awe because his group, Kvartet 70, actually sang Four Freshmen music arrangements while my quartet sang Barbershop Harmony.

We drove home on cloud nine, ecstatic that the Freshmen were still active and that, through Jørgen and Betty, I had actually sat at the same table as my musical hero, Ross Barbour. Jørgen and I bonded at our chance meeting and that close friendship has survived undiminished for 50 years.

We began snail mail correspondence and exchanged tape cassettes and Barbershop and Four Freshmen music arrangements. *This Whole Wide World* was my quartet's first challenge and we devoured those chords that Jørgen had transcribed from a Freshmen recording. From then on all my quartets and choruses sang Four Freshmen arrangements.

So began a lifelong friendship with the Bjørnos and after attending Freshmen concerts all over Europe and the USA, we became lifelong friends with Sue and Ross Barbour. Ross and Sue hosted us on a Four Freshmen history tour of LA and we reciprocated when they visited Edinburgh, Scotland along with the Vocal Majority from Texas.

What a privileged life we have lived with all those good people and good music.