

AUGUST 20, 2025 ANNE LEVIN

## "Real Men Sing A Cappella" Program Geared to Men Who Like to Sing



**IN HARMONY:** The Princeton Garden Statesmen Barbershop Chorus includes members from ages 22 to 87. The organization is recruiting for its upcoming four-week series in Plainsboro.

By Anne Levin

Many people associate barbershop quartets with visions of four old white men wearing straw hats and suspenders, harmonizing "Down by the Old Mill Stream" or "Let Me Call You Sweetheart."

That image does not fit the Princeton Garden Statesman Barbershop Chorus (PGS), the 56-year-old a cappella chorus and quartet known for their performances of contemporary pop, doo-wop, show tunes, and jazz as well as traditional barbershop quartets at area parades, nursing homes, shopping malls, and parties.

"It's not your grandfather's barbershop quartet anymore," the organization's president, Mark Van Bruggen, said in a phone conversation last week. "It's been modernized. You rarely see people in that old-style getup anymore."

Van Bruggen and other members of the PGS are hoping to attract new members to the upcoming "Real Men Sing A Cappella" program on four Tuesdays between October 7 and 28 at the Plainsboro Recreation & Community Services Center. The program is for experienced singers and novices alike, offering "a welcoming environment to explore the excitement of four-part harmony and the camaraderie of making music together," according to the PGS website.

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It's all about the enjoyment of singing, said Van Bruggen, as well as the friendships that are formed.

"We're all amateurs," he said. "This is a hobby for us. We have guys of various musical abilities. Some can sight read without any rehearsal; others don't know the g-clef from the bass-clef. It doesn't matter. Whether you're singing in a chorale, chorus, or quartet, you just have this camaraderie with the people you sing with."

There are various theories about the origins of barbershop singing, which is considered a blend of white and African American musical styles.

"It has its beginnings in a dark time," said Von Bruggen. "Slave owners would hear the slaves singing in the fields, and they were attracted to those harmonies. These men would go to the barbershop and try to imitate those slaves. That turned into what we call barbershop harmony."

Barbershop harmony's heyday was during vaudeville, but had begun to fade by the 1920s. It was revived in the 1930s with the founding of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America (SPEBSQSA), and was open only to male singers. Groups of female singers, like Sweet Adelines, began to show up in the mid-1940s.

Van Bruggen started singing while a student at Ewing High School. He began performing with the PGS in 1981.

"I've been singing my whole life," he said. "My father is a Presbyterian minister, so I learned to sing in church. My favorite teacher at Ewing High School was Ed Scheirer, who led the music program. He got me involved with three other guys, and we formed a barbershop quartet."

The harmonies that blend together in this type of singing "can create an expanded sound," he said. "There are physics to the types of chords that are sung, called overtones. When you have a harmonic that establishes a chord, the sound waves create additional sound waves. It can often sound like five, six — or if you're good, seven — and that's when people get goosebumps."

"Real Men Sing A Cappella" will focus on the chorus as well as barbershop quartets. "We don't want to downplay what we do as far as barbershop quartets. But when you tell people it's an a cappella chorus, there is more of an acceptance," Van Bruggen said. "There can be a stigma associated with barbershop harmony."

Spots are limited for the upcoming program. For more information and registration, visit [gardenstatesmen.org/real-men-sing](http://gardenstatesmen.org/real-men-sing) or call (888) 636-4449.

"You can do this at any age," said Van Bruggen. "It's a kind of hobby that can take you through life and give you a lot of joy. I credit my own good health to this."

CONTRIBUTOR ANNE LEVIN

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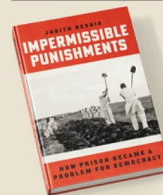


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