

BARBERSHOP— IN PERFECT HARMONY

Though more than a century old, four-part harmony stays in tune with today's world.

by Alanna Nash

Taylor Wilson is just like every other 16-year-old kid—he's wild about music. He plays trumpet in the high-school band and loads up his iPod with his favorite tunes. But that's where the Nashville, Tennessee, teen's similarity to his peers ends. Taylor's iPod isn't stacked with the heavy metal of Whitesnake or the Brit-pop of Coldplay, but with a cappella music, specifically barbershop. His group of choice: The Four Freshmen, whose roots harken to 1948 and the influence of the barbershop quartet Hal's Harmonizers.

"It's just the sound—hearing a really good lock and ring brings an instant smile to my face," he says, referring to the classic barbershop chord structure. "But I really like performing, putting a grin on a little kid's face, or jerking that tear out of a grown man's eye—anything that can get that emotion across."

At first glance, Taylor's attraction to a genre normally associated with middle-aged men in straw boaters



In 2008, the young and energetic quartet OC Times became the new kings of barbershop with their electrifying sound, reminiscent of such unforgettable artists as Sinatra, the Beach Boys, and Elvis.

would appear to be an anomaly. After all, barbershop music reached its zenith in popularity in the '60s and '70s, after the phenomenal success of the musical and 1962 film *The Music Man*. But membership in the Barbershop Harmony Society, the primary men's organization (the women's is the Tulsa-based Sweet Adelines International), has dropped from 38,000 to 28,000 since the 1980s. And most of the folks who come into Barbershop's 800 chapters in the United States and Canada are roughly 52 to 55 years of age.

But the surprise is that the music's peak performers—the male quartets OC Times and Vocal Spectrum—are in their twenties and thirties. The former (the OC stands for Orange County, California) draws its inspiration from jazz and swing artists such as Michael Bublé and Frank Sinatra, with the music of Elvis Presley and the Beach Boys balancing the Rat Pack verve and the traditional barbershop canon. Likewise, Vocal Spectrum mixes things up with a smattering of Disney songs and show tunes.

The light-hearted American tradition still thrives, then, particularly

through youth-outreach programs in high schools and colleges. But it's clearly not your grandfather's barbershop anymore. Take, for example, groupies.

"When OC Times walk on stage, they're treated like rock stars," says Taylor's 48-year-old dad, Todd Wilson, the Barbershop Harmony Society's director of marketing who sings with both Acoustix and the venerable Suntones. "Girls scream and swoon over OC Times. Really, it's like Elvis in his heyday."

If many of the old-school barbershoppers bristle at the idea of Beach Boys tunes usurping such polecats as "My Wild Irish Rose," "Down By the Old Mill Stream," and "Wait 'Til the Sun Shines, Nellie," it helps the younger generation relate to the older form. Rick Spencer, BHS's director of music and education, points out that even 45-year-old Beach Boys songs can hardly be called "contemporary." There's room for it all, he says, as long as folks stick to the formula—precise four-part, unaccompanied close-harmony singing, with the lead or melody appearing in the second voice and rising over a romantic, intimate, and conversational lyric, the mushier the better. "Let Me Call You Sweetheart," indeed.

"Any song that tells a good story and has an interesting melody line could be adapted to the barbershop style in some form or another," offers Spencer, who proposed to his wife with a singing valentine on stage. "It's really about the sound more than the actual song itself."

Which is the conclusion that the audience came to in January 2008 at BHS's first International Barbershop Youth Chorus Festival. There, the student-led Marcsmen Barbershop Chorus at Texas State University-San Marcos beat out five other young



Before Ol' Blue Eyes became a household name, a very young Frank Sinatra (far right) harmonized with the Hoboken Four, taking home first prize on the amateur hour of Major Bowes (center) in 1935.



Rockwell's unforgettable 1936 Post cover graces the Barbershop Harmony Society's new headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee. With 30,000 singers in more than 800 chapters in the United States and Canada, the society is the world's largest all-male singing organization.

choruses to capture the trophy for top honors. The rules dictated that competing choruses sing three songs, two of which had to be traditional barbershop. According to Ed Watson, BHS's executive director, it was the most thrilling vocal square-off since the Buffalo Bills competed for the scene-stealing thunder of Professor Harold Hill.

"They loved it, we loved it, and our barbershop audience—the 70-year-old gray and blue hairs—were just ecstatic that we had young kids who appreciated barbershop."

Everybody is also in harmonized glee about the new BHS headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee. The move to Music City from Wisconsin last August gives the BHS a chance to build more visibility and clout in the industry—there's currently no Grammy awarded for barbershop, for example—and eventually, the building will add an interactive museum and Hall of Fame to its existing Old Songs Library. With 750,000 sheets of 125,000 titles, it's the largest privately held collection of sheet music from the Tin Pan Alley era.

The building is also a standout for the 30-by-26-foot reproduction of Norman Rockwell's famous *Barbershop Quartet* illustration, which graces its side. The image first appeared on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* in September 1936, two years before Tulsa tax attorney O.C. Cash founded the Society for the Preservation and Propagation of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in the United States, or SPEBSQSA, now the BHS.

"We just loved putting that on there," says Watson. "Rockwell had a phenomenal ability to capture little bits of Americana and make them instantly recognizable, and everybody should know what this building is."

If Rockwell captured the wholesomeness of the music for all time, other famous names have embraced it at some point in their lives and careers. The late *ABC News* anchor Peter Jennings sang barbershop as a boy in Canada, and jumped at the chance to reprise it at parties as an adult. Lance Bass, the former bass singer for 'NSync, also started in barbershop, as did folksinger

Television, Broadway, and film star actor Dick Van Dyke loves barbershop quartets—a passion that in 2000 inspired him to join an a cappella quartet called the Vantastix, which recently released a new children's album—Put on a Happy Face.



Gordon Lightfoot and actor Dick Van Dyke, who still sings with his own group, the Vantastix. Politicians such as President Harry S. Truman and Attorney General John Ashcroft barbershopped a bit in their youth, and of course, the Osmond Brothers used barbershop as a steppingstone to all manner of family-oriented entertainment fame.

"It was the very foundation of our music and the reason we were discovered," Merrill Osmond remembered in an email interview. "At that time our mother dressed us all alike, and we were in Disneyland and [the barbershop quartet] the Dapper Dans spotted us



Before younger siblings Donny and Marie catapulted to stardom, Alan, Wayne, Merrill and Jay Osmond first gained fame as The Osmond Brothers, a barbershop quartet that sang at Disneyland and on The Andy Williams Show.

and sang a few songs with us and took us in to see Walt Disney himself. Walt put us to work on a show called 'Disneyland After Dark,' and it was there that Andy Williams' father heard us, and told Andy to put us on his show. Barbershop taught us to listen for the notes and harmony in a song, and brought us to the blending of our voices. It was the basis for all the music that followed."

If it's the music that initially hooks all barbershoppers, it's the fellowship and camaraderie that keeps them. In a barbershop quartet, a ditchdigger can stand between a doctor and a lawyer or a bail bondsman, and all the differences in their lives melt away in the swell of the crescendo. "To me, the guy next to me is a good baritone—he's not a CEO of some big company," says Wilson.

The music is also a leveler of age. "It doesn't matter if one is 12 and the other is 50 or 60," explains Spencer, who started out singing as a youngster in Connecticut. "I always say that I grew up with 30,000 uncles. I knew that I could go anywhere and be safe with them, because they were all looking out for each other."

That strength of character holds true for the lady barbershoppers, too. "It's such a support system," says the Louisville, Kentucky-based Charlene Staats, a member of the Sweet Adelines for more than two decades. Years ago, a woman in Staats' chorus needed an operation, but the family had just switched their medical insurance, and the hospital demanded \$3,000 before admittance.

"They were truck farmers, and they didn't have any money because the

crops weren't in," Staats remembers. "She told the chorus about it one night, and people just handed over \$2,400. Then when the crops started coming in, everybody went out and picked radishes and bundled them together, because she couldn't do it. I've never been in a church that's done that much for people, and I've belonged to churches all across the country."

Such acts of familial love are commonplace in barbershop, as in the case of the Suntones' Gene Cokeroff, 73. The legendary tenor presents youth workshops in high schools in Florida, and nine years ago, he began mentoring 15-year-old Paul Saca in Miami. Despite coming from a loving family, Saca was directionless, a self-described cocky young man with no aspiration beyond becoming a superstar, or maybe attending community college. Instead, he found a sorely needed father-son relationship with his musical hero.

"Any young person struggles with confidence and self-esteem issues," Saca says, "but through music I was able to develop a strong sense of self." With Cokeroff's encouragement, he went on to the University of Miami and majored in vocal jazz, and at 19, he won international gold singing lead for Heat, the 2003 collegiate champions.

Today, 24-year-old Saca teaches music at the elementary-school level when he isn't doing studio work, writing pop songs, and singing with the quartet On Demand. "The quality of young singers is so much higher than it used to be," he says. "The future looks good for us, I think. These kids are so much smarter."

Even if some of them are frustrated, including Taylor Wilson, that trumpeter in the award-winning McGavock High School band.

"Barbershop really makes me a musical snob," he moans, his lament wrapped up in pride. "It's given me such a bigger understanding of music. I'll tell my dad not to even come to band concerts. If someone's just a little bit out of tune, uh, it just kills me."

Relax, Taylor. Long after school, marriage and raising kids, barbershop will be there for you. And chances are, "Goodbye, My Coney Island Baby" will still hang tough to edge out the latest rendition of "Little Deuce Coupe." ▲



Move over men, the Four Bettys (top) hit a high note in 2008, garnering the trophy as the International Champion Quartet from Sweet Adelines International, a worldwide organization of women singers advancing barbershop harmony. In 1948, the Johnson sisters became national champions at the second Sweet Adelines' competition.