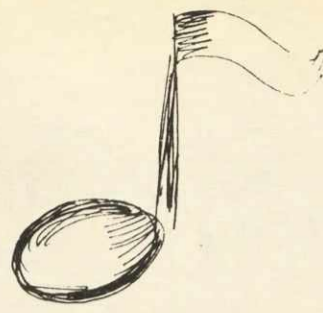
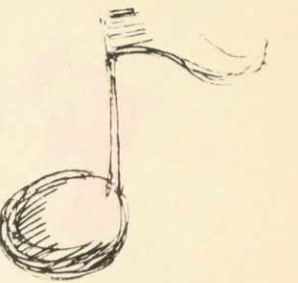


Four the Moment



Striking a vocal chord



by Michael Sean Morris

On a muggy Thursday afternoon, not so long ago, I spoke to two members of the four woman a cappella group Four The Moment which has performed all across Canada in their ten years together. The reason: their tenth anniversary "family reunion" concert is on Sunday evening, September 20th, at the Rebecca Cohn auditorium.

I was to meet with Kim Bernard and her sister Delvina together; it didn't work out that way, and so while waiting for Delvina, Kim and I began to talk.

Michael Sean: We should start off by dealing with how the group got started. What did you feel in 1982 when you heard that the Ku Klux Klan wanted to set up an organisation here in Halifax?

Kim: Well, actually, I wasn't really involved with that whole thing that went down with the KKK. Delvina was more involved with that. But you're right, what happened was that the KKK wanted to set up an office in Halifax and a group of concerned individuals got together and decided that they wanted to protest against that, and it was really nice because you saw a group of people that it didn't matter what colour they were get together and decide that they weren't going to allow this to happen. As a result of that my sister Delvina and Jackie Barkley [now the manager of Four The Moment] and a few other people in the community decided that they wanted to get together, and it was at this benefit, well really it was a rally, where they sang Bob Marley's "Get Up, Stand Up". Then there was a benefit concert that was taking place where they were trying to set up an abortion referral line in Halifax and Delvina was contacted and asked if that same group of people could actually sing

for this benefit concert and she at that time said that she couldn't pull the people together but Jackie said we should do something, and as a result of that Jackie and Vina pulled out the album by Sweet Honey in the Rock [another all-woman a cappella group] and decided that they wanted to do a protest song off that album, and thought to themselves, well, there's five-part harmony on this album....

Our interview continued after that for ten minutes or more, and in that time Kim related the stories, mostly of triumphs, that have marked the group's decade together.

When Delvina called to say she'd be late, that's when I noticed that the tape machine I'd been using had died on me, sometime about, well, about ten minutes back. So I packed it up, a little sheepish at my screw-up (which was actually the machine's screw-up) and hat in hand (metaphorically, of course), asked Delvina if she would consent to an interview of her own. She agreed, and I was glad for that, but not half as glad as I was by the time we'd finished our conversation.

In the cool dining room of my North End flat, the errant sounds of music and children playing alive in the autumn air, Delvina and I really, really got into what Four The Moment is:

Michael Sean: Okay, so we should start off by talking about how the group began.

Delvina: (laughs to herself) It was a complete shock, honest to God, because in one sense you know that there has always been racism in Nova Scotia, you know that through folklore or through history, storytelling. You know all about race riots that took place here, in Shelburne, New Glasgow, and some of the oppressive laws that are still on the books, but somehow I think we in Canada don't identify the Ku Klux Klan with the Canadian context.

M: It's not a Canadian thing.
D: Exactly! Although the Klan has been active in the Prairies.
M: B.C.
D: Mmm-hmmm. And all these

things really kind of shocked me.

M: Then outrage?
D: Then after that I WAS outraged. I was outraged. Then I wanted to do something about it.

M: The group formed, and it was part of another thing, a rally.

D: Exactly. I think the good thing about it was that Halifax showed it's best face. White people, black people, Jewish people, people of colour, women, men, got together to essentially say "NO", you are not welcome here. Because the government took a very slack approach by saying we can't set the legal precedent of outlawing any group, knowing full well the kind of hatred and activities the Klan perpetrates. So basically it was community justice. I wasn't intimately involved in the organising, I was primarily involved in the singing event, but that was how the group formed. We sang "Get Up, Stand Up".

M: The song that's sort of a signature.

D: Well, yeah! I think so.
M: I felt a little funny, originally, conducting this interview, me being a white man, interviewing a so-called "women's" group, three of whom are black. But the music is not like that. It comes across the boundaries people might perceive.

D: Well, I think you're right. It does cross the boundaries. The audiences we've performed for over the ten years have been certain interest groups like the black community, the lesbian/gay community, the women's community, and the third world community, which is just people doing development work in various countries, the arts community - you know, the ESTABLISHED arts community in Canada.

M: A notoriously hard community to break into.

D: But...the responses have been so varied. I think, by and large, people agree that the themes in the songs, while they come out of the experience of being a Nova Scotian black woman, the message we feel is universal, because injustice is injustice by any colour, by any sex, by any sexual orientation, and that's what we're speaking about - human rights and dignity. We constantly filter people out by saying these people are this or that....

M: Kim made the point very clear to me that the group isn't POLITICAL. But by being black and female in this society your life is inherently political.

D: Yes.
M: She agreed that your lives are all political, but that the music's more than that.

D: It's an interesting comment, because I think we do speak out of our experience. We're storytellers. We are observers of a culture.

M: That's the strength of folk music.

D: Yeah, and we try to bear witness to things that happen. What's interesting, and what we've really attempted to do is re-define what political means in the Canadian context. But by accepting the label of political in some ways we've accepted the dominance of European culture in Western society, and we're not a part of that. When Tommy Hunter or Anne Murray sing, they basically sing out of their experiences, and they are bearing witness and telling stories of their traditions. And that's not defined in Canadian consciousness as political.

M: I guess it depends on how political the status quo is, and if they sing from the status quo, that's cool. That's NOT political. But anything that's not the status quo immediately IS political.

D: Well, that's how the mainstream would label it. And one of the dangers, I think, in the label "political" is that it sets up a mental construct of opposition.

M: So can you get anything out of an Anne Murray song?

D: (a very friendly laugh) Actually, I can. I don't mind her music. It's not my experience, but I can get a lot out of any song.

M: You're just very musical.

D: I appreciate music from all domains because I think that it's a way of reaching out to people. Certainly, it helps me to see how the other half lives, whether it's my experience or not.

M: Okay, here's the cliché: where do you get your song ideas?

D: (thoughtfully) Where do I get my song ideas.

M: Because you do the writing.

D: Yeah. Well, they come from varied sources. I think sometimes one of the main impetus for writing comes from the community of people that we perform for, who come to us and say, could you speak to this, some particular issue. When we get invited to sing at an event, we would pen a song accentuating that event.

M: Writing a song to fill a need in people, like "West Hants County" or "U.I. Line".

D: But I think that as Delvina Bernard the artist that a part of the creation of art is that some of it has to come from within, from some place in your soul that you don't even know about. Sometimes I write songs about experiences that of course I've never had, but I think it's that sense of vicariousness I enjoy. And also what I term as "ancestral memory". Some things you just feel within your spirit that allow you to speak of things you haven't done.

M: Which you're in touch with, but another artist wouldn't be, because white culture is not like that.



A quartet of storytellers... observers of a culture.

It's not clannish; Celtic culture is, but not this eighth-generation whitebread stuff, like Bryan Adams.

D: Influences like that, and influences like-

M: Tracy Chapman?

were the source of something like "Black Mother, Black Daughter". Another recent song I wrote is about

poor of spirit. It was only after getting older and looking back that we said, "Damn! We were poor!" (laughs)

"...the themes in the songs, while they come out of the experience of being a Nova Scotian Black woman, the message we feel is universal, because injustice is injustice by any colour, by any sex, by any sexual orientation..."

But in your case there might be too many ideas around, because there's so much hurt and there's so much need for this kind of music. And with influences like Sweet Honey in the Rock.

D: I think more of the influences are pretty localised, and oftentimes aren't necessarily of a musical frame. Like for instance, women in my community, like all of my aunts, both maternal and paternal. Their lives

poverty, and a woman who's experiencing this. You needn't look far in black Nova Scotia to see material poverty. I call it material poverty because when we were growing up we certainly did not feel in any way

But your food, and clothing, and your other necessities, they were there.

M: The first time I heard of you was at Expo. What was that like?

D: Well, that was interesting, be-

cause it was a difficult decision. There was a lot of controversy around Expo, with respect to the displacement of many people from their homes, but we were very honoured and pleased to see that the Canadian government had the wisdom to recognise and incorporate African-Nova Scotian culture into the Expo celebrations. We felt we had a responsibility incumbent on us to be there.

M: What amazed both Kim and I was that the music really travelled.

D: A lot of people asked us, which part of the United States we were from, like somehow-

M: You couldn't be from here because you're black.

D: Well, yeah...

M: So, a cappella, it's supposed to look easy, because there's no instruments involved, but it's not easy, is it?

D: You're right. Are you a musician?

M: Well, no.

D: Well, you figured out something that's very wise. It's true, that is the magic of a cappella. The air of simplicity.

M: All the greats make what they do look easy.

D: That's very very true.

M: And then you find out it's not.

D: But it strikes a real chord in audiences, especially young people, and children, because I think people love the voice as an instrument, you know? What's that saying, "The voice is the only instrument that's alive." That characterises everything. To be able to manipulate sound and then be able to emote while doing it. You can emote on a guitar, or on a horn -

M: We're all familiar with the wailing saxophone.

D: Exactly! But when the voice does it, it's very challenging. None of us come from musical training, and so to be able to construct songs that are musically cohesive and pleasing to the ear, and sometimes teasing to the ear, that's quite an achievement.

M: It is.

D: What we want to do is achieve not only a message in our music, but to also have that backdrop - not to have music that's flawless, cause we're not doing that, but we're sort of particular about the construction of our music, that the integrity of it is at a professional level.

M: It's that untrained quality, and the diversity of the four of you, that makes the group so...natural. It comes through, it really does. You listen to it, and it's there. It says, these are PEOPLE. These are not machines.

D: If you strike a chord on a guitar, you depress the seventh fret, and the amp is set to a certain gauging, you will replicate the same note consistently, over and over and over. But the voice is part of your whole spirit. Each time you do a song it's totally different in texture.

M: Kim said that you determine the arrangements, but then it's really a consensus.

D: It is a consensus. Well, let's see...I think the first ingredient is the natural instrument of the voice, and everyone's voice is so different. But as we age, so do our voices. Then there's basically arranging the music, stacking the harmonies, according to first soprano, second soprano, contralto whatever. And in terms of the actual musical arrangements, it depends on what kinds of musical styles we're experimenting with. We have a style that's I'd like to think is uniquely ours, but it draws on our various backgrounds. And then I guess the final ingredient is interpretation. And interpretation is entirely boundless.

M: The second time I heard from you was during Black History Month, when I saw "Black Mother, Black Daughter". Your work on the title track, may I say, was haunting. It made the film.

D: (her eyes flashing) Yes.

M: And then now there's this concert.

D: (very touched) Thank you.

M: Four The Moment will sing their songs of personal triumph and heart-break at the Cohn on September 20th, at what will likely go down in the musical history of this city as something like the proudest homecoming and family-of-friends reunion, the kind of event that the Cohn could not hold, but is intimate enough to contain.

Four intense voices which weave into harmony. Four distinct women whose lives are woven together by the commonality of their differences. Expect pride, expect tears, expect elation. You wouldn't have it any other way.

Tickets are likely to go fast. They are \$15 regular, \$12 Students/Seniors, and available at the Cohn box office.