

“Come On Along”

When your quartet intones “Bandolero” at the SDQ Competition during the 110th Reunion Renewal, you’ll be revisiting a 150+ year-old musical tradition, with roots in America’s Civil War era and nourished by the lively minstrel and vaudeville theatrical experiences that carried well into the 20th century. It’s the same tradition that gave rise to collegiate glee clubs and a cappella groups.

A musical note first: quartet singing’s skeleton is chordal, not melodic or textual. That is, it is built from the three notes of the major (or minor) triad plus a fourth note necessary to move harmonically from chord to chord (the original Whiffs were a quintet, not an uncommon size). The melody was often carried by the second lowest voice, the chords’ root notes by the lowest. Arrangements were unwritten, created (and remembered!) by the singers as they sang.

“The ‘barbershop’ style of music,” according to the A Cappella Foundation, “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 writes, ‘every barbershop seemed to have its own quartet.’”

In their seminal historical accompaniment to Dog Gould’s *The Twentieth Century Project*, Charles Buck ’69 and Robert Birge ’68 note that “even before the first Yale Glee Club was formed [in 1861], close harmony had made its appearance on the Yale campus,” and they quote from Marshall Bartholomew’s unpublished *History of Music at Yale*:

“In 1856 . . . there were informal singing groups which took fanciful titles unto themselves, as similar groups do at present [the 1950s]. We find the Beethoven Bummers—evidently poking fun at the more serious Beethoven Society; also there were the Owls and the Four Sharps. . . . This tradition continued into the 1880s with other groups including the Midnight Caterwaulers of 1870 (a quintet), the Singing Club of 1872 (a quartet), the Crows of 1872 (an octet), and the Offenbachanalians of 1874 (a quartet). The Beethoven Bummers lasted into the 1870s with as many as fifteen singers.”

For college students, the years between the Civil War and World War I were marked recreationally by song, beverage, and more song. On the Yale campus and elsewhere quartet contests emerged, class quartets, augmented quartets—a five-voice aggregation with its own “fanciful name,” the Whiffenpoofs, appeared in 1909—leading to including a “varsity” quartet to sing with the Glee Club, along with a banjo or mandolin band. Later editions of the Whiffs contained a performing quartet as well. Yale’s Spizzwinks emerged in 1914—as a quartet.

In 1922, Prescott Bush ’17 convinced Charles S. “Chuck” Spofford ’24, Richard A. “Dick” Kimball ’22, and C. Minot “Minnie” Dole ’23 to join him in founding the Silver Dollar Quartet as a means of continuing an active singing life beyond New Haven. All four were recent Yale Glee Club presidents and Whiff “Managers,” as the Popo was called in the very early years. These men would lead prolific, storied careers in government and public service, and the SDQ would continue to harmonize and entertain all who would listen—at Glee Club, Whiffenpoof, and other Yale reunions, as well as at scores of parties and gatherings from Florida to Maine for more than forty years.

Conversations in July, 2014, with sons of three of the original SDQ singers elicited similar and still powerful memories of their fathers' singing. Jonathan Bush '53 recalls sitting with his siblings at the top of the stairs in Greenwich listening to the Quartet entertain the "grownups" with their singing. Dick Kimball '52 recollected the power (and volume!) of Bush's commanding bass voice. Nick Spofford '56 echoed the others in reaffirming the pure joy the four seemed to have singing together.

Indeed, it seems to have been that perfect communication—"intimacy," Spofford called it—that continued to draw these four men together, whose complex lives militated against their spending much time with each other. One compelling site was the Saybrook College home of Alison and Basil "Duke" Henning '37, both devoted singers and raconteurs, where quartet singing, patter songs, practical jokes, and other behaviors worthy of such highly energetic and talented iconoclasts became the norm.

Stowe Phelps '39 fell under their spell as well. Recounting in his autobiography *Many Very Good Years* the Whiffs' 30th anniversary reunion "attended by about 115 Whiffs dating back to a few of the founding members," Phelps wrote that "One of the most impressive performances . . . was by Pres Bush's famed Silver Dollar Quartet, [who] sang 'April Showers' and 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' and brought down the house. Both were arranged by Charles Spofford, a truly talented musician"

"I was so fired up by the Silver Dollar Quartet," Phelps continued, "I went back to my room and wrote down what I could remember of 'April Showers' and 'Alexander's Ragtime Band,' and the next day polished it off. I straight away called in our top tenor Doug McKellar and Dave Knapp and Jerry Blanchard and taught it to them. It became the hit of the spring season. Wherever the Whiffs appeared, the Whiff Quartet had to sing 'Alexander's.' "

On October 12, 2019, the Silver Dollar Quartet will be honored at the 110th Reunion Banquet with brief recollections of their era and their mark on the Whiffenpoofs by both Whiff historians and friends who knew them. More importantly, the Silver Dollar Quartet will be honored by plenty of quartet singing in a structured competition in which all interested Whiff alumni are heartily invited participate. Will quartet singing become a regular feature of future alumni reunions? "Come on along"