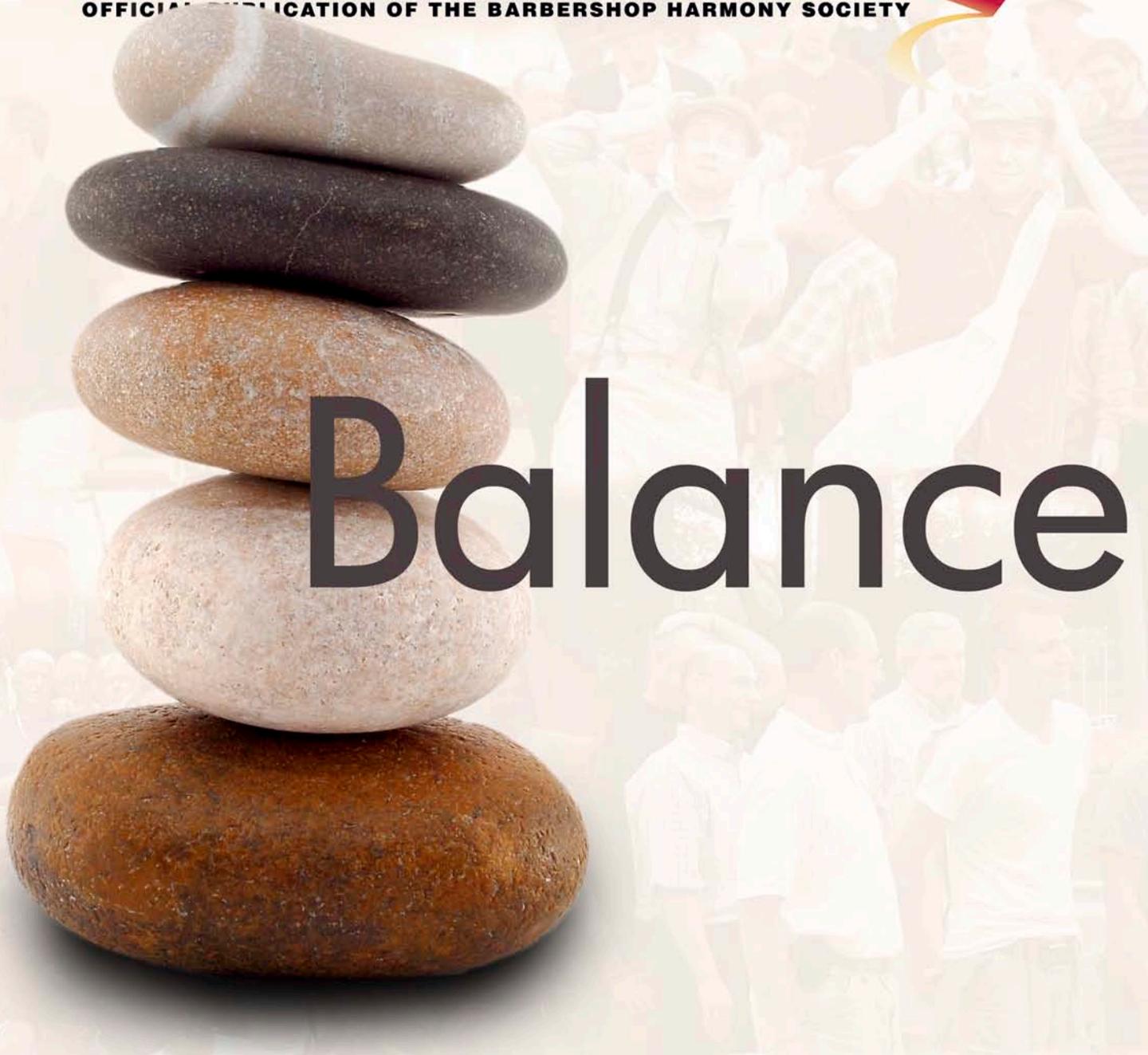


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# THE HARMONIER

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# Balance

10 chapters that are doing a lot of things well



Chordial Celebration quartet, featuring the fathers of three Storm Front members, performed "Wonderful World" at afterglows for years. Unlike their sons in Philly, they always sang it straight up ... and fully clothed.

# Storm Front

# EXPOSED

As Storm Front bows out as the reigning International Champion, lead Jim Clark gives the inside scoop on what it takes to "bring the funny"

## Why comedy?

Ultimately, in a contest you want to capitalize on your strengths and develop your weaknesses. Since we had no strengths, we played rock/paper/scissors to decide which weakness to develop. Comedy won.

## Is comedy more difficult than non-comedy?

We've had success at both, and comedy is definitely harder. The upside can be almost limitless, but if comedy doesn't work, you curl up into a ball in front of 10,000 people and start mumbling, "No place like home. No place like home." It's not pretty.

## How can a group develop into a comedy quartet?

It starts with really bad choices in your youth. Actually, step one is to answer the question, "Is anyone in our quartet funny?" It's much harder to be successful at comedy if no one is inherently funny. (It's not impossible. Look at us.) Next, determine whether or not every guy is willing to throw all caution to the wind to make the audience laugh. It takes a personal resolution (or resignation, in Jeff's case) to say, "This could cost us the contest. But if the audience laughs ..." After that, trial and error, coaching, trial and error, coaching, trial and error ...

## How do you balance comedy, contestable music, and quality singing?

With a whip and a chair.

## How about just using someone else's material?

The rule of thumb is, *never steal someone else's shtick*. You'll always be compared to the original quartet. While developing your own original ideas is difficult, fresh material that's unique to your quartet is often better-performed (and better received) than copied routines. (We're still waiting to find out what that feels like.)

## What does a quartet brainstorming session look like?

Honestly? Very little singing, a tremendous amount of laughing. Formal brainstorming usually only develops general concepts—it might occasionally get a song to around 75% complete. But it's usually more like this: Someone throws out a random idea while in the hotel room, then someone tacks onto that while in the dressing room, then someone else thinks of something more on the way to the afterglow, etc. Most of our ideas take quite a while to percolate. From concept to stage is usually a months-long process, and one that never stops. In fact, a strangely high percentage of our great "hits"

in contest songs were added during the International Contest week each of the last three years. It takes warped minds to operate like that. (Or a lack of minds, in our case.)

### How do you “test drive” comedy so you don’t have to bomb in front of audience to learn something doesn’t work?

The #1 rule is *know your audience*. They must understand your shtick before they can laugh at it. (A non-contest audience won’t understand contest-specific comedy, for example.) Once an idea seems viable, it’s time to bring in “outsiders”—wives, kids, friends ... getting a reading from others is critical. Once it begins to develop, the inclusion of a coach who knows “funny” can be a tremendous help. (In our case, Rick LaRosa, lead of 1999 champ **FRED**, was an exception.) Ultimately, we tend to think that if something makes us laugh, it might make the audience laugh. However, until it is actually in front of that audience (contest or otherwise), you just don’t know. Zero guarantees of what will work. All part of the risk/reward and part of the excitement.

### What got you over the top? Was there a watershed moment that helped you jump from 20 to 10, from being “accustomed to third place” to gold?

Work. Toil. Sweat. Time. Frustration. Effort. Plain old work. We’ve also worked with some great coaches over the years, including Jim Casey, Kim Hulbert and others. Since 2007, the two guys who took us the rest of the way were Chad Guyton (lead of 2002 champ **Four Voices**) and Rick LaRosa. They were the right guys at the right time. Rick taught us how to sing, and Chad “brought the funny.” Or was it the other way around? ...

### Were you worried about how long each of your sets ended up lasting in Philly?

What? Were we on stage especially long? No one’s ever mentioned that. Actually, I think our default position



## Our only two missions were to make sure everyone noticed our improvements in singing and to pull out all the stops to make everybody laugh.

was, “If they stop laughing, we’ll get off the stage.”

laugh. If that meant we were on stage longer than any quartet in history, we’d be satisfied so long as we won the audience. (Jury’s still out on that.)

It’s odd, but once you begin to believe you can do anything, it becomes easier to do it. We always wondered where **FRED** got the confidence to work up new shtick during the convention week. Yet there we were, 10 years later, in Nashville, Anaheim, and Philly, changing things the night before, the day of, and backstage. It was thrilling.

### Is it true that your wives gave you a “now or never” mandate in the year running up to Philly?

Maybe not a “now or never,” but there was an urgency unlike anything before. Jeff had spent many years with **Riptide** while the other three had been toiling away with **Storm Front**. While our families loved what we did for audiences and each other, we were often missing from our families’ lives. Even when we were home, we were often “not home,” with all the quartet work to be done. It was tough. In the spring of 2009, when we realized the only way to beat **Crossroads** was via sabotage, we looked forward to 2010. Things changed when Darin (an excellent musician and realist) said, “If we do everything right the next year, I think we can win in Philly.” Our wives gritted their teeth and said, “Okay, you have one year to go crazy. After that ...”

We loaded up with shows, coaching and rehearsal. Nearly every show weekend in 2009-10 became a three-day marathon. From Friday night, every moment we weren’t singing on a show or afterglow was spent coaching or rehearsing until we flew home Sunday night. Tough. (Especially when you are so tired, you show up for work Monday morning in your lime quartet suit.) But it was the fastest year of our competition lives.

### How do the “straight men” in comedy make or break the buffoon’s shtick?

This was a challenging question for us. I’m naturally

### Why push the envelope so far? What gave you the guts to risk wearing out your welcome with all the talking, non-singing and disjointed music?

A change of attitude. For Philly, our only two missions were to make sure everyone noticed our improvements in singing and to pull out all the stops to make everybody



**Jeff Selano (tenor):** A native of Toronto, Jeff is well-known as a past Singing judge and bass with five-time quartet medalist **Riptide**, as well as with **Bandstand**. Jeff was introduced to barbershop by his father, Julian, singing in the International champion chorus, **The Dukes of Harmony**. A chiropractor and entrepreneur who owns several businesses, Jeff lives near Atlanta with his wife, Mary, and their children Julian, Camille and Annabelle.

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hammier than the other three, so we initially planned for me to be the buffoon. However, it was awkward for the audience to have the lead singer play the fool. It was Rick LaRosa (Mr. Know-It-All) who first suggested turning the traditional model on its ear, instead going with three fools and one put-upon straight guy. After some initial consternation we tried it, and everything clicked. It's been downhill ever since.



**Jim Clark (lead):** Jim sang in a handful of quartets, including 1995 CSD champ, *Freefall*, and won a medal with college quartet *Milennium*. For nearly 10 years, Jim sang with his wife and other family members and friends in *The Denver A Cappella Project*, and continues to perform on the front row with *Sound of the Rockies*, as well as direct the *America the Beautiful Chorus* in Colorado Springs. A retirement plan account manager, he lives in Aurora, Colo. with his wife, Rhonda, and their sons Simon and Seamus.

**There were other tough adjustments outside of the comedy, weren't there?**

A few. We had three guys changing voice parts [Jim-tenor to lead; Darin-bass to bari; Jeff-bass to tenor], a member switch [adding Jeff], quartet members in different locations [two in Denver, two in Atlanta], getting together only once or twice a month ... we didn't plan for it to be so hard. However, we didn't set out to find the four best voices to try to win gold. (None of those guys would sing with us.) We set out as friends and family with goals of putting on a great show and developing our singing to a point where we could win International, and then continue beyond. The gold medal was never the



The "Storm Front section" of the Father-Son-Grandson chorus in Kansas City.

**BITTERSWEET CHAMPIONSHIP YEAR.** Bass Syd Libsack's grandmother died during the 2010 finals, not long before Storm Front took the stage. (Syd found out just before posing for championship photos.) Later in the year, the wives of Syd and tenor Jeff Selano escaped serious injury while having their cars totaled in separate accidents; then between the matinee and evening shows on the shared weekend with their fathers in Kearney, Neb. (see sidebar), Syd and lead Jim Clark somehow avoided serious injury when their car was demolished in a high-speed collision. Two weeks later, bari Darin Drown's father, Gary, would be diagnosed with terminal cancer. The day after that diagnosis, Jim's father-in-law passed away. "It was almost as if Providence had said, 'We're going to hold off until you get this gold medal thing out of the way, and then we're going to cut loose,'" said Jim.

final destination, merely part of the journey. The road has sure been difficult, but it made the contest success awfully sweet.

**Speaking of sweet, it had to mean everything for the dads to see your homage to them help you win gold.**

Gary Drown, Steve Libsack, Dan Clark and Rod Businga formed the Rocky Mountain District quartet **Chordial Celebration** in the late 1970s. Darin, Syd, and I grew up watching their superb slapstick. They never competed at International, never won distinct,

**Funny fathers upstage their sons in their last show together, then upstage their own performance during a backstage glance**

"It was a God moment for sure ..."

That's how Storm Front tenor Jeff Selano described a chapter show they co-headlined with **Chordial Celebration**, a long-time Rocky Mountain District comedy quartet featuring the fathers of the other three Storm Front members. It's true that the evening looked even sweeter in hindsight; at the time nobody knew it would be Chordial Celebration's final performance. (Gary Drown was later diagnosed with the cancer that would claim his life.) Yet for Jeff, his "God moment" came sooner, during a fleeting backstage



glance at the three fathers' smiling faces.

Chordial Celebration had booked last October's **Kearney, Neb.** gig more than a year earlier, and Storm Front performed for expenses-only so the chapter could afford both quartets. From a purely performance standpoint, the champs never should have agreed to follow these comedy veterans. "We had our rear ends handed to us ... and we could never get the audience back on our side," Jeff said. "It was awesome!"

While the audience wiped away tears of laughter following Chordial Celebration's set, Gary himself teared up as

he prepared to introduce the men he vividly remembered as three boys playing on the carpet during their fathers' rehearsals. His buddies had already shared these stories, but Jeff had never heard it from the fathers' side. That new perspective, just as Storm Front was ready to take the stage, set up "the moment of my year," Jeff said.

As Storm Front began trying to coax laughs out of a laughed-out audience, he caught several glimpses of Chordial Celebration watching from backstage. Having spent an evening with those three fathers, Jeff's father, Jules, wasn't far from his mind.

"My dad is my personal hero," he said. Ten-year-old Jeff got hooked on barbershop harmony the first night Jules took him to a rehearsal with Ontario's **Dukes of Harmony** in the fall of 1976. The chorus was like "a freight train" as they built

but for their sons were one of the all-time great quartets. They showed us both the joy and power in making an audience laugh. Without ever saying it, they taught us that no award is worth more than releasing an audience from themselves for a few short minutes.

We were honored to share the show stage with Chordial Celebration at multiple shows over the years, including the Kearney, Neb. chapter show in October, 2010, which turned out to be their last show. Two weeks later, Gary was diagnosed with the cancers that took him from us in February, 2011. What a gift to perform with them that one last time.

**Back to the original question, how did y'all pull off the "long-distance" quartet thing?**

Lead-line tracks via e-mail, non-stop coaching/rehearsing on show weekends, and very forgiving wives.

**Your contest parodies made the case for more traditional barbershop, and then you released a Beatles album that isn't barbershopy at all. What's up with that?**

It's not "barbershop?" Really? Actually, it was driven by eclectic tastes. Jeff is a major Beatles fan who had commissioned arrangements from Jay Giallombardo before joining the quartet, so we jumped aboard. Loving more than one style of music does not mean we love barbershop any less. In fact, we are all better Barbershoppers because of our appreciation of multiple styles and genres. Variety is the spice of life.

**Variety indeed—your quartet is almost as famous for its trumpet finale as for its barbershop. Was that by fate or design that you all play?**

Fate. Darin was a trumpet major in college (and can play anything). I played trumpet through college.

Darin and I first did the horn finale in the Central States District quartet **Freefall**, which had three trumpet players and a trombone player. When Storm Front first formed, Darin floated the idea of bringing back the horns. We cobbled it together with chewing gum and baling wire. When Jeff joined the quartet, it was pure luck that he happened to be a trombone player, even if he hadn't touched one in 15 years. He worked harder than anyone to resurrect his chops. (When that didn't work, we implanted a tiny digital player in the bell of his trombone. Syd and I have no excuse.)

**How has being a international champion affected life outside of barbershop?**

When you come back to work and show your co-workers the gold medal, they smile and say, "That's nice," and usher you to the work that piled up in your absence.

**How does Storm Front "encourage"?**

We have been humbled, more than once, to have parents tell us how they dragged their kids to a show, only to have them be so enthralled with our show that they didn't want to leave. Beyond the performance, we try to connect with every person we can during a show weekend. If we are not singing tags with kids and guys from a chapter, if we are not the last ones to leave the theatre, if we are not the ones "closing down" the after-



**Darin Drown (bari):** A 19-year music educator, Darin is Director of Vocal Music at Grandview High School in Aurora, Colo. His college quartet, **The Four Hoarsemen**, won silver in the first international collegiate contest in 1992. Darin directs the five-time International medalist **Sound of the Rockies** and for nearly 10 years was musical director and baritone of **The Denver A Cappella Project**, singing with his wife, sister, and other family and friends. Darin lives in Aurora, Colo. with his wife, Jenny, and children Colin and Mary.

on the energy from a surprise second-place international finish earlier that summer.

"I got my doors blown off, there was so much electricity in that room. I was so proud because I looked up and there was my dad," Jeff recalled. Jules went on to win his first chorus gold in the Dukas' record-setting 1977 performance in Philadelphia. Jeff's path to gold in the same city began at that 1976 rehearsal. "Everything I've done in this hobby ever since, I'm still chasing the feeling from that first rehearsal."

Back to Kearney. Jeff will always remember

the sight of the older men watching from backstage, their faces beaming with pride at a comically flat performance that only a father wouldn't recognize as

the evening's second-best. That's when he realized those smiles had little to do with the quartet's shtick.

On their faces, Jeff instead saw a powerful image of hearts bursting with joy at their sons' success. "I can't imagine what it would be like if my son got a gold medal in a quartet," he declared. "We'd be inconsolable." But these three men's sons had inherited more than a knack for comedy and a passion for barbershop harmony.

"Beyond being great barbershoppers," Jeff said of his quartet mates, "they're fantastic men, fantastic fathers." Their fathers' faces backstage told Jeff why this was so: "It's all they know," he realized. Like father like son, and barbershop harmony was part of the medium. "Everything kind of came together at that moment."



**Gary & Darin Drown**



**Jules Selano**



The show was "a God moment" to the quartet, even before learning it would be their last time together.

Two weeks later, all would be shocked to learn that this shared time on stage could never again be repeated. Yet, even while the evening's shtick was earning weak chuckles from out in the hall, Jeff already knew he wouldn't forget what he saw and felt from behind the side curtain. "I realized there were so many gifts we'd been given," he said. "God had brought this full circle."

—Lorin May

## Swipes 'n' Swaps

**“New director” ads are free in *The Harmonizer*** (first 50 words) to Society chapters. Additional copy for director ads, or other ads for uniforms and risers are \$25 per column inch. Send to [harmonizer@barbershop.org](mailto:harmonizer@barbershop.org).

### DIRECTOR WANTED

**The Midwest Vocal Express (MVE)** of Greendale, WI is seeking a new director who will help us build upon the rich and unique heritage of the MVE and take us to the next level of singing, performing, and International medal excellence. Contact Darryl Cremer at [dbcremer@wi.rr.com](mailto:dbcremer@wi.rr.com).

**The Wild Rose Harmonizers**, Red Deer, Alberta, Canada are looking for a new director to take over the development of our chorus. More information and a job description available on our website [www.harmonizers.ca](http://www.harmonizers.ca).

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glow and the glimmer, it just doesn't feel right.

### Why should men and kids get involved in barbershop?

Where else in the world can kids and teenagers be working toward a common goal alongside men in their 20s, 40s, 60s, and beyond? Where else is your background, your job, or your salary completely irrelevant, and the only important thing is what part you sing? What other “hobby” can be shared by fathers, sons, and grandsons, while simultaneously changing people's lives? Where else can youngsters be given so many great role models to admire? Oh, and that “small” thing about preserving a great American musical art form. Nothing like it.

### You're all second-generation barbershoppers. Any insight to how chapters can encourage more people to enjoy more and sing more barbershop?

1. Sing well. A chorus or quartet doesn't have to be winning contests to sing well. Good singing brings people in.
2. Put on an entertaining show. It doesn't have to be comedy, but it has to entertain. Patrons who have a great time in the seats are more likely to show up at a rehearsal.
3. Reach out to schools and music teachers. It's a tightrope act, as you don't want to beat a music educator over the head with barbershop. (They have others trying to get “in with them” all the time.) But reach out. Invite a high school group or program to appear on a chapter

Nearly every show weekend in 2009-10 became a three-day marathon. Tough. Especially when you are so tired, you show up for work Monday morning in your lime quartet suit.

show. Learn what you can do to help a local school music program, then do it with no strings attached. Work to form a friendship/relationship with music educators, it is a conduit into the Society's future.

4. Ask for help. Many choruses have tremendous encouragement/outreach “programs.” Find out what the other guys are doing. Share the things that work. For example, if we could all replicate the tremendous music camp that the **Rexburg, Idaho Chapter** hosts each January, the sky would be the limit! And there are countless other chapters in the world with similarly successful programs. Ask around. Ask your district leadership. Ask for help.

5. Always strive to improve. People like to be part of organizations who have purpose and direction.

### Will Storm Front use its “champ power” to influence others to join the Society?

Unlike the Scarecrow, who became brilliant when Oz handed him a diploma, a medal didn't make us any smarter. (Just ask our wives.) We try to be the best guys we can be. If the gold medals give us some additional credibility to show audiences what a life-enhancing experience Barbershop is, we're proud to do it. Barbershop has given us more than we can possibly imagine; the least we can do is tell the world about it every chance we get. ■



**Syd Libsack (bass):** At Northwest Missouri State University, Syd and lifelong friend Soren Wohlens founded **Millennium**, which won the college gold in 2000. Syd maintains membership (if not activity) with **Sound of the Rockies** and **Great Northern Union** choruses and has competed with each many times. As Manager of Secondary Loan Markets for Delta Community Credit Union, Syd lives near Atlanta with his wife, Abby, and their children Carley and Graham.