

George Shearing Awarded "Honorary Membership" in the Four Freshmen Society

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Legendary jazz pianist, George Shearing, received an "Honorary Membership" from the Four Freshmen Society following his concert on June 23, 2002, at the Meyerson Symphony Hall, home of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.

Mr. Shearing is known for his beautiful arrangements and haunting harmonies, not totally dissimilar to that of the Four Freshmen. He is mentioned in Ross Barbour's book *Now You Know*, which outlines Ross' life on the road throughout his 29 years as a Freshmen. In it, a segment is devoted to George Shearing, who went on a road tour with the Four Freshmen in 1962. This being the 40th anniversary of their performances together, coupled with the fact that Mr. Shearing was due to be in town for a concert, brought up the idea of giving him an honorary membership in the FFS. This gave those of us from FFS who attended his concert a chance to get to meet him back stage - and also to thank him for the part he played in the Four Freshmen history. There was also a personal reason for meeting Mr. Shearing - so I could shake his hand and thank him for the books of his arrangements which I have delighted in playing on the piano for many years. They are most challenging, and most rewarding to play. An interesting side note is that I asked Mr. Shearing if it would be possible to get him to autograph one of the books of his arrangements. He called to a lady to help him (I assume it was his wife) and he held the pen while she scrolled out a large signature of his name in the book. I consider it a prized possession.

Like the good FFS groupie that I am, I wore my FF tee shirt to the concert, thinking I might encounter some fellow fans, and perhaps interest them in membership in our organization. Four different groups struck up a conversation with me about the Freshmen, some members and the others interested in becoming members.

Presenting Mr. Shearing with this award was made possible by help from the folks at IVI, who manage Mr. Shearing as well as the Four Freshmen. It all came together at the last minute (3 days before the concert), so that's why there wasn't time to get our FFS president to sign the certificate. It also explains why there wasn't time to call around and see if any of the FFS members in the area were going to attend the concert so they could be there for the award. So those who did attend the presentation were there as a result of serendipity and the Freshmen tee shirt. I didn't know ahead of time that any other Freshmen fans would be there. Those in the picture at the presentation all hooked up with me at the concert due to the FFS tee shirt. It's great in airports, too, for contacting potential new FFS members.

There was some interesting biographical information about Mr. Shearing in the program from the concert. Born in London in 1919, he was the youngest of nine children and congenitally blind. His father delivered coal and his mother, after caring for her children during the day, cleaned trains at night. George Shearing's only musical training consisted of four years of study

at the school for the blind that he attended. Although he won a number of musical scholarships, he was forced to turn them down in order to work for a living - playing the piano, of course. By the way, is it any surprise to hear that his Dallas concert was awesome, especially his very hypnotizing rendition of "Out Of This World." Of course, he also played "Lullaby Of Birdland," the jazz classic which he composed.

There are a couple of delightful anecdotes told by the Freshmen about their travels with Mr. Shearing. In his book, *Now You Know*, Ross Barbour tells about the time their bus driver left the bus for a few moments, and when he came back to the bus, George was sitting in the driver's seat, revving up the motor like he was going to drive. They all had a big laugh over the joke he pulled on the driver, including the driver himself. At the convention last week, Bob Flanigan was telling about the time they were all getting off a plane and George exited down the stairs onto the tarmac, wearing the captain's coat and hat, and being led by his seeing eye dog. I'm sure that raised a few eyebrows.

Another noteworthy item about Mr. Shearing is that he turns 83 sometime this year. I'll bet that when the Freshmen were on the road with George 40 years ago, none of them dreamed that 40 years later George Shearing and the Freshmen would still be going strong. Of course, the Freshmen have had a few pinch hitters since then, but there's only been one George Shearing carrying on his wonderful musical tradition all these years.

