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Ghosts of the Black Forest

Part One

On a July day in 1967, a magic moment occurred in American music. An idea passed between two men on the Michigan Avenue bridge over the Chicago River, just south of the point where the street passes between the Wrigley Building on your left, looking like a tall white wedding cake, and the Chicago Tribune, an improbable Gothic tower on the right.

The men were Don Shelton, a veteran saxophonist and singer, and Len Dresslar, known to the public as the voice *ho-ho-ho* of the Jolly Green Giant but a man of far wider skills than that. And that conversation led to the formation of what many people consider the most remarkable vocal group in the history of the United States or any other country. The group, when it came into being, numbered four singers, Bonnie Herman at the top of the harmony, Len Dresslar at the bottom, Don Shelton, and Gene Puerling, the group's arranger and musical director, in the middle. They would make fourteen albums for Hans Georg Brunner-Schwer's MPS label, each of which stunned the jazz world when it was first issued, and did so again when they were reissued in 1997 in a boxed set of seven CDs.

The albums were:

1. *In Tune*, with the Oscar Peterson Trio, 1971.
2. *The Singers Unlimited: A Capella*, also 1971.
3. *The Four of Us*, 1973.
4. *Invitation*, with the Art Van Damme Quintet, 1974.
5. *Feeling Free*, with the Patrick Williams orchestra, 1975.
6. *The Singers Unlimited: A Capella II*, also 1975.
7. *A Special Blend*, orchestral writing by Clare Fischer, 1976.
8. *Sentimental Journey*, with the Robert Farnon orchestra, 1976.
9. *Friends*, with Patrick Williams, 1977.
10. *Just in Time*, with the Roger Kellaway Cello Quintet, 1977.
11. *The Singers Unlimited with Rob McConnell and the Boss Brass*, 1979.
12. *Eventide* with the Robert Farnon Orchestra, 1979.
13. *A Capella III*, 1980.
14. *Easy to Love*, 1982.

The set is still available for about $100, and the three *a capella* albums have been issued as a separate set, which you can get as an import. And there is a Christmas album.

Each of the albums was recorded in exactly one week, usually two tracks a day, with all four singers unrehearsed and sight-reading the extremely difficult vocal charts. The group cannot be reconstituted: it is gone. In a way it should never have existed at all, and it wouldn't have but for the advances in recording technology and the support of Brunner-Schwer.

With the increasing use of magnetic recording tape in the late 1940s, all sorts of things became possible, including overdubbing. An early example is the guitar work of Les Paul and Mary Ford. Vocal overdubbing became fairly common, giving us Patti Page's *The Tennessee Waltz*. In 1959 the Double Six of Paris had their debut, using jazz themes to which the group's leader and founder, Mimi Perrin, added lyrics. By overdubbing, the six expanded to twelve voices. And then there was the hit group Don Elliott had called the Chipmunks, all the voices overdubbed at slow tape speed and then speeded up. In the case of the Singers Unlimited, their extraordinarily complex arrangements and overdubbing took them at times up to twenty-seven voices.

Recording engineers soon learned to record string sections twice, to get a larger sound. In due course, the practice of "sweetening" came into being. A jazz group or a singer with rhythm section would record in multi-track, and afterwards an orchestra would be added on the open tracks, all of this involving the use of headphones. André Previn, perhaps in rebellion, once made an album called *No Headphones*. The problem headphones present for many singers, and even instrumentalists, is one of intonation. Frank Sinatra hated headphones and wouldn't use them.

But for singers who work in the advertising field, the "jingles" business, headphones are a way of life, a commonplace working tool. And jingles singers are among

the best in the world. The good ones are demon sight-readers with superb intonation. Over the years, in the studios of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, I acquired the most enormous respect for them.

A great many jazz musicians gravitated to the jingles field. They too were in demand for their flexibility and sight-reading skills. One of the best was pianist and composer Dick Marx, who became the king of that profession for the mid-west. He had the house trio, with bassist and violinist John Frigo, at Mr. Kelly's, an elegant night club in the Rush Street area, and as such he accompanied a long list of singers, some of them great singers. Then he went into the jingles business, where he became soaringly successful.

Dick wrote the music to Ken-L-Ration's *My Dog Is Better than Your Dog* and *Aren't you glad you use Dial*, among many. All the members of The Singers Unlimited were veterans of the Chicago jingles business, whose appeal in part is the money it pays. Performers in that field not only get the fee for the job, they receive residual payments when the commercials are played on radio and television. Len Dresslar, who was the voice of Dig 'Em the Bullfrog in the Sugar Smacks ad, and that of Snap in the Snap, Crackle and Pop trio in the Rice Krispies commercials. Len once said his residuals put his two kids through college

But as well as being veterans the jingles business, The Singers Unlimited were also the product of the Hi Lo's, since their arranger and music director, Gene Puerling, held these roles in that earlier quartet.

The personnel of the Hi-Los evolved into Puerling, Don Shelton, who also played the saxophones and still does, Clark Burroughs, who gave the group a distinctive sound with his ability to sing extremely high passages, and Robert Morse. The group made some exquisite records, including *The Hi Los and All That Jazz* with the Marty Paich Dektette. Clare Fischer was their pianist and instrumental arranger during much of the group's life. They disbanded in 1964.

After the Hi-Los, Don Shelton and Len Dresslar became part of a group called the J's with Jamie, who were among the best jingles singers in Chicago. "They were the darlings of the advertising community," Don said. Joe Silvia headed the group, and his wife Jamie was one of its members. Don continued:

"One night in July of 1967, Joe and Jamie announced that they were moving to New York and they didn't invite Len and me to go. We were doing a Hamm's Beer session at studio A at Universal, and I ran up behind Len and stood on my tiptoes, because he is the Jolly Green Giant.

"I said, 'Len! I have an idea! Meet me for breakfast!' I had to figure, how are we going to do this? There's got to be a new group to take the place of the J's with Jamie. Gene Puerling had been in town for the last year just sort of freelancing, trying to get a group going, but we were so heavily entrenched with the J's that it didn't work and he had gone back to California. I said, 'I'll call Gene, and then I have to call and see if Bonnie Herman might be available.' I called her manager, Ralph Craig, and he said, 'Boy, this is your lucky day.' Her contract had just expired with the Dick Noel Singers. And I said, 'Do nothing until you hear from me. Put her on hold right now and I will get back to you within the hour.'

"Len and I were crossing the Chicago River at the Wrigley Building, and I said, 'What would you think about The Singers Unlimited?' There had been a group in L.A. called The Singers Incorporated, which I loved. And I said, 'Unlimited — we have to be so many things doing jingles.'

"And he said, 'Sounds good to me.' I called Gene. I said, 'There has been a real shake-up in Chicago. Can you come back and talk to Bonnie, Len and me?' So he flew back. I called Ralph Craig back, and he said, 'Bonnie's available,' and I said 'Good. Have her meet us at Len Dresslar's house tomorrow afternoon and we'll go from there.'

"And that is how it all got started on a hot, steamy July afternoon in 1967. Then we started doing commercials."

Len Dresslar said, "Gene had these friends with a small advertising agency in San Francisco, and when we all got together, it was a case of: This is a *hell* of a group!"

Gene said, "We sang about one chorus or something."

Len said, "It was something like that, and then, *Yes*! That's what it was. You *knew*!"

Len said, "We learned how to utilize these four voices together at Audio Finishers, a little studio. We had multiple tracks, and we would record the same track again just to enhance the sound, and the advertisers loved it. The guy at the studio, Murray Allen, called Gene and he said, 'You've got to write something so we can learn how to use this damn thing.' It was an Ampex eight-track. And Gene wrote *Fool on the Hill.* We'd get over there, and we'd finish maybe, sixteen bars in a whole evening."

"It took thirty-six hours," Len said. "How many tracks were on there? We must have done sixteen or twenty."

Don Shelton said, "Ping-ponging it."

Gene said, "Do one and two, and then combine them on track three. Then re-record on track one."

Len said, "That is why *Fool On the Hill* has such a massive, fat sound."

Don said, "It was the first tune we ever made." He said to Gene: "You played *The Shadow of Your Smile* for Joe and Jamie. And Joe thought it was 'too modern.' Gene put it back

in his satchel and said, 'Oh, okay.'"

Len said, "And it was incredible. We decided that we were going to have a coming-out party. And here's the old Ambassador Hotel sitting up there, and they had the Guild Hall right across the street. Sam Cohen said, 'Don't worry about it. We'll take it over.' So they took it over and started off by sending a card to every advertising person in Chicago. It had a tuning fork on it, and it said, 'Can you name this?' We got the most outrageous and wonderful answers to it. Another card said that we are having a party and you're invited.

Don said, "A series of teasers went out for several weeks, all building up to this October day of '67. We rented two Voice of the Theater speakers."

Len continued, "Well, the guys stood at the entrance to the Guild Hall on either side of a lanky, lovely young lady in black tights and black top, wearing a black cap with a big red feather sticking up from it, holding a placard that said 'The Singers Unlimited.' It was out of sight!

"We started out after having hors d'oeuvres and cocktails on the stage in the Guild Hall, and watched the speakers play our demo tape for which Gene had written a lot of fictitious commercials. After that, we sang for the music producers live, in their offices, just so they would hear there was going to be a group, not a vacuum. As soon as they knew that Joe and Jamie were leaving town, we had to fill that gap really quickly. We sang for Dick Marx, and people around town, and they all breathed a sigh of relief. Dick Marx made the comment, 'I was worried that you and Len were leaving town too!' We assured him that we would have a group.

"That got us started in advertising. That was our thrust at the beginning, 1967, 1968. Then, we decided to do a Christmas album. We were going from studio to studio — in demand like crazy. It was the most exhilarating time of my career.

"We would go from studio to studio, sometimes having to rush across town. We were so much in demand people would actually wait for us. If we couldn't make a three o'clock because we were booked from two to four, they'd say, 'Okay, come when you can.' No way can that happen these days, not even close. We were so blessed to have that kind of working relationship with our music producers. It was fabulous."

Len said, "We knew inherently that we had a really great thing. It wasn't just the commercials. There was a hell of a sound. The four of us created something that was unique."

"We were like athletes in the studio," Bonnie said. "We were singing all the time, sheet music in front of us every hour, someone else's composition or whatever. It had a lot to do with what we were thrown into — a lot of situations in sessions in Chicago. So we were prepared, we were all at the same speed.

"We'd finished an album. The pages would just be flying. We never memorized anything, so at the end of the week, you just felt exhilarated because you were reading fast."

Gene said, "I'll tell you how these people work. I used to send them the vocal arrangements months ahead in hopes that this would give them enough time to really lock it in. The next day, we start recording at eight in the morning. So I figure I'd sent it to them and everything is going to be fine. And I said, 'Well, you've looked at it before.' It turned out that they'd never looked at those things at all."

Bonnie Herman was born in Chicago to Jules Herman, lead trumpet player with Lawrence Welk, and Lois Best, the first Champagne Lady with Welk. They married and settled in Chicago, then moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, when Bonnie was five. Bonnie said, "Then he decided, during a musician's strike in the late-1940s, to start his own band, which was a brave thing to do with a couple of babies. He was a farm boy from North Dakota who played his way through college. He's still going strong. Retired his band at the age of eighty-six. So I was the daughter of well-known people growing up.

"I took classical piano. My teacher was Winnifred Bolle, pianist with the Minneapolis Symphony. She was just the pastor's wife, to me I did not know that I was getting a really good education that way. I was in a school district that loved music. The superintendent was a musician. And the school would get these people from Concordia College and St. Olaf College to teach. The biggest thing to be in our school was in an *a capella* choir. So I had this training for singing alto. I never sang lead. At the same time I was in a three-girl vocal group, the Debutantes. We won a Coca Cola contest that took us to New York. I was fourteen. I came home, I was just a normal kid. I was a cheerleader; played in the band; and this choir."

I asked: "What did you play in the band?"

She laughed. "Snare drums. But don't tell my husband, because he thinks it's a joke." She is married to the fine Chicago drummer Tom Radtke.

"But that's another thing that added to my musical education. I was reading all these percussion parts. So I had this conglomeration of musical influences, including the big-band music at home with my family. There wasn't enough jazz in my background in Minnesota. There wasn't any in my school. That was regrettable. There was this one guitar player who would come over and play *Easy Street* and teach me a few songs. Then I started to sing commercials up there, because as a freshman at the University of Minnesota, I was

in a campus production and a producer happened to walk by where I was singing. I did a Dairy Queen commercial, and that was it. Then I started flying into Chicago a couple of months later. I remember going home and calling my dad and saying, 'Daddy, this man wants me to sing for a commercial.' He knew him. So he suggested that he come over to the sorority house, where it was safe. And I auditioned. Two day's later I did the commercial. It ran all over the country.

"Then, I was heard by Ralph and Doris Craig, whom Don mentioned earlier. They brought me to Chicago seven months later. I kept flying back and forth to sing for various producers in Chicago. I never knew studio work existed. My parents did not want me to be in the business. My mother kept asking me — wouldn't I like to be a nurse? They knew that for a woman, music would probably be of a hard life.

"In eighth grade, while my dad had some hit records on the radio in Minneapolis, my science project was 'How to make a record.' I was always fascinated with the process. So he took me down to the local studio, the Kay Bank Studios, where he recorded. They took me through and showed me the whole thing. And they gave me all these acetates after showing me how they did it. And the acetates were the J's with Jamie. A commercial for Northwest Orient Airlines.

"Don wasn't there in Chicago yet. You were a young whippersnapper. Who knew that in a matter of five years we would be together singing and that I would have a studio career? But that's how far back my interest was. So on the Dairy Queen production, it was fantastic: this little room, musicians, and a microphone. I never liked live performing. But in a studio, it was calm. So that was my love.

"My folks are my biggest supporters. We are on the same wave-length, because we are all musicians. But it was really because of what they saw women go through. Studio work was just an ideal situation for me."

I said, "Public performing is hard. Unless you become a big star, and you're working at the upper level of it. You're going to have night club owners making passes at you, the money's lousy."

Bonnie said, "And the loneliness of it."

I said, "Jeri Southern hated the life, and quit, and began teaching voice and piano."

"I never would have pursued anything like that. I often think, What would have happened? What would I have been doing had I not made this move? I transferred to Northwestern University and immediately got busy in Chicago. Don and I came the same month, February, 1964.

"Things just happen. It was just meant to be. And then, I think of all the training and the *a capella*. Minnesota is a hotbed of choral activity. That was very lucky for me to be in that environment."

Don Shelton said, "No vibrato either. So you had lots of straight pure tones."

"Yes. And also my dad was a big one with that — and big on pitch. He always said to me, 'The least you can do is be in tune.' And, 'If you are ever going to practice piano, practice it right. Just play well.' My parents were fantastic.'

I said, "That's another thing we have never even discussed in this past two days — the bossa nova singing, the straight tone. None of this would work with vibrato on it."

Len Dresslar said, "No, it would not." The others brightly agreed with him. "It depends on who you are. Now, Bonnie used it very discreetly."

I said, "At the end of the tone, she did a terminal vibrato, and very slight."

Don said, "To warm the phrase up at the end."

This perhaps requires a little explanation. It was long assumed that vibrato was necessary in popular music, and in classical music too for that matter, whether in instrumental or vocal music. This was not always so. In the baroque period, a terminal vibrato was used. That is to say, the violinist or other player would start a note with straight tone and then add vibrato as it progressed. This disappeared from music. As far as I know, Louis Armstrong initiated it in jazz, and in later years, at least with very good, very controlled singers, it became not uncommon. It takes effort to develop a good vibrato and control it, but it takes even more control to sing without it. And if it is not very much in tune, it sounds hideous. In The Singers Unlimited, it became critical because of the nature of the harmonies Gene used, frequently involving close intervals.

Len said, "One of the really perfect things is when you have a lead horn that you can tune to, and maintain purity. It makes it a hell of a lot easier. And Bonnie is that lead horn."

Gene said, "Many times I would say that it was a very acceptable take, and she would say 'Lets just do one more.' She would do that a lot — only because she wanted it to be the best ever."

Len said "Just right on the money. That was the way we worked. I think all of us were geared into that — that whole concept that you get as close to perfection as you can."

Bonnie said, "Now-a-days, with the computer and Pro Tools and everything, our records, to me, sound innocent. Now, a friend of mine — a producer for a well-known act, a singer — said that maybe ninety times in one vocal or even in between syllables, it is common to edit.

"And you just line it up, mathematically or however you want to put it. If you're entry is too late, or you come in too early, you don't do it again. You just fix it. So I often

wonder, if Hans Georg were still recording, would he have gone for the latest technology?

Gene said, "I don't think so."

Bonnie concurred: "I don't think so either."

Len said: "He was too much of a purist."

Pro Tools is a piece of equipment that makes it possible to fix an out-of-tune phrase, or even single notes. This baffled me at first, since I thought back to the era of recording tape when the only way you could raise the pitch was to run the tape a little faster, which raised it even in the accompaniment. But recording is now digital, it is mathematical, and the pitch of even one or two notes can be altered without affecting the background. On the last Academy Awards broadcast, Itzhak Perlman played very out of tune. In the recording studio, his solos could be "fixed" but not on live television. It is thus almost impossible to tell from records whether any of the new young idols can sing or not.

Bonnie continued: "And people used to criticize us for punching in and correcting things. It makes us seem absolutely primitive. It's there, and the imperfections are sort of endearing now — even the worst!"

Gene said, "I don't hear any imperfections."

"We tried so hard to end syllables together," Bonnie said. But, every now and again, it was difficult to come in on a rubato section — to kind of feel it, and come in."

My conversations with four members of the group occurred in February, 2005, when I did interviews with them for the Jazz Oral History Practicum Project at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, California. The talks continued over two days. The meeting amounted to a reunion: the four had not seen each other in a long time. I hadn't seen them since a record date in Los Angeles in early April 1977.

Len Dresslar said, "Don, let's get to you next."

Don responded: "Well, I wasn't going to be a nurse."

Bonnie laughed, "Neither was I."

Gene said, nodding toward Don, "While we are doing this self-congratulating, I need to give kudos to this guy because he has never been really recognized on our albums. He has had more to do — all of the instrumental solos and things — in addition to vocal solos than any of us. He has really been an important person in our group."

"Oh my, yes," Bonnie said.

Don smiled and resumed: "I was born in Texas. My father was a musician — alto sax and clarinet player — in East Texas. When he was a young lad, he was playing records by the likes of Harry James, from Beaumont, Texas. Next thing you know, he was with Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall. I said, 'Wow, my dad should have been a professional musician.' But the Depression came along and he decided to stay with his $75-a-month job at Texas Power and Light. That's what he did, his entire career. When he would play his weekend jobs — I was just three and four years old — he would come home and on Sunday morning, he would open up his alto case and clean his horn. I have it at home now in Santa Monica, a Buescher gold-plated alto, in the case with green velvet lining. It smells the same now as when I was three years old. I open the case and I am that tall again. It just gives me a great feeling.

"My mother was not musical, but they were both extremely supportive. At an early age he tried to get me on clarinet because that's the only thing that I could possibly hold. Alto was 'way too big for me. My arms were so short. I couldn't play the bottom half of the clarinet. So my father says, 'Okay, we'll wait until you can.' So I kept listening to stuff and taking it in. And then one day he put it together and *voila*!" Don sang a line. "I can play it! That was my beginning. So it was clarinet and classical for years, contests every year in New Mexico and Texas.

"Fifth grade we moved to New Mexico. I kept practicing clarinet and going to summer band school over at Texas Tech College, every summer. That would be my real shot in the arm for culture. Getting to read manuscript music of Ein Heldenleben. Dr. A. A. Harding would come down from the University of Illinois for the last two weeks. I got to set up with the principal clarinetist of the Berlin Philharmonic, who was my teacher, and play with him in the faculty band. So I would make great strides in the summer, and then go home, and all winter listen to the Cities Service Band of America — and get so excited."

In the 1930s and '40s, network radio carried a considerable amount of live classical music each week, including such programs as the Voice of Firestone, the Bell Telephone Hour, and Cities Service. Cities Service was a gasoline company, now vanished.

Don said, "All of my early career was just playing clarinet, all the while chomping at the bit. As I said, my father was playing Harry James, Artie Shaw, and Benny Goodman. I'm playing Richard Strauss and all my classical things — that I was loving — and the two were amalgamating, as it were, in me. Then, 1949 came along, and Gene Krupa came to town for the Lions Club. They weren't supposed to let minors in because they were serving alcohol. My dad said, "You don't understand. My son needs to hear this." They said, 'Okay, but you must monitor him carefully.' They let me in. That was the first big band I had ever seen. Great band: George Roberts, Ray Triscari, Urbie Green, Boomie Richman. One of the trumpet players turned

his music stand at an angle so that I could follow the manuscript all night. I was going crazy.

"After that, it was one big band after another coming to town: Woody Herman, Tommy Dorsey. I was hooked totally then. I didn't give up classical but I just gathered in all of the swing things that I could get. I still didn't know alto saxophone until I graduated from high school in Hobbs, New Mexico, near Lubbock, Texas. I went into the Navy School of Music, in Washington DC. The Korean War was on and my parents were afraid that I would get into the Army and have to go to Korea and be in the infantry. The Navy band would come to town every year. We invited a couple of first chair players to our home for dinner. After dinner I played with them in the living room. Then, we would go hear them play. Again, I would go absolutely berserk. They were so good. We contacted those people, and they said, 'Yes. You should apply to the Navy School of Music.' That led to the U.S. Navy for three years.

"I wound up in Chicago at Great Lakes Naval Training Center. We took a band down to the Howard Miller Show on Chicago radio, WIND, one night, and there was Len Dresslar, singing and wearing a yellow sweater. He was the boy singer on the show, and I was in my Navy outfit. I did not know that years later, I would be singing with him, because all this time, I was not singing — well, only in church choirs.

"After I graduated from high school, I left the Navy and came back to Texas Tech where I had gone to summer band school, and where I felt comfortable. Then, I transferred to UCLA. That's when I met people in the music business — whose dads were in the business. There were vocal arrangers: Ian Freebairn-Smith, and Perry Botkin Jr. That's how we learned to sing vocal charts, down in the practice rooms at UCLA. I was a big Four Freshmen fan. When I was back at Texas Tech, I heard a Monitor broadcast — remember Monitor Radio on NBC? — and the Hi Lo's were on. And I went, 'Whoa, what is that?' So I ran out and got that album. And from then on, the Hi Lo's were front and center. One year, I took my wife on a trip to be home for Christmas, and we were coming to Tucson, Arizona, and the beautiful Arizona sunset. What should be playing on the radio but *The Heather on the Hill*, by the Hi Lo's. And as we were driving into the sunset, I said, 'Joan, if I could ever sing with a group like that, wouldn't that be something? I got home and my roommate says, Gene Puerling called.' And, I went, *'What?'*

Bonnie asked, "How did he know you?

"From singing groups. I was already singing in Los Angeles with Jud Conlon and doing motion pictures, and records, rock-and-roll dates, and then, the radio show with Rusty Draper. My career suddenly began to go — singing, playing, I just kept doing them both, and rehearsing with the Bob Florence band.

"Remember Lyle Ritz? The ukulele album that he did Barney Kessel? It was called *How About Uke?* We did the song with Red Mitchell on bass. I was playing flute and alto flute, and Lyle was playing ukulele. That was my first recording session. I was scared to death — Capitol Records, studio B. Then I started singing more. And as I said, Gene had called and said they were thinking about taking on a replacement but they were not sure. At the time, I was auditioning for the Modernaires, the Skylarks — all these vocal groups. And then Harry James had called and said, 'Do you want to play third alto to Willie Smith on a tour to South America?' My first big band offer. I was so excited.

"The Hi Lo's went on a tour to New York to do the *Swing into Spring* show, with Peggy Lee and Benny Goodman. I watched that show. They came back and said, 'We are ready to make a change.' And they started making auditions.

"So they really changed everything when I joined the Hi Lo's. I still played and sang. But then, our touring began to take more time. When we were doing Las Vegas's Tropicana, during the summer of 1963, I get a call from Chicago, and it's the J's with Jamie calling. They wanted to know if I would be interested in coming to Chicago. After much trepidation, I decided. Gene had moved to San Francisco, and we weren't able to rehearse every day, like we always did before. And the Beatles came on the scene. Our bookings began to be a little bit thin. It was changing. All my mentors were telling me that 'You need to go back and give these new opportunities a chance.' So, I went back to Chicago in February 1964. There was Len. They met me at the airport. That started my Chicago experience. I moved back and stayed twenty-five years. In 1988 I came back to Los Angeles, where I still do freelance playing and singing. It's been a wonderful move, because I am able to do things that I wasn't able to do in Chicago."

It was Len Dresslar's turn. Len was born in 1925 in St. Francis, Kansas. "My dad was a superintendent of schools. He got caught by the repertory shows that toured in the early twenties.

"They would do the shows there at the high school. And of course, in between, I was chosen — plus another lovely young lady — to entertain between two acts. They had to shove me on stage the first time. From then on, they had to pull me off. My mom was a singer, and she bet that I would be a singer as well. I am really glad for that, because she started me into a whole area of life that I really love. God knows what I would be doing now. So after the war, I came

out of the Navy and went to the Conservatory in Kansas City. I met my wife there.

"I studied there and found this incredible teacher. A guy who was kind of a young Lauritz Melchior. We became good friends. And, after Nicki and I were married, we spent the summer with one of those rep shows before we went into New York. We and wound up working with a class act. There was a five-man singing group called the White Guards. During that time we continued to audition, and finally, we got into a *South Pacific* production. We did that for two and a half years. Then we went back to Chicago where this teacher was. I thought, I'm tired of this, I need a real job. Because we had a baby daughter.

"When we were with *South Pacific* we had a party at this big nightclub in South Chicago. I sang, and the owner said, 'If you ever want a job, come see me.' So I went back, and I got a job. I was a production singer. A scout from CBS happened to come in and hear me. And the next thing I knew, I got this offer from CBS to do a nightly television show. After five and a half years, CBS went from their fifteen-minute music shows to all-network talk. At that point, I did my first commercial. I got more out of that one Holsom Bread spot — they circulated all over the country with all of their subsidiaries. I think the first check was like $2,800. I thought, 'My god, I haven't had that much money in three months.' I just walked into the commercial business. From there it just migrated along with different groups and pickups. Until this J's with Jamie thing happened. When they moved to New York, it was the chance of a lifetime. I thought, 'Wow, we have to do this!' And that's when Don started saying we have to get Gene in here and we have to get a girl singer. And of course Bonnie was it. All of the pieces fell together. I did a few concerts afterwards. Once I got with these guys, The Singers Unlimited, that was the pinnacle of my career."

Don Shelton interjected:

"I have to give Len all the recognition, all he could possibly use. My youngest daughter, Jennifer, who is very much into vocal jazz — she teaches and arranges and sings — came to me one day, in a very serious moment, and said, 'Dad, when all is said and done' — as much as she loves this group — 'it's all about Len.' And it is, it's all about Len."

Startled, Len said, "Holy heaven."

Don said, "When you listen to those records, I don't care — as great as Bonnie is in that whole thing — it comes down like this: what people hear is this 'Wahhhhh!' — this thing down on the bottom. On which, like a pyramid, we're all resting. It's just incredible. And the reason my daughter said that is because, at the college level and even less at high school, you don't have a bass. You got a bass at 'Bahhhh.' That is about as low as they can go. So, when they try to do Gene's charts, Whoops! You've got to take an alternate. Either sing it an octave higher, or at least take the fifth above that. And it's not the root. Len was the root of the whole thing. I thought it was wonderful."

Obviously astounded, Len said, "Well, thank you so much! My God!"

I asked him, "How low can you go?

"Generally, on a good day, I can pull a low C."

Bonnie said, "We could never understand how he did it."

I said, "Sinatra's bottom note was an F, maybe an E-flat."

Don said, "Len's got another six notes below that."

It was now Gene's turn. He said, "I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin."

I said, "Along with Woody Herman and Hildegarde."

Gene said, "Yes. Hildegarde and I used to go together." That's a very inside Milwaukee joke: the flamboyant cabaret singer, on whom Liberace doted and modeled himself, was a lifelong lesbian. She died in 2005 at ninety-nine.

So when Gene said that, everybody laughed. He resumed:

"I was always interested in the vocal groups singing with harmonies. In junior high and high school I had proper vocal groups. When I was in junior high I had choirs, various groups for singing. I even had a popcorn truck in front of the theater on Wisconsin Avenue in Milwaukee. Delius, Bartok, and Stravinsky I liked very much, and I still do. I had a group called the Double Daters. It was my first mixed group, two girls who were just lovely, and they wore sweaters with 'DD' on them in the appropriate places. They couldn't sing, but it was a lot of fun. Two men and two women. We auditioned for Major Bowes, at the Milwaukee Theater."

In the 1930s, Major Edward E. Bowes had an "amateur" show heard on network radio. Frank Sinatra was heard on that show in a vocal group. I never encountered anyone who had a good word to say for Major Bowes.

Bonnie asked, "Did you make it?"

"Yes. And, we were there for two weeks. He was just terrible to work for. He was really cheap. After a week he fired us. He got bad reviews the *Milwaukee Journal.* So he hired us back in the second week. We got so bored with the whole thing that we used to throw furniture outside into the river and watch it go by.

"I got another group later on, called the Honey Bees, three guys and two women. That was the first foray into really thicker harmonies. We were singing at a local nightclub. I forget about what was after that. I guess I worked at Music City in California"

Don and Bonnie asked in unison, "What brought you to

California?"

Gene said, "It was 1950. The Four Freshmen were in California a lot. I really like the Freshmen. I told them that I might move out to California. I decided, on January 1, when I bought a Chevrolet Bel Air, to leave. It was colder than hell. I drove for five days. It got warmer and warmer until you hit the Colorado River. Got to Los Angeles and met Clark Burroughs in the first couple of days. The high tenor voice, that stuff, and I guess doing some productions for the movies."

Bonnie said, "No kidding!"

"So, I decided to start the Hi Lo's. I called my old friend, from South [Divisional ?] High school, Bob Strassen. He was back in Milwaukee, just out of the service. I asked Bob if he wanted to come out to Los Angeles and do something. So it was Clark Burroughs, Bob, myself and Bob Morse. We rehearsed a lot together. I think we learned about thirty arrangements, rehearsing three hours every day. We lived together in an apartment.

Bonnie said, "Were all of these your arrangements?"

Gene said, "Yeah. There's a couple we recorded that were not mine, by Bill Thompson — a very good arranger. The first thing we recorded was *They Didn't Believe Me*. He had some of these vocal ideas that we incorporated into the Hi Lo's. He would do theatrics with punctuation marks like a trumpet or trombone might be, making Clark go way up. I may have been working at Music City record store at the time. Billy May would come through. Every day I would meet performers because the publishing houses were near there. I got to know these people. So we went to sing for them first. Then we went to sing for Jerry Fielding. He called Trend Records and he recorded four selections. The stuff went immediately. It was playing in every radio station. It was a good time for harmony and jazz recordings. We got a recording contract for a little company called Starlite Records. We brought Frank Comstock in as the arranger. It was in Goldstar Studios, three-track recording. I arranged everything for the Hi-Lo's, did a lot of albums for them. Then, we went to Columbia Records. We did some things there, and had my usual arguments with Mitch Miller."

Miller, the head of A&R at Columbia, was famous for pushing bad material at good singers, including most infamously *Mama Will Bark* on Frank Sinatra. Miller was interested only in sales, and I have always considered that he was one of the most insidious influences in putting American popular music on its long downward slide.

Gene continued, "He'd say, 'I want you to do this.' I said, 'No way.' We had about six LPs on Columbia Records. Then we went to Reprise Records; we had about three records with them, and worked with various people like Clare Fischer and Billy May. Then I think that's when I went up north."

Don Shelton said, "Yes. In 1963 you moved to San Francisco."

Gene said, "And then I went and tried Chicago. I started another group, but it was in direct competition with the people who would later form The Singers Unlimited. I was thinking, 'They're tough, because they're so talented.' In '67 I said this was enough. We just sang commercials, and my wife and I missed Marin County very much. We drove back. Two weeks later, I got this call from Don telling me what was happening in Chicago. He said, 'Could you come here?' So I left the next day."

Bonnie said, "That's amazing!"

Don said, "So, that's how we all got together."

Then came their experimental recording of *The Fool on the Hill* that would change all their lives.

Through overdubbing, they could have as many voices as they wanted, in effect a large choral group with the four of them singing multiple parts, the whole thing lent a special sound by Bonnie Herman on the top of the harmony and Len Dresslar singing a very distinctive bottom. They produced a *huge* sound, with textures ranging from beautiful simple unisons to dense harmonies, including seconds or even minor seconds when one of the lines Gene wrote called for it. These are the tones that the late Hugo Friedhofer called "grinders", and they add spice to the harmony. What was amazing is that they could sing them uncannily in tune.

Enter Audrey Morris.

Audrey, an icon of the Chicago music scene, is a superb quiet singer who leaves a song pure and undecorated although she certainly has the chops to do otherwise with it, since she is an excellent pianist. Oscar Peterson told me he copped some voicings from her. He is one of her close friends, and often would stay at her house with her and her late husband, bassist Stu Genovese.

Gene Puerling said, "She's a dear friend of ours. In turn, she is a dear friend of Oscar's who stayed at their house when he was in town, sleeping in the bed on the second floor. Audrey gave him *The Fool on the Hill*. He called Hans Georg Brunner-Schwer and said, "I'd like to do the next album with The Singers Unlimited. It's good stuff." And he got the okay — right away, I guess."

To be continued

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