

“FULL-MEETING” CHAPTER PRESENTATION (3 pp.)

by Vin Zito — May 2000

(Customize the personal parts to fit your personal history.)

1. **THE WOODSHED** — That was the little wooden building in the back yard where, in the old days, Dad took you for a spanking when you did something wrong. That’s where you hid to get away from doing the chores. That’s where you went to sneak a smoke or maybe steal a kiss from the girl next door. Or maybe that’s the place where you hid to sing and play the ukulele or play the harmonica for your own enjoyment and not be frowned upon or made fun of by others.

Let me introduce myself — I’m Vin Zito, and I’m a very fortunate Barbershopper. I have been a Barbershopper for over 50 years, and you can bet that in those 50 years, our Society has gone through many changes. Let me take you back to when I joined. Our International Headquarters was in Detroit, Michigan, in a hole-in-the-wall storefront. Our Executive Secretary at that time was Carroll Adams, one of the well-known pioneers numbered among such notables as O.C. Cash and Hal Staab, to name a couple. Carroll, by the way, tutored me when I joined the judging system. (My tenure lasted a record 40 years.) Carroll operated on a shoestring. If I recall correctly, per-capita dues were \$2.50 in those days. With that income, Carroll printed *The Harmonizer*, which came out bimonthly if we were lucky. Occasionally (and not too often), we received a musical arrangement from him, arranged by one of the more popular Barbershop arrangers of the day. So, we were somewhat fortunate; we managed to get a song now and then.

So, here we are, chorus and quartets alike, yearning for good arrangements. If you were lucky, you had someone in the chapter who could do some basic arranging, or you paid a “professional” a fee of \$100 or so to have a particular song arranged. If it was a good arrangement and you sang it at a convention or contest, someone would have a wire recorder and would steal the arrangement. Many were guilty of that. I remember that we had a District Convention & Chorus Contest in Lynn, Massachusetts, around 1959. Eleven choruses were entered in the contest, and nine of them sang *A Son of the Sea*, an extremely popular arrangement at that time. My quartet, *The Sleepless Knights of Harmony*, was slated to sing while the judges added up their scores. Back in the dressing room, we quickly learned the Intro to the song, walked on stage, and sang it. Before it was over, we expected to be the first casualties of the Society.

What’s my point? It’s simply that arrangements were at a premium and hard to come by. When I joined the Hartford chapter, one of the first members I met was a man named John Vergotti. John sang in a quartet called *The Four Pals*. I asked him how many songs his quartet knew, and he proceeded to pull two 8.5-x-11 sheets out of his pocket with two rows of song titles on each side. I laughed and told him that he was pulling my leg. He said, “Pick a song,” which I did. He got his other three guys and sang it. I picked another and another, and they sang them. How was it that they could learn so many songs? John let me in on the secret: He said that the Lead knew the melodies and the other three improvised as they were sung. John called it “woodshedding” — the first time that I had heard that word. I was flabbergasted. John said that most of the chapter quartets learned that way.

What woodshedding amounted to was to develop a harmonic ear and learn to recognize the melodic road being traveled down while you were singing. You would recognize a feel for, or premonition of, what the other harmony guys were going to do. This is woodshedding in its purest form. No music, no musical director, no written arrangement — just sing, and sing it until it sounds right. The key was to develop an **ear** for music and make it as important as the mouth emitting the tones. Woodshedding is four men finding a ringing chord to each melody note and working out their own arrangement to that melodic line, familiar or not. Woodshedding incorporates all the fine points of good singing, breath control, vowel-matching, and fitting your part so that you are listening to the other parts and blending. Best of all, woodshedding is primarily for self-enjoyment of the four singing members of

the quartet; it is not designed to please or entertain outside listeners or spectators. Are there any questions about woodshedding?

2. A dear old friend of mine who hailed from Massachusetts, Charlie Nichols, was an avid woodshedder. In 1977, he recognized that quartets and choruses were increasingly dependent on written, intricate arrangements. These arrangements had a degree of difficulty that did not allow the average Barbershopper an opportunity to show off his ability to improvise. Woodshedding was becoming a dying art. Sensing this, Charlie and several of his stalwart followers founded AHSOW in order to keep the pure form of woodshedding alive. Charlie discovered that he was not alone in his desire to save woodshedding, and soon AHSOW's membership began to grow. Not only did it grow, but weekend "woodshedding conventions" began to pop up. Along with the average Barbershoppers joining, notable quartets — some with medals — and some of our most noted music men have joined. Everyone is interested in keeping AHSOW's purpose alive, and that is to help Barbershoppers develop a good ear, have a respect for three other parts, and keep alive the off-the-cuff harmonizing without a written arrangement. One other thing that AHSOW preaches is to sing another voice-part, not just your own. Get a taste and a feel for another part, and it will help you to have more respect and discipline when singing with three other guys. It will also give you an opportunity to fill in on a part other than your own, when it is needed.
3. One of our earlier staff members in the Society's Music Department was a gentleman by the name of Dave Stevens. Dave had a wonderfully unique way of getting a Barbershopper to tune in his brain and listen while singing. I'd like to demonstrate this method to show you how he did it.

How many of you know the song *Five Foot Two*? I see that quite a few of you are familiar with the song. I'll sing the first part to refresh your memory.

(Sing: "Five foot two, eyes of blue, oh what those five feet can do; has anybody seen my gal?") Now, I'm going to ask you to give me an opening major chord on an "ooo" sound to the first phrase, and I don't care if you sing a note in your part or somebody else's. *(Group sings chord — E^b or any comfortable chord for the singer. Leader sings "Five foot two.")*

(Leader asks group to think of the next chord and prepare to sing a note in that chord. Leader sings "eyes of blue." Leader asks for the next chord and sings, "oh, what those five feet can do." Leader asks for next chord and sings, "has anybody" [group changes chord] "seen my" [group changes chord] "gal?" Group will put a swipe on the last chord.)

Now, why did you put a swipe on that last chord? You simply felt it, didn't you? That's part of the harmonic road that you're traveling down. Let's see if we can get further into the song. *(Leader sings rest of song, while group puts in the chords on a neutral sound.)*

Now — let's go back to the beginning. Those of you who want to can sing the melody, and the rest of you sing along on a harmony part, using the words the best you can. *(When it's over, Leader compliments the group and asks where/when they've seen an arrangement of that song. Few or none should have seen it — **remember to have confirmed this in advance!**)*

Then how did you know what chords to sing? You know how — your brain recognized the melodic road, and your ear told you what note to sing that would fit.

The musical road that the songwriter had in mind can be recognized sometimes by the musical notations written above the staff of the published arrangement. A chord for each passage is noted, along with the finger-placement for a guitar. In woodshedding, there could be several roads, and all could be pleasing to the ear.

4. Now, there are a few rules that we try to adhere to in AHSOW:

- a. The melody-singer must know the words. Harmony parts may sing on a neutral sound.
- b. It's more fun to sing more than one voice-part (but only one per song!).
- c. As guidelines, we agree —
 - i. The Lead is always right. He may not be correct, but he is right.
 - ii. If the Lead is wrong, refer to the rule just above.
 - iii. When you establish a note in a chord, stay on it until you are obliged to move.
 - iv. When you're obliged to move, move the shortest distance possible to the next acceptable note.
 - v. When you are able to, move back to the original note.
 - vi. Possession is nine-tenths of the law. Whoever gets a note in the chord **first** is entitled to it, and you must find another... unless the other singer agrees to give up the note. This applies to harmony parts only; see "the Lead is always right" above.

Now, let's put it to the test. Who in the Lead section can read music? (*Select one volunteer. Give him a copy of the melody-line to "Down Mobile." Have him sing it through, helping him if he needs it. Ask the group if they recognize the song.*)

You know what? *Down Mobile* was the very first song that O.C. Cash and the boys sang in 1938 at the Society's initial gathering in Tulsa, Oklahoma. See what you can learn from woodshedding?

(*Leader asks a Tenor to join the Lead and try to harmonize with him. Leader asks him not to be shy, and tells him that if he can't remember the words, he can sing with a neutral vowel.*)

Now, let's find a Bass! (*Three parts sing. Introduce a Bari to the group and let them sing. Guide them where needed, based on anything appropriate that they're trying to do.*)

Now, let's see what happens when the Bass gets carried away and sings a different note on *-bile* of *Mo-bile*. (*Leader tells Bass to sing the Bari's note. The Bari finds another note that fits the chord.*)

Ah, ha! The Bari got pushed off his note, but notice how fast he found another one? You are woodshedding, fellows.

I'm going to pass out a list of song titles amongst you, and let's see if you can break up into groups of four and see if you can put something together. Remember — you don't necessarily sing your own part. I'll give you 15 minutes or so, and then we'll get back together and have a mini-contest. Remember: ***No singing published or written arrangements!***

(*Leader conducts the contest and praises all of the participants.*)

This concludes my presentation, gentlemen. I'm passing out to you the rules and the process by which you can join AHSOW. I am the District Certifier, and it will be my extreme pleasure to come visit you again in the very near future and audition you for AHSOW. You know, AHSOW has a room at most Barbershop gatherings where you can go and meet and harmonize with your fellow members. Most of us go to conventions and never get to sing. Well, here is a way to change all of that! If you become a member, you'll get a badge, a list of the members, and a copy of the AHSOW bulletin that will keep you abreast of goings-on and coming events. You can buy a shirt like mine so you can be easily recognized — and, believe me, you'll meet some great guys in the AHSOW room. If there are no more questions, I thank you for the opportunity to stand before you and tell you about AHSOW and how it works. As a member since 1987, I have enjoyed it, and I want to share it with you. It's achievable, it's fun, and it's musically fulfilling. Give it a try, and remember — even if you are not a member of AHSOW, you're still welcome in an AHSOW room.

Come to the meeting prepared with: AHSOW badge & shirt; copy of member bulletin & membership roster; folio of melodies; enough Song Titles to pass out to the group; enough copies of "What is Woodshedding" flyers & the rules of the contest; enough "Harmonize with AHSOW" gold brochures; yellow Certifier Cards.