

ORANGE COAST

THE MAGAZINE OF ORANGE COUNTY SINCE 1974



Music With A Mission

By Anastacia Grenda

The first meeting of Rich Cook's nascent gay men's chorus was approaching and—despite a strong belief in his mission, the encouragement of friends, and audition notices posted throughout the county—he still wasn't sure if anyone would show up. So he made a deal with God.

"I said I would do this if I got 12 good singers. And at that first rehearsal, we had 12 good singers," the Aliso Viejo resident says. "I knew the deal was sealed there. I had to move ahead; I was sensing it in my gut."

Since that night in September 2001, growing success of the chorus, now called Men Alive, confirmed Cook's instinct. In December of that year, Men Alive had its first performance, at the Irvine United Congregational Church, before an audience of 340. The singers—19 at that point—stood onstage holding sheet music because they hadn't memorized the songs yet.

"New York City Rhythm!" features special guest Bernadette Peters and songs from Broadway and opera. It'll take place at 3 and 8 p.m. May 31 in Segerstrom Hall at the Orange County Performing Artscenter. Tickets are \$35 to \$55. 714-556-ARTS (2787).

Now, the chorus of 130 singers, who come from as far away as San Diego and Palm Springs, plays the Orange County Performing Artscenter and the Irvine Barclay Theatre, and the concerts draw crowds of more than 2,000. Each season, Cook selects a unifying theme for the shows—this year, it's glamour, with songs from Hollywood, Las Vegas, Broadway, and opera—and brainstorms ideas with Bob Gunn and other members of his creative team. The concerts brim with choreography, props, and costumes that range from formal tuxedos to toy soldier uniforms for the holiday show. And Cook's push for musical excellence has helped Men Alive draw some big-name guest stars from the world of musical theater, including Michael Feinstein, Sam Harris, and Bernadette Peters, who will appear this month.

What hasn't changed during those seven years is Cook's goal for the group to be a "bridge to the community" and offer a positive picture of gay men. "I had the desire to do something productive and bring people together," Cook says. "We're activists. ... Every song we sing has the influence to change another mind. This is the passion behind our mission."

Using music as a tool for outreach is nothing new for Cook. He says he has loved music for as long as he can remember and began playing the piano when he was 3. As he got older, he used those gifts in Christian ministry. As a composer, he has written more than 1,000 songs, many of them Christian oriented. As a music or artistic director, he worked for such employers as Pat Robertson, Trinity Broadcasting Network, and Melodyland in Anaheim. Cook was minister of music at Melodyland when, in 1995, he decided to finally be true to himself after years of prayer, reparative therapy, and even exorcisms. His marriage fell apart, and he left Melodyland, where he had worked for 18 years. "I had, and still have, a deep affection for that church and its leadership," he says.

While reorganizing his life, Cook saw a performance by the Turtle Creek Chorale and began thinking about forming a gay men's chorus in Orange County. The timing was right in 2001, after attending a concert by the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles moved him to action. Now, Cook is busy as artistic director of Men Alive, and he also serves as music director at his church, Glory Tabernacle Christian Center in Long Beach.

Although Cook wouldn't use the word "ministry" to describe his work with the chorus, there are parallels to his old career. "I worked in the business of trying to help people better their life, and if I can't do it in one place, I can do it in another place," he says. "When you find out what you're supposed to do with your life, you find a way to do it. It just may look different than what you've thought."