

INSIDE: Saturday Evening Post sets Seniors record • Harmony U WILL sell out! • How your district measures success

January/February 2015

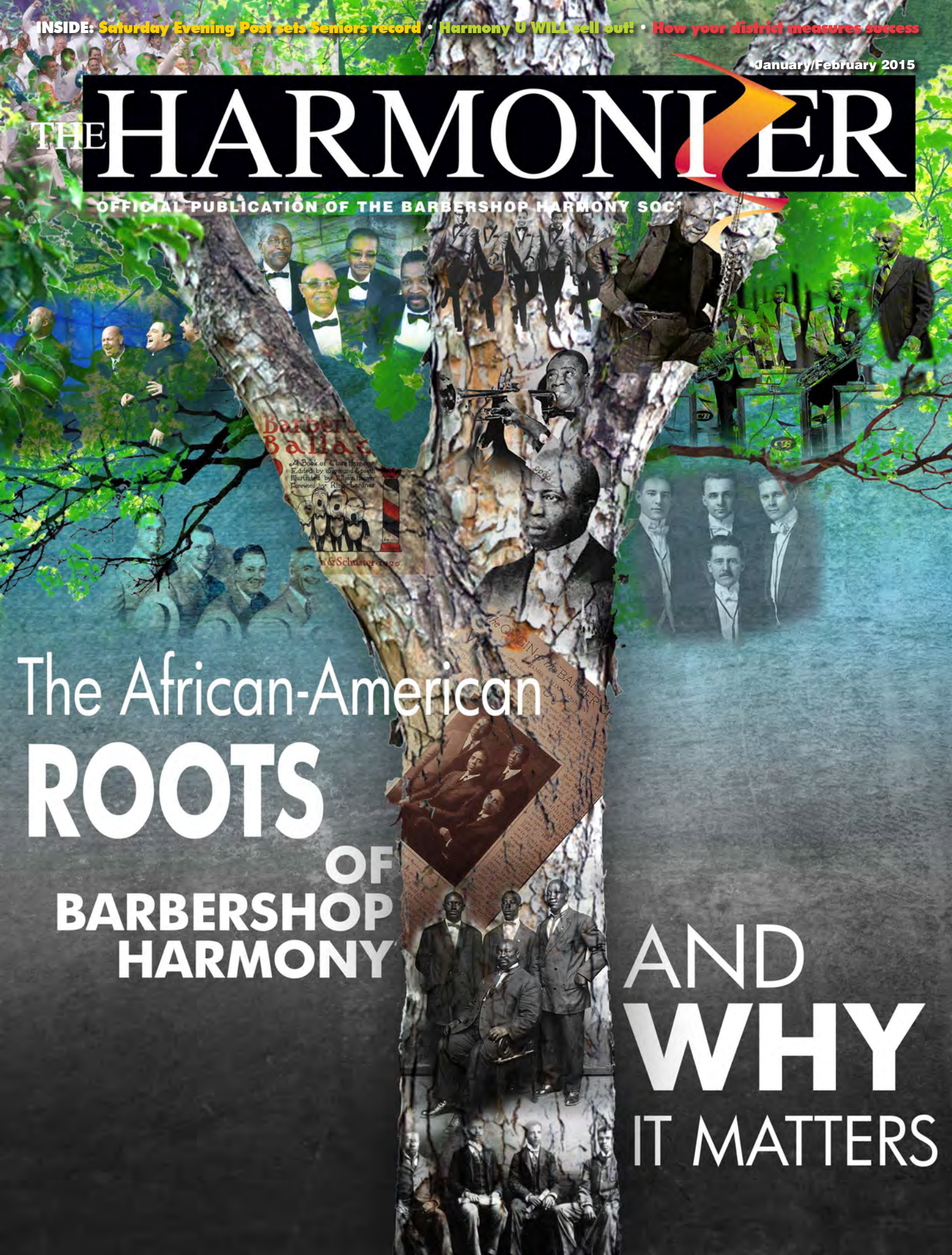
# THE HARMONIER

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE BARBERSHOP HARMONY SOCIETY

## The African-American ROOTS

OF  
BARBERSHOP  
HARMONY

AND  
WHY  
IT MATTERS







As a young man, Louis Armstrong formed a vocal quartet with his buddies, singing for tips on Rampart Street and in the Storyville section of New Orleans. Louis sang tenor. It was typical for African Americans to vocally harmonize in four parts, improvising in a style similar to what eventually became the instrumental sound of early jazz.



Ragtime legend Scott Joplin included a barbershop quartet in his life's work, a 1911 opera called *Treemonisha*, which incorporates the musical traditions of African Americans. His barbershop passage sounds just like something we would sing today.

PHOTO MONTAGE BY EDDIE HOLT



"I have witnessed ... these explorations in the field of harmony and the scenes of hilarity and backslapping when a new and rich chord was discovered. There would be demands for repetitions and cries of, 'Hold it! Hold it!' until it was firmly mastered. And well it was, for some of these chords were so new and strange that, like Sullivan's Lost Chord, they would have never been found again except for the celerity in which they were recaptured."

- James Weldon Johnson (1925),  
barbershop singer, NAACP Executive Secretary



According to jazz scholar Vic Hobson, barbershop and the blues were very entwined with the beginnings of jazz, and in fact might have had a formative influence on the beginnings of jazz.

# The African-American Roots of Barbershop (and why it matters)

*Adapted from David Wright's Harmony University class on barbershop history, presented at the 2015 Midwinter convention in New Orleans on Jan. 10, 2015. Barbershopper and historian David Krause participated in the preparation of this class. View the class on YouTube at [bit.ly/barbershophistory](http://bit.ly/barbershophistory).*

Most of us hadn't realized the extent of the presence of barbershop harmony in African-American culture until 1992, when Lynn Abbott published an article called "Play that Barbershop Chord; A case for the African-American origin of barbershop harmony" in *American Music*. ([bit.ly/barbershopchordabbott](http://bit.ly/barbershopchordabbott)) Lynn had documented so well, irrefutably, from numerous newspaper articles and books and live interviews, the extent of which our music was pervasive in the culture of African-Americans.

Until then, many of us believed that the first historical reference to barbershop harmony was the 1910 song, "Play That Barbershop Chord." The sheet music cover features a black Vaudevillian named Bert Williams. The song was also recorded by a white quartet, **The American Quartet**, which twice stops the song and then says in Afri-

can-American dialect, "That's it. That's what. That's a barbershop chord." The chord they've stopped on is what we now call our barbershop 7th. This shows that in 1910, that chord was associated with a barbershop quartet and with African-American harmonizing.

There's little evidence to support Sigmond Spaeth's belief that barbershop harmony had something to do with Elizabethan England. However, in the late 1800s, barbershop was pervasive in black culture. There were youth harmonizing on the street and pro-



**David Wright**  
Hall of Fame  
arranger, his-  
torian, coach,  
judge, director  
[wrightmath@  
gmail.com](mailto:wrightmath@gmail.com)



**Lynn Abbott, a jazz archivist at Tulane University, is an expert on early African-American popular music and gospel quartets. He discovered overwhelming evidence that barbershop quartetting was pervasive in African-American culture in the late 1800s and early 1900s, including among many men who went on to become the pioneers of jazz. Abbott published his findings in a 1992 academic paper (read it at [bit.ly/barbershopchordabbott](http://bit.ly/barbershopchordabbott)) that forever changed the way Barbershoppers understand their roots. In recognition, during January's 2015 Midwinter Convention in New Orleans, Abbott was honored with a Society Honorary Lifetime Membership.**





When James Weldon Johnson was leading the NAACP during the 1920s, he became concerned that barbershop music was becoming associated with white quartets. He and others remembered that the music had been a much earlier product of black culture: "Pick up four colored boys or young men anywhere and chances are 90 out of 100 that you have a quartet. Let one of them sing the melody and the others will naturally find the parts. Indeed, it may be said that all male Negro youth of the United States is divided into quartets ..."



Atlanta University Quartet, early 1890s; Johnson is on the far right

fessionals harmonizing on stage. Many, many famous African Americans harmonized in the barbershop style. Ragtime legend Scott Joplin thought enough of this that he incorporated the barbershop quartet into his life work, a 1911 opera called *Treemonisha*, which incorporates the musical traditions of African Americans. His barbershop passage is just like something we would sing today.

When the professional white quartets began recording, they were simply "male quartets." Early on, they never used the term barbershop, even though that's what it was. "Barbershop" would have been interpreted as an African-American reference.

One of the cradles of barbershop harmony is right here in New Orleans. Louis Armstrong talked about harmonizing on the street corners of New Orleans

### Bringing black singers back into the barbershop fold—and why songs associated with slavery and segregation may need to be retired



Yes, the Society was exclusionary in the past, but that is not what is going on today. The Society can't change what happened in the past. Yes, some of the songs are on the edge of racism, but only if you look really hard and know the history of the Society and the songs.

The problem, in my opinion, is not with the Society, but with the black community that seems unwilling to reach out and see how beautiful the music is.

I raised a concern when "Alabama Jubilee" was announced as the contest song that we went on to win gold with in 2011. I know what a jubilee was, and that it was not in the best interest of the slaves on the plantation. I was not exactly excited about singing this song. Interestingly enough, when I told some people about my concern, they had no idea what a jubilee was and they thought they were singing just another song. That changed my perception of what was going on in my own chorus and probably a good percentage of the Society. Most people have no idea how derogatory some of the songs can be perceived to be.

I was willing to get over the idea behind the song because I love four-part harmony. I wonder how many people in my community would be willing to do that.

I think we need to get my chorus and the Society in front of minority communities as a recruiting tool and show them how great the sound is. Sure, there will be people unwilling to participate, but I am sure there are more than enough people like me who will embrace it despite the perceived issues.

— Charles Carothers, *Masters of Harmony*



At the recent Golden Globes, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler talked about the new movie *Selma*, and how it covers the dawning of the Civil Rights Movement, which led to the Voting Rights Act of 1966, "and now everything is fine." It got a big laugh—ironic, cynical—because everyone knows that racial inequality is not fine, whatever real strides we have made.

The BHS was discriminatory in the past, and many members probably do not realize they are blind to the perceptions of some outsiders. Why do fewer racial minorities sing barbershop? Quite apart from the quality of the music, imagine the feelings of a black singer in our midst. I believe song selection may be an issue at times.

For example, the glorification of the Old South; "Alabama Jubilee" was about white plantation owners celebrating while the slaves fetched and carried. The Showboat was welcomed by the rich, but not so much by the ones who had to tote the barge and lift the bale. "Floatin' Down to Cotton Town," "Mississippi Mud," "All Aboard for Dixieland," and "In The Evening By The Moonlight" are in the same genre, despite their great tunes.

A Sweet Adelines chorus recently felt the need to change a song title to "Hot-Town Strutters' Ball"—even though "Dark-Town Strutters Ball" is a 100-year-old non-racist song created by a black songwriter. If we sang "Alabama Jubilee" but called it "South Dakota Jubilee," does the racism go away? False and obvious gestures do not address real racism.

— Kirt Thiesmeyer, past president, *Masters of Harmony*



Here is a brief brainstorm of the kinds of actions I believe could make a difference:

- Most chapters may want to reach out to institutions of color within their community that have music programs, and present opportunities to sing on shows and to perform on any secular shows. Perhaps if a chorus is thinking of a gospel-type song, they invite in a local music ministry for coaching.
- For the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, perhaps come up with song suggestions for groups to participate in local celebrations.
- Provide chapters with a Black History Month program on the African-American roots of the art form and script and song list groups can use.
- The greatest thing we can do in the short term is ban "Mammy" songs and make clear to the external community we've done it. I am for preserving the songs and arrangements much in the way folks collect "racial" imagery—not to use, but only to remember what once was.
- With headquarters in Nashville, perhaps work with groups like Fisk University to catalog some of the Southern and mammy-themed songs that just don't resonate in our enlightened age.
- The Fisk Jubilee Singers and Jubilee Hall could be a part of the 2016 convention in Nashville.
- With Belmont in the mix for Harmony University, Fisk and its music department shouldn't be left out. Music-related internships (for college credit, not pay) at the HQ might be a good way to get an interest in our organization.

— Cecil Brown, *Big Apple Chorus*; lead, *Up All Night*



"A noticeable advancement along the lines of the profession is the passing of the barber shop quartette with its barber shop harmony. It doesn't take much of an effort of memory to recall when all quartettes sang their own self-made harmonies, with their oft-recurring 'minors,' diminished sevenths and other embellishments. This barber shop harmony, although pleasing to the average ear, and not altogether displeasing to the cultivated ear, is nothing more or less than a musical slang. It violates—at times ruthlessly—the exacting rules and properties of music. All forms, phrases and progressions of music go down before it. What does [sic] the barber shop exponents of harmony care for such delicacies as the forbidden progressions of perfect fifths and octaves? What do they care about chord progression in its correct form? Their chief aim is to so twist and distort a melody that it can be expressed in so-called 'minors' and diminished chords. The melody is literally made to fit their small stock of slang chords, instead of the chords being built around the melody."

– "Tom the Tattler," an African-American musical purist who held black barbershop quartets in contempt due to their continual musical experimentation; this 1900 editorial prematurely celebrated their waning influence

as a youth. This was about a mile from where we are right now, in 1910 or 1911, when he was only about 10 years old and a tenor.

New Orleans Jazz—and this really was the birthplace of jazz—was based on what singers sang when they harmonized in their quartets. That makes a lot



of sense to me. When I hear our embellishments like pickups and backtimes and swipes, those are the same things that

instrumentalists do when they play Dixieland jazz. If you notice, you'll find them doing the same thing.

An African-American musical reviewer who called himself "Tom the Tattler," wrote a review of the African-American barbershop quartets in 1900. He's trying to insult barbershop harmony, but he gives some of the best compliments our style has ever received.

This tells us a lot about our music. I think for a long time we got away from our musical roots, and I think this gets us back there. Barbershop was very free-wheeling, flamboyant, experimental. It doesn't necessarily stick with the composer's song. It's like jazz—jazz is probably entwined with barbershop and its roots more than any other single style of music.

Not all African American scholars had reservations about barbershop harmony. James Weldon Johnson, who was executive secretary of the NAACP, grew up singing barbershop harmony. He called all the African-American culture of singing "barbershop harmony," and in the 1920s was afraid that it was beginning to be associated with white people. And it was. Studio quartets out of New York City were all white, a lot of the Vaudeville quartets that people saw were white. Barbershop harmony by then had crossed racial barriers and was a fabric in society. Black people, white people, rich and poor. It really was everywhere. It was ubiquitous in the early 20th Century on a professional level and on a recreational level.

James Weldon Johnson, unlike Tom the Tattler, was very proud of barbershop harmony. He wanted to go on record that there was a very strong African-American component in its origin.

**Our style of music has breadth.** There was a time when we were trying to legislate away what I believe are all the African-American contributions to our music—which are the things that make our music most interesting.

*Barbershop is not a purely homophonic style.* The



Jelly Roll Morton, the first-ever arranger of jazz music, recalls his barbershop quartet's improvisations: "The boys had some beautiful harmony they sang. And, of course, we got together and made all kinds of crazy ideas of the harmony, which made it beautiful and made it impossible for anybody to jump in and sing."

Around 1888, W.C. Handy, later to become widely known as "Father of the Blues," sang tenor in a quartet that gathered in a Florence, Alabama, barbershop "for the trying out of new swipes." Handy reported that ... "they often serenaded their sweethearts with love songs; the white bloods overheard, and took to hiring them to serenade the white girls."





Nashville's Grammy-winning gospel quartet, Fairfield Four, has been in existence for more than 90 years. They will join Crossroads quartet in a presentation at this year's ACDA National Convention.



2009 International Champion Crossroads; Dr. Jim Henry (Bs), is third from left

In the July 2001 issue of *The Harmonizer*, Barbershopper and music professor Jim Henry distilled key points from his doctoral dissertation. Building upon Lynn Abbott's research on the African-American roots of barbershop, Dr. Henry analyzed 250 transcriptions and recordings of early barbershop, tracing the musical elements themselves back to their African musical DNA. Elements traced exclusively to African music included call-and-response, rhythmic charac-

ter, and harmony, including the all-important barbershop 7th chord. Download the article at <http://bit.ly/BBshopRoots>.

Dr. Henry's Crossroads quartet is scheduled to join the legendary gospel quartet Fairfield Four for a presentation at the 2015 National Convention of the American Choral Directors Association in Salt Lake City regarding the African-American roots of barbershop harmony. Look for forthcoming video/audio of the joint presentation in upcoming Society communication.



recording studio quartets at the turn of the century sang the composer's melody exactly right because they were trying to plug the sheet music. But the African-American singer on the street corner was all about the improvisational elements of our style. Things like pick-ups, swipes, and echoes probably come more from the African-American tradition.

The rich harmonic content, circle of fifths, was probably European, but the African Americans blended that with the riveting rhythmic tradition of African music, and they did that both with barbershop and jazz. This influence really gives our music its interest and its character.

When you hear today's quartets doing things that aren't so homophonic, people say that's getting away from barbershop. But no, it's not. It is where we came from.

Certainly, contributors to the style were white quartets from New England, who sang in a very formal, hymn-like tradition. Usually the melody was in the

second tenor, and very barbershop-like. Our style has many roots. And African Americans were from vastly different parts of the country, so who is to say that they all sounded the same? But our style is not monolithic. It's a broad style of music. When we understand that, we'll become wiser as we face the future.

**Barbershop relates to other styles.** I love Vic Hobson's book because it makes it absolutely clear the intertwining of barbershop, blues, and early jazz. We shouldn't be afraid of the fact that our music resembles and has relationship with other kinds of music. For many years, you could damn something by saying, "that's just a country song" or "that's jazz." But our music is twined with other American music.



Sydney Bechet, a New Orleans musical pioneer remembered as the first important jazz soloist, had been an avid quartet harmonizer during his youth: "It was Bunk Johnson who was the first to make me acquainted with Louis Armstrong. Bunk told me about this quartet Louis was singing in. 'Sidney,' he said, 'I want you to hear a little quartet, how they sing and harmonize.' He knew I was crazy about singing harmony."



## A racially-mixed family of Barbershoppers reflects on how the Society can move toward enjoying a more racially mixed barbershop family

*Drew Ellis and his son, Jacob, are respectively 3rd- and 4th-generation Barbershoppers in Bowling Green, Kentucky.*

We have always joked that God blessed our family with chocolate, vanilla, and swirl. Our 14-year-old son, Jacob, is black, our 11-year-old daughter is bi-racial (black/white), and their 5-year-old brother is white. Jacob recently received his 8-year membership card and is a strong bari in the **Spirit of the Commonwealth** (formerly the **Caveman Chorus**) of the **Mammoth Cave, Ken., Chapter**.

As a family that has crossed racial lines through adoption, we've worked to preserve the racial heritage of our children while encouraging them to develop their own identities. This has allowed our family to enjoy diverse relationships we may not have otherwise had, and has given us a perspective on the challenges and opportunities in spreading barbershop harmony to communities that rarely hear or perform it.

**There's a huge, untapped resource of harmony lovers of various racial backgrounds.** Harmony has always been a rich part of the African-American culture. This goes far beyond those who created the early barbershop sound. It can be found in worship styles, singing styles, and in the musical evolution of doo-wop, Motown, jazz, and hip-hop music. You'll often find high concentrations of quality singing and musicianship in black communities, because these activities are often tightly interwoven into the cultural fabric.

**Early black Barbershoppers deserve belated recognition.** I believe the Society and others would benefit from a concerted effort to visually recognize, appreciate the talents of, and even "glorify" the talents of early black quartets.

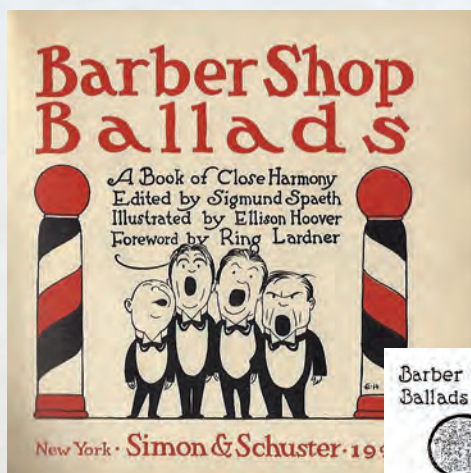


We can't change the history of social norms that barred non-white singers from Society membership until the early 1960s, but we can honor and listen to the black quartets who might have become Society idols had they been allowed to compete. The talent and skill of groups like **The Mills Brothers** and many other early black quartets like **The Morris Brown Quartet** had tuning, precision and ring that was often much better than our early champion quartets. (Enjoy several such quartets at [bit.ly/MorrisBrown](http://bit.ly/MorrisBrown).)

**Contemporary black harmony groups deserve recognition, too.** Perhaps the Society can consider some sort of honor to the **Fairfield Four**, the **Jackson 5**, **Boyz II Men**, the **Temptations**, or other iconic harmonizing groups in gospel, Motown, R&B.

**Obstacles can be overcome one man at a time.** If we are serious about breaking down racial barriers, we have some notable obstacles to overcome. But it can be done one man, one boy, one quartet at a time. Younger Barbershoppers are already more diverse. Of the eight men who won an international quartet gold medal in Las Vegas, 2014, only two were white, and the **Musical Island Boys** won while 'shopping Motown hits. Members of many past collegiate champs have come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds; in most cases, they got hooked on barbershop by another Barbershopper who cared enough to reach out.

**Let's work to show people what "harmony" can mean.** While we have now welcomed ethnic diversity in the BHS for many years, joining with the unreached communities among us could give us an advantage in growing a global interest in the barbershop art form and culture. Ours can be a culture—both in fellowship and in competitive performance—that could metaphorically and visually demonstrate the power of "close harmony."



**Society pioneer Sigmund Spaeth was also a famous musicologist. In his 1925 book *Barber Shop Ballads*, he attributed the style to European traditions. There is little evidence to support his theory, but overwhelming evidence that black quartets had developed the early sound; white quartets later added their own elements and popularized the style with the masses.**

**We should aggressively strive to break the race barrier and make barbershop culture more inclusive.** What could be more right than to include more African Americans, whose grandfathers had such a strong role in the beginning of our music! It's not an easy thing to do. I think if we want to do it, and I believe we do, that that's the first step.

We need to find a way to share our music and this experience with a wider group of people. That's going to make our music richer, make us much more acceptable. Grant money would be much easier to get, many good things would happen, if we could make a dent in the racial barrier. And I think we are. ■

