

King of Hearts – Harpenden:

Chuck Odom (2006) mentions the earliest reference to Barbershop origins. He reports a study of SPEBSQSA archive material showing that in Elizabethan England common folk were schooled in 4-part vocal harmony for singing in Church. Commoners met at the barbershop before Church, and the techniques of 4-part harmony were applied to popular song. This habit was taken to the USA by early immigrants.

Jim Henry (2001) vividly demonstrates the African-American refinement into what we now call Barbershop. Again, people schooled in 4-part harmony in Church also adopted the practice of singing both secular songs and spirituals in the same way. These singers, it is argued, added features that are peculiar to African spiritual music: 'call and response' (also used in sea shanties); the use of improvisation around a core theme; the use of the "barbershop seventh" chord (major-minor seventh). These features cause 'barbershop' 4-part close-harmony to differ from Church music in ways similar to African-American influences on Ragtime and Blues music.

The Barbershop Harmony Society was founded by O. C. Cash in 1938, and was the first of several organizations to promote and preserve barbershop music as an art form.

The [British Association of Barbershop Singers](#) (BABS) promotes Barbershop singing here in the UK.

Wikipedia:

A short history lesson

Barbershop music, with its close, unaccompanied, four part harmonies, is a unique American folk art. It was taking form between 1860 and 1920. In the early years, singers would improvise the harmonies but when the printing press was adapted to produce musical notation, there was further advancement of the barbershop idiom. At the turn of the century, amateur singers, mainly men, were often heard singing improvised barbershop harmonies at parties and picnics. Minstrel shows often featured barbershop quartets. The influence of barbershop music on other popular forms of singing is profound. "Old Blue Eyes" himself, the great Frank Sinatra, sang in a barbershop quartet before he became famous as a singer with the Tommy Dorsey band. The vocal quartets of bands such as Dorsey's and Glenn Miller's were also greatly influenced by the barbershop style. In the latter half of the 20th century, the close harmony style has been the hallmark of "pop" and jazz groups such as the Beach Boys, The Four Seasons and the Four Freshmen. True barbershop lives on however, kept alive by dedicated barbershop choruses, groups and organisations that include Sweet Adelines International and its individual members.

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Barbershop Harmony Society of America

The Origins of Barbershop Harmony

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 immigrants

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-lowest 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 writes, "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 Today, we are accustomed to receiving all forms of music in every home by way of CD, cassette, radio and video. In the early 1900s, though, pop music success depended on sales of sheet music to the general public. The song writers of Tin Pan Alley made their living by appealing to the needs and tastes of the recreational musician. To become a sheet-music hit, songs had to be easily singable by average singers, with average vocal ranges and average control. This called for songs with simple, straightforward melodies, and heartfelt, commonplace themes and images. Music published in that era often included an instrumental arrangement for piano or ukelele, and also 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:

The coming of radio prompted a shift in American popular music. Song writers 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 travelling 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 fell to talking and 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", 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 was born.