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The Royal Serenaders Male Chorus

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JAMES P. McCOY/Bufalo News

Roy A. Mathis sings at choir practice at Pilgrim-St. Luke's United Church of Christ.

A chorus of praise

Directing choral music and blending voices
is what Roy A. Mathis likes to do best

By PAULA VOELL
News Staff Reporter

It was 1945. World War II would end that year. And the great migration from the South was on.

As part of it, Roy A. Mathis, then 19, left Chattanooga to move to Buffalo.

The youngest of 10 children, Mathis had one sister and two brothers who were here already. At the time he only knew he wanted to find work and "look for a better life."

"It must have been meant to be, because I've had a good life here," he said, smiling at Joyce, his wife of eight years, during an interview in their comfortable North Buffalo home.

Buffalo, undeniably, has been enlarged by his presence.

Roy Mathis added to the music here — Negro spirituals, pop, opera, anthems, gospel — almost from the day he arrived.

In 1946, he started the Mathis Brothers Quartet with brothers James, Cecil and Theodore. Others joined them and the Royal Serenaders Male Chorus was born with six members. Though the city has older singing groups, Mathis thinks the Serenaders may hold the distinction of having just one director for nearly 50 years.

On Monday, he received the Buffalo Ur-

ban League President's Exemplary Service Award.

"It's given to someone who has dedicated their whole life to lifting the sights of others and Roy Mathis and the Serenaders certainly have done that," said Leroy Coles, Urban League president, who started the award last year.

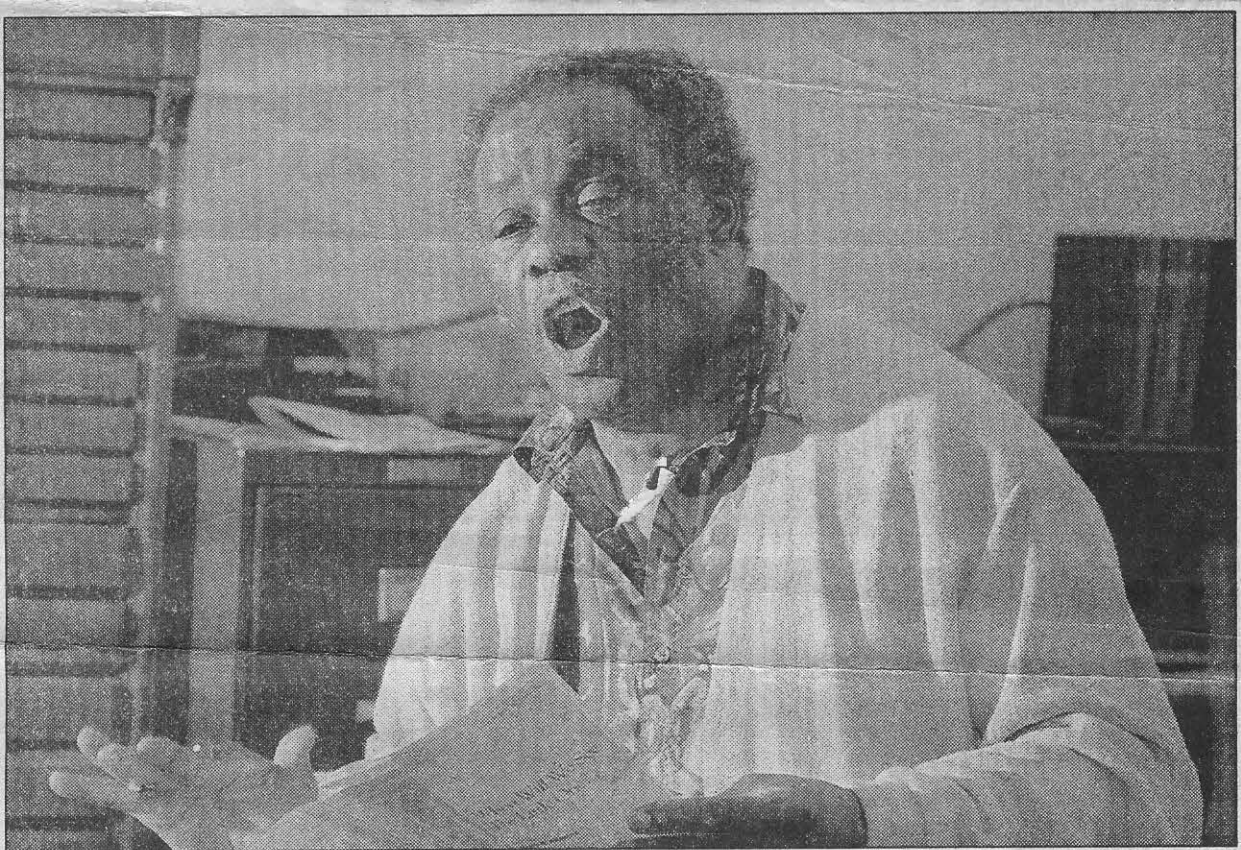
In the mid-1970s, the group won first- and second-place prizes in national competitions, Mathis said. As chanters for a local lodge of the Prince Hall Masons they represented them around the country. Now, the 19-member group sings less frequently, giving an annual concert and occasionally singing at churches and for other functions.

Mathis also directs the choir of Buffalo's Pilgrim-St. Luke's United Church of Christ.

He laughs in a booming voice — the kind of voice one could imagine singing "O! Man River" — when he talks about what M. Bruce McKay must have envisioned before he became pastor there a few years ago.

"He must have been thinking, 'I've got an old retired reprobate for a choir director,'" said Mathis, 66, "but he never was so shocked as when he found this energetic guy."

McKay now views Mathis as a church pillar.



JAMES P. McCOY/Bufalo News

Roy A. Mathis also directs the choir of Buffalo's Pilgrim-St. Luke's United Church of Christ.

Mathis: No formal training

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"He has a remarkable willingness to work with a diverse group of people and call forth their gifts," he said.

More remarkable when it's known that Mathis, who was raised by an older sister from age 11 after their mother died, has never had formal music training.

"Guys would call you a sissy if you sang or played the piano at that time," he said.

In high school, a teacher guided him into the Howard High School Male Sextet. As a sign of respect for that teacher, he displays her picture on his mantel, along with those of his five daughters, Joyce Mathis' daughter and their eight grandchildren.

Joyce, his second wife, is a retired Buffalo school teacher. She has been the Serenaders' piano accompanist since 1966 and has been the choir director for Lincoln Memorial United Methodist Church for 40 years.

They share a love of music. But she married him for reasons beyond music, she said: "He's handsome, he's sexy, and he doesn't have a mean bone in his body."

Mathis loves center stage. His size, his manner, his laugh, his brightly colored silk shirts and floral ties demand that he be noticed.

He remembers his father raising the large family very strictly.

"And we love him for it," he said. "Coming up in the South, as a black man, he made us toe the line. He didn't want us in difficult

situations. And it worked. You can't beat discipline."

Just ask his singers.

"He won't let sloppiness go," said Jerry Richardson, Serenaders' president. "He's very particular about appearance, about everything. It has to look as good as it sounds."

Directing choral music and blending voices pleasingly is what Mathis likes to do best.

"You don't need great voices to make a great sound," said Mathis. "Sometimes when you find a person with a great voice, it's an ego thing. When the voice isn't so great they are willing to blend."

Bob Cook, who belongs to the choir and the Serenaders, says Mathis "drags the best out of people."

"He can hear four parts at once and tell you who's screwing up. And he has a powerful, booming bass voice that can carry a section through any troubles."

Marianne Rathman, who has sung with Mathis for more than 30 years, says Mathis knows what he wants.

"He puts on an attitude of 'I'm the last word, you'll do it my way,'" she said, "but he's really soft-hearted and doesn't want to hurt anyone's feelings."

Mathis admits to a temper that's likely to erupt when he's getting ready for a performance.

"I'm a little hyper," said Mathis. "I don't see how you can be in music and be staid."

He feels a particular passion for keeping Negro spirituals alive.

"So many young black musicians are forsaking the spirituals, those songs that went mouth to mouth," he said. "As long as I have a group I won't let them die."

For 10 years, when he first came to Buffalo, Mathis was a railroad worker. Then he worked a mail carrier in the Main and Amherst streets area, retiring in 1984.

Now, most of his time is spent with music, one way or another. Either he's rehearsing, arranging or transposing music. He also reads music to a blind choir member so she can transfer it into Braille.

Frequently, as he tells stories about his past, he'll end by saying, "I learned a lot from that."

"My forte is experience," he explains.

He recalls caroling through the streets of Buffalo with his Serenaders friends until the early hours of Christmas mornings. Of having a live radio show in 1953 for the Old Virginia Packing Co. Of always experimenting with new ways to bring music alive, to make worship more meaningful.

But he doesn't live in the past. He's thinking of the best way to mark a half-century of the Royal Serenaders. Without doubt, parties and music will dominate.

And maybe he'll allow himself to be somewhat proud.

"I must be doing something sort of right," he says.

"So many musicians are much better than I am, but they don't love it more than I do."