

THE HARMONIER

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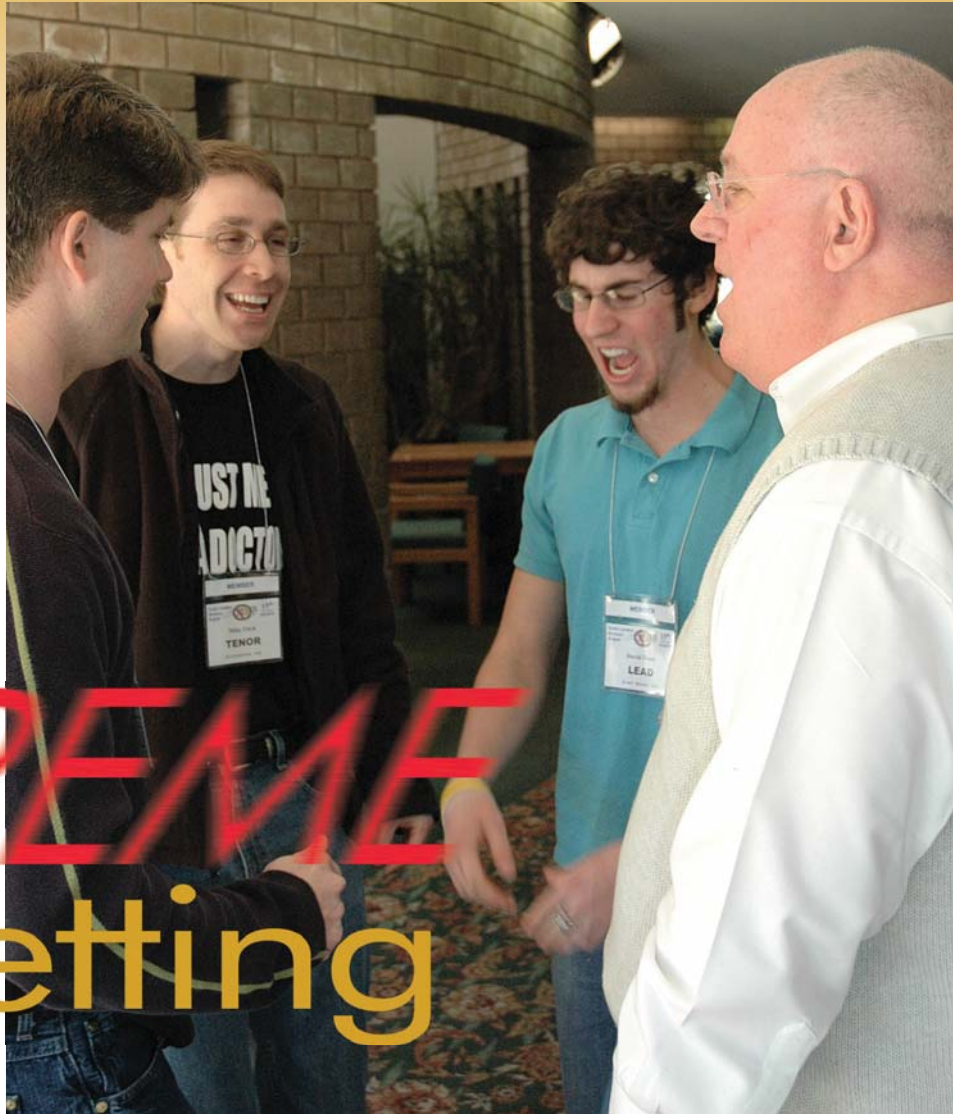


EXTREME quartetting

The Harmony Brigade experience



EXTREME quartetting



While it may look familiar, Harmony Brigade quartetting sounds and feels unlike any other quartet experience

Ever had that dream where you show up for class and realize it's the final exam, and you freak out because you missed the entire course? (In some dreams, this is also the moment you realize you're naked.) For a few minutes at January's North Carolina Harmony Brigade, I felt like that dream multiplied by 10.

I was staring at a sheet of paper with the names of my assigned quartet members and the song we had one hour to prepare before performing in front of all 160 Brigade singers and judges. It was "This Little



Light Of Mine," track 12 out of 12 on my iTunes playlist, one of the songs I rarely reached before shutting down. Not the toughest song of the bunch, but the **Northern Lights** version with all the ... um ...

"[The Brigades] have really helped my personal musical growth," says Mark Ream of Rocky Mount, N.C., one of the die-hards who attends all three affiliated Harmony Brigades. He's learned nearly 20 new songs each year. "I feel like every time I come to a Brigade, I get better as a result."

naked lead entrances, and so many variations of the repeat that I couldn't learn them in an hour to save my life. To make matters worse, minutes earlier I'd been announced as editor of *The Harmonizer*, here to write a story about the Bri-

gades. "And he's going to be up here singing just like the rest of us!" Just in case you didn't catch the name of this loser who is about to self-immolate in front of y'all.

Everyone told me to expect "the best two days in barbershop" at the Brigade. After a couple of hours of casual quartetting, I'd already learned they weren't blowing smoke. But now everyone but me was so revved up that any one of them could have started dead car batteries with their bare hands. At this moment of truth, the rest of the guys were ready. They'd listened to their learning tracks almost every day for four months. They'd plunked out tough passages on the keyboard until they had them down cold. Many of them had gotten together with other Brigaders several times to practice for these two days.

Me? I'd played the learning tracks on and off for

It gets tough to find any hallway, storage area or doorway of the hotel that hasn't been claimed by a quartet. One of the reasons the Brigade keeps coming back to this particular Day's Inn is possibly the unusually high number of corners, nooks and crannies available for up to 40 quartets singing at any given moment.

A very large chunk of the weekend is unscheduled time, during which you usually can't walk more than 10 feet without someone grabbing your arm and saying, "Here's a lead, let's sing one more ..." With 40 men on each part, there are tens of thousands of possible quartet combinations, multiplied by 12 songs.



Got what it takes?

Below what everyone learned note-perfect before the 2007 North Carolina Harmony Brigade; the songs are followed by groups who helped make the particular arrangements famous. Each of the Brigades during the year agrees on eight common songs then adds four of their own to the mix. Most men got their sheet music and learning CDs late in the summer for the January event.

"Blue Skies" – Keepsake

"Cuddle Up A Little Closer" – PLATINUM

"Goodbye Old Dixie, Goodbye" – The Confederates

"I'm Going Back To Carolina" – Suntones

"Lullaby (Goodnight My Angel)" – The Gas House Gang

"One For My Baby" – State Line Grocery

"Side By Side" – Power Play

"Somebody Knows" – Michigan Jake

"That's An Irish Lullaby" – Acoustix

"The Nearness of You" – Uptown Sound

"The One I Love Belongs To Somebody Else" – Four Voices

"This Little Light of Mine" – Northern Lights Chorus



about a month while I did other things. I crammed with the sheet music on the plane ride over.

So I chickened out. I quietly asked the organizers to find new places for the other three guys, which they fortunately were able to do without much trouble.

Better to be thought a fool than open your throat and remove all doubt—I just saved three men from a very agonizing hour of rehearsal and remained in a much better mindset for observation. (If I say that enough, it almost makes me feel better!)

So rather than wait for my quartet to be announced like everyone else, I hung by with a camera and watched nearly 40 quartets sing one song each, with category judges to select the top 10 for Saturday. A small handful of men appeared to have either too many nerves or not enough practice. But few quartets had note or word issues, and most managed to pack some musicality and presentation into their brief rehearsals. (They should feel lucky—other Brigades have you draw your song out of a hat on your way to the stage!) The top two or three quartets here could have contended for district medals. And after hearing the same 12 songs for two hours, everyone was ready to sing them all over again until 2 a.m.

Luckily for me, the competition aspect was really just a sidelight to the weekend. I didn't miss out at all on the reason people are wild about the Brigade experience in the first place: extreme quartetting, the more the better!

"Barberpole Cats on Steroids?" No, better!

I was expecting the ample casual singing to be like a really good version of Barberpole Cat singing with newer, tougher arrangements. "There's only so much 'Wild Irish Rose' I can stand," quipped first-timer Lauren Rantz, an experienced former Evergreen District quartetter, shortly after he arrived from Utah for the experience.



Story and photos by
Lorin May
Editor, *The Harmonizer*

Lauren and I soon learned that it's far more than the tough songs that make the Brigade different. Brigade members told me beforehand that the experience would be far more fun than tagging (I've done plenty of that), worlds different from singing in an organized quartet (ditto) and a bigger rush than singing in a large A-level chorus (ditto again). They were right on all accounts. It's not so much that the

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Brigade is a different league of singers as it is a different category of singing.

Extreme quartetting—what it's like

It's hard to put into words, but try this: It's the pleasure of nailing a great tag without the burden of learning it, and the thrill lasts the length of a whole song. It's the instant lock that you get with a polished quartet, but you're doing it with three guys you've never met, and it's a

new sound and experience with each combination. It's the fun of quartetting your chorus numbers with fellow chapter members, but without the creative ruts imposed by being locked into a common director's interpretation.



Keep 'Em Guessing was a featured guest quartet for the weekend, headlining the Saturday show. They were the only organized quartet out of several that visited area schools to give demonstrations of barbershop harmony—something this quartet does a lot, particularly with lead Brian Hughes' connections as a school music teacher. All are active Indiana Harmony Brigade members who owe the formation of their internationally competitive quartet to connections made through the Indiana Harmony Brigade.

Several other quartets visited area schools, but in all other cases their quartets were formed by blind assignment via email. Most choir teachers couldn't believe their ears when they heard the quality of singing from these quartets, some of which confessed that they first sang together during the car ride over.

In short, it's everything you enjoy about singing barbershop, but you've done all the work before you get there; the weekend is 100 percent reward. It all hinges on the fact that everybody *really* knows these 12 songs when they show up—better than most chorus singers know their contest numbers. (Well, except for schmoes like me who have to stick with the same five or six songs all weekend.) That means when you get with three other guys, nobody is a leaner



The competitive portion of the weekend is about as casual of a contest as possible, where only the winners are revealed and the scores are irrelevant. Each randomly selected quartet has one hour to put together one assigned song. Most quartets had a seriously good time of it, cobbling together some very entertaining numbers with whatever was available.

and everybody is nailing his part. How often have you sung like that in a room full of guys you just met? While singing championship-level arrangements?

In a Brigade pick-up quartet, the words and notes are non-issues, so you're instead making up the musical interpretation as you go along. For a lead like me, it's a little bit like woodshedding with musical psychics. Every guy you sing with can follow your nuances without hesitation, and then each throws in his own personality to make a sound that's different from any of the tens of thousands of possible quartet combinations at the rally.

You hear unique sounds and textures with every combination. It only gets more fun as the evening wears on. It's kind of a weird comparison, but Brigade singing is a bit like some entrees at Chinese restaurants, which start out good and then get spicier and tastier the more you eat. As the Brigade evenings progress, you soon find yourself trying more and more vocal tricks and getting new rewards every time the personnel or song changes.

Every Saturday evening, Brigade members who have earned their riser pass put on a well-publicized show for the local community, who fill a large college auditorium every year. Profit from ticket sales defrays the cost of the weekend. How good is a chorus that has never sung together before the weekend? The sound is excellent, the faces are great and the choreography is of necessity almost non-existent. Every man on stage came to town for the quartetting, but many remark afterwards that it is the best chorus in which they have ever sung.



The Brigade vision: many more throughout the Society and beyond

A big variety of Barbershoppers attend Brigades, from past international medalists to newer Barbershoppers who have never before sung in a quartet. Most are Joe Barbershoppers who belong to typical chapters and who want to supplement their quartetting opportunities. A lot of registered quartets have formed out of the Brigades, and several organized quartets attend the Brigades as a foursome. (Imagine adding 12 or more high-end songs to your repertoire every year!)



The 2007 North Carolina Brigade featured men from 22 different states and provinces. About 110 members and more than 50 guests were present, many of whom are members of other Brigades. Guests included several district leaders and a Sweet Adeline interested in starting their own Brigades. A Brigade weekend can host no more than 160 men (40 on each part) before becoming unwieldy.

The three affiliated Harmony Brigades (Atlantic, Indiana, and North Carolina), share leadership and repertoire, while the Confederate Harmony Brigade, formed in 1957, remains separate in both administration and approach. Brigades leaders are concerned by how many quality applicants they now have to turn away. Inclusion is by invitation only, with a current member sponsoring your application and vouching for your skill and dedication. Brigade leaders believe more Brigades will form as word continues to spread. For more information, contact:

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Atlantic: Neal Siegal, NealSiegal@aol.com

Indiana: Duane Henry, duanehenry@ameritech.net
www.harmonybrigade.org

No learning curve, no pressure, and nobody dragging down the sound—just pure singing endorphines and a high that keeps getting higher. It's a unique musical Nirvana in a hobby where people know a thing or two about fun.

I may have forgotten my weak musical cramming when it counted, but I haven't forgotten some of the more visceral moments of that weekend. Such as how good the pizza tasted on Saturday night, or how much more I enjoyed the rich and gooey chords that were as satisfying as the company. On that last night, I had to force myself to get at least a couple hours of sleep before flying out, even though I hadn't come close to getting my fill.

When all was done, I thought that my roommate for the weekend, an organized quartetter

who rarely misses an international convention or Harmony University, summed things up pretty nicely: "There is no more fun in barbershop than the Harmony Brigade." ■

