



July 2, 2007

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Quartets Contend With Disharmony In the Barbershop

Kibbers and the New Kids Differ a Lot About Style; How to Enliven the Genre

By **NEAL E. BOUDETTE**
July 2, 2007; Page A1

For 69 years, the Barbershop Harmony Society has worked, as it says, to "keep the whole world singing" -- preferably in the style of unaccompanied, four-part harmony. But these days, the organization has its hands full just keeping itself together.

The trouble stems from recent efforts to reverse declining popularity by getting younger singers to join in. To make barbershop seem less like grandpa music, the society loosened the rules for its annual competition, allowing contestants to sing modern songs with hipper, contemporary arrangements. Beatles songs, for instance. Once taboo in competition, they are now just fine.

That hits a sour note with the society's traditionalists, or "kibbers," which stands for "keep it barbershop."

"They're screwing it up!" snaps purist Marty Mendro, 93 years old and a barbershop legend.

Mr. Mendro, of Twisp, Wash., sang lead in the Mid-States Four, the champion quartet of 1949. Many consider the group one of the greatest of all time. Tom Neal, 73, who made a fortune in hot tubs, has set up a separate organization that allows only old-time barbershop. "A lot of guys really hold a grudge against the society for what they've done," Mr. Neal says.

Yet the modernization effort seems to be working. Quartets of guys in their 20s, once rare in the society's championship, now regularly vie for the title, and won in 2002 and 2006.

At this year's contest, set to open Wednesday in Denver, the Westminster Chorus, a group of 63 men, almost all under 30, is favored to win the barbershop chorus championship. It was featured on the NBC television series "America's Got Talent" last month.

Top Contender

In the quartet category, a group of young men called O.C. Times is a top contender. For its run at the gold medal this year, the quartet has been working on "Surfer Girl" and "Fun Fun Fun," both Beach Boys songs.

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Shawn York, the foursome's 29-year-old tenor, thinks the older guys need to lighten up. "They're so outraged that we'd do this. Yeah, we're trying to push the envelope, but it's not like we're doing rap," he shrugged after a recent rehearsal. "We're trying to sing the songs we heard when we were growing up. You can't just keep singing songs from the '20s over and over."

Ed Watson, 56, a retired Navy pilot who became the society's chief executive in 2005, says barbershop has to evolve or die. "If you don't change anything, then you'll end up losing everything," Mr. Watson says. But he also worries about the discord in the society. "This dichotomy threatens to split us in half," he says.

Barbershop dates back to the early part of the 20th century and is believed to have roots in a style developed by African-American singers hanging out on street corners and in barbershops. It is a very precise type of a cappella. The four voices -- tenor, lead, baritone and bass -- are supposed to sing the same words almost all the time. In other types of choral music, the tenor, the highest-pitched voice, sings the melody, with the other parts blending in. In barbershop, the second highest voice, the lead, sings the melody.

In the best of these groups, the four voices create ringing chords with an overtone that sounds like a fifth voice, which singers call the "angel's voice."



Tom Neal

On a sunny afternoon at his home overlooking Lake Mead in Boulder City, Nev., Mr. Neal cranked up the volume on his stereo to get the full effect of an old recording of Mr. Mendro's group, the Mid-States Four. Each time the quartet hit a brilliant chord, he punched the air. Then, pointing to the skin on his forearm, he said, "It gives me goose bumps."

Kibbers like Mr. Neal argue that the barbershop style only lends itself to songs with simple lyrics and melodies, like "My Gal Sal" or "Hey, Look Me Over," songs that have been around for a while. "Elvis, this rock 'n' roll stuff, that's not barbershop!" he grouses, pounding a fist into his knee.

The society was founded in 1938, when two dozen barbershop fans gathered to sing on a rooftop garden in Tulsa, Okla. As a lark, one of the organizers, a Missourian named O.C. Cash, told a reporter the group was called the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America. The unwieldy name, and the less than melodious acronym Spebsqsa (pronounced "speb-squa") stuck.

In the '50s and '60s, champion quartets were regularly invited to perform on the "Ed Sullivan Show." The hit Broadway show "The Music Man" featured the 1950 champs, the Buffalo Bills. Back in those days, contests were all business. Quartets had six minutes to perform two songs and were scored strictly on their singing, how well the voices blended, how true the chords were.

But by the 1990s, after the arrival of rock, heavy metal, rap and other types of pop music, most people heard the word barbershop and thought of "four old guys warbling in striped shirts and fake mustaches," Mr. Watson says. With barely any younger members joining, only gray-haired seniors remained in most Spebsqsa chapters, and they were dying out.

Wave of Popularity

A few years ago, as more and more pop groups began performing a cappella, the society thought it might be able to ride its wave of popularity. The trick was to somehow make barbershop cool. The organization changed its name to the Barbershop Harmony Society and dropped the idea of preserving old-time barbershop as its primary mission. It started working with music teachers to introduce high-school singers familiar with a cappella to the barbershop style, and expanded its collegiate contest.

To be closer to the music industry, it decided to move its headquarters from



Kenosha, Wis., to Nashville. "The Music City," Mr. Watson says. "That's where the recording studios are, and the marketing opportunities."

In competitions, judges started allowing elements of jazz, doo-wop and gospel into performances, and gave points for entertainment. Quartets do two songs and can pause for jokes, gags or brief dance steps. In this week's contest, the Westminster Chorus will embellish one song with stomping and clapping of hands and thighs.

Fed Up

A few years ago, Burt Szabo, 75, a well-known barbershop arranger, became so fed up with the jazz, rock and Disney songs that were being sung in competition that he started posting a list of "barbertrash" numbers on the Internet. One example: "ABC," the 1970s hit by the Jackson 5, which caused a heap of controversy when it was sung by a quartet in last year's competition.

Mr. Szabo, who lives in Orlando, Fla., acknowledges that many of the younger quartets are great singers, but he says, "If we let things evolve too far, then the real barbershop will disappear."

Mr. Neal, the leader of the breakaway group, is resolved not to let that happen. For years he has gathered a hundred or so kibbers together each year to sing the old way. They don't have a competition but there's a parade of quartets and plenty of "woodshedding" -- when four guys just happen to get together and knock out a few numbers over a few beers.

After shunning Mr. Neal's group, the society this past winter agreed to let him organize a sanctioned contest for quartets singing the old style. He put up half of the \$6,000 in prize money himself. Fourteen quartets competed, not as many as Mr. Neal had hoped.

The society hasn't decided whether it will sanction another traditional contest next year. Undeterred, Mr. Neal already has another gathering of his group planned for September outside Chicago. "We want to bring barbershop back so people will be aware of what it was," he says.

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David Wagner

O.C. Times quartet, set to compete in this week's contest.

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