

Conventional Harmony

At about 3:30 on Wednesday afternoon, August 12, 2000, members of the Bryn Mawr Mainliners barbershop chorus and their families loaded on two school buses in Radnor, Pa., and headed for the Republican National Convention in center-city Philadelphia. The final arrangements for our singing were made only a few days before. It was surprising to learn that no one in the city seemed to be able to make decisions very far in advance of the RNC.

I was delighted when my wife, Tamra, and our two Alabama granddaughters, Kristan (11) and Jennifer (9), were able to join us on the bus. It was a very hot day and Kristan wondered why we didn't have air-conditioned buses. I explained that since our chorus wouldn't be paid a lot of money, we couldn't afford fancy buses. After a hot, 40-minute ride we unloaded at Loading Dock D of the new Philadelphia Convention Center and went into a huge room that contained something called "POLITICALFEST."

The Mainliners had been looking for big conventions in Philadelphia who would pay us to sing. We needed to earn a little money to cover the chorus expenses. POLITICALFEST was our best paying gig in the first eight months of this year. Though we have both Republicans and Democrats in our chorus, on our bus downtown it seemed as if there were more Democrats. But no one really bothered to count. What counted was that everyone liked to sing and was there to have fun.

POLITICALFEST was sort of a political trade fair that focused on things Republican, things presidential, and things Philadelphia. In addition to convention credentials, political memorabilia, campaign trail shoes, and a giant screen of the convention floor, my granddaughters learned about presidential libraries, the White House, the Presidential plane, and Philadelphia and the presidency. They were especially interested in the liberty bells presented by many states, the dolls of the past presidents, and the inauguration dresses of the first ladies.

But what about singing?

I've always enjoyed music, especially performing.

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I started singing in high school with the chorus. Throughout my life I've been in several classical choruses and church choirs. During and after a good performance or rehearsal I sometimes feel a mental or spiritual lift that makes all the effort worthwhile.

Perhaps 30 years ago, when I lived in Indiana, I had a friend who wanted me to join his barbershop chorus. I learned that male barbershop choruses belong to the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBQSA) and that there are barbershop quartets in addition to barbershop choruses. This particular chorus met once a week all year. I was working full time for an insurance company then, so I wasn't ready to sing two nights each week since I also sang in my church choir.

Nine years ago, while I was living in Pennsylvania, another church-choir friend said he was in a quartet that needed a bass. Was I interested? Why not, I thought. So I tried out and was accepted only to find out (too late) that the barbershop chorus met every Monday night and the quartet met almost every Wednesday night. With church choir that made three nights out each week for music.

But by then I was hooked on the barbershop sound. I liked to ring those barbershop seventh chords and feel that barbershop musical high.

Tuning Up the Pipes

Between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. our 85-member barbershop chorus warmed up and reviewed our program in a corner of the huge room at POLITICALFEST, behind several layers of curtains. I was surprised that our warm-up singing couldn't be heard for more than a few yards because of the high level of activity in the room. The New York agent who hired our chorus

asked us to parade to the stage in the opposite corner of the big room, singing a song so we would attract an audience. Our director asked that we sing our song in unison and as you might guess, the basses objected to singing the high notes.

In the last few years, my chorus has had men from many walks of life. We've had one or more doctor, lawyer, minister, messenger, professor, dentist, cab driver, Air Force officer, cook, salesman, insurance agent, fire hydrant fixer, high school student, teacher, college student, retiree (all types), and even an actuary.

We sang our two half-hour shows with a short intermission in between. Four of our quartets sang two songs each to round out the program. Our audience of several hundred people was appreciative. We thought that the two patriotic songs we developed for this show would be show-stoppers, but they got the least applause from our audience. The audience really enjoyed our contest uptune.

Many of the songs in the barbershop repertoire are of the "good old song" variety, such as the ballads "My Wild Irish Rose" or "I Love You Truly." There are also fast tunes full of pep we call uptunes, such as "Hello, Mary Lou" or "Side by Side." Frequently our uptunes get more applause, perhaps because they're so fast and full of pep. But once in a while one of our ballads with a very soft ending will really touch some heartstrings and there's a long pause before the applause. We work the hardest on the songs we'll sing for contests, so these are often our best songs.

After our show we had an hour before the buses would leave so we broke up into quartets and small groups and had fun singing around the POLITICALFEST. A group of three wandering instrumentalists joined us for a while. Later, we sang with one of the door guards who wanted to learn the barbershop tenor part to a song.

On the way home the buses were no longer hot and even our granddaughters enjoyed singing along with the barbershoppers.

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