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Legends of the Apollo

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For generations, the Apollos ruled as IWU's premier vocal ensemble.

By KIM HILL

As their voices blended in the same layered harmonies that had made the Apollo Quartet a campus favorite for decades, it felt just like old times. Gliding through standards such as "Ride the Chariot," as well as a rousing rendition of "Alma Wesleyana," Apollo alumni who reunited for Homecoming 2012 won a standing ovation.

"We were just four guys out singing," says Bob Cummins '56, who participated in the reunion performance. "Singers like to sing, and if there is an audience and we get some applause, that's like icing on the cake."

For almost 70 years, male singing groups bearing the name of Apollo, the Greek god of music, thrived both on campus and across the state, even gaining national renown for their pioneering radio performances in the late 1920s and '30s. After the 1980s, the group gradually faded from Wesleyan's music scene, but its spirit lives on in exciting new student vocal groups that have emerged this past decade ([click here](#) to read the sidebar story).

The earliest records of the Apollo group's existence appear in the 1920s. As part of a trio of choirs supported by the University's School of Music, the all-male group, at that time, was comprised of up to 30 student singers. According to *Wesleyana* yearbooks from the era, the Apollo Club presented operas, provided vocal music for chapel services and performed at student events.

The first big moment in Apollo history came in 1929 when the club traveled to Chicago and became known as the first-ever college glee club to broadcast over the National Broadcasting Company's network of radio stations. "NBC estimated its audience at that time to be five million people," according to the Jan. 1, 1930, *Bulletin*, a publication sent to IWU alumni. Noting another performance by the group would be broadcast on Jan. 30, the *Bulletin* urged alumni to "bring someone else near the radio in order that you may interest them in your Alma Mater. We hope you will do this especially with prospective students."



The 1927 Wesleyana yearbook captured the Apollo Club before it became exclusively a quartet.

This is possibly the first but definitely not the last time the Apollos were enlisted to help recruit future students. The group was quickly recognized as a public relations bonanza for the University. A *Bulletin* from January 1932 was breathless in its announcement of an upcoming broadcast over 46 NBC radio stations. "It is the greatest publicity stunt of the year for Wesleyan, and we are anxious that all our Alumni and friends are listening on that date." That same issue of the *Bulletin* also mentioned, for the first time, "an excellent quartet" that was a spin-off from the larger club.

Throughout the Depression years, both the Apollo Club and its quartet performed at numerous campus and alumni events. "The quartet has easily proved to be one of the most popular organizations on campus," proclaimed the 1937 *Wesleyana*. "Each member is a talented and outstanding musician." That same year the quartet toured the state, performing at churches, community clubs and high schools, according to the yearbook. Sometime during this same era, it appears the larger club was discontinued, leaving the quartet as sole bearer of the Apollo name.

A 1949 *Argus* article gave a retrospective of the quartet's early years, writing how the group "was sent on tour in an old touring car completely covered with Wesleyan stickers. It was during the seasons of '32 and '33 that the foursome, and accompanist Dwight Drexler '34, averaged 1,200 miles a week for a total of over 30,000 miles." Drexler went on to become a music professor, serving on the faculty until 1979.

Music professors Henry Charles and Frank Bohnhorst also sang with the quartet as students. Along with Drexler, they continued to provide inspiration for the group, as did Robert W. Cummins, an alumnus who sang with the Apollo Club in the 1920s. Cummins' son, Bob, was perhaps the first IWU student to succeed his father as an Apollo member.

"I knew my dad was a member of the Apollo Club because I had seen pictures all my life," Bob Cummins says. "When I was an Apollo, I had the feeling I was following, not in my dad's footsteps because his shoes were too big to fill, but in the sense of carrying on the tradition."

During Bob Guenzler's time with the quartet, the Apollos were associated with both the School of Music and the Admissions Office. It was Admissions that provided the perks each performer received: "a stipend of one-half tuition and a new suit," says Guenzler '53, who vividly recalls the double-breasted navy suit, red and white polka-dot tie and white buck shoes that served as his era's "performance uniform."

"Our class schedule was arranged so that we had at least one day during the week to be 'on the road,' and we were often scheduled for events on weekends," Guenzler says. Their gigs were primarily high school assemblies and performances for Methodist organizations. "We might even work in a noon appearance for a Kiwanis, Rotary or Lions Club in a town where we were doing a school program, with a free meal as a reward."

The free meal was also a staple at their many church appearances. "It was always ham, scalloped potatoes and green beans," Cummins says with a laugh. "I haven't eaten ham, scalloped potatoes or green beans since then."

In the early 1950s, Lee Short '44 took over leadership of the quartet. A music major at IWU, Short served briefly on the music faculty before being tapped by then-University President Merrill J. Holmes to serve as director of Admissions. Short immediately sought the help of the Apollo Quartet among his many

efforts to improve enrollment, which had declined following the graduation of hundreds of veterans who had attended IWU on the G.I. Bill following World War II.

With Short at the wheel, the troupe took a three-day road trip each semester to sing and sign autographs at high school assemblies throughout Illinois. “The (high school) girls thought they were tremendous,” says Short. “And the boys — well, they didn’t like them very much,” he adds with a chuckle.

Short ramped up the group’s showmanship, according to Jim Stahly ’62. In Cummins’ day, the Apollo repertoire was all barbershop, all the time. Under Short’s tutelage, the group still did barbershop but also sang show tunes and spirituals, with a little soft-shoe dancing and some jokes thrown in. “Lee had a big band background,” Stahly says. “He knew we should open with a rouser, close with a rouser, and the ballads should come in the middle.”



The 1970-71 Apollo Quartet included, from left: Dave Anderson '71, Bob Small '72, Clarence Semmes '72, Randy Rocke '71 and accompanist Dale Miller '70 (not shown).

While group members never took payment for their performances on behalf of the University, private gigs were a different matter. For \$25 (\$5 for each man), a hostess or committee chair could hire the group to perform at a bowling alley, social club or private birthday party. “We got so busy that to try to make it worth our while, we raised our fee to \$35 my senior year, but not without a lot of trepidation,” Stahly recalls. “Some of us thought, ‘We’ve done it now, no one will hire us.’ We found it didn’t matter that the price was \$10 more than it had been the year before, we stayed so busy. And we still ate a lot of chicken dinners.”

During Stahly’s senior year, that quartet was pegged to entertain troops stationed overseas ([see related story](#)). According to Roger Sheldon ’64, Stahly’s group was so busy getting ready for the overseas tour that a new generation of Apollos was recruited to fill their places earlier than usual. “We learned all new stuff so we were ready to sing as Apollos my junior year,” says Sheldon. That material included show tunes such as “Till There Was You” and “Lida Rose” along with the sea shanty “The Keeper of the Eddystone Light” and even a cowboy-style “Ghost Riders in the Sky.”

One song, however, remained a staple, no matter who was in the quartet. “We could do ‘The Wesleyana Cheer Song’ in four parts at the drop of a hat,” Sheldon laughs.

In the late 1960s, the Apollos added “TV performers” to its collective resume, appearing on local stations in Illinois and Indiana. Lee York ’56, who had become a member of the quartet with his friend Bob Cummins, accompanied them on a tour in October 1968 in his role as admissions counselor for IWU.

Outside the glare of publicity, the Apollos are fondly remembered by alumni of the era as an integral part of campus life. In the 1950s and ’60s, they entertained at campus events such as the Mother’s Day banquet and Dad’s weekend, alumni dinners and the annual Greek variety shows.



Two decades of Apollos were represented at Homecoming. Pictured from left to right: Bob Guenzler '53, Jim Stahly '62, Roger Sheldon '64, Marlin Tenboer '52, Bob Cummins '56, Doug Amman '61 and Alan Harler '62. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

After Short's retirement in 1978, the Apollos became a student-run group. Ron Kieseletter '89 says Professor David Nott, director of choral activity, served as their sponsor. "Everyone in the group came from the Collegiate Choir ranks," says Kieseletter. "Dr. Nott gave us feedback as far as our quality and also set up most of our performances at local high schools, IWU events, private parties and at high schools across the country when the Collegiate Choir toured." Coincidentally, "Goodbye, My Coney Island Baby" was their signature song, just as the tune had been for Bob Cummins' group 30 years prior.

It's not clear exactly when or why, but the group gradually faded into obscurity until it got an unexpected revival in 2006. That's the year then-freshman Jeremy Kings '10 got the urge to "do a different kind of music, and also arrange songs for four voices." At that time, Kings didn't know about the Apollo group, but picked a similar repertoire of spirituals, sea shanties, folk music and barbershop arrangements. For months, his group had a set list but no name. Kings mentioned this problem to his high school choir director, Ron Kieseletter, who then suggested Kings take the Apollo moniker as homage to the former group. Kings and the others — Paul Cochran '10, Mike Schneider '10 and Andy LoDolce '10 — settled on Apollo Four. "In a sense, we were the spiritual successors to the Apollo Quartet," Kings said.

Apollo Four disbanded in 2008, but Kings says its two-year stint defined his IWU experience. "One of my favorite memories is seeing how many of our friends turned out to support us at our first official concert," he says. "Incredible singing experiences are so much better when you have good people with which to share them."

That sentiment resonates throughout the decades of Apollo incarnations, no matter if there were four voices or 40. From one group to the next, the Apollos counted off "a 1, 2, 3" to begin the next number, the next gig and the next decade.

History was far from the minds of Apollo alumni, however, as they rehearsed in a Presser Hall practice room for their Homecoming performance — they were just trying to nail the tricky vocal parts. At one point, Stahly noticed three young men seated in the tiered seats up top, who he learned were alumni members of Suspended, the student group that has continued the all-male vocal tradition into a new generation at Wesleyan.

"They asked if they could watch us rehearse," says Stahly. "We didn't mind, even though we hadn't done these arrangements in years, and we were still trying to work out the parts without too much arguing."

After introducing himself to Stahly and the others, Suspended founder Tim Shelton '04 provided a quick caveat. "If you notice us snickering back here, we're not laughing at you or your singing," he advised. "We're just trying to figure out which one of you guys we'll be in 50 years."

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