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Christian musician finds happiness forming gay choir

An O.C. musician turned adversity into a new career. The result is Men Alive, which performs Saturday at the Orange County Performing Artscenter.

By PAUL HODGINS

The Orange County Register



AT THE HELM: Men Alive conductor Rich Cook was a prominent member of the Christian music community before announcing he was gay.

Rich Cook had it all: a dream job in his chosen field, Christian music; a solid marriage and three adoring daughters; a home in Orange County, a paradise in his eyes, worlds away from his New Jersey roots.

But something was wrong. "I'd been around a long time, and I knew what it was," said Cook, 63. "I had to do something. The bottom line was changes had to be made."

Cook was gay. And by the mid '90s he decided it was time to acknowledge it to his family and the world.

"It wasn't a scandal that made me come out," he said. "It was an integrity thing."

"Unfortunately, most people in my life didn't see it that way."

Cook and his wife divorced. His daughters left the state, though he remains close to all three. And his church urged him to reconsider his decision ? by various means.

"I've been through exorcisms. I've been through therapy. My question going in was, 'Can you change my thinking?' They said yes. After two years I said, 'Nothing's different. How long does this take?' My therapist said,

"Well, you'll just have to learn to live with it.' That's not what I wanted to hear."

Cook's career ended. "I've been in the Christian music industry all my life. I'd worked for major ministries. I'm a published songwriter, a conductor and arranger. But when I came out, that brought me to a dead end of being marketable in that world. The thing I'd hear was, 'Too bad all that talent's gone to waste.' "

But Cook didn't want to give up his music. He couldn't go on without it.

"I'm really a people person. When I was a young man I felt that I was called to a special ministry ? a music ministry. I am an ordained minister as well as a musician. For me, the two worlds go hand in hand. I needed to be in a place where I could help people like me find a better way to live through music."

That's when the idea came to Cook to form a choir in the place he loves. In the fall of 2001, Men Alive was born ? Orange County's first gay male chorus.

In its short life, Men Alive has quickly grown from grass roots to gargantuan. The group's season finale on Saturday at the 3,000-seat Orange County Performing Artscenter promises to be a big-league event. Broadway star Bernadette Peters is the special guest, and the theme for this year's two concerts is music from Manhattan's operatic and musical-theater worlds. The show is titled "New York City Rhythm!"

FRUSTRATED GAY MUSICIANS

Cook's 115-to-120 man choir rivals older, more established gay men's choruses in size; it's one of the first of its kind outside a major American city. Building it from scratch was no easy feat, and Cook acknowledges he met his share of skeptics who thought his idea would never fly in a place like O.C.

"I've heard all of that," Cook said of the naysayers. "I've lived here since 1969, except for a couple of years when I moved to Phoenix for a job. Yes, Orange County is known to be a conservative community." Cook paused. "But I was just so inspired I didn't worry about that whole 'conservative image' thing. I knew a lot of gay people lived here."

Cook is a little surprised that he encountered no resistance from any quarter as he developed his dream choir. "It hasn't been a rocky, uphill experience. There has been no opposition from the community. I think other choruses paved the way for us."

Cook's experiences when he came out opened his eyes to creative possibilities in his field. "It was a time when my life took on a new direction. I began meeting a lot of gay people in Christian communities and elsewhere."

Many of them were frustrated musicians, and it wasn't long before Cook thought of tapping that potential. "I wasn't worried about getting a constituency together. I had a deal with God. I said, 'If we could start this thing with just 12 good guys, then I'll know we can do it. That will be the sign.' And at the first rehearsal there were 12 really good singers."

The next hurdle was the group's first concert. The ensemble had only 19 members at the time.

"We scheduled an event at the Irvine United Church of Christ (now the Irvine United Congregational Church). We didn't know if anyone was going to come. We had no money to advertise."

That evening was another sign from God, Cook said. The church was filled to standing room only ? 340 people paid \$20 each to get in.

"We were very excited and proud of ourselves."

The turnout convinced Cook that his timing was perfect. Orange County was ready for its own gay men's chorus, similar to those performing in Los Angeles and San Diego. By 2002, the year of the group's first major concert, Cook's group fielded 40 singers. The next year it was 50. Men Alive passed the 100 mark in the fall of 2006, and it's still growing.

"Gay communities historically have thrived in urban areas, inner-city areas," Cook said. "But as gays have been filtering more openly into society and the workplace and coming out in more numbers, the image of the gay

community is broadening. Some people say to me, 'Are there gay people in Orange County?' Well, of course ? they're in every county. It's just that now they're becoming more interactive in the communities where they work and live. They're becoming more visible."

PROVIDING HOPE FOR THE OSTRACIZED

Peters is a good fit for the choir.

The two-time Tony winner, 60, is a familiar face and a box-office draw. She's also a devoted supporter of gay causes, including Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS and the Gay Men's Health Crisis. She received the Special Advocate Award from the City of New York for her contributions to that city's gay and lesbian community.

Peters has performed with gay men's choirs in other parts of the country, and she always enjoys the experience. "It's so much fun to have 100 or so male voices behind you. They're like an orchestra. It's really thrilling."

Peters wouldn't reveal much about the program, but promised there'd be at least one Rogers and Hammerstein tune: a slightly rearranged version of "There Is Nothing Like a Dame" from "South Pacific." "I took it and reworked it to be a woman's song ? about how great it is to be a dame and use all the power that we have."

Her devotion to the gay community and its causes stems, in part, from her four decades in show business, Peters says she's seen, firsthand, the difficulties that homosexuals encountered in the days when the subject was taboo.

"If you're a young person who feels different, if you know you're gay, it's important to know you have a future ? that you don't have to go underground. The minute you start hiding and sneaking around, it gives you something to be ashamed of. That's wrong! That's why groups like (Men Alive) are so important."

Cook shares Peters' belief about the emblematic value of his choir, which is still growing. Major auditions are held every September. You don't have to read music, Cook says. He's looking for pleasant voices ? and people who understand the larger meaning of the group.

"It's all about helping people find a place. When people come out, sometimes they're ostracized. It happens a lot still, even today.

"The camaraderie, the healing, the help, the acceptance are all so important to someone who has just taken that step," Cook said.

"Men Alive is about people making great music, and music making great people."

New York City Rhythm!

- What: Men Alive and Bernadette Peters in concert
- Where: Segerstrom Hall, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa
- When: 3 and 8 p.m. May 31
- How much: \$35-\$55
- Tickets: 714-556-2787
- Online: www.ocpac.org

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