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Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

86-year-old Roy Mathis leads the Royal Serenaders male chorus, a group he started 66 years ago, during a celebratory concert Sunday at First Presbyterian Church on Symphony Circle in Buffalo.

Singing praise for chorus director marking 66 years of sweet sounds

By CHARLIE SPECHT

NEWS NIAGARA REPORTER

If they're lucky, most vocalists can hope for a music career that lasts a few years, maybe even a decade.

Roy and Joyce Mathis have those folks beat by a half-century.

The North Buffalo couple on Sunday celebrated Roy's 66th year as director of the Royal Serenaders male chorus, which has risen from a small African-American quartet to what supporters call a gem of the independent singing community.

To mark the occasion, the group put on its annual concert Sunday, drawing a diverse crowd that packed Buffalo's First Presbyterian Church and left Roy Mathis, 86, feeling young as ever.

"We don't perform often, but when we do, I try to put on a great show," said Mathis.

After moving from Chattanooga, Tenn., in 1945, Mathis started the small singing group with his brothers at an East Side church.

Known to friends as a postal carrier and an avid walker, Mathis soon attracted new members to the group. After developing an a cappella routine, the chorus competed nationally in the 1960s and 1970s before settling down.

More than 60 years after starting the group, much about music – and Buffalo – has changed, Mathis said, including the racial makeup of the

group.

"It's integrated now, and I'm proud of that," he said.

The group has adapted to include more contemporary songs, even some pop music numbers, as the times have changed, supporters said.

But one thing that has stayed the same is Roy's passion for the craft, said Joyce Mathis, his wife of 26 years and the group's accompanist.

"We've seen changeover after changeover and we're still in existence," she said. "My husband, he's the inspiration, he keeps the guys passionate."

Roy Mathis on Sunday had the look of a composer who knew his chorus. As the crowd streamed in to the ornate Buffalo church, Mathis chatted leisurely with a reporter before declaring he had to "get ready" for the performance.

One minute later, he was in front of the Arthur Bel Canto chorus – which performed with his group – directing about 80 members through a classical rhapsody.

He changed into a pink sport jacket before donning the stage with the 13 members of the men's choir, who made their way through 10 classical melodies to the delight of the crowd.

"It's his life, it's in his blood, it keeps him going," said his daughter, Deborah Watkins. "He had quite a remarkable career in music."

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