

Quartetting 101
Confessions of a Barbershopper IV
Or
Singing with More Potato Salad on Your Coattails

We have talked about starting your quartet, selecting music, practicing, picking out uniforms, walk-about and half-hour program. Here are some other tidbits, some “rules” that might be helpful in making your performance successful.

If you can, case the joint ahead of time. How big is it, how are the acoustics, will you need amplification (My rule of thumb: 50 or less, no mike; 50-100 mike for frontman but not for quartet; over 100, mike for everybody all the time.)? Will you be working from a stage? Where are the steps? Are they navigable? Where is the kitchen? What is the traffic pattern of the wait staff? Will you be working the tables? If it is a daytime job, you do not want windows behind you. If it has to be that way get the curtains drawn. Sit where the audience will be sitting, see what they will see. Have a good idea of what you are going to be doing physically during your program. Meet your new boss. Be nice. They will become a booster for you and you will have a bigger crowd. Have some attractive flyers? Of course you do (bless the computer!). See if the management can place them for you. Remember, you are the employee.

On the day of the gig, meet at someone’s house and give your self enough time to warm up before leaving for your performance. Review the program and run through most of it. Know what you are going to do.

Drive to the place of the performance in one car and get there at least 30 minutes ahead of the scheduled time. You should be joined at the hip until you are finished with your program. We were 20 minutes late to one gig because we came in two cars and ended up in two different parking lots.

Before you go on, check each other out. Buttons buttoned, sunglasses off, hair combed. I once knew a quartet that was doing their thing and getting a better than usual audience response. Twenty minutes in to their program they suddenly realized that the bass had forgotten to zip up his fly. Not only that, but his shirrtail was flapping about through the opening in a rather suggestive fashion.

If you are the front man, have your program on a 3X5 card and keep it in the same pocket at each performance. Be sure that at least one other member has a similar card. I can’t tell you how many times my card has disappeared. It is very embarrassing to be doing a strip search on yourself looking for a lost card.

It is probably best to have a separate pitch blower. (Everyone carries a pitch pipe. Only one person blows the pitch. How many times has pocket lint caused a respiratory arrest for you pitch pipe? An extra one is a good standby measure.) Your front man has enough things on his mind. Your lead has to remember all the first words. This obviously depends on the make up for your group.

My personal preference is to do a barbershop tune up for every piece. The audience expects it. Give it to them. Even if I have a solo pick up, I want to know that the other three parts are on the same page. It is a brief moment in time where you as a quartet become totally focused on what you are about to do. Nothing else should be in your mind but the pitch. Are you on the pitch, the fifth, the octave, or the third? Does everyone sound OK. Good, let’s go.

Go to the bathroom before you go on. This is self-explanatory. You should be well hydrated for the sake of your voice. Your bladder should be well emptied for the sake of your peace of mind.

When introduced, walk on briskly and take charge of the place. For the next 30-40 minutes, you own it.

Act like a quartet. Stay together, do not drift apart while you are singing. Do not wince, criticize, direct, etc. each other. You should know what you are doing. Mistakes are probably noticeable only to you and can be dealt with at rehearsal.

Smile and have fun. You are aren't you? If you are not, you had better take up macramé or basket weaving. The audience will know it right away. I don't know how many times a member of the audience has come up afterwards and told us, "You looked like you were having so much fun!" (They have occasionally told us that we sang well.) That makes me feel that we have accomplished our task as it usually translates in to, "You were having so much fun that I had fun." Fun is like a communicable disease, it is infectious. It is like trying to keep a straight face when you hear babies laughing

Learn to bow as a quartet. Acknowledge the applause, you've earned it.

Get the crowd involved. Get them involved early and keep them there. This is very important. They will enjoy it much, much more if they are part of the show.

We may like ballads but don't push your luck. One or two are nice but that is about the extent of it. Want to see people looking at their watches, shifting in their chairs, and shuffling their feet? Sing three ballads in a row. I don't care if you ring every chord, the feet will be shuffling.

Watch for those signs. It may be better to do a shorter program. Some nights were just not meant to be. I usually say we will do a 30 to 45 minute program depending on the audience response. As the 30 minute limit approaches, I watch for the foot shuffling and shorten the program if I detect it. People often ask for an hour program, I try very hard to avoid it. Even on our best nights, the feet start going at about 45 minutes.

If you are not a good joke teller, don't even try.

Don't do requests. I guarantee that, unless you have planted a shill to request something you know, you will die.

Don't do encores. Chances are that you have already done all your best stuff. Leave it at that.

Accept compliments graciously and do not dissect your performance in public. A simple thank you will suffice, you need not qualify it with critical comments of your own performance.

When you have finished, get your check and leave. Leave a little mystery in the air. "Who was that Masked Man?" is better than, "Did you know the Lone Ranger has halitosis?"

I personally don't think it is a good idea to accept food or drink. It is often offered but I think it is best declined for the above reasons. There are many exceptions to this.

When you get home, go to your computer where you have the program listed and note how it went. The next time you perform look over the last two or three programs for correctable problems.

Speaking of computers, next month we will visit Chordmaster Central Command.
Please bring your birth certificate, social security card, and blood type.

B Martin
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