

MUSIC

A few good men

Southern Oregon gay men band together in song and pride

BY ORIANA GREEN



The Rogue Valley Gay Men's Chorus knows what to do with a drunken sailor

Imagine that you're a gay man living in one of the redneckier parts of Oregon, perhaps a few toes still safely in the closet, but you're hungry for camaraderie. Imagine that the Oregon Citizens Alliance has established strongholds throughout your area and that anti-gay ballot measures are an easy sell in your southern Oregon town. Now imagine that you summon your nerve and join a small group of gay men who are determined to sing in public—as the Rogue Valley Gay Men's Chorus. *Gulp.*

In the Rose City, the 100-plus members of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus are celebrated and invited to perform in City Hall, so it's easy for us to forget that such a welcoming atmosphere does not extend into the far hills and valleys. Certainly not as far as Ashland, Medford, Talent, Phoenix, Gold Hill, Central Point and Grants Pass—all hometowns of Rogue Valley Gay Men's Chorus singers.

Since 1995, a small but determined group of guys has been rehearsing once a week; five original members continue with the chorus, which now numbers 15. (They'll resort to anything to recruit singers—one flier lists the phone numbers of "the cutest members of our group"!)

Director Charles Freisen says his goal is "to have the group grow, to reach out to gay men and involve them in a positive activity." For some more perspective, consider that the chorus "is the only out group in the Rogue Valley." Thankfully, Freisen says they "haven't encountered direct hostility, but we're sensitive where we perform."

"In Ashland we're pretty much out," he adds, noting that the creative community and Southern Oregon University make for a more tolerant environment. "But in other towns in this area it's difficult for gay men to be out."

Freisen moved to Ashland from Southern California six years ago but is quick to point out that he simply was returning to his native state. He has worked with the chorus for three years and has been involved with choral and church music all his life.

As the group has increased in size, it has expanded its performances from short programs at AIDS benefits and churches to a broader audience; for the past two years it has done a holiday program at the Cadillac Cafe in Medford. The chorus also has sung at the annual Daedalus fundraiser presented by Oregon Shakespeare Festival, at the Lambda Community Center Association awards ceremony and Pink Weekend celebration, and for civic organizations in the Rogue Valley.

Now it is preparing its first full concert May 20 at Trinity Episcopal Church in Ashland. This is where Freisen also works as music director and where the choir rehearses. Reflecting popular support, the concert already is sold out, so the best you could hope for is standing room in the back.

Chorus member Charles Quince says: "We don't consider this show our most important event. We're more proud that, later on the same night of the show, we're singing at the annual AIDS vigil."

The concert program contains an eclectic mix of love songs, show tunes, some Beach Boys and even a sea chantey, "What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?"

"We do some campy numbers, but not too many," Freisen explains. "I'm trying to introduce classical literature into the programs and music composed by gay composers for gay choruses. Our limitations are that we have to sing music appropriate for a small chorus."

Also on the program are "Heart I Will Remember Him," a song in memory of those who have died of AIDS, plus songs of the '50s and '60s as well as chorus favorites "When You Believe," "The Rhythm of Life" and "A Celtic Blessing."

Freisen will be accompanied by pianist Jodi French and two special guests artists: french horn player Jodi Schmidt and mezzo-soprano Renee Merrigan.

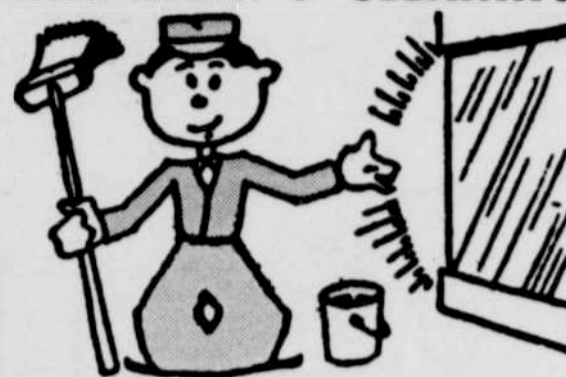
With tongue firmly in cheek, the singers like to call themselves "Oregon's other gay men's chorus." Although there is a great size disparity, both choruses have much the same purposes: affirming diversity, promoting community through music, service and outreach.

Because of their isolation from other queer groups and activities, the singers especially emphasize outreach. "We're going to Yreka, Calif., to sing for [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] and the gay community there on June 3," Freisen notes.

Quince adds: "On June 8 we're singing in the somewhat less accepting town of Grants Pass at a meeting of the gay and lesbian community there.... Every little step builds a community for all of us." □

The ROGUE VALLEY GAY MEN'S CHORUS will perform twice May 20 in Ashland: in concert 4 p.m. at Trinity Episcopal Church, 44 N. Second St., and during the 18th International AIDS Candlelight Memorial and Mobilization 7 p.m. at the bandshell in Lithia Park. To join call Charles Freisen at 541-535-7233.

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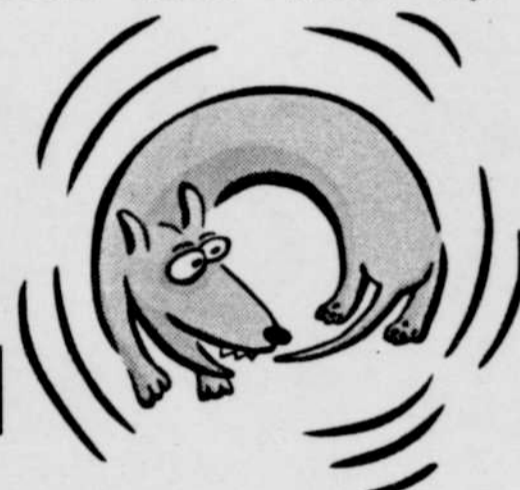


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