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## A Vocal Group at the Top of Its Class

By **WILLIAM H. SMITH** August 20, 2008; Page D9

Widely known for basketball, the Indy 500, and a plethora of covered bridges, Indiana also proudly claims The Four Freshmen as its own. The legendary vocal/instrumental group will celebrate its 60th anniversary at a reunion, sponsored by The Four Freshmen Society, of band members past and present -- there have been 23 lineups to date -- at the Sheraton Indianapolis City Centre, Aug. 21 to 23. Commemorative concerts continue to air across the country during PBS fund-raising drives, and a highlight of 2008 will be the Freshmen's Oct. 25 performance before Russian fans at the prestigious Great Hall of the Moscow Performing Arts Center.

Although not the first successful vocal group, The Four Freshmen was, without question, the most



innovative. Inspired by Artie Shaw's Mel-Tones with Mel Torme, as well as by The Pastels, a five-voice group with Stan Kenton, the Freshmen soon developed their own unique style of harmony -- singing a five-part sound with four voices and playing instruments as well. Every vocal group that followed -- except for those that sang with no or minimal chord structure -- was influenced by the Freshmen, including The Lettermen, Manhattan Transfer, Take Six, the Beatles and the Beach Boys. (At The Four Freshmen's Jan. 14 performance at Palm Desert, Calif.'s McCallum Theatre, I sat in the audience next to the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson -- one of the Freshmen's most enthusiastic fans, who listened to their records as a teenager and wanted to emulate their unique sound in his arrangements.)

The close harmony of this unique quartet had its genesis at Butler University's Jordan Conservatory in Indianapolis, when Hal Kratzch, along with Don Barbour and his brother Ross, formed "Hal's Harmonizers." In an interview at his home in Simi Valley, Calif., Ross Barbour recalled that "we tried a few lead singers, but it was only after

our cousin Bob Flanigan, with his strong high voice, joined the group that we started getting that Freshmen sound." The four went on the road in 1948 as The Toppers, but the name was soon changed to The Four Freshmen. (Both Ross Barbour and Bob Flanigan, the only survivors of that quartet, received honorary doctorates at Butler this May.)

Stan Kenton heard the Freshmen in March 1950 at the Esquire Lounge in Dayton, Ohio, and gave them their first big break by introducing the group to his own recording label, Capitol Records. The Freshmen had developed their trademark sound by structuring chords much like the trombone section of Kenton's own band, and Mr. Barbour maintains that the success of one of their biggest-selling albums, "Four Freshmen and Five Trombones," can in a large way be attributed to Pete Rugalo, the arranger the quartet and Kenton shared.

The Four Freshman's signature tune is "It's a Blue World Without You," released in 1952, a song that continues to send chills up and down the spines of audiences as soon as the first a capella chords resound. But the Freshmen gained their first national exposure when they appeared on CBS's "Steve Allen Show" on Christmas Day in 1950, and their popularity lasted not only through the decade that later gave birth to rock 'n' roll but into the mid-1960s -- the era of Bob Dylan and the Beatles -- and beyond.

Despite this generational change, the Freshmen continued playing universities around the country and, according to Mr. Barbour, "the multitude of college kids remained loyal fans."

Over their 60 years of performing throughout the U.S. and abroad, the Freshmen have recorded some 45 albums and 70 singles, and have received numerous honors, including six Grammy Awards. Down Beat magazine awarded the quartet the Best Jazz Vocal group honor in 1953 and again, 57 years later, in 2000, an example of the quartet's timeless appeal. The present lineup placed No. 1 in this same category in the 2007 JazzTimes Readers Poll.

"The Four Freshmen have endured for the simple reason that they are top in their class," said Charles Osgood, anchor of "CBS Sunday Morning," when a profile of the group aired in August 1994. Steven Cornelius of the Toledo Blade put it this way in April 2005: "There is no Dorian Gray youth potion at work, just a healthy retirement system." When a member leaves, he is replaced with an equally talented musician.

The present lineup of this multifaceted, ultratalented quartet of vocalists and instrumentalists now comprises Vince Johnson, baritone, playing bass and guitar; Bob Ferreira, bass voice, playing drums; Brian Eichenberger, lead voice, playing guitar and bass; and Curtis Calderon, singing second part, and playing trumpet and fluegelhorn. Although the other three Freshmen joke about it, Mr. Johnson accompanies his bass with some of the best whistling since Bing Crosby.

Bob Flanigan -- introducing the current quartet on their recent DVD, "The Four Freshmen Live From Las Vegas" -- vows that "this group is the best Four Freshmen of all time." On the DVD, Mr. Flanigan, reflecting on his 44 years with the Freshmen, remembers all the "Bad roads . . . Bad food . . . Good and Bad Hotels . . . and millions of air-miles in DC3s to 747s."

Long live The Four Freshmen. May they never graduate!

Mr. Smith writes about jazz and the big-band era for the Journal.