

# HISTORY OF BARBERSHOP

compiled by David Wright

## Lesson 2: THE GOLDEN AGE

***The quartet enters its heyday.*** We have seen that interest in quartet singing had blossomed in the late 1800's, encouraged by trends in popular music that produced songs that were easy to harmonize. Amateur quartet singing was further encouraged by the professional quartets which sang in the minstrel and vaudeville shows, and which recorded on the new recording companies like Edison, Victor, and Columbia.

***Further development of amateur quartet activity.*** The early 1900's was indeed the age of the male quartet. There were thousands of amateur quartets. Lodges, churches, granges, fraternities, service clubs, companies, corporations, police and fire departments, and even baseball teams all had foursomes singing under their sponsorship. It should be noted that this was still the practice in the early days of our Society, when many of the quartets had names like Topeka's State Journal Quartet, Shell Quartet, Phillips 66 Barflies (formerly the Bartlesville Barflies), New York Police Quartet, Westinghouse Quartet, Lions Club Serenaders, Gipps-Amberline Four (Gipps-Amberline was a beer brewed in Peoria, Illinois.) Family quartets were common, and the better ones became professional, making recordings and doing concerts. There were also neighborhood and family quartets organized less formally. Young boys formed quartets on the street corner. We know for a fact that this actually happened, because one such quartet was George Burns' Peewee Quartet, in which he sang tenor when he was eight years old. In his book *Living It Up* he talks about singing in saloons and passing the hat on New York's Lower East Side. Sometimes they made fifteen cents — big stuff. African American musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Jelly Roll Morton, and W. C. Handy sang as youths in street corner quartets. Such amateur groups were likely inspired by the vaudeville and minstrel quartets whose circuits came to through the towns and villages. Later they were also inspired by the famous recording studio quartets.

***Chung Hwa Four.*** As with today's quartets, vaudeville's quartets used all kinds of off beat novelty. One example: the Chung Hwa Four – a Chinese quartet! This quartet first sang the Chinese seventh chord. (Just kidding.) The Chung Hwa Four barbershop quartet was organized in San Francisco, as reported by Hugh Liang who joined the quartet at that time. (Hugh was interviewed by the authors of the book *A Place Called Chinese In America*, by Dianne Mei Lin Mark and Ginger Chih in 1979 at the age of 90.) Hugh was then a student at the University of California at Berkeley. The quartet played the bay area, then attempted to make it in New York, where they were greeted by show managers with much skepticism because people felt that Chinese could not sing in harmony. Finally they were put on a show in Buffalo. When they came out on stage they asked the audience to join in at the chorus, then proceeded to sing a song in Chinese. They joked, "Gee, maybe you don't like Chinese songs. We'll sing something American." The quartet then sang in English with a quality that no one expected. They were a splash. The Chung Hwa Four sang the vaudeville Circuit for 14 years.

***Scott Joplin's Treemonisha.*** In 1910 Scott Joplin created what he considered to be his crowning achievement, and opera called *Treemonisha*. *Treemonisha* is an educated young black woman who leads a campaign to educate the people around her. The plot takes place in September 1884 on a plantation between Texarkana and the Red River in Arkansas. Joplin's intention in part was to represent the musical forms and traditions of rural African Americans, which he recalled from the years 1870-1890. The opera includes a barbershop quartet consisting of farm workers singing a song called "We Will Rest A While", composed by Joplin.

***James Weldon Johnson.*** In 1925 author and musicologist James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) (early activist in the NAACP), feared that the African American contribution to the barbershop harmony tradition would be forgotten. He wrote:

"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."

- Book of American Negro Spirituals, 1925

**Quartets begin to record.** The first song to be recorded had been by Thomas Edison back in 1876, when he first demonstrated his new machine. It was "Mary Had A Little Lamb." (Actually it was spoken, not sung. To our knowledge, Edison didn't have a quartet!) But in the 1880's and 1890's, Edison created the recording industry, which gave impetus to the male singing movement, and the names of the Haydn Quartet, Peerless Quartet, and American Quartet were almost household words. In 1890 we see a male quartet listed in a catalogue, but it doesn't say what the quartet's name was, nor its personnel. An Edison studio logbook lists twenty recordings on September 27, 1891, by the Manhasset Quartet, who were African American. We know that this quartet recorded a number of songs, continuing to record until 1896. They may well have been the very first recorded male quartet. Another early black quartet, the unique Quartet, recorded the song "Mama's Black Baby Boy" in 1893. By 1900 white quartets such as the Haydn Quartet and the Orpheus Quartet were also recording. In 1901 the Haydn Quartet recorded and popularized "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean", a traditional Scottish folk song.

The masters of the early recordings have long since been discarded. In those days a master made less than a hundred records so recording artists would record the same song all day long. Modern day collectors of old records and cylinders like to obtain different recordings of the same number. When listening to these old recordings, one must keep in that (1) these men were pioneers, so we can't evaluate them by our standards, and (2) the technology that recorded their voices was new, hence extremely primitive by our standards, and moreover the cylinders and records from which these were taken are old and scratchy.

**Haydn Quartet.** (Called the Edison Male Quartet on Edison Cylinders; later called Haydn Quartet on Victor.) This was the first great recording quartet. They were organized in 1894 to make wax cylinders for Edison. Bass William Hooley was considered by some to be the finest of the early quartet basses. In 1896 John Bieling replaced the original tenor singer, and eventually became one of the great early quartet men. Shortly after 1900 they began to make disc records for Victor, and an early Victor catalogue claims that this group ". . . was the first male quartet to make satisfactory talking machine records." (Columbia Studios, for example, began making discs in 1902).

**Peerless Quartet.** This fabulous quartet became the most famous, perhaps for three reasons: (1) the quality of the singing; (2) longevity — their recording career ran from 1906 to 1928; and (3) the popularity of their lead singer, Henry Burr, as a singer in his own right. Burr soon became manager of the group; his fine ability and personality held the group together through several personnel changes over the years. Henry Burr was to become probably the most recorded voice in history. Some estimates say he recorded as many as 12,000 songs, including solo, duet, trio, and quartet numbers. (Bing Crosby recorded about 1,200 songs in his career.) Albert Campbell, perennial top tenor of the Peerless Quartet, was probably the first person to sing on a recording involving musical advertising. It was for the Quaker Oats Company in about 1896, and consisted of cylinders distributed by this breakfast food company. To start, an announcer would say, "Good day madam. Mr. Albert Campbell will now entertain you with a song." After Campbell balladized a tune, the announcer signed off with, "Madam, remember—Quaker Oats are good for the children." Here are Burr and Campbell in one of their numerous duet recordings.

**American Quartet.** (Called the Premier quartet on Edison cylinders) This was probably the most illustrious of the studio quartets. In 1909, two of the members from the Haydn Quartet, bass William Hooley and tenor John Bieling, teamed up with baritone Steve Porter of the Peerless and a fantastic 31 year old lead singer named Billy Murray (perhaps the first super-quartet). The Haydn Quartet had sung mostly sentimental ballads, old standards, and gospel songs, but the new American Quartet was to make flash and pizzazz a trademark, specializing in ragtime, comedy, and (believe it or not) special effects. Many of the quartet's numbers, like the one you just heard, featured lead singer Billy Murray. He was one of Victor's most popular artists. Early in his career he learned to nasalize certain vowels and articulate consonants with great energy, making his voice ideal for recording by the day's technology. Like Henry Burr, he did many solos. Collectors of early recordings have voted him the best of the early pop singers. His energy, diction, and personality sold millions of records. He was a commanding lead, setting tempo, dynamics, and mood.

**Greatest Basso.** Much of our information about the early quartets comes from Jim Walsh's articles in Hobbies Magazine. Walsh was a collector and authority on early recording artists. One of his articles is called "The Greatest Quartet Basso," from November, 1967, in which he poses the question of who was the greatest of the early quartet basses. In those days, as today, basses commanded much respect. Among the top contenders, in Walsh's opinion, is the bass of a quartet we haven't

discussed, the Shannon Quartet, named Wilfred Glenn. In 1912 Glenn made a famous recording of "Asleep in the Deep".

***The early studio singers.*** The fledgling recording business attracted much of the top vocal talent. The early recording artists like Burr and Murray were skillful, versatile, and durable. They often woodshedded their arrangements, revealing excellent musical ears. Their versatility was proven as they would sing various parts, frequently filling in for one another at various studios around town, free-lancing, as do today's studio singers. These intrepid pioneer artists would sometimes record 30 or more songs per day, singing by rounds. A round consisted of six songs, or "takes". Sung into horns, each take would cut a master from which 60 to 80 records could be made. In the early days the record companies usually paid a dollar per round per man, but the top quartet men got a dollar per song. Music writing and publishing was now becoming big business, along with the recording industry, and the professional quartets wanted in on some of the action. The American Quartet paid young Walter Von Brunt five dollars per session to show up and fill in just in case lead Billy Murray, an inveterate baseball fan, didn't show up for the session or concert. Once the Premier Quartet even used a woman, Inez Barbour, to help them in an emergency in a recording of "Carry Me Back To Old Virginny". These quartet men were fine vocalists. They often sang solos, duets, trios, and did choral back-up work too. Some experienced collectors and listeners are able to determine who was singing in the quartet in certain sessions, because recording companies did not always accurately list the personnel and participants.

Quartets also knew that part of the action was in musical advertising. Billy Murray, the great lead singer of the American Quartet, recorded a tribute to Henry Ford's "tin Lizzy" called "The Little Ford Rambled Right Along". Henry Burr of the Peerless Quartet gave us in 1918 "A Soothing Serenade", a song which mentions the brand name Victrola: "Now my Victrola plays all day that melody through and through." Of course it was on the Victor label. A spoof came out in 1921, sung by Billy Murray, called "My Old New Jersey Home". The song is devoted to the beauty of outdoor advertising. A song called "Under The Anheuser Bush", obviously commissioned, was written by the famous songwriters Andrew Sterling and Harry Von Tilzer, the same team that penned "Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie".

***First song referring to "barbershop".*** This came in the song "Play That Barber Shop Chord", words by Wm. Tracey, music by Lewis F. Muir, which appeared in 1910. (Wm. Tracey would later pen the lyrics to "Mammy o' Mine" (1919) and "Them There Eyes" (1930).) The implied harmony of song features the bVI<sup>7</sup> chord. It was recorded by the American quartet and was the nation's number one hit in for two weeks in 1910. This recording contains a monologue that identifies, the seventh (II<sup>7</sup>) on "Lord" as the "barbershop" chord. Some other aspects of this recording seem significant. First of all, the interpolation from "You're The Flower Of My Heart, Sweet Adeline" indicates that the latter song was definitely associated with barbershop harmony at this time. Secondly, the speaking is done in black dialect.

***On the use of the term "barbershop".*** We have discussed some of the historical references to tonsorial parlor singing in Elizabethan England, and the fact that barbers were often fine singers and skilled lutists, and encouraged their customers to pass the time of day in musical activity. We also said that this tradition was eventually transplanted to the New World. The association of barbers with guitar music was evidently still common at the turn of the century, for in 1908 the impresario Oscar Hammerstein cancelled a Spanish Opera whose score called for a large number of guitar players, saying "I should have been obliged to engage all the barbers of New York". As impromptu quartets sprouted around the turn of the century, the town barbershop became the male gathering spot. It was natural, therefore, that as this "lamp post" or "curb stone" harmony spread it gradually became known as barbershop harmony. And it is a fact that this harmony was sung by the barber himself. The late Dr. Matt Warpick shared with the author vivid memories of a New York City barber of 1904 slapping his razor on the strap in tempo as he and the other barbers harmonized "Heart of My Heart." Dr. Warpick affirmed that there were indeed many street-corner quartets, and that as early as he could recall they were called "barbershop" quartets.

***Tin Pan Alley.*** Tin Pan Alley is the nickname of the song publishing industry. At this time the song publishing business was centered in New York City, and the publishing district had gravitated to West 28th Street, between Fifth and Broadway. In 1909 a journalist and named Monroe Rosenfeld wrote a series of articles on the fledgling industry entitled "Tin Pan Alley." The name arose because, as he walked through the district, the sounds floating out of open windows of pianists banging out tunes reminded him of the clatter of pots and pans. The name stuck and became synonymous with New York's song publishing industry. In the early 1900's, Tin Pan Alley cranked out songs by the thousands, and people bought them by the millions. Irving Berlin, Gus Edwards, Ernest Ball ("Mother Machree" (1910), "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" (1912), George M. Cohan, the Von Tilzer's—Harry and Albert—were producing songs in prolific quantity. Harry Von Tilzer wrote almost eight-thousand songs during his career, including "Wait 'Till The Sun Shines, Nellie" (1905), "I Want A Girl Just Like The Girl That Married Dear Old Dad" (1911), and "Last Night Was The End Of The World" (1912). They knew how to aim for the heart with their simple, straightforward lyrics.

***Influence of Ragtime.*** While Tin Pan Alley was grinding out popular music that incorporated new harmonies and lyrics for respectable society, another indigenous art form was taking shape in the hinterland of the United States. It too employed the full range of classical harmonies, plus a few of its own, but its main trademark was its rhythms. It was the largely music of America's black musicians, centered in New Orleans, and just as the singing of the slaves had come floating in the window 80 years before, the sound of this jubilant music inevitably came floating up the river. This new music was at first considered crude and even vulgar, and was called "rag time" — two words then (like "barber shop") — because of its disgusting off beat syncopations. In 1901, at the annual meeting of the American Federation of Musicians (the musicians' union) a resolution was unanimously passed forbidding its members from playing it. Ministers used their pulpits to denounce rag time as the music of the devil, corrupting the young people of this country. All public figures were asked by reporters to take a stand on this controversial music. But the people loved the sound of it, and they loved to dance to it. Eventually ragtime became the rage. There were even ragtime contests, and in 1910 a young man named Eubie Blake won such a contest, playing his own composition, "Charleston Rag". The invasion of ragtime into popular music began as innocent lyrical references, like ". . . hello my rag time gal.", (from "Hello My Baby", 1899). But more and more songwriters were tempted to borrow from its happy rhythms. Then in 1911 a song swept the country that would legitimize and popularize this most wonderful music. That song was "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

***Irving Berlin.*** In 1893 a Jewish family from Russia named Baline arrived, amongst the hordes of immigrants, to New York City. Their village had been ransacked by Cossacks. Young Israel Baline, five years old at the time, had a talent for music, and found that he could make money as a singing waiter. To his mother's chagrin, he quit school and ran away from home to pursue his musical interests. He eventually became a song pusher, employed by publishing houses to stand up in the theater and echo the refrain of the song that had just been performed, as if the outbreak were spontaneous. This was Tin Pan Alley's way of advertising their latest songs. Competition was fierce. Soon Baline began composing, and in about 1906 his first published song appeared — "Marie From Sunny Italy," for which he wrote only the lyrics. He took the name Irving Berlin as a pseudonym.

Irving Berlin was the first to really capitalize on the public's growing acceptance of ragtime music. He wrote "Alexander's Ragtime Band," which isn't really ragtime; it sings more like a march. But it made the word respectable and popular, and from then on he very skillfully integrated its elements into his songs, which had tremendous appeal. He was prolific! He wrote over 900 songs in his career, half of which were considered hits by the publisher. And he gave us barbershoppers some of our most interesting and challenging material, like "When I Lost You" (1912), "When The Midnight Choo-Choo Leaves For Alabam" (1912), "When It's Night Time In Dixie Land" (1914), "Mandy" (1919), "All Alone" (1924), "Always" (1925), "Easter Parade" (1933), and "God Bless America" (1939). Many of his great songs of the twenties and after are more sophisticated: "What'll I Do" (1924), "Blue Skies" (1927), and "Puttin' On The Ritz" (1928) He had a huge hit in the 1940's with "White Christmas" (1942). Irving Berlin died in 1989 at the age of 101. Berlin was not schooled in music and could not really play piano. He learned to play on the black keys, in the key of F-sharp, and had a piano constructed with a shifting stringboard so that he could play in any key by playing in F-sharp.

The 1990 biography *As Thousands Cheer*, by Laurence Bergreen, gives fascinating insights into Irving Berlin's world.

***Ring Lardner's short story.*** As we have said, all kinds of organizations had official and unofficial quartets, including baseball teams. Ring Lardner (1885-1933) was a well-known sports writer and short story writer of the early 1900's. In 1915, McClures Magazine published a story by Lardner called "Harmony". The story, told by Lardner from the perspective of a sports writer covering a major league baseball team, focuses on four of the team's members who have a quartet. Much to the chagrin of veteran outfielder and baritone, Art Graham, the quartet's tenor, an aging pitcher, is sent back to the minors. Graham goes on a scouting assignment and recruits a young outfielder whose baseball talent turns out to be phenomenal. But the writer learns that Graham is not noted for his abilities as a scout. Moreover, in the game where he allegedly saw the kid play he only batted once — and then he popped out! It turns out Graham wasn't in the ball park at the time. He had recruited the kid because he learned that the kid was a great tenor. An interesting term is used: When the quartet hit a good barbershop chord, they called it a "wallop".

***African American quartets.*** We have already pointed out that some of the first male quartets consisted of black men. Their contribution to the quartet singing tradition continued into the 20th century, although recorded evidence, unfortunately, is rare because of their low status in society. They sang on street corners, as shoe shine boys, and as singing waiters; like most other quartets of the day, they probably woodshedded their arrangements..

James Weldon Johnson, the black musician/author/historian, in an article entitled "The Origin Of The Barber Chord" in 1925 wrote:

"Pick up four colored boys or young men anywhere and the 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. . . In the days when such a thing as a white barber was unknown in the South, every barbershop had its quartet, and the men spent their leisure time playing on the guitar. . . and harmonizing."

An interesting recording from 1921 is of the Columbia Colored Quartet singing a song called "I'm Just Wild About Moonshine", part of which resembles "Bill Grogan's Goat". The lead "leads out" and the others echo, a practice established by the Gregorians in the chants we heard in the last lesson. "Sweet Adeline" follows this form. Also there is a lively rhythmic chant resembling a rap.

***Louis Armstrong's quartet activity.*** Laurence Bergreen, in his book *Louis Armstrong, An Extravagant Life*, recounts that at age eleven Armstrong dropped out of school and "joined a quartet of Uptown boys...The others were 'Little Mack,' the lead singer; 'Big Nose' Sidney; and 'Redhead Happy' Bolton. The preadolescent Louis sang in a sweet tenor. They practiced in an abandoned lot on Feret Street, and when they felt ready they went out on the streets to perform and pass the hat...They staked out a spot on Poydras Street...hoping to catch the attention of the swells with their repertoire of 'Swanee River' and 'Mr. Moon, Won't You Please Shine on Me?' Once a crowd gathered, the group performed a ridiculous skit in which Louis knelt in front of Redhead happy and sang of his undying love for 'her' as he rolled his eyes and drew laughter, applause and coins from the audience."

The book *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans*, by Thomas Brothers, also notes Armstrong's vocal quartet, stating that this was "the most important of Armstrong's childhood hustles", adding that "it was not unusual for men sitting in barrooms to sing extemporaneously in quartet style". Armstrong is quoted as saying that he heard "some of the finest singing in the world, listening to guys who hung around the saloons, with a cold can of beer in their hand, singing as they drank". Such harmonizing was called "cracking up a chord".

It is interesting that Armstrong refers to the parts "tenor, lead, baritone, and bass", years before Sigmund Spaeth would formalize this nomenclature for the (largely white) readers of his 1925 book, *Barber Shop Ballads*.

***Gospel quartets.*** One favorite type of song for both the white and black quartets was the religious song, be it hymn, gospel, or spiritual. As religious songs continued to be among the more popular songs being written (e.g. "The Old Rugged Cross" (1913)), many of the songs sung by quartets were of this type. One such song that has become a standard today is "Shine On Me," which appeared in many hymn books. In addition there developed many quartets developed solely as gospel quartets, and they sang religious songs in style very close to the barbershop style. When these male quartets sang hymns, the lead sang the soprano in the male range (an octave low) and the tenor sang the alto part. Many of the hymnals were printed in shaped notes, a system in which each note of the scale is printed as a distinctive shape, rather than a round note.

***The Avon Comedy Four.*** The Haydn, Peerless, and American Quartets were primarily recording groups, so they probably had no visual routines. When they appeared live, their performance was concert style, and their dress was formal, setting a real historical precedent for the modern quartet's use of formal attire. By contrast, the great vaudeville quartets depended heavily on the visual for the entertainment value of their act. Their costumes and songs were geared toward novelty and comedy, and they enhanced their performance with moves, setting an alternate precedent also followed by modern quartets. The Avon Comedy Four (1914 -1924) was perhaps the greatest of these quartets. In 1914, *Billboard Magazine* gave them this review:

"The Avon Comedy Four, in their singing farce, which has provoked more laughter in the theatre than in any time since its erection, cleaned up again today. . . Whenever they appeared they rolled 'em in the aisles. They were past masters of many dialects, and close harmony was their middle name."

***Circuit Chautauquas.*** In addition to vaudeville, the minstrel show, and the recording studio, there was another American institution that often highlighted quartet singing. This was the Chautauqua — a weeklong tent show that featured lecturers, humorists, magicians, and musical entertainers. Edgar Bergan (of Charlie McCarthy fame) performed on the circuit chautauqua, and William Jennings Bryan gave lectures. The first one was in Marshalltown, Iowa in 1904, and its schedule included a quartet called the Temple Quartet. Another quartet that sang the circuit was the Whitney Brothers.

A major contribution of the Chautauqua was the forerunner of the modern day MC. Each town had a "platform manager" whose responsibility it was to provide continuity between acts, give information about the upcoming speaker or entertainer, and finally say, "Now it is my pleasure to introduce..." By contrast, vaudeville used audience cue cards to introduce the next act.

***Concluding remarks.*** The era of 1890-1920 was indeed the golden age of the barbershop quartet, as quartets were among the top entertainers in vaudeville and in the exploding recording industry, while amateur quartetting was at its peak. In the next lesson we will see how changes in society and in entertainment led to the decline and near extinction of the barbershop quartet.