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JAMES P. McCOY/Bufalo News

Roy Mathis leads the Royal Serenaders during a rehearsal in the chorus' clubhouse for the group's 50th anniversary concert Nov. 10 in Lincoln Memorial United Methodist Church.

## Over 50 years, Serenaders' song goes on

By **MIKE VOGEL**

*News Staff Reporter*

That old, sweet song just won't let Roy Mathis go.

It started in Tennessee when he was young, and it now is a symphony. For half a century now, he has gathered voices and shaped them into harmonies.

Next month, his chorus — the Royal Serenaders — will take the stage for the group's 50th anniversary concert. Roy Mathis has been there, for each of those 50 years.

"There are groups that have been singing longer, but I don't know of any other group where one of the founders is still conducting," he said.

The claim seems to find gentle amusement in his longevity, reserving his pride for some of the group's accomplishments.

He is proud of the chorus clubhouse near the St. Augustine Center, for example, and proud that the 17-voice choir now includes three white singers.

And then there's the range of music — much of it arranged by Mathis — that marks

a Serenaders concert. Opera mixes with church hymns, popular favorites with an thems.

"They tend to think you do only gospel, but we do it all," the retired letter carrier said. "I don't want to be typecast."

Music, for Mathis, started early.

"I sang in a choral group in high school in Chattanooga, Tenn., where I was born," he said. "It all stemmed from there."

The youngest of 10 children, he was raised by a sister who was 12 years older and who sang in choirs and trios.

"I had some tips from her," he recalled. And in high school, he became the protégé of a music teacher who soon had him singing in a glee club, a chorus and a male sextet.

In 1945, just after high school, Mathis moved to Buffalo to join two brothers. A fourth brother soon came north as well.

"I said, 'Hey, let's start a quartet,'" he remembered. "They went along with it, and in a little while we added two more guys. Thus started the Royal Serenaders — that's the only name we've ever had."

Three members are left from that original

# Choir: Red jackets to supplant group's tuxedos

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group. The rest of the chorus includes tradesmen, ministers, members of Mathis' West Side Pilgrim-St. Luke's United Church of Christ choir and community leaders such as Derrick Byrd, Buffalo Urban League director.

"We're from all walks of life," Mathis said. "Now, a great many of the guys are retired."

Members meet weekly for rehearsals, mastering 16 or 17 new songs a year.

"We don't perform as often as we used to," the veteran director admitted. "I pick and choose."

One of his choices has worked out exceptionally well. His wife, church organist Joyce Mathis, "has been playing for the group for 30 of those 50 years," he noted with the same gentle smile.

She will be the piano and organ accompanist again, for the 50th anniversary concert at 6 p.m. Nov. 10 in Lincoln Memorial United Methodist Church at 641 Masten Ave. Soloist Susan Malik, who has performed with the Serenaders in the past, also is scheduled to re-

join the group for the concert.

The Gentlemen Songsters of Niagara Falls, Ont., also will sing, and Sherry Eidt, the group's director, will perform with the quartet Melodia.

Mathis plans a program with a typical Serenaders mix. There will be anthems, including the "Ave Maria," an operatic theme by Rossini and a modern piece from Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Phantom of the Opera." Malik and a Serenader tenor will present a scene from Verdi's "Il Trovatore," Mathis

said, and "We're going to do a couple of spirituals, and a couple of gospel tunes."

The Serenaders also will perform in a new uniform, featuring a cardinal red jacket. For years, the group has been known in the community for performing in tuxedos; while the new look may be a break with tradition, Mathis said, it's not a break with history.

"We didn't really perform in tuxedos from the start," he said. "Back then, we couldn't afford to buy them."