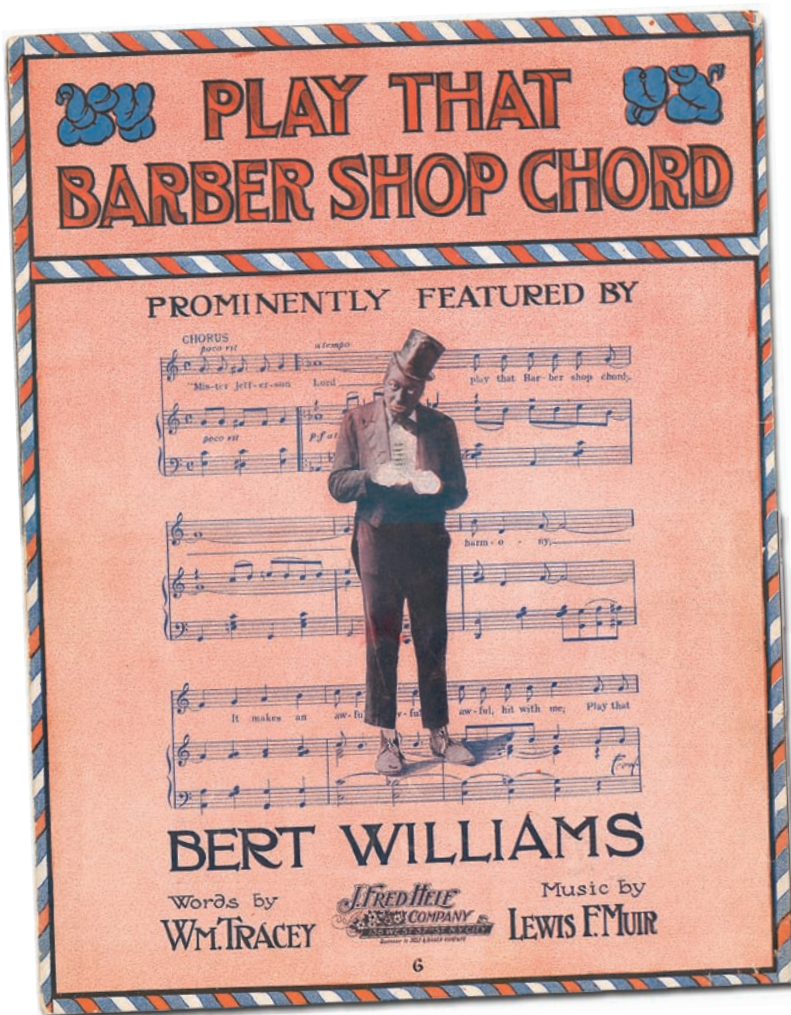


This 1910 score had long been the earliest known musical use of the term “barber shop”. (Note black minstrel performer Bert Williams on the cover.) Now the oldest reference dates to 1900—a black music critic’s lamentations about black barbershoppers.

THE HISTORICAL Roots OF BARBERSHOP HARMONY



If you're a Barbershopper, the odds are good that a certain Norman Rockwell print is hanging on some wall in your house. You know the one I mean. First appearing on a 1936 *Saturday Evening Post* cover, the scene depicts four men, one with lather on his face, warbling a sentimental ballad: the quintessential barbershop quartet.

Barbershop quartets often are characterized as four dandies, perhaps bedecked with straw hats, striped vests and handlebar mustaches. These caricatures of the barbershop tradition are not only a quaint symbol of small-town Americana, but have some historical foundation. Barbershop music was indeed borne out of informal gatherings of amateur singers in such unpretentious settings as the local barber shop.

But modern scholarship is demonstrating with greater and greater authority that while the stereotype seems to have successfully retained the trappings of the early barbershop harmony tradition, it breaks down on one key point. If you visualized the characters described above as you were reading, you probably pictured them—like Rockwell did over sixty years ago—as white men. And therein lies barbershop music's greatest enigma: it is associated with and practiced today mostly by whites, yet it is primarily a product of the African-American culture.



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Historical evidence

The African-American origins theory is not new. Several of our early Society members and recent historians have made the assertion, or at least suggested an African-American influence upon barbershop harmony. But it was a non-Barbershopper, Lynn Abbott, who in the Fall 1992 issue of *American Music* published, “‘Play That Barber Shop Chord’: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony,” presented the most thoroughly documented exploration into the roots of barbershop to appear up to that time.¹ In that writing, Abbott draws from rare turn-of-the-twentieth-century articles, passages from books long out of print, and reminiscences of early quartet singing by African-American musicians, including Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong, to argue that barbershop music is indeed a product of the African-American musical tradition.

Among Abbott's recreational quartets, W.C. Handy, for example, offers a memory that is quite telling of the racial origins of barbershop music. Before he became famous as a composer and band leader, Handy sang tenor in a pickup quartet who, he recalls, “often serenaded their sweethearts with love songs; the young white bloods overheard, and took to hiring them to serenade the white girls.” The Mills Brothers learned to harmonize in their father's barber shop

The African-American origin theory, in a nutshell

From the evidence gathered by Lynn Abbot and other historians and other supporting evidence, we might glean the following plausible, albeit overly simplistic, scenario of the black origins of barbershop music.

1. Starting in the 1880s and 1890s, blacks harmonized recreationally the popular songs of the day as well as spirituals and folk songs, improvising harmonies according to long-standing African-American musical practice.
2. From these sessions arose certain idiosyncratic musical qualities that are the hallmarks of what we now consider the barbershop style.
3. The idiosyncrasies of the sound made it ripe for imitation by white minstrel performers, who used blackface, Negro dialect and musical inspirations to parody the black culture. It should be noted that black minstrel shows also included the unique musical style.
4. The sound became so popular that white professional quartets, often consisting of minstrel performers, brought the sound into the burgeoning recording studio scene. Black quartets, on the other hand, were rarely recorded, and when they were, their recordings were not given the mass distribution enjoyed by white artists. These white close-harmony recordings included the old minstrel songs, but also newly written songs that did not necessarily refer to stereotypes of African-American culture.
5. A hybrid form of the music arose, resulting from two main factors: (1) whites were singing it and infused it with some of their own traditions and (2) the limitations of the recording process at that time forced quartets to shed inherent vocal traits and affectations that would not reproduce well on the early recording equipment, or, perhaps, would not have been acceptable to the public. As a result, certain so-called “low-brow” elements of the black version of barbershop music were lost.
6. Due to the popularity of these recordings, people—especially those in the white communities—came to associate the peculiar close-harmony sound with the white quartets that recorded them, thus sealing the stereotype.

in Piqua, Ohio, and several well known black gospel quartets were founded in neighborhood barber shops, among them the New Orleans Humming Four, the Southern Stars and the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartette.

Early musicians associated barbershop music with blacks ...

Among Abbott's findings are specific early musical references that suggest that barbershop was once acknowledged as African-American music. Here's just a sampling of the findings:

- The illustration on the cover of Irving Berlin's 1912 composition, “When Johnson's Quartet Harmonize,” features an African-American quartet.²
- Geoffrey O'Hara's attempt to accurately transcribe what he had heard sung by early African-American barbershop quartet singers resulted in the publication of “The Old Songs,”³

which we still sing today as the theme song of SPEBSQSA. The first refrain of O'Hara's version proceeds on to “Massa's in de Cold, Cold Ground,” complete with its reference to “the cornfield” and vocal imitations of farm animals and a banjo, all conventions of early black vocal music.

- The earliest white quartet recordings are rife with minstrel show conventions which included negro dialect and other parodies of the African-American culture, suggesting an African-American association with the music.

... and the earliest known reference to barbershop music is associated with black quartets

Finally, the earliest known references to the term “barbershop,” as it refers to a particular chord or brand of harmony, link it with African-American society.

As early as 1900, an African-American commentator with the self-imposed moniker “Tom the Tattler” accuses barbershop quartet singers of “stunting the growth of ‘legitimate,’ musically literate black quartets in vaudeville.”⁴ The 1910 song “Play That Barber Shop Chord,” which before Abbott's discovery of the Tattler's commentary was considered the earliest reference to the term “barbershop,” also associates the genre with African-American society.⁵

The song tells of a black piano player, “Mr. Jefferson Lord,” who was given the plea by “a kinky-haired lady they called Chocolate Sadie.” The fact that the barbershop chord in this case is not articulated by a quartet, but rather by a single pianist shows that by 1910 the flavor of barbershop harmony had already taken on a life of its own beyond the boundaries of its usual host.

It is unknown exactly when or why barbershop music became associated with whites. Abbott cites African-American author James Weldon Johnson who, in the introduction to his *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, published in 1925, offers a hint at how the association might have shifted:

*It may sound like an extravagant claim, but it is, nevertheless a fact that the “barber-shop chord” is the foundation of the close harmony method adopted by American musicians in making arrangements for male voices. ... “Barber-shop harmonies” gave a tremendous vogue to male quartet singing, first on the minstrel stage, then in vaudeville; and soon white young men, where four or more gathered together, tried themselves at “harmonizing.”*⁶

There is additional support for the effluence of barbershop music from black neighborhoods into the white mainstream, as suggested by Johnson, in its parallel with other forms of African-American music. Ragtime, for example, was wrought by African-American musicians, whose syncopated rhythms and quirky harmonies (which, by the way, are the same as those found in barbershop music) became the backbone of the white-dominated Tin Pan Alley. More recently, musical genres such as rock-and-roll and country-and-western,

though clearly rooted in the African-American musical tradition, are now commonly associated with whites.

Musical support for the “African-American origin” theory

Lynn Abbott’s scholarship regarding barbershop music’s roots is unparalleled and his arguments are utterly convincing. He limits his scope, however, to historical data and primary-source recollections, and chooses not to delve into the inherent musical qualities that demonstrate the ways in which barbershop music reflects the African-American musical tradition. In my recent doctoral dissertation, “The Origins of Barbershop Harmony,” I address this important link.⁷ Using more than 250 transcriptions and recorded examples of early African-American and white quartets, I illustrate how the most fundamental elements of barbershop music are linked to established traditions of black music in general and African-American music in particular. The scope of this article allows me only to summarize my findings, focusing on the following musical characteristics: (1) call-and-response patterns, (2) rhythmic character and (3) harmony.

Call-and-response

The call and response pattern is one of the most fundamental characteristics of black music. Though it has many variations, call-and-response can most simply be defined as a type of responsorial song practice in which a leader sings a musical phrase which is either repeated or extended by a chorus of other voices. It is heard in spirituals, gospel, the blues, Cab Calloway’s “Hi-De-Ho” songs and rap, to name a few genres.

The barbershop musical lexicon abounds with examples of African-American-based call-and-response technique. Indeed, some of the most recognized barbershop tunes such as “You’re The Flower Of My Heart, Sweet Adeline,” “Bill Grogan’s Goat,” and “Bright Was The Night” are made up almost entirely of call-and-response pat-

terns where each musical phrase is sung first by the lead and repeated by the other three parts.

The very first song to be sung at that fateful 1938 meeting in Tulsa that christened the SPEBSQSA was “Down Mobile,” whose ending—at least as transcribed by Sigmund Spaeth in his 1940 book *Barbershop Ballads and How to Sing Them*⁸—is a classic example of call-and-response. The following year, in 1939, the **Bartlesville Barflies** would win our first “international” competition with a medley that included a call-and-response rendition of “By the Light of the Silvery Moon.”

Rhythmic character

Upon listening to nearly any form of African-American music, sacred or secular, one is immediately drawn to its unrelenting regularity of the pulse. Above this basic pulse might be found any variety of uneven rhythmic patterns. Tilford Brooks explains that the element of rhythm in most black forms of music can be contrasted with that of music in the European concert tradition in that “the former makes use of uneven rhythm with a regular tempo while the latter employs even rhythm

While many barbershop chord structures run counter to Western classical conventions, they’re a natural part of African-American musical traditions.

with accelerandos, ritards, and different tempi.”⁹ This metric sense is so ingrained in the music of the African Diaspora that it is stressed “even in the absence of actual instruments.”¹⁰

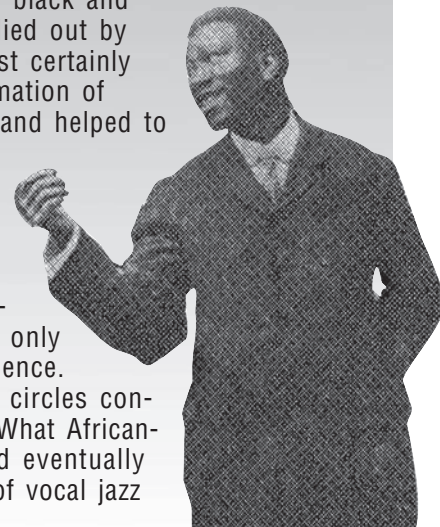
The African-American a cappella quartets devised a method

whereby the feeling of percussion and meter is created through vocal means. The technique employs a class of devices—called “rhythmic propellants” by recent barbershop theorists—which are designed to maintain the metric pulse through held melodic notes and rests. Like call-and-response patterns (which themselves can be considered types of rhythmic propellants) the rhythmic propellant is fundamental to the barbershop style, and most Barbershoppers will recognize the prevalence of these devices in the songs they have sung or listened to.

Perhaps the most common rhythmic propellant in barbershop music is the “echo.” The echo is closely related to call-and-response pattern and usually occurs at the end of a musical phrase while the melody is holding a note. To keep the pulse going under the held note, one or more of the harmony parts

Why do so few African-Americans sing barbershop today?

The answer to this question may lie in the early history of SPEBSQSA. Barbershop music, both in black and white society, had almost completely died out by the late 1930s. Its demise would almost certainly have been continued if not for the formation of SPEBSQSA, which preserved the style and helped to spawn and sustain barbershop clubs first across the country and eventually world-wide. Because SPEBSQSA—citing the pre-civil rights norms of fraternal organizations such as the Shriners and the Elks—disallowed African-American membership until 1963, only whites were benefactors of this resurgence. Barbershop music in African-American circles continued its decline to virtual extinction. What African-American barbershop groups remained eventually shifted their interest to various forms of vocal jazz and gospel.



*Even the first
refrain in the
publication, “The
Old Songs,” pro-
ceeds on to
“Massa’s In De
Cold, Cold
Ground,” complete
with references to
conventions of
early black vocal
music.*

will repeat the last word or words of that phrase.

One need only look at the phrase endings in the song, “Keep the Whole World Singing,” to find clear examples of echo technique. Other rhythmic propellants clearly of black origin and commonly found in barbershop music include instances where one or more parts sing strict downbeats under syncopated rhythms; counter-melody or “patter” (take, for example, the lead patter that accompanies “Down Our Way”); “fills” (basses are especially popular choices to fill this role; every time you’ve heard “bum bum bum,” “my honey,” or “oh, lordy” you’ve experienced fills); “swipes” (where the chord changes or moves to a different voicing under a held melody note—recall, for instance, the phrase endings in “My Wild Irish Rose”); and the ever-popular “tiddlies” (baritones are particularly adept at performing these little flourishes to color a held chord, and become quite agitated when you try to rush them through it).

Harmony & the tell-tale blue note

Perhaps the most characteristic element of black music, the one that pervades every one of its incarnations, is the so-called “blue note.” Relative to the Western major scale, two blue notes are commonly identified: the lowered third and the lowered seventh notes of the scale.¹¹ The blue note is a testament to a culture’s ability to retain musical traits over great spans of time and distance. It is an anomaly by Western standards. No form of Euro-centric music gave rise to it. It is this blue note and the scale that derives from it that offers the strongest argument in favor of the “African-American origin” theory of barbershop music.

In order to support this claim, a little technical background is required. I apologize in advance to the academic musicians who will no doubt cringe at the generalizations I am about to make for the sake of simplicity and space con-

siderations.

The barbershop seventh

The single most telling hallmark of the barbershop style is that curious sonority we call the “barbershop seventh” chord. The barbershop seventh chord is described as a “major-minor seventh” chord be-

cause it results from taking a simple, three-note *major* chord and adding to it a *minor* seventh above the root, i.e., the lowest note of the chord).¹² If we were to build seventh chords on every note of the major scale, the only one that would yield this sound would be the fifth note of the scale, sometimes called the dominant. For this reason, many musicians call this chord a “dominant seventh,” and give it the Roman numeral shorthand V7.

In Western classical music, this dominant seventh chord anticipates a harmonic return back to the tonic chord (called Roman numeral I because it is built on the first note of the scale, the key note). We call this motion a “falling fifth” because the progression from the dominant to the tonic is down a perfect fifth. So in the key of C, the major-minor seventh chord built on the fifth note of the scale (G) will tend to lead back to C. (Go backward down the musical alphabet counting each letter: G-F-E-D-C—five total letters.) The major-minor seventh chord as heard in classical music is almost always used to suggest this dominant function.

In African-American music, however, we may hear the major-minor sound built on, and functioning as, any number of chords other than the dominant. A major-minor seventh chord built on the subdominant (i.e., the fourth note of the scale, Roman numeral IV), for example, is a common occurrence. The natural seventh of this particular major chord is a major seventh. Yet in African-American music one will often hear it sounded with a minor seventh, thus giving it a major-minor or

“dominant” sound. The major-minor seventh chord in this instance, however, is clearly not conceived as a dominant seventh chord because it does not progress in the falling fifth manner discussed above. Rather, it moves as it would if it were a simple version of IV.

Three distinctly African-American traditions merge to seal the deal

So how did above anomaly come about? It is the result of three African-American musical traditions all coming together: (1) an approach to music that is primarily horizontal rather than vertical, (2) a particular penchant for improvisation and (3) the blues scale. Let’s use the chorus of “Shine On Me” (in the key of C for the sake of simplicity) to illustrate how it works:

1. The implied chord on the word “shine” in the second phrase (after the lead sings “in the mornin’”) is a IV (subdominant) chord. It would classically be written as a simple major chord (F-A-C) without a seventh, and proceed to the V (or V7) chord (G-B-D-[F]). In the case of this song we do find the IV chord moving to the V chord two words later on the word “me.”

2. If a quartet were singing this with a somewhat classical flavor, the tenor and bass probably would sing in octaves on the root of the chord (which, you’ll recall, is built on the fourth scale degree, F). A singer in the African-Ameri-



Want to learn more? Want to hear some early quartets? Attend Dr. Jim’s class at Harmony College. Register at spebsqsa.org/hcdc.

can quartet tradition, however, would be the thinking of his part not only in terms of how it stacks up against the other parts, but as a line unto itself. The improviser in him would add little flourishes (“tiddlies,” if you prefer) that would no doubt incorporate blue notes. In this instance, he would likely pass down from the fourth-scale-degree root (F) through the blue (flatted) third (E-flat) of the scale.

3. The resultant F-A-C-Eb quality will sound exactly like a major-minor seventh chord. Since it was not conceived as a dominant chord, however, but simply an improvisation upon a IV chord, it will proceed onto the V as originally intended, not down a fifth as common practice would dictate. Thus in terms of function, this particular F major-minor seventh is not really a major-minor seventh at all. It is a simple IV chord with the lowered scale degree “three” from the African-American blues scale added to it. The influence of the African-American musical tradition to this basic barbershop idiom is unmistakable and argues forcefully in favor of the “African-American Origin” theory.

What's next?

While barbershop has been an ever-changing musical art form, certain hallmarks of the style seem to have remained implacable for well over a century. Call-and-response patterns, rhythmic propellants and “barbershop seventh” chords are among the many distinctive features of the barbershop tradition that, when considered alongside the entirety of found historical evidence, root the genre in the African-American musical tradition. The road that leads back to barbershop, however, is still fraught with holes that need to be filled. Thus, while the performer in me looks excitedly to what our 21st century singers will add to barbershop’s future, the historian in me prays for more scholars who will dedicate themselves to its rich and enigmatic past.

Notes

1. Lynn Abbott, “Play That Barber Shop Chord: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony,” (*American Music*, 10 [Fall 1992], pp. 289-326). Wilbur Sparks review of the Abbott’s article is found in the January/February 1994 edition of *The Harmonizer*.
2. Irving Berlin, “When Johnson’s Quartet

Harmonize” (New York: Waterson, Berlin & Snyder Co., 1912).

3. Geoffrey O’Hara, “A Little Close Harmony” (Boston: Boston Music Co., 1921).
4. On page 308 of his article, Abbott includes the following quotation from “Tom the Tattler,” Indianapolis *Freeman*, December 8, 1900. It is valuable not only as the first known reference to the term, but also in the insights it offers regarding the musical constituents of early barbershop harmony: A noticeable advancement along the lines of the profession is the passing of the barber shop quartette with its barber shop harmony. It doesn’t take much of an effort of memory to recall the time when all quartettes sang their own self-made harmonies, with their oft-recurring “minors,” diminished sevenths and other embellishments. This barber shop harmony, although pleasing to the average ear, and not altogether displeasing to the cultivated ear, is nothing more or less than a musical slang. It violates—at times ruthlessly—the exacting rules and properties of music. All forms, phrases and progressions of music go down before it. What does [sic] the barber shop exponents of harmony care for such delicacies as the forbidden progressions of perfect fifths and octaves? What do they care about chord progression in its correct form? Their chief aim is to so twist and distort a melody that it can be expressed in so-called “minors” and diminished chords. The melody is literally made to fit their small stock of slang-chords, instead of the chords being built around the melody.
5. Lewis F. Muir and William Tracey, “Play That Barber Shop Chord” (New York: J. Fred Helf Company, 1910). Abbott discusses the song on page 312 of his article.
6. This quotation, found on page 299 of Abbott’s article, is from James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking Press, 1925), 36.
7. Completed at Washington University in St. Louis in May 2000; the complete title is *The Origins of Barbershop Harmony: A Study of Barbershop’s Musical Link to Other African-American Musics as Evidenced Through Recordings and Arrangements of Early Black and White Quartets*.
8. Sigmund Spaeth, *Barber Shop Ballads and How to Sing Them* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1940).
9. Tilford Brooks, *America’s Black Musical Heritage* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984).
10. Richard A. Waterman, “African Influence on the Music of the Americas.” In Sol Tax (Ed.), *Acculturation in the Americas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 216.
11. It is important to keep in mind that the degree to which these pitches are bent is not absolute, but may fall anywhere within a half step.
12. If you play every other white key on the piano starting on G and ending on the F above it (to the right of it) you will hear a major-minor seventh chord.

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