

# THE RACING CITY CHORUS



Striking a Chord with Young and Old

By Amy E. Tucker

If you happen to pull up next to Joe Cutshall-King's car at a stoplight, it could be your funniest moment of the day.

"You'll probably see me singing my lungs out," the bearded Cutshall-King says. The newest member of Saratoga Springs' famed Racing City Chorus, he uses his commute to Adirondack Community College to practice his barbershop harmonies. "You have to do the facial expressions to make the vowels and notes come out better, so it's quite comical." Cutshall-King, 60, of Glens Falls, found



the Racing City Chorus last February when his wife, Sara, hired the group to perform a Singing Valentine for him. It was love at first note.

"I sang a lot in the bath tub, but never sang on stage or in a choir and have no formal training," he explained. "I don't even think amateur would apply to my singing ability. But, they were encouraging and supportive and coached me along."

The Racing City Chorus, the oldest and most decorated all-male a cappella chorus in the region, has nearly 70 members from at least 20 area communities and a proud 51-year history of winning competitions

and performing. The chorus first medaled in district competition in 1966, placed first in 1970, and has claimed the gold six times since then.

The group has represented the North Eastern District — a sprawling area that takes in part of eastern New York, New England and the Maritime provinces of Canada — at international competitions in San Francisco, New Orleans, Salt Lake City, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Seattle and Anaheim, Calif. They are also the 2007 champions of the Mountain Division, a smaller part of the North Eastern District that includes groups from Troy, Schenectady, Plattsburgh, Montreal, Burlington, Vt., and Pittsfield, Mass.



The Racing City Chorus is a chapter of the Barbershop Harmony Society, originally known as the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America, or SPEBSQSA. The women's counterpart, Sweet Adelines, has a new chapter in Saratoga Springs called Saratoga Soundtrack. (See page 34.)

The accolades are nice, but the men of the Racing City Chorus say the fun and fellowship of simply singing together are equally rewarding.

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**Joe Cutshall-King**, new member of the Racing City Chorus

"Most of our singers are just ordinary guys without a musical background," said chorus Support Director Gary Glidden, a 65-year-old tenor from South Glens Falls. "Many can't read music, and they learn everything about barbershop from us."

Glidden, who has been singing barbershop for 45 years, teaches vocal instruction, helps select the music and directs many of the shows. Five championship quartets have come from the Racing City Chorus, and Glidden's quartet, Yesterday Bound, is ranked 17th in the world.

"We sing songs with melody, meaning and harmonies that people can't hear on the radio," said Glidden. "We sing a lot of songs from the 40s, but we sing contemporary songs from Billy Joel, Elton John and the theme from 'The Lion King' too."

The group provides members with practice CDs that feature individual parts and combined harmonies. Singers can

raise or lower the volume on their part as they practice.

"The harmonies and physics of sound involved with barbershopping are unique," explained George "Guv" Wallace, 59, a bass from Clifton Park. When Wallace joined the chorus in 1970, there were a few dozen General Electric engineers singing with the group. They explained the acoustics and physics of sound to him and the way the chords are built. "If everyone

used his marketing background to turn it into highly successful fund-raising effort. It earned him the Racing City Chorus's coveted Barbershopper of the Year Award in both 1998 and 2006.

The chorus welcomes singers of all ages. Its oldest active member is bass singer Ron Platt, 86, a charter member from Saratoga Springs, and the youngest is Mike Torres, 13, who was recruited by his friend, Cody Alvord, 14. Both of the



▲ The chorus performs on Broadway in Saratoga Springs as part of the "Hats Off" celebration last summer.

sings the correct word, forms the correct vowel shape with their mouths, and sings their part in the correct volume relationship to the other three parts, then we can generate a fifth or sixth note that isn't sung by anybody, but is generated by the interaction of the music," Wallace said.

"It's called an overtone in physics. That's what you're striving for with a good chorus. It makes your group sound even bigger than it really is."

In contrast to many members, Jerry Crouth of Ballston Spa grew up singing. The 65-year-old tenor, who joined the chorus in 1996, said his mother was a pianist for the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Music filled their household.

Crouth took over the chorus's Singing Valentine program a decade ago and

teen-agers are from Galway. Alvord joined with his uncle and became a "man of note" when he sponsored Torres, who in turn is in the process of sponsoring his grandfather.

The chorus meets most Tuesdays at the Knights of Columbus Hall on Route 29. A minor audition is required, largely to determine a singer's range. "But, if you can sing Happy Birthday reasonably well on key, you'll pass," Wallace said.

The chorus's next big appearance will be at First Night. ■ ■ ■

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<http://www.RacingCityChorus.org>