

Let's Sing Again ♪

2001

Jim paced behind the curtain, the old excitement coursing through him, making him feel 20 again.

Mary Ann tapped him on the shoulder. "You look wonderful, dear," she said, smoothing the lapels of his black tux and straightening his gold championship medal. "Just as handsome as you were 50 years ago!"

"It was quite a ride," He grinned. "It wasn't easy for you... all those trips and you home alone with the kids. What were we getting ourselves into?"

"None of us knew at the time," she laughed. "But you know, I wouldn't have traded a minute. You and your brothers had a wonderful, wonderful gift. You *had* to share it. You made a lot of people very happy and proud... including me."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Good luck!"

Jim was grateful for the twinkle in her eye. She had always been his biggest supporter. As the stage manager whisked Mary Ann away in the backstage commotion, the emcee strode up.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Well, to tell you the truth, thrilled," Jim sighed. "It's been a long time since I've been on a stage like this."

"Everything is all set backstage. All you have to do is speak into the microphone."

"Into the microphone," Jim chuckled. "You know, the quartet didn't often need a microphone, but I think I can handle it."

The emcee smiled as he stepped through the heavy black velvet curtain.

Behind the veil, Jim heard him say, "In 1989, the Barbershop Harmony Society started a wonderful tradition to honor our 50-year champions, our true heroes from long ago. And tonight is no exception. We honor a very special quartet that in 1951 took the gold medal. Four brothers who we came to know and love over the years. We present them right now, first in a video that tells a little bit about their story."

On the monitor, Jim could see the video playing for the crowd. “Gold Medal Quartet Golden Anniversary” spun across the screen. As an old recording of *I Love the Way You Roll Your Eyes* played in the background, a family photo of his parents and all 17 children appeared. One by one, Fran, Joe, Paul and Jim were spotlighted. Old photos and newspaper clippings floated by. There was Mother on the back of the convertible with the quartet as they rode into town after winning the championship. A 1958 black-and-white film featured *Hello!* and launched into *Shine*. Jim couldn’t help singing along under his breath. Then the 1981 clip of Joe, always the comedian, saying, “You know, we’ve sung together longer than any other barbershop quartet, we have more kids than any other quartet... and we weigh more than any other quartet, too!” Jim laughed. And finally, the live video from 1983 singing *When Your Old Wedding Ring was New*. Statistics scrolled up the screen: 3,000 performances... more than 2 million miles... appearances on Ed Sullivan, Arthur Godfrey and Lawrence Welk... live shows at Carnegie Hall, Madison Square Garden, Chautauqua and the tour in Alaska to entertain the troops. Finally, the 1951 photo with the quartet sitting around the trophy, proudly sporting their gold medals.

The crowd roared.

“There is no honor that we could have tonight that could top introducing the lead singer of the Schmitt Brothers Quartet. Please say hello to our friend, Jim Schmitt!”

The emcee peeked through the curtain, grabbed Jim’s arm and led him the few steps to the podium.

The sudden burst of hot white light stabbed his eyes. Thunder boomed in his ears. Through the glare, he sensed a surging wave rolling toward him like the breakers on Lake Michigan. He blinked, shuffling backward a step. Ten thousand pairs of hands were applauding for the quartet that they loved—that he loved—so dearly.

Suddenly, he felt small in this enormous venue, the annual convention of the international barbershop association. And he felt alone. “God,” he thought. “How I miss my brothers.”

That Silver-haired Daddy of Mine ♪

1935

“Those boys are cute as a bug’s ear,” the lady whispered to the radio announcer as she grabbed a tall chair. “Now, you just sit on here, sonny,” she said patting the top of the seat. His brothers lifted Jimmy up. “That’s it. Now, just sing right into the microphone.”

Little Jimmy’s eyes grew big as saucers. “That big round thing?” he said. It seemed enormous. A huge metal ring held a smaller disc in the center suspended by springs. The whole contraption was the size of a dinner plate. Four big letters—WOMT—perched on the top like a crown.

“Yes, honey. Just sing into the microphone,” she smiled as she tussled his hair.

“OK, boys! Are you ready?” said the announcer from his desk.

“Yes, sir!” the four brothers exclaimed anxiously.

“The rules of the contest are simple. You can sing one song, one time. Our judges will decide which singer or group does the best job. The prize is \$5. Sound good?” In the midst of the Great Depression—when 10 pounds of sugar cost 49¢ and steak was 22¢ a pound—\$5 was a prize worth over \$90 today.

“Yes, sir!” The boys replied with nervous smiles. One swallowed hard. Another coughed to clear his voice.

“I’m going to turn on the microphone now. First, I will introduce you, and then you will sing your song. Ready?”

They nodded.

“And now we have the four Schmitt brothers from Two Rivers. Hello boys!”

“Good morning, sir,” said Leo. He was electrified by the experience of performing on the radio. Two of his older brothers had been announcers in college. It was amazing to hear their voices over the airwaves. Now it was his turn. He sensed how uneasy his little brothers were and took the lead. “We are very happy to be here today.”

“Why don’t you tell us your names and how old you are?”

“I’m Leo, I’m 18, and I play guitar.” He poked Joe.

“Oh, I’m Joe,” said the next brother leaning toward the big metal disc. “I’m nine years old.”

“I’m Paul, and I’m seven,” replied the third nervously.

“I’m JIMMY!” shouted the youngest.

“And how old are you, sonny?” laughed the announcer.

Jimmy held up his fingers, tucking his thumb into his palm.

“Four? Well, aren’t you a big boy! Now, what song would you like to sing?”

Leo said, “We would like to sing *That Silver-haired Daddy of Mine.*”

“Ah, the Gene Autry tune. That’s a favorite! Ladies and gentlemen, the Schmitt brothers will now perform *That Silver-haired Daddy of Mine.*” The announcer nodded, signaling them to begin.

Leo hummed the pitch and strummed the initial chord. The three boys began,

It’s Joe, Paul and Jim singing lullabies.

It’s Joe, Paul and Jimmy trying to vocalize!

Spreading the last note into a three-part chord, they took a breath and launched into their song.

*In a vine-covered shack in the mountains,
Bravely fighting the battle of time,
There’s a dear one who’s weathered life’s sorrow.
It’s that silver-haired daddy of mine.*

*If I could recall all the heartaches,
Dear old Daddy, I’ve caused you to bear.
If I could erase those lines from your face
And bring back the gold to your hair.*

*If God would but grant me the power,
Just to turn back the pages of time.
I’d give all I own if I could but atone
To that silver-haired daddy of mine.*

The announcer sat back in his chair, astounded by the power of their voices. For little kids, they sure had a big sound. He raised his eyebrows and locked eyes with his assistant. She nodded in agreement.

“Well boys, that was mighty fine! Ladies and gentlemen, you’ve just heard the Schmitt brothers. Tune in tomorrow to hear which one of our talented contestants will win top prize!”

The announcer flipped a switch. “That was great boys. We will give you a telephone call later today. Thanks for coming in!”

Jimmy scrambled down from his chair. “That was fun!” His brothers were beaming. “Boy, it wasn’t as scary as I thought,” said Paul.

“Told you it was a great idea,” said Leo, glancing at the clock on the radio station wall. “Anyhow, we’ve got to get home. We’re going to be late for dinner.” Tardiness was not acceptable in the Schmitt household. The brothers ran down the stairs from the second-floor radio station and spilled out onto the cobblestone street where Leo had parked the car in front of the Mikado Theater. It was a bright sunny day. With any luck, they just might make it back in time.

The drive took them from bustling downtown Manitowoc north along Lake Michigan to their small hometown in Two Rivers. Leo always enjoyed the seven miles beside the lake. It was like an ocean really—you couldn’t even see the other side. But on a clear day, you could almost see Sheboygan 40 miles to the south. The lake could be wild with whitecaps or calm and still as glass. In the winter, ice bergs bobbed among the waves, and if it was really cold, the lake steamed. In the summer, the deep blue water lapped the sandy beaches and a cool breeze floated up the rivers.

In the back seat, Joe, Paul and Jimmy were chattering excitedly about their radio debut. Jimmy still didn’t quite understand how it all worked. “We’re going to be on the radio!” said Joe. “Why would we sing on the radio?” asked Jimmy. “I usually just stand on a chair.” The boys laughed hysterically.

It was true. Almost since he could talk, Jimmy had been standing on chairs and belting out tunes while his sister, Mary, accompanied him on the piano. Mother even had him sing for the Ladies Society at church. Five years earlier, when she was leaving Mass one morning, a good friend asked her, “Annie, you aren’t going to have another one? You know, at your age, you could have some real trouble.” (Mother was 47 at the time.) But she just replied, “You never know. This could be my little Caruso.” And so he was.

Leo pulled up to the garage behind the big gray foursquare house on the corner. It was 2-1/2 stories tall with windows peeking out of the hipped roof. An elm grew beside the sunning porch. Like all the neighborhood homes, it stood on a narrow lot, separated from the next house by a driveway. Everyone piled out of the car, sprinted up to the

side door and bolted up the stairs, letting the screen door bang behind them. Pal, the Great Dane, welcomed them with a great “Woof!” Joe patted the gentle giant on the head as they raced by.

It was too late. Halting in the kitchen doorway, they could see everyone already seated, sipping their soup in the dining room. At the head of the table, Dad conveyed his rebuke with a sharp, intent stare. Leo hurriedly apologized, “We’re sorry we’re late. Come on, guys. Let’s wash up.” He led them to the kitchen sink to wash their hands. Glancing over his shoulder, he could see that Dad and Mother weren’t really mad, but expectations must be met, and rules must be followed.

Instead of sitting down at the table, they headed straight for the front hall, entered the living room through the French doors, got down on their knees, placed their hands together and said grace loud enough for everyone in the adjoining dining room to hear. Being late was no reason to forget to thank the Lord. Finally, they joined the family for dinner.

The long Hepplewhite mahogany table could seat as many as 24, although it required a variety of chairs. Mother and Dad had 17 children, but several had already left the nest. Sylvester, Agnes, Raymond, Ben and Al were married. Henry was ordained, and Louise was away at nursing college. Only 12 chairs were needed now.

Out of necessity, the dining room was much larger than the living room. Dark oak board-and-batten paneling rose two-thirds of the way up the wall, capped with a plate rail. A built-in Craftsman-style oak china cabinet with leaded-glass windows extended most of the length of the long wall. Doilies hung daintily over the shelves where Anna displayed her prized china.

In the Schmitt home, dinner conversation revolved around one central question: What have you accomplished today? Each person had their turn. If you didn’t accomplish anything, you were likely to receive an assignment.

“Kathryn and I made the soup today,” said Mary.

“Well, it certainly is delicious,” said Dad, nodding with approval.

“Jean and Jane helped, too,” said Mother. At three, even the twins could lend a hand. “They helped put all the vegetables in the pot.”

“Very nice, girls,” said Dad. “Someday, you will be good cooks, too.”

The little girls exchanged smiles and giggles.

Jimmy couldn’t contain himself any longer. “WE SANG ON THE RADIO!”