

Rob Interviewing Hank on Barber Shop Singing

Hank: Barber shop singing is a method of bringing 4 voices together in close harmony. You have a bass, a baritone, the tenor one is called lead, and then tenor 2. So 4 voices singing in harmony, with fairly short upbeat songs, mostly. It originated, for what I understand, back in the days when before TV, before cell phones, and iPads and things like that, when people basically created their own entertainment, a lot of people sang. Then when they were waiting to get shaved at the barber shop they would entertain themselves by singing and somebody would take the melody or lead and other guys would erm...harmonise with him. So supposedly that was the start and then as other forms of entertainment got more popular it started dying out, until somebody said we've got to preserve this and he organised a group. Now in the United States the Barber Shop Harmony Society has about 25,000 members. They hold competitions all over the United States and then once a year they have an International competition and it truly is international, because there are groups that come in from Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, UK, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany. I think even now Italy has a barber shop.

Rob: These presumably are expatriate Americans that have set this up?

Hank: yes yea, yea, but infact, there was a group out in New Zealand, made up of Maoris who won the quartet competition about 10 years ago and there is some quartets out of Sweden who have also won the International competition.

Rob: What kind of songs are normally sung by barber shop groups?

Hank: The songs range from songs originating in the 1920s and 30s, all the way up through Broadway songs, gospel. It's a wide variety. A lot of the songs have their roots in Jazz and so if you are familiar with the standard jazz songs you'll recognise quite a few of those barber shop songs.

Rob: The important thing is there is no accompaniment, is there.



Hank: Absolutely none.

Rob: It's acappela.

Hank: It's strictly acapella.

Rob: And you've been singing for some time in this style. What, what's been the appeal for you?

Hank: I really enjoy the harmony, it just, it rings in my head and the camaraderie of course. Working with 4 people, it takes a lot of work to be able to get your voices to match. One of the keys to singing barber shop really well is if you can all pronounce the vowels in the same manner, then the over tones will reinforce themselves and the chord rings and it can really send shivers up and down your spine if you do it right.

Rob: So you've brought this way of singing over to Brittany some time ago. Have you found local people to join you in groups?

Hank: Well when I first got over here I put an ad in the Anglo-info and was able to contact 2 people. A man who had taught music in an English school in Belgium and a woman who was a language teacher, who teaches French, English and Breton. We couldn't find a third, so Tim created background music to play the bass. So we were together for about four and a half years and had a few concerts here and there, mostly in chapels which is great, and then Tim moved and I scratched around and came up with another woman and a guy, we were able to put together a full four part acappela quartet and we did quite a few concerts over the years. Fete de la Musique and a lot of concerts in chapels. And singing acappela in a chapel is about the best location because of the acoustics.

Rob: but not in a barbershop, not actually in a coiffeur.

Hank: We did once, but it was not greatly successful, the acoustics weren't great and so we haven't tried to do that again.

Rob: and do you have a group at the moment?



Hank: My present group consists of one woman and 3 guys, including myself and we are teaching our new bass, who is French, how to sing acapella in a barber shop and also how to pronounce the English words in English rather than in French. He's struggling with that a little bit, but he's made a lot of progress and he's learning all of the songs. I am now relearning the songs in baritone as I had been singing bass but my voice is not really low enough to sing bass so I'm more in my present range. We will continue rehearsing over the summer and hope to be able to perform some time in the fall.

Rob: Well, I'm sending you an invitation right now, to come and sing to us in Central Brittany.

Hank: I accept:

Rob: haha. You accept, that's great...we'll keep in touch I think on that Hank.

Hank: Great, Can you find us a chapel up there to sing in.

Rob: No problem, there are plenty of chapels up here.

Hank: Ok!

Rob: Thanks ever so much for explaining barber shop singing to us Hank and we hope to see you and hear you soon.

Hank: Ok, well thank you very much Robert and I look forward to singing for you and your wide audience.