

NEW FRESHMEN VISIT OLD NEIGHBORHOOD

by Wayne Corey (FFS-Wisconsin)

It all seemed so right. Perhaps the musical spirits of Hal Kratzsch and Don Barbour were backstage. Hundreds of people anxiously anticipated the show. In the lobby ice tinkled in wineglasses. A woman clutched two precious 78 RPM records, the big ones with the little hole in the middle and the early purple Capitol Records label. She remembered. Some veteran fans looked, well, slightly smug. They'd seen these guys before. Often. The veterans knew why we keep coming back to listen again, and again and again. These vets knew the musical excitement that was about to grip this audience. And in their hearts the veterans felt the same excitement they have been feeling every show for what seems like forever.

But this wouldn't be just any show. The Four Freshmen were back on the western shore of Lake Michigan, back where the Freshmen got a timely kick-start in late 1948. 53 years later it was the great new Group #22, live at the Capitol Civic Center in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, November 17, 2001. Just south of Sheboygan and east of Green Bay, the Freshmen had returned to the neighborhood that named them and claimed them! It was in nearby Green Bay where the Freshmen Four changed to the "Four Freshmen." It was a long time ago but an audience of 350 people acted as if the Freshmen had never gone away. These Freshmen flew into Green Bay and took a chauffeur-driven black limo to Manitowoc.

"Route 66" opened the show and Curtis Calderon's trumpet showed why fans have welcomed the new guy so enthusiastically. From the 1960 Bobby Troup sensation it was back to 1953's "Poinciana." With Curtis' mellow flugelhorn and Vince Johnson comping on guitar, the song of the tree once again held an audience spellbound. "Poinciana" is vocally *owned* by the Freshmen in the same manner that Ahmad Jamal *owns* the song on the piano. Anyone else can perform *Poinciana* but no one can perform it this way! Realizing that Group #1 worked out the harmonies by ear half-a-century ago makes the arrangement all the more remarkable.

From the old to the new, it was time for Brian Eichenberger to solo with "If I Only Had A Brain." The Scarecrow's song from the Wizard of Oz features some astounding whistling by Vince and tasty trumpet work by Curtis. An uptempo "Young and Foolish" is a welcome addition to the Freshmen repertoire. Chet Baker was smiling somewhere when Curtis took the flugelhorn solo on "I Fall In Love Too Easily" and Vince and Curt looked like rockers with the wrong instruments as they helped Brian swing through his signature song, "I'm Gonna Go Fishing." And yes, I know a tall Irish guy was once the featured soloist on this Duke Ellington-Peggy Lee classic from *The Swingers*. But with all due respect to Bob Flanigan, Brian flat kicks this song into high gear every time.

It was classic time again, but these are new Freshmen classics. Cole Porter wrote "I Concentrate On You" and Frank Sinatra with Antonio Carlos Jobim had the definitive version of the song until Greg Stegeman wrote an arrangement for the Frosh. With shades of Sinatra phrasing and Jobim rhythms, the arrangement is one of Greg's great lasting legacies with the group. And then Bob Ferreira sang "Love Dance" and all the old women sighed, the young women sobbed and the men got nervous. Dang, that bald drummer can steal female hearts every time he sings that song. Back in the book after being dropped some years back, Bob's solo still holds an audience spellbound.

It was from quiet to riot as the Freshmen reprised "Day In, Day Out" from the legendary *Road Show* album. Arguably the greatest FF

recording ever, the arrangement to "Day In, Day Out" is tough to sing and harder to play. And, of course, the original had a hot Stan Kenton Orchestra behind it. It still sounds great today. Two tunes from "five" albums wrapped up the first set. "I Remember You" took the audience back to *Five Trombones* and "After You've Gone" sampled *Five Trumpets*. The "distant bell" rang out perfectly in "Remember" while Vince's bass solo and Curtis' flugelhorn in "After" blasted the audience into the lobby for intermission.

"Whistle Me Some Blues," the first song Ken Albers recorded with the Freshmen, kicked off set two. The multi-instrumented Vince was whistling up a storm. Curt and Brian exchange grins when Curtis blew a lyric. "Invitation" from *Five Guitars* featured the one guitar of Brian Eichenberger. Four Freshmen Society member Jack Jennerjahn (La Crosse WI) was wowed. "I didn't know Brian could play guitar THAT well," he opined. "You Came A Long Way From St. Louis" gave the group "a chance to screw around a little bit," as Bob mentioned.

Then came the showstopper. Tony Bennett does it every show, perhaps to prove that old guys can still have strong pipes. The Freshmen do it, perhaps to prove that young guys can sing breathtaking harmonies without microphones and still reach the back row of the balcony. The almost acapella "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows" had only some tasteful guitar from Brian as accompaniment. "Rain" brought us another *Five Guitars* gem. Vince's trombone was featured on "How Can I Tell Her" and he scatted his inimitable way through "Easy To Love." "It Could Happen To You" was followed by "Day By Day" and, of course, "It's A Blue World." With Vince's hot guitar licks guiding their steps, the guys did "Walking My Baby Back Home," won an enthusiastic standing ovation and encored with "In This Whole Wide World," 1955 harmonies that sound just as - yes, I dare say it - "fresh" today.

Some observations:

There are FreshFans who were nervous over the absence of keyboards in Group #22. Rest easy, friends, The guitar comping is so solid from Vince and Brian that I haven't missed the keys at all. I once was positive I would miss Bob's full drum kit. I was wrong.

There are lots of us who were certain it wouldn't be the same without Greg Stegeman on stage. It isn't the same, of course, but it is really difficult to believe that Curtis has been with the Freshmen less than three months as this is written. Curtis' horn work is magnificent, he loves the music and he is having a great time on stage. Curtis is all kinds of fun to have in the group and we hope he's there for ages! And this comes from the guy who would volunteer to be president if Greg had a fan club. Greg told me I would really dig Curtis' work and, as usual, Greg was absolutely correct.

Group #22 shows real respect for the music in the Four Freshmen chapter of The Great American Songbook. The guys also show that making music is lots of fun for musician and audience, alike.

FFS members truly appreciated the generous plug from the stage and the fine work of Wisconsin state representative Mike McCoy in arranging hotel space, our pre-concert dinner, post-concert fun and our FFS table in the lobby. "We're in the friend-raising business," Mike told one prospective member. A great show, combined with a super time in Manitowoc, made lots of people want to be friends with our Freshmen!