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# The Origins of Barbershop Harmony

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— courtesy of Heritage Hall Museum of  
Barbershop Harmony, Kenosha, Wisconsin

## 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 musical devices, European hymn-singing culture, and an American tradition of recreational music — a tradition SPEBSQSA continues today.

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.

## **J**azz era: changes in American music and social habits

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.

## **B**irth 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” [sic], the two invited their friends to 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 was 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.

*For more information, contact the Heritage Hall Museum of Barbershop Harmony at (800) 876-SING.*