

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the twenty-second article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

FOUR FRESHMEN

Or should we say the Twenty-Four Freshmen? Few musical groups have lasted over 65 years, and to do so, one can expect personnel changes now and then. More on that later.

Hal Kratzsch, brothers Don and Ross Barbour, and their cousin Bob Flanigan, formed a barbershop quartet in early 1948 at Indiana's Butler University. Initially called Hal's Harmonizers, the group renamed itself the Toppers, then finally The Four Freshmen in September. By then, their style began to pick up on popular Jazz and they developed an improvised vocal harmony. Feeling they could make even better music on tour, they hit the road. Although they got their share of bookings, the group was struggling, living gig-to-gig. Luckily, they didn't need to pay a backup band, since each member played multiple instruments.

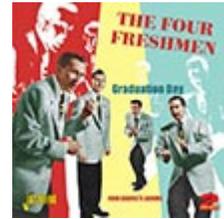
Their hard work paid off when bandleader Stan Kenton heard them in Dayton, OH. Stan, suitably impressed, arranged an audition with his recording label, Capitol Records, in 1950. Although the group recorded several singles in the next two years, none were commercial successes. In fact, Capitol rejected their new proposed tune, *It's a Blue World*, and promptly dropped them from their stable of recording artists.

Outraged, Kenton demanded that Capitol send them the demo tapes (which Capitol did), allowing the four to promote the song on their own (which they did). They got it on radio, and the song became their first of dozens of charted singles. (Later in 1952, Capitol decided it had been a mistake to let the group go, and re-signed them.) And *It's a Blue World* became their signature song, recognizable even today.

Their first LP (to the younger readers among us, an LP is like a CD, only bigger) was released in 1955 under the title, *Voices in Modern*, and one track therein, *Mood Indigo*, charted as a single. I recommend this album because it showcases their instrumental talents as well as their unique blend of voices. It's available on Amazon as an Audio CD, released in 2005. Coupled with a

1964 LP, *Funny How Time Slips Away*, it's on the Collector's Choice label, ASIN B000A7BB88.

The four were pretty savvy marketers, as well. They released over a dozen more LPs over the next five years, known as their "Concept Albums." Each one was either a musical concept (such as *Four Freshman and Five Trombones*, *Four Freshman and Five Guitars*), or a thematic concept (*Voices in Latin*, *Voices in Love*, etc.).



It's fairly well-known that their body of work influenced later groups such as the Hi-Lo's, Manhattan Transfer, and even Brian Wilson's Beach Boys, whose harmonies were just as important as the lyrics themselves. Over the years, the Four Freshmen have been honored numerous times in Down Beat magazine's Readers' Polls, nominated for Grammys 5 times, including as recently as 1986 for their 41st LP, *Fresh*.

Oh, I almost forgot! The group has had twenty-three different personnel lineups through their career. As of late 2013, the Four Freshmen lineup consisted of Brian Eichenberger (voice #1, bass, arranger), Stein Malvey (voice #2, guitar), Curtis Calderon (voice #3, trumpet, flugelhorn), and Bob Ferreira (voice #4, drummer, soloist). They perform at nearly 100 bookings per year. An interesting chart showing both the various lineups' "who" and for "what length of time," on my website page, www.JustMeLiveMusic.com/4FreshmenLineups.html.

Their special sound hasn't changed very much at all. You can look at two short Youtube videos to hear the differences (ignore the ads, the music will follow):

- 1952: www.youtube.com/watch?v=iggWvFgp3KE, singing *It's a Blue World*.
- 2007: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRuOioBfDJA, singing *Angel Eyes*.

Fifty-five years apart, and their sound is still as fresh as ever.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com.