

Woodshed Weekend XX Promises to be a Real Blast

(lifted from article for the upcoming AHSOW news letter)

The annual Woodshed Weekend is hosted in the Baltimore area in mid-February each year by the Dundalk MD chapter. What fun! What a chance to hear new songs, to stretch the mind and wrap it around lots of melodies with other equally eager woodshedders!

The February 2007 event will be the twentieth anniversary of the “Danny Cuthbert Memorial Woodshed Weekend” and the Dundalk guys are asking us to spread the word to help make it an even bigger blast. Mid-February is precisely when ‘cabin fever’ is at its worst and enthusiastic harmony-crafting is just what the doctor ordered.

Dundalk hosts the event at the Holiday Inn Select in Timonium MD (first exit off I-83 north of I-695, the Baltimore Beltway). The main event of the weekend is the woodshedding competition. How’s that, you ask? How can one compete and be judged in such a free-form unstructured activity as woodshedding?

The answer: quartets are judged NOT by musical excellence, NOT on presentation, NOT on vocal athleticism, but simply on how they exemplify the “spirit of woodshedding”. Therefore, mistakes made while trying to craft a song are not necessarily wrong *per se* if they demonstrate ability and knowledge of harmony principles and of taking a chance in the hopes of really nailing an unusual chord – and this ‘discovery’ process is precisely what woodshedding is supposed to be about.

It’s somewhat like Olympic figure skating: the skater who does only safe predictable moves will never win, whereas the winning one may actually spill and recover during the performance. Likewise a woodshedding quartet doing only simple predictable moves (we call this “recollection” singing rather than woodshedding) will generally lose out to a daring competitor. At least that’s the theory on which the contest is predicated. We’ve all sung “I Want A Girl” and “Girl Of My Dreams” so much that we know just what to sing; so there’s not much spirit-of-woodshedding in simply burping back a standard output. When the quartet actually finds chords to an unfamiliar melody, the woodshedding skills are obvious!.

Entrants put their names on index cards for each part they want to sing. All tenors in one bucket, all leads in the next bucket, and so on. Foursomes are drawn at random from the buckets. Two quartets compete head-to-head in a round and the winners get their cards promoted to the next-round buckets. Losers get a second chance if it’s their primary part or discarded if it’s a secondary part.

New quartets are drawn at random each round. (This is what really blows the minds of people used to Society quartet competitions: you *never sing with the same guys twice!* Or maybe there will be one, but he’s a tenor this time and not a lead.) The lead selects the song by himself; no consulting with the others is allowed. Polecats and well-known arrangements like Coney Island Baby are prohibited, and if a song has previously been sung it is not allowed to be repeated (although there has been a little rule-bending from time to time.) The harmony parts are told the song as they are marching up to the stage – no studying/collaborating allowed.

Eventually, through the multiple rounds, cream does float to the top and the better “shedders” make it to the Final Four then finally the champion foursome emerges. And remember that those four guys never sang as that group-of-four till the final round!

There is also a chapter trophy for most individual ‘wins’ throughout the contest. It’s more complicated than that so come to Baltimore and find out firsthand.

Of course a nitpicker would find plenty to complain about in the judging! It’s everything the Society contests are not. Heckling, hooting, laughing are par for the course. Judges have been known to leap onstage and finish the proper note for some poor struggling soul amid great hilarity. But the main goal is to **have fun** while embracing and encouraging the principles of volunteer harmony. It’s the antithesis of the perfection-oriented, arrangement-on-paper system used elsewhere in the Society and perhaps for that reason, it’s an emotional release of great enjoyment. Instead of “I’m OK, you’re not OK” it becomes “I’m OK, you ain’t so bad yourself.”

Woodshed Weekend is scheduled for February 16-17, 2007 but keep checking at www.dundalk.org/woodshed.html as the time nears. (That site also has a link to this year’s results.) Note that this is not an officially sponsored AHSOW event, nor an officially-sponsored Society event for that matter. It’s woodshedding, by gum! It’s fun. Ask anyone who’s been there.

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