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The Royal Serenaders Male Chorus

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
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Royal Serenaders' founder and his male chorus still going strong

Founder Roy Mathis' love for music was inspired by a teacher



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Roy Mathis leads The Royal Serenaders Male Chorus at a concert at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Buffalo on Sunday. He founded the choir 68 years ago. See a photo gallery and video at BuffaloNews.com. Sharon Cantillon/BuffaloNews

By [Samantha Christmann \(mailto:schristmann@buffnews.com\)](mailto:schristmann@buffnews.com) | News Staff Reporter | [@DiscountDivaSam \(https://twitter.com/DiscountDivaSam\)](https://twitter.com/DiscountDivaSam)

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Entering in a slow procession to a regal blend of trumpet, organ and applause, the Royal Serenaders Male Chorus took their places Sunday night at the front of Buffalo's Our Savior Lutheran Church.

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All were dressed in impeccable black tuxedos, but at the end of the line, helped along by a smart-looking cane, founder and choral director Roy A. Mathis wore red.



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No one would have had trouble picking him out of the crowd if he had worn a more subdued color. Since 1946, the Royal Serenaders Male Chorus has filled churches like this one with its smooth, four-part harmonies and eclectic song selection. The venues, the members and the audiences have changed over the past 68 years, but one thing has remained constant: Mathis. Now 88 years old, he has been at the helm since age 19.

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Since childhood, Mathis has loved music. That passion was nurtured along by a high school music teacher in his hometown of Chattanooga, Tenn.

"Her name was Edmonia Simmons. I'll never forget her," he said.

As part of the Great Migration – a mass exodus of African-Americans from the South to the country's northern states – he left Tennessee at age 19 and joined two brothers and a sister in Buffalo. After a third brother arrived, Mathis formed a quartet with his siblings.

With musical knowledge he gained from his beloved Ms. Simmons, he developed an a cappella repertoire for the group, singing at church services and Sunday night church programs around the city.

Over the years, Mathis expanded his musical education on his own. He painstakingly taught himself how to arrange music – pulling apart songs' traditional mixed soprano, alto, tenor and bass parts and rearranging them to fit the chorus's deeper, tenor- and bass-only voices.

As the chorus' reputation grew, so did its ranks. Originally, all the members were black. Today, the majority of the current lineup's 16 members are white.

"When I came here, I didn't know any white people," he said, his booming voice deep and crisp. "But I say, 'I don't care what color you are. If you can sing, I'll take you.'"

His wife, Joyce C. Mathis, has spent more than 40 years accompanying the Royal Serenaders on piano and organ. At age 7, she took piano lessons from her church's organist at Lincoln

Memorial United Methodist church, climbing up to the instrument after services to "learn the finer points," she said. When her teacher passed away, she took over the job and has remained a church organist for the past 62 years.

It was at a church performance that Mr. and Mrs. Mathis met. She was there accompanying another male chorus and agreed to fill in when his accompanist failed to arrive for the show. Both were married at the time, but they tied the knot 28 years ago, after they had both become widowed.

The two have given countless performances together, before audiences that grew and grew.

“People got to know us. We had a following,” said Mrs. Mathis, sitting on a piano bench in the couple’s living room.

The Mathises’ lives are steeped in music. It’s apparent in their living room, where a piano sits side-by-side with a gleaming organ beneath a wall tapestry that reads “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord.” Musical notes adorn nearly everything around their North Buffalo home – the doormat, an embroidered pillow, even the garage roof. A wall clock signals the hour by ringing out familiar melodies.

Roy Mathis loves all kinds of music, and the chorus’ repertoire reflects it. It runs the gamut from sacred music and spirituals to pop songs, opera and show tunes.

“I like everything,” he said, leaning back in a soft black and gold chair. “Well, not everything. I don’t like rap and I don’t like hip-hop.”

The chorus’s members come “from every walk of life,” Roy said, traveling from as far as Akron and East Amherst for the group’s weekly rehearsals.

The chorus’s diversity is a feather in its cap, fans say.

“They bring uplifting joy, especially when you can look at their faces and see all the varied communities they come from,” said Ansel Cureton, congregation president at Our Savior Lutheran Church. “They’re from all over but they come together with a good common purpose of love.”

Roy and Joyce have different theories as to why the chorus has lasted so long. Roy thinks it’s because the men like the camaraderie and because the rehearsals don’t take too much time. Plus, performing in public is fulfilling for the members and they all just love to sing, he said.

But Joyce thinks Roy has more to do with the winning formula than he lets on.

“They all like Roy,” she said. “If they didn’t like him, they wouldn’t stick it out.”

Sunday evening’s concert began with gentle hymns before moving into opera, gospel, spirituals and pop songs, including West Side Story’s “Somewhere.” The finale, “Old Man River,” featured Our Savior Lutheran Church’s new pastor, Stephen R. Everette.

The pews were packed.

“They’re a draw because they speak to inner peace,” said Ken Dennard, a church deacon.

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