

NOVEMBER 2010

FOREVER YOUNG

## GORD ATKINSON'S SHOWBILL

## Fond Memories of Al and the Aces

2010 has been a sad year of farewells to old friends and colleagues. Just recently I became aware of the death of a long time musical friend and Ottawa fan favourite, *Al Alberts*. The lead vocalist of the popular quartet of the 1950's and '60's, *The Four Aces*, died a year ago this month of complications from kidney failure. He was at 88 still young at heart. I will long remember the Aces' frequent visits to the *Chaudiere Rose Room* and the *Gatineau Club* on the old Aylmer Road.



Al's gifted rapport with children and teenagers served him well when in 1962 he began hosting a weekly TV talent program in Philadelphia. It was "on the air" for a remarkable 32 years. He retired in 1994 and published a pictorial biography of *The Four Aces*. He thoughtfully dedicated one section of his book to our Ottawa days together.

Back in those happy days of the 1950's when rock was a new musical fad and the hit parade belonged to Tin Pan Alley, four personable young men from the Philadelphia area were the most popular vocal group in the world.

Al Alberts was a band singer early in his career. During World War II, while serving in the US Coast Guard in Newfoundland, he met Dave Mahoney, who was from his home town, Chester, Pennsylvania. After their discharge they decided to form a musical combo. They convinced two friends, Sod Vaccaro and Lou Silvestri, to join them in their showbiz endeavour. Oddly enough the foursome began as an instrumental group. "Well, Lou was our drummer," Al once told me, "Sod our trumpet player and I was the piano player and occasional

vocalist. Dave, who was our saxophonist, was one of the best jazz musicians in the business.”

Al was always amazed at how easily they switched from their roles as musicians to a close-knit vocal ensemble. “The Aces came about as if by fate. It’s quite possible that among four musicians one of them, or all of them might be tenors. It is also difficult to locate a top tenor voice, which is quite unique. Well, when we first attempted to sing as a quartet we were very surprised to discover that we had a bass, a baritone, a top tenor and a lead voice. When we recorded our first hit record, *It’s No Sin*, we had a natural blend of voices. It was an amazing discovery.”

Their first record came about through unusual circumstances. “We were playing in a club in a coal mining area of Pennsylvania where polka music was very popular. The manager insisted that every night we had to play at least one polka. A friend of ours who was a local musician and songwriter, George Hogan, offered to arrange a few polkas for us provided we featured one of his songs in our act. We did, and *It’s No Sin* won us a Decca recording contract.”

The Aces had the golden touch, with five of their releases selling over one million copies. *It’s No Sin* was followed by *Tell Me Why*, *Stranger in Paradise*, *Three Coins in the Fountain* and their biggest hit, *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*. They were so popular that they appeared 12 times on the Ed Sullivan Show and were Jackie Gleason’s guests 10 times.

Their familiar shuffle beat identified most of their arrangements and their performances which were always meticulously choreographed. Al was associated early in his career as a vocalist with the Jan Savitt Orchestra. “It was a band that popularized shuffle and when we began writing our arrangements, although we never planned on making it our beat, it just happened.”

During two international nostalgia tours in 1978 and 1980, The Four Aces were enthusiastically received at the National Arts Centre with “sold-out” performances. Their beautiful golden recordings of a half century ago continue to linger on in our collective memories like old friends from happy days gone by.

\* \* \*

The recent death of one of Ottawa’s most likeable and prominent citizens, Jake Dunlap, at 85, brought back to my mind a favourite memory of the colourful sports and judicial personality. It happened at a down town intersection during my early Ottawa radio days. While waiting for a red traffic light to change to green a

booming voice from across the street began singing a pop ballad. It was Jake, who then challenged me by saying, “Okay, deejay Gord A, what year was it popular and who made it a hit?” As startled pedestrians looked on I called back, “Don Cornell, 1950!” It was a touch of irony that the song was entitled, “*It Isn’t Fair*”! Jake was a loveable fellow to all who were privileged to know him.

*Contact and share your memories with -- [gorda@rogers.com](mailto:gorda@rogers.com)*