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The Lettermen are: Tony Butala, Donovan Tea and Bobby Poynton
THE LETTERMEN BIOGRAPHY Revised (June 1, 2016)

The one change Tony Butala, original and founding member of The Lettermen, would have made in the 50 plus year career of one of the most popular vocal groups in history is a surprising one. "We chose the wrong name!" he exclaims. "In the late 50's, when you started a vocal group and wanted to stand out from the crowd, all you had to do was use a novel new name that would give your group a unique look and image." "If you are a new group in today's world and you want to get noticed, you have to dye your hair purple or pink, multi-pierce your face, ears and tongue, and even then you may not be different enough to get any notoriety."

In the late 50's, most vocal groups had chosen school type names such as Danny & the Juniors, The Four Freshmen and The Four Preps. Because of this trend we chose the name The Lettermen and wore letter sweaters. By the time those names started to become passé in the early sixties, The Lettermen had already had a few hit single records and albums, and had become a phenomenal success in colleges and nightclubs. Capitol Records, The Lettermen's record label, was reluctant to try to market a new name as The Lettermen wanted, due to the fact that it was already an established worldwide name.

The Lettermen did however, pack away the sweaters in mothballs, and fortunately, their fans and the general public had gotten past the sweaters, and the name and image of the group for the last five decades definitely has meant The Lettermen.

The Lettermen name first appeared in February 1958 on the marquee of the Desert Inn Hotel Resort Showroom in Las Vegas Nevada, where Butala, Mike Barnett and Talmadge Russell performed in the record-shattering revue, "Newcomers of 1928," which starred the most popular big band leader of the 1920's and 30s, Paul Whiteman, silent film comic Buster Keaton, singers Rudy Vallee and Harry Richmond, film star Fifi D'Orsay and the sneezing comedian Billy Gilbert. Butala played the part of Bing Crosby, who sang lead in the "Rhythm Boys" the vocal group that had hits and toured in the 1920's with Paul Whiteman's Orchestra.

The early vision of The Lettermen was of three very strong soloists who also had the ability and showmanship to perform and entertain an audience on their own but who also had the individual discipline needed to be group singers. The style they came up with was a sound between the big band vocal groups such as the Modernaires, Pied Pipers, Mills Brothers, Four Freshmen and the early Rhythm and Blues, soft rock groups such as the Ink Spots, Flamingos and the Platters. Butala began singing professionally at age seven in Sharon, Pennsylvania and by the age of eight was singing on KDKA Radio in Pittsburgh, PA. Within a few years, he moved to Hollywood, California and became a member of the famous Mitchell Boys Choir, which since 1932 had appeared in over one hundred motion pictures, scores of television and radio shows, radio and television commercials, and world-wide concert tours. While in the boys choir, he appeared in such classic films as "White Christmas," "War of the Worlds," "On Moonlight Bay," and was the voice of one of the Lost Boys in the classic Walt Disney animated film "Peter Pan."

He was the singing voice of child actor Tommy Rettig in the Doctor Seuss script, Stanley Kramer production, "5000 Fingers of Doctor T," released by Columbia Pictures in 1953. In the mid-fifties, while attending Hollywood Professional School, Butala formed The Fourmost, a vocal group of three ex-Mitchell Boy Choir friends and a female classmate, Concetta Ingolia. In a few years, after moderate local success, Concetta exited the group to be cast in a new TV series, "Hawaiian Eye," and used her stage name Connie Stevens.

By 1960, The Lettermen - now Butala, Jim Pike and Bob Engemann - were signed to Warner Brothers Records and released their first singles: "Their Hearts Were Full of Spring" b/w "When" and "The Magic Sound" b/w "Two Hearts." In 1961, Nic Venet, a new, young, creative A&R man with Capitol Records who years earlier had written a few songs with Butala, was played these first recordings. Nic Venet was impressed by their unique natural close harmonic blend and convinced that he could produce a hit record, signed them to what turned out to be an over twenty-five year contract with Capitol Records.

For The Lettermen debut single record in the summer of 1961, Capitol Records decided to put a romantic ballad on the B-side of "That's My Desire," which was an attempt at a doo-wop single, figuring disc jockeys would have to play the A- side because the B-side was so sweet, and slow, and did not necessarily encompass the commercial sound of the day.

That B-side was "The Way You Look Tonight". Soft, melodic and romantic, it was a departure from the rock 'n' roll music of the day and eventually listener requests made it a must for disc jockey play lists nationwide. The song shot to No.13, on the Billboard chart. The group's second single that year did even better. "When I Fall In Love," another soft, slow ballad hit No.7, establishing The Lettermen as the most romantic singing group of the sixties.

The next year, their first original song written by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weill "Come Back Silly Girl" reached No.17 and The Lettermen's debut album, "A Song for Young Love," hit the Top 10, their first of 32 straight Top 40 hit albums.

Butala's breathy vocals were the lead on most of The Lettermen's many hit records, except "Theme From A Summer Place". In almost every poll, The Lettermen were named Best New Group or Best Vocal Group as two more albums followed in 1962 - "Once Upon A Time" and "Jim, Tony and Bob", the latter an effort to segue away from The Lettermen name.

The '60's and early '70's saw The Lettermen score over 25 chart hit singles, including "Theme From 'A Summer Place" No.16, in 1965, from the Sandra Dee/Troy Donahue film, "Goin' Out of My Head/Can't Take My Eyes Off You" No.7, in 1968, the first hit record ever to completely integrate two songs as one and then "Hurt So Bad" No.12, in 1969.

The Lettermen signature sound made romantic hit standards of love songs such as "Smile," "Put Your Head On My Shoulder," "Shangri-La," "Love," "Traces/Memories" and on and on. Among the 32 consecutive albums, which charted in the Top 100 in the United States, four were certified gold: "The Lettermen!!!...And "Live" (1967), "Goin' Out of My Head" (1968), "Best of The Lettermen" (1969) and "Hurt So Bad"(1970).

During this same time, The Lettermen toured with George Burns, Jack Benny, Bob Hope and Bill Cosby; performed on bills with Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, Jerry Lewis, Dean Martin, Jimmy Durante, Debbie Reynolds, Sam Cooke, and Sammy Davis, Jr.; appeared on "the Johnny Carson television show," several times on "The Ed Sullivan Show," were regulars on "The Red Skelton Show" and "The Hollywood Palace."

Butala estimates that the group made some 200 appearances on television shows such as Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" series, "Shindig", and "Hullabaloo", were interviewed and performed on talk shows and variety shows with Johnny Carson, Mike Douglas, Merv Griffin, Jack Paar, Milton Berle, Steve Allen, Dinah Shore, and many others throughout the 60's and 70's, cultivating new crops of fans.

The Lettermen have also enjoyed international success touring Japan, The Philippines, China, Thailand, Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong, Germany, France, South America, Canada, Mexico and even Saudi Arabia. They have sung and recorded in over fourteen languages and have received eighteen (18) gold records internationally.

Their All-American, clean-cut, no-drugs image may have been a drawback in the hard rock era of the sixties and seventies, but The Lettermen stood by it. Says Butala, "I never thought people who did drugs were hip."

Even as the British Invasion diminished other American artist record sales in the 60's, television and concert appearances sustained The Lettermen career. The group has been a rarity that can perform from small college campuses to the posh Empire Room at The Waldorf Astoria in New York City; from the Iowa State Fair to main showrooms in Las Vegas, Nevada; from U.S.O. shows in the jungles of Thailand and Cambodia to elegant concert halls with the world's most renowned symphony orchestras.

"One of our rules," says Butala, "is to never dress below the level of our audience." The Lettermen stage wardrobe is comprised of denims and jeans for outdoor festivals and fairs, casual dress for colleges, tuxedos for hotel showrooms and glitzier garb for the main Las Vegas casino showrooms.

The Lettermen have also appeared in most of the major sports arenas in the United States by singing their touching a cappella rendition of the "National Anthem." People Magazine honored their version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" by voting the group "one of the best 'anthem-singing' groups in sports."

The Lettermen have continually recorded, averaging at least one album a year. They formed their own Alpha Omega Records in 1979. Some of their newer CD albums, now numbering over 75, are: "The Lettermen – Favorites," "The Lettermen – Best Of Broadway," "The Lettermen – Live In The Philippines," their holiday CD "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year" and one of their latest releases "The Lettermen -- New Direction."

During its over fifty-five year career, the trio has gone through a few personnel changes. Engemann left in 1967, replaced by Gary Pike, Jim Pike's younger brother. A few years later, due to vocal problems, Jim left the group and was replaced by his even younger brother, Donny Pike. The group stayed stable, with this combination all through the seventies and early eighties led by the constant lead singer Tony Butala. Since then, Donovan Tea, Bobby Poynton, Ernie Pontiere, Darren Dowler, Don Campeau, Chad Nichols and Mark Preston have each had stints as members of The Lettermen.

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Donovan Tea was born in Houston, Texas and started singing professionally at seventeen when he won an international vocal competition in Guilford, England. After touring Europe, he returned home to sing at the Hollywood Bowl with the L.A. Master Chorale. At eighteen, he became a lead singer for The Young Americans, appearing in Las Vegas for the first time in 1973 opening for the likes of Sammy Davis, Jr., Rich Little and Tony Bennett, and also performed for then President Gerald Ford in Washington, D.C.

While with The Young Americans, he guest-starred on NBC's holiday special "Merry Christmas, Fred, From The Crosbys," performing a tap dance number with Fred Astaire and singing backup for Bing Crosby on the song "White Christmas." In 1977 Donovan began performing as a soloist at the prestigious nightclub "The Horn" in Los Angeles, opening his career to nightclubs around the country and to performing in the cruise ship industry.

In late 1978, Donovan eventually became a solo production singer at The Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada in the revue "Casino De Paris." It was during his time there that he first met The Lettermen when they attended one of the shows at The Dunes. He then moved over to The Stardust Hotel as lead production singer in the revue "Lido De Paris" for about four years until 1984, when he heard of the vacancy he now fills as one of The Lettermen.

Donovan Tea has remained a continuous member of The Lettermen since he joined the group in September of 1984, making him the longest tenured Letterman next to Butala.

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Donovan's most favorite things in life are his wife Darla, his children Landry and Lawson, and working his cattle ranch in North Central Tennessee.

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Shortly after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1980, Bobby Poynton decided to leave the security of his suburban Chicago home and head to Hollywood, California to seek his fame and fortune as an actor. With five hundred dollars, a beat up sports car and his Dad's gas credit card in hand, he began his journey to pursue his dream.

Over the years the acting roles were there for the taking but the "fame and fortune" Bobby had sought proved to be elusive. Acting parts on such shows as "Days of Our Lives," "Jake and the Fatman," "Life Goes On," "Scarecrow and Mrs. King," "The Sentinel," "Touched by an Angel," "Viper," "Promised Land" and "Walker: Texas Ranger," as well as numerous theatrical credits all served to keep Bobby's dream alive, but were never ever enough to satisfy his inner-self. In 1988, an opportunity came to him to audition for an "internationally known" recording group seeking an attractive male vocalist with a tenor voice, falsetto, and at least six (6) feet tall.

The tenor voice used to be there when he was in college, so he figured he would wear boots for the height and hope the room was dark enough for the rest. The result was an invitation to become the newest member of The Lettermen.

Bobby recorded six albums with The Lettermen and performed in excess of one thousand (1000) concerts, Television and Radio shows around the world.

In 1995 Bobby decided to leave the road for a while so he could put all his efforts into raising his young family. In 2001, he once again began touring the country, this time as a member of the legends of doo-wop, The Diamonds, the group who originated the hit "Little Darlin."

In 2002, the soundtrack for "The Adventures Of Tom Thumb and Thumbelina," an animated film, included Bobby's duet with Jennifer Love Hewitt.

In 2010, Bobby was delighted to be invited to take the stage for a night with another legendary group, The Vogues.

After more than thirty years in show business, Bobby has finally come to the realization that the "fame and fortune" he had so fervently sought was nowhere near as important or rewarding as the "fame" he had in his own family as a big brother or the "fortune of the heart" he receives daily from his wife Beth, son Robert V, and daughter Callie at their home in Illinois.

Bobby considers his return to The Lettermen in 2011, a true honor and looks forward to recreating the magic on stage and in the recording studio once again with Tony Butala and Donovan Tea.

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In 1997, after decades of acting as an unofficial clearinghouse for information about, for and with vocal groups, Butala fulfilled a long-held dream with the opening of the Vocal Group Hall of Fame and Museum, in his hometown of Sharon, Pennsylvania.

The non-profit organization honors the greatest vocal groups of the world in all genres of music: Rock, Doo-Wop, Rhythm and Blues, Gospel, Country, Folk, Big- Band, Jazz and Pop. There are now over one hundred vocal groups inducted into the Hall of Fame, some of which are the Eagles, Beach Boys, Four Seasons, Simon and Garfunkel, Peter, Paul & Mary, Alabama, Crosby, Stills & Nash, 5th Dimension, The Righteous Brothers, Association, Oak Ridge Boys, Supremes, Three Dog Night, Earth, Wind & Fire and many more. There are over one hundred and fifty vocal group memorabilia displays in the Hall of Fame and Museum.

For more information on the Vocal Group Hall Of Fame and Museum see: (vocalgroup.org)

Tony Butala is proud of the fact that his group, The Lettermen, has been part of Americana for over fifty-five years and that as long as there is a Lettermen group, they will be singing good, quality, and positive harmony music that the whole family can enjoy.

Revised: 6-1-16