



Photograph: Jim Spitzer Painting: © SEP 1936



## Electronic Press Kit for Media

**MISSION:** The Barbershop Harmony Society brings men together in harmony and fellowship to enrich lives through singing.

**VISION:** To be the premier membership organization for men who love to sing.

110 7th Ave. N., Nashville, TN 37203  
800.876.SING (7464) | 615.313.7620 (fax)  
[www.barbershop.org](http://www.barbershop.org) | [info@barbershop.org](mailto:info@barbershop.org)



# Facts about the Barbershop Harmony Society



The Barbershop Harmony Society is the modern name for the “Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBSQSA),” the world’s largest all-male singing society. As the name indicates, the Society exists for the purpose of promoting barbershop harmony, a uniquely American a cappella musical genre. Since its inception in 1938, the Society has grown to include:

- 26,000 members in the U.S. and Canada, with an additional 4,000 members in official affiliates in Australia, Great Britain, Germany, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, and the Netherlands. There are also active barbershoppers in Argentina, Brazil, China, Denmark, Hungary, India, Israel, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and the Russian Federation. We truly live up to our motto: “Keep the Whole World Singing!”
- 800 chapters in 17 districts in the U.S. and Canada, ranging in membership from 12 to 160 or more. The Society is governed by a Board of Directors.
- 2,000 registered quartets, and an estimated additional 1,000 unregistered, most of whom also sing in a chorus
- Headquarters staff of 30 professionals, based in Nashville, TN. Staff music educators travel frequently to conduct workshops and clinics throughout North America
- Harmony Marketplace, a street-front and on-line store grossing over \$1 million annually
- Two annual conventions and competitions: International in July, and Midwinter in January. International includes quartets, choruses and collegiate quartets; Midwinter includes senior quartets and our annual Youth Festival, the most recent of which drew a record 576 teens and young men in 19 choruses.
- The Old Songs Library, the second largest collection of turn-of-the-century sheet music (after the Library of Congress), housing more than 750,000 sheets and 125,000 original songs from the heyday of Tin Pan Alley.
- Music publishing, to include over 1,000 titles arranged in the barbershop style, as well as distribution of videos for entertainment and education purposes
- Harmony University, an annual week-long school which includes Director’s College, Quartet College, Harmony college and other classes taught by a world-class faculty of vocal coaches, arrangers, choreographers and educators. This is attended by more than 600 students of all ages
- Publication of bi-monthly full-color magazine, *The Harmonizer*, and weekly e-newsletter, *LiveWire*

## What Do We Do?

### Mostly, we sing!

In addition to our annual competitions, activities on the chapter level include weekly rehearsal meetings, public and private shows and charitable events for churches, schools, hospitals and other community functions, and singing the National Anthem at sporting and community events.

### Outreach to schools:

Chapters also participate in outreach to music teachers and boys and girls at all grade levels to enrich their music programs. Many barbershop choruses organize joint concerts with local high school and university performing groups.

### Outreach to the community:

Some of our programs include Singing for Life, organized around community blood drives, and Singing Valentines, where quartets will go to homes, businesses, hospitals to deliver a Valentine's Greeting, bringing roses or candy. Chapters close to military bases often do special Singing Valentines for loved ones of military personnel, recording the event and sending DVDs overseas to deployed soldiers.

### Charitable endeavors:

Harmony Foundation, the charitable arm of the Society, provides funds for education, Harmony Explosion Camps and the Youth Chorus Festival, supporting the Society's mission of "Enriching Lives Through Singing." This year, the Foundation funded registrations and room & board for all 576 young men at our Midwinter Convention in Las Vegas.

## How Did It All Begin?

### The History of Barbershop Harmony and SPEBSQSA

Musically, barbershop singing is a uniquely American style of close, four-part a cappella harmony. The melody is sung by the lead, while the high tenor sings harmony above the lead. The bass sings the lowest root notes and the baritone provides the in-between notes that complete the chords, giving barbershop harmony its distinctive four-part sound.

### Was Barbershop Harmony Actually Sung in Barbershops?

Certainly—and on street corners (it was sometimes called "curbstone" harmony) and at social functions and in parlors. Its roots are not just the white, middle America of Norman Rockwell's famous painting. Rather, barbershop is a melting-pot product of African-American musical devices, European hymn-singing culture, and an American tradition of recreational music — a tradition the Barbershop Harmony Society continues today.

Immigrants to the new world brought with them a musical repertoire that included hymns, psalms, and folk songs. These simple songs were often sung in four parts with the melody set in the second-highest voice.

Minstrel shows of the mid-1800s often consisted of white singers in blackface (later black singers themselves) performing songs and sketches based on a romanticized vision of plantation life. As the minstrel show was supplanted by the equally popular vaudeville, the tradition of close-harmony quartets remained, often as a "four act" combining music with ethnic comedy that would be scandalous by modern standards.

The "barbershop" style of music is first associated with black southern quartets of the 1870s, such as The American Four and The Hamtown Students. The African influence is particularly notable in the improvisational nature of the harmonization, and the flexing of melody to produce harmonies in "swipes" and "snakes." Black quartets "cracking a chord" were commonplace at places like Joe Sarpy's Cut Rate Shaving Parlor in St. Louis, or in Jacksonville, Florida, where, black historian James Weldon Johnson wrote, "every barbershop seemed to have its own quartet."

The first written use of the word "barbershop" when referring to harmonizing came in 1910, with the publication of the song, "Play That Barbershop Chord"—evidence that the term was in common parlance by that time.

## **Tin Pan Alley Era: Edison's Talking Machine Spreads Harmony Nationwide**

In the early 1900s, pop music success depended on sales of sheet music to recreational musicians. Songs had to be easily singable by average singers and have simple, straightforward melodies, with heartfelt, commonplace themes and images. Music often included an instrumental arrangement for piano or ukulele and a vocal arrangement for male quartet.

The phonograph made it possible to actually hear the new songs coming from Tin Pan Alley. Professional quartets recorded hundreds of songs for the Victor, Edison, and Columbia labels, which spurred sheet music sales. For example, "You're The Flower of My Heart, Sweet Adeline" captured the hearts of harmony lovers, not simply because it easily adapted to harmony, but also because it was heavily promoted by the popular Quaker City Four and other quartets.

## **Jazz Era: Changes in American Music and Social Habits**

The coming of radio prompted a shift in American popular music. Songwriters turned out more sophisticated melodies for the professional singers of radio and phonograph. These songs did not adapt as well to impromptu harmonization because they placed a greater emphasis on jazz rhythms and melodies that were better suited to dancing than to casual crooning.

Radio quartets kept close harmony singing popular with many amateur singers, though—and these singers were ready for the revival of barbershop harmony that took place in April 1938, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

## **Birth of SPEBSQSA — the Dream of O.C. Cash and Rupert Hall**

While traveling to Kansas City on business, Tulsa tax attorney O.C. Cash happened to meet fellow Tulsan Rupert Hall in the lobby of the Muehlebach Hotel. The men discovered they shared a mutual love of vocal harmony. Together they bemoaned the decline of that all-American institution, the barbershop quartet, and decided to stem that decline. Signing their names as "Rupert Hall, Royal Keeper of the Minor Keys, and O.C. Cash, Third Temporary Assistant Vice Chairman," of the "Society for the Preservation and Propagation of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in the United States" [sic], the two invited their friends to a songfest on the roof garden of the Tulsa Club, on April 11, 1938.

Twenty-six men attended that first meeting, and returned the following week with more friends. About 150 men attended the third meeting, and the grand sounds of harmony they raised on the rooftop created quite a stir. A traffic jam formed outside the hotel. While police tried to straighten out the problem, a reporter of the local newspaper heard the singing, sensed a great story, and joined the meeting.

O.C. Cash bluffed his way through the interview, saying his organization was national in scope, with branches in St. Louis, Kansas City and elsewhere. He simply neglected to mention that these "branches" were just a few scattered friends who enjoyed harmonizing, but knew nothing of Cash's new club.

Cash's flair for publicity, combined with the unusual name (the ridiculous initials poked fun at the alphabet soup of New Deal programs), made an irresistible story for the news wire services, which spread it coast-to-coast. Cash's "branches" started receiving puzzling calls from men interested in joining the barbershop society. Soon, groups were meeting throughout North America to sing barbershop harmony.

SPEBSQSA—now known as the Barbershop Harmony Society—was born, and achieved international stature in 1944 when the first Canadian chapter was chartered in Windsor, Ontario. Barbershop harmony was largely confined to North America until the late 1950's when Harry Danser of Sussex, England heard the famous Buffalo Bills in Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* in New York. He took an armload of recordings across the pond and founded the Crawley Barbershop Harmony Club, which in 1974 became the British Association of Barbershop Singers, the first affiliate outside North America. Barbershop harmony is also sung by over 25,000 women worldwide in Sweet Adelines International, founded in 1945, and in Harmony, Inc, founded in 1957.

Barbershop is not just a musical genre, but for those who really love it, it's a whole way of life, forging bonds of friendship all over the world.

# Celebrities in Barbershopping



The Code of Ethics of the Barbershop Harmony Society states: "We shall accept for membership only congenial men of good character who love harmony in music or have a desire to harmonize."

Through the years, more than 300,000 men have been accepted for membership from all walks of life; indeed, few hobbies embrace a broader spectrum of individuals than does barbershopping. By way of illustration, in a recent international competition, one quartet was composed of a pastor, a programmer, a printer and an artist; another quartet was made up of a dentist, a mailman, a banker, and a nursing home administrator.

Among the many devotees of barbershop harmony are some figures who are household names in America. Honorary Lifetime Members are noted by \*:

## **Politics and Government**

- Harry S. Truman, U.S. President
- Alfred E. Smith, Governor of New York
- William Sessions, Director of Federal Bureau of Investigations
- John Ashcroft, Attorney General
- Trent Lott, U.S. Senator
- Jim Jeffords, U.S. Senator

## **Musicians**

- Bill Gaither\* - award-winning songwriter, producer and performer
- Bing Crosby - singer, actor, former Barbershop Harmony Society board member
- Irving Berlin\* - composer of "God Bless America", "White Christmas" and hundreds of other hit songs
- Mitch Miller\* - orchestra leader, host of "Sing Along with Mitch" television show
- Fred Waring\* - choral conductor, leader of the Pennsylvanians
- Meredith Willson\* - author and composer of the hit musical "The Music Man"
- The Buffalo Bills - famous quartet from The Music Man on Broadway and film, international quartet champion, 1950
- The Osmond Brothers\* - preteen quartet, later pop music stars
- Ferde Grofé - composer of classical music; "Grand Canyon Suite"
- Burl Ives - folk singer, actor, Oscar winner
- Gordon Lightfoot - pop singer, composer of "Sundown" and "Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald"
- Sigmund Spaeth - music critic, "The Tune Detective"
- James Melton - opera singer
- Jerrod Ottley - Director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir

- Victor Borge - pianist, comedian
- Jim Pike - member, The Lettermen
- Sherrill Milnes\* - opera legend
- Bob Flanigan\* - member, The Four Freshmen
- Gene Puerling\* - Grammy Award-winning arranger, The Hi-Los and Singers Unlimited

### **Entertainment**

- Mike Rowe - television personality and star of "Dirty Jobs with Mike Rowe"
- Dick Van Dyke\* - television and film actor, singer
- Bill Hanna\* - creator of "The Flintstones", many other television cartoon series
- Groucho Marx - actor, comedian, host of "You Bet Your Life"
- Pat O'Brien - film actor
- Ned Beatty - film actor
- James Gregory - television (Captain Luger on Barney Miller) and film actor
- Burt Mustin - television and film character actor
- Bob Lally - television director (The Jeffersons)
- John Miller - Chief Marketing Officer, NBC television network

### **Sports**

- Tom Henrich - professional baseball player
- Greg Buttle - professional football linebacker
- George Luken, Jr. - professional basketball player
- Bobby Bragan - professional baseball executive

### **Radio's Golden Age**

- Arthur Godfrey\* - radio and television personality
- Art Baker - radio and television personality, actor
- Jim Jordan - star of "Fibber McGee and Molly" radio series
- Chester Lauck - Lum of "Lum 'n' Abner" radio series
- The King's Men - professional quartet, regulars on "Fibber McGee and Molly"
- The Sportsmen - professional quartet, regulars on Jack Benny radio series