

Barbershopping: a
history and analysis
of past and present
barbershop singing in
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Barbershop defined

We must have a clear definition of what barbershop singing is at its core. Merriam-Webster defines barbershop as “ adjective: of a style of unaccompanied group singing of popular songs usually marked by highly conventionalized close harmony.”[1]Where this definition is often true, there have been some instances where a barbershop quartet has been accompanied by a chordal instrument or even a full band. The barbershop “ style” has its own definition across three categories: music, performance, and singing, which we will look at in depth later. Now that the definition of barbershopping is clear, the history of barbershopping can be approached.

The history of barbershop

The documented history of barbershopping is quite disputed in the world of Academia. Sigmund Spaeth states that it goes as far back as 17th century Elizabethan England, where lutes and citterns (both are chordal instruments) were available to be played by patrons of a barber’s shop while they waited to get the “ boyish bob” of the day.[2]Other scholars, however, point to the mid-to-late 19th century as the emersion of the barbershop harmony style. Putting aside the fact that historians do not have an exact start date for barbershopping, the theoretical roots go deep; as far back the Greek philosopher Pythagoras in 570-495 B. C.

With a monochord instrument of his own design, he found that certain mathematical intervals were pleasing, or consonant, to the human ear. These intervals, known as “ Pythagorean intervals”, have a very specific ratio on the monochord. He found that the octave (2: 1), Perfect fifth (3: 2),
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Perfect Fourth (5: 4), are all very consonant harmonic tones, which becomes the basis for Gregorian chants of the 9th and 10th centuries.

Gregorian chants, which were acapella chants sung by monks in very large, stone Abbeys, had a very particular sound. These chants, with their relatively fixed key, had harmonies and modes that would resolve in a specific way of moving around the tonic key. Though not as closely harmonized as modern barbershop, the sound produced by these chords, the “ring” and reverb time of a well-tuned chord, would become the highest goal of barbershoppers.

Lynn Abbott, a researcher-writer-historian, states in her article to American Music that what we today as barbershop harmony has its truest roots set in the African American culture of the late 19th century.[3] Spaeth, made slight nods to his fact, but would go on to later retract their admissions of this fact. A few barbershop scholars make a connection to an African American Quartet out of Jacksonville, FL, around 1888. These scholars would mention it in one article, then in their next article elude to the Elizabethan era “Barber’s shop music”, so as to remove any credit to the African American people. Further disassociation from them was prevalent throughout the mid-20th century, as shown that in 1941, a “colored” quartet won a city championship in New York, but was neither invited nor allowed to compete in the National quartet competition of the SPEBSQSA held in St. Louis, MO, of the same year. The influence of jazz and ragtime on barbershop, which are also African American staples in American music history, cannot be overstated. In the late 19th century, when vocal barbershop was becoming more prevalent, the only real “style” that would be sung would be ballads.

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This was because ballads were typically slower, and it was easier get the chords to “ ring”. It was not until the early 20th century, when ragtime became popular, that the rhythmic intricacies became more prevalent. In her article, Abbott also cited C. T. “ Deac” Martin as having said the following:

“ America’s musical debt to our colored people is beyond calculation, since negro influence has been felt almost from the inception of native American music. And as to close harmony, a rich sheen in the blending of untrained negro voices makes trained whit harmony hard, brittle, artificial by comparison.”

Along the lines of the forgotten and retracted influence of the African American society, women have also had a large role in barbershopping in the past and present.

The first documented Anglo American “ barber shop singers” were families, especially one family group known as The Hutchinson Family Singers. This family group was comprised of Abby and Rhoda Hutchinson, and their three brothers (their names were not mentioned).[4]The sisters or women in the group would often take on the high harmony and melody lines, since these tones fell naturally into their vocal range. Eventually, more and more women found themselves singing in the barbershop style and, around the World War II era, wanted to form their own groups, and thus the Sweet Adelines were founded in 1945.

“ Modern” barbershopping

The Sweet Adelines were not the first society of barbershoppers to be established. That honor goes to Owen C. Cash and Rupert Hall in 1938. By 1938, the term “barber shop chords” had gotten such mixed press, that the artform nearly died out. Gone were the of parlor singing and spontaneous singing, since the automobile could get people from place to place over further distances. One evening, two Tulsa men met by chance in a Kansas City airport, as their flights were grounded overnight due to inclement weather. Rupert Hall, an investment broker, and Owen Cash, an attorney, struck up a conversation that night and found that they both enjoyed singing in the barbershop style. Rumor has it that Cash tipped a bellboy a quarter to find two other singers in the hotel lobby. Thus, the Society for the Preservation for Propagation (later renamed Encouragement) of Barbershop Quartet Singing in America was created. The acronym SP(P/E)BSQSA was created as a bit of a jab to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s new government agencies of various three-letter fame. In time, the society became colloquially known as the Barbershop Harmony Society (BHS), which is how is it commonly referred to today.

In 1939, the first annual quartet competition was held by the society in Tulsa, OK, and the competition tradition was born. In 1941, Joseph E. Stern set 11 rules for the quartet competition. These rules were established so that there would be a clear definition of barbershop harmony. These 11 rules are paraphrased as the following:

1. Real barbershop harmony contemplates four-part harmony
2. There should be a minimum of doubled voices
3. High bass is preferred as low bass is not conducive to close harmony

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4. Lead, tenor, and baritone never double each other at any time
5. The bass can double one of these three parts, as long as it is doubled an octave below
6. Cloe harmony chords are best
7. The part singing the melody may change if it improves the overall harmony
8. If a song's tonic is too low, the harmony will sound "muddy"; if it is pitched too high, the singers may show signs of strain; therefore, a medium-high pitch will allow best ringing of chords
9. No accompaniment is permissible for two reasons: a) The quartet must smooth out the rough spots themselves b) An accompaniment detracts from the ability of the quartet
10. In judging a contest, showmanship is less important than good old-fashioned barbershop harmony
11. If you can distinguish individual parts at a distance of 50 feet, then the quartet is not good. It should be very close to impossible to pick out who is singing which part.[5]

These rules have been altered slightly in the past 80 years, but overall, the spirit of the competition is the same. The *Contest and Judges Handbook* lays out 14 pages worth of exact specifications and expectations of a barbershop arrangement, but the main concept harkens back to these 11 rules. Over the years of barbershop singing there has been an expansion from solely quartet singing and competitions to chorus, senior quartets (55+), and Collegiate quartet competitions. These have all been hosted by the Society, with the competitions starting in 1953, 1986, and 1992 respectively. In most recent

history, as recent as June 19, 2018, the biggest change to the BHS was that women were finally allowed admittance into the BHS.

Barbershop singing has not only grown within the society but has made moves into mainstream American entertainment. From film to the stage, the barbershop harmony style, and even specific quartets, has had an influence on American media. In Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, the 1950 champion quartet, The Buffalo Bills, were featured on both the 1957 Broadway production and the 1962 film versions of the show. The list of celebrities who have been affiliated with the BHS is quite long, including, but not limited to: Harry S. Truman, Bing Crosby, Dick Van Dyke, Mike Rowe, and Jimmy Fallon. Even *The Simpsons* have an entire episode to Homer and his barbershop quartet, The Be Sharps. Several other movies and television shows have made reference to barbershop harmony and quartets.

Further expansion from American media comes the International break-offs and their respective harmony societies. Three notable international societies are:

1. The British Association of Barbershop, also known as BABS, formed in 1974
2. The Barbershop in Germany association, also known as BinG!, formed in 1991
3. The Society of Nordic Barbershop Singers, also known as SNOBS, formed in 1980

In 2012, The Ringmasters, a Swedish quartet, was the first quartet that was comprised of members of the same nationality outside of the United States

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to win the BHS quartet competition. In 2005, Realtime was the first international quartet to win the competition, and this group had members from three different nations.

Conclusion

Though the early 20th century almost saw the dissolution of barbershop quartets and harmony, and emphatic duo of businessmen from Tulsa, OK., ultimately saved this truly American genre through their desire of preservation of their beloved artform. From the early African American roots, to the growth of the Barbershop Harmony society, the outlook of this genre of music is very bright. Barbershop performing ensembles continue to push the limits in regards to their barbershop arrangements, showmanship, and style. As this artform continues to grow, it has been willing to incorporate more and more talent, and has been open to incorporating all people, regardless of race and gender. The Barbershop Harmony Society has truly paved the way to have “ Everyone in Harmony”. I am looking forward to seeing where the future takes this wonderful genre, and the entertainment value that will come with that growth.

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[1]"Barbershop." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed November 23, 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/barbershop>.

[2]Sigmund Spaeth, Ellison Hoover, and Ring Lardner, *Barber Shop Ballads: a Book of Close Harmony* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1925)

[3]Lynn Abbott, "'Play That Barber Shop Chord': A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony," *American Music* 10, no. 3 (1992): p. 289, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3051597>)

[4]Robert M. Campbell and Val Hicks, "Heritage of Harmony," *American Music* 7, no. 3 (1989): p. 340, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3052084>)

[5]Frederic Döhl, "From Harmonic Style to Genre: The Early History (1890s-1940s) of the Uniquely American Musical Term *Barbershop*," *American*

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