

Magical July 12 Freshmen performance at Newport Beach

by Fred Miller

As a college freshman away from home in 1958 the Voices in Modern album often lifted my spirits. I loved the sensual Freshmen harmonies from first hearing, but never heard them live until last year. A fraternity brother from Palm Springs had the Four Freshmen and Live Trombones CD and told me the Freshmen were still in business, albeit with new personnel. My wife and I flew down from Portland, OR to attend the spring 2012 Palm Springs performance. We then saw the Freshmen again in July at their annual Balboa Bay Club outdoor performance at Newport Beach, California. Magical truly describes that lovely waterside setting, where the Freshmen always rise to the occasion.



We returned there again this July 12, to enjoy another beautiful summer evening, where the fellows gave everyone their money's worth and more. My wife bought me the *Love Songs* CD and all Four Freshmen signed the program for her. We enjoyed brief conversations with each of them. I'm attaching a few photos of the event.



Eternal Freshmen

Group's Hoosier roots run deep

By Tom Castaldi

Often you'll hear the classic 1950s tune, *Graduation Day*, when the end of the school year comes around. For some reason it sounds just great when it's sung by the Four Freshmen, whose close harmony vocals rose to the top of the charts in the 1950s. The group's roots reach deep in Hoosier land. The group was founded by brothers Ross and Don Barbour, natives of Burnsville (east of Columbus, IN), who were joined by their music theory classmate, Hal Kratzsch from Warsaw.

The three came together at Butler University's Arthur Jordan Conservatory of Music in Indianapolis, and with fellow student Marvin Pruitt formed Hal's Harmonizers. At first the four pursued a barbershop quartet style; however, Pruitt disliked being onstage and soon dropped out of the group. Ross Barbour's future wife, Nancy Sue Carson, filled in, but it was a male voice that was more appropriate for the sound they were seeking. The Barbours' cousin, Bob Flanigan from Greencastle, stepped in and as lead singer took the group in a jazz-oriented direction as the Toppers.

When they played their first date in September 1948, the Toppers went on stage with the new name. Because the group dropped out of school their first year, their Chicago-based agent suggested, "Freshmen Four." Before heading to their next show in northeast Indiana, the guys reversed the name and the moniker stuck.

Vince Johnson, who in 1999 joined the Four Freshmen as a replacement, told a Los Angeles Times reporter in 2011 that the four were always pursuing the sound of five voices. Their inspiration came from the Stan Kenton Orchestra's trombone section. He said, "When the first tenor went up, the three other voices would stay either in the middle or lower register and sing full volume, which would create that open harmony. Since none of the four were arrangers, each song was arranged by ear and rehearsed in a parked car with windows rolled up tight."

Later in 1950, in the Esquire Lounge in Dayton, Ohio, Stan Kenton heard the Four Freshmen and was so impressed that he got them a Capitol Records deal. After a struggle to get a hit tune, the four finally landed the 1952 hit album, *It's a Blue World*. The tune itself epitomized their unique style and the beginning of a long list of hits: *Mood Indigo*, *Day by Day* and *Graduation Day* reached No. 17 in 1957. The Four Freshmen's music is considered the innovative four-part harmony that influenced The Beach Boys, The Lettermen, The Four Preps, The Mamas & the Papas and The Manhattan Transfer, to mention a few.

In 1955, the Four Freshmen went to Hollywood with the song, *How Can I Tell Her* for the Charlton Heston and Jane Wyman film, *Lucy Gallant*. All went well enough that the music was issued as a single and the flip side was a last minute decision. That song was *Day by Day*.

From 1953 to 1958, DownBeat magazine's Readers Poll named the Four Freshmen as the best vocal group each of five years. A Grammy nomination in the jazz-group category was earned in 1958.

Ross Barbour retired in 1977. In 1995 he authored *Now You Know: The Story of the Four Freshmen*.

Sadly, Don Barbour was killed in an auto accident in 1961. Hal Kratzsch went on to sing with The Signatures before he died in 1970. Bob Flanigan passed away in 2011 followed by Ross Barbour three months later — the last of the original Freshmen. Even so, with replacements joining in, the group's legacy continues on, as does their unique sound. Sixty-five years ago on September 20, 1948, the Four Freshmen played their very first professional date in the 113 Club on West Washington.

Allen County Historian Tom Castaldi, a retired Essex vice president, hosts "On the Heritage Trail," which is broadcast at 6:35 a.m. and 8:35 a.m. Mondays on WBOI, 89.1 FM, and "Historia Nostra" heard on WLYV-1450 AM.