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## Blue collar opera: Three Redneck Tenors at Rialto

By Annie Alleman  
STAFF WRITER

Matthew Lord has performed with such companies as San Francisco Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Washington Opera and Metropolitan Opera. He graduated from the Julliard School of Opera.

Now, with the Three Redneck Tenors, he performs in a mullet in front of a trailer. He even drives the tour bus.

"That's about as redneck as you get, I guess," he said with a chuckle. "When I (was with an opera company), I had people come up to me in theater asking me to move the truck. They had no idea I was the tenor in the show that evening."

Lord is the writer and originator of the show Three Redneck Tenors, which will be in Joliet at 8 p.m. Saturday at the Rialto Square Theatre. And yes, he really does drive the bus — a 1981 Eagle that used to belong to Disney on Ice, as a matter of fact.

Three Redneck Tenors is a musical-comedy experience designed not to educate the masses on classical music, but to entertain them with humor and pop culture.

"It's like old-time vaudeville with really good music," he said. "And at the end of the show, I always tell the audience, 'I hope you didn't learn one thing.'"

Although chances are the audience will leave the theater having learned that it's OK to laugh at opera.

The Three Redneck Tenors started a couple of years ago, when Lord — whose nickname while touring with the San Francisco company was Opera Redneck — "started getting real tired of the Three Tenors phenomena, only because it's about as boring as you can get to me," he said. The fact that it was "being cast off as really good music, when all it was is three guys singing in unison" bugged him, he said.

In fact, in the first act of his show they kill off one of the tenors in a woodchipping accident.

The show does have a story — it's not just three guys with mullets and big voices singing songs. Written by Lord with music arranged by award-winning composer Craig Bohmler, the cast includes Broadway vets and opera stars Keith Buterbaugh, Steven Sanders and Dinny McGuire.

The plot involves three Texas cousins — Billy Joe (Lord), Billy Bob (Sanders) and Billy Billee (Buterbaugh) — who are discovered singing in front of their mobile home by a city slicker agent known as The Colonel (McGuire). The boys

need money to help cousin Edna Mae (Lindsay Hilliard) build a new trailer, so they travel from venue to venue in search of the perfect performance hall.

Thus, they'll become the Village Tenors (dressing as The Village People and belting out "YMCA"), the Rock'n Tenors (dressing as Elvis and performing "Hound Dog") and Ye Old Tenors (dressing as Robin Hood.) The audience experiences the journey with them, culminating with their debut performance at New York City's Carnegie Hall.

The tenors include audience participation, costume changes and a six-piece band.

### Dying arts

Despite his character's admonition that he hopes the audience hasn't learned a thing, Lord is "real big into education," he said. He sees the arts dying out — opera houses and touring companies are fading away.

He wanted to bring music he loved, performed by fresh talent unknown outside the operatic circles, to the masses.

"The comments we're getting is that people have never laughed so hard, that the music is great, and on and on," he said. "We encompass everything from opera to Village People to country western. I think we get lost in the arts sometimes, forgetting we're there to entertain. If you want to bring in new audiences, you can't keep pounding them with the same seven operas over and over again.

"I was in Monteverde, and that's about as arty as you can get. That has its place and that's great, but a buck is hard to come by these days and (people) want to be entertained when they come to the theater," he said. "If you're pressing the 'It's good for you,' kind of thing, you're really limiting your performance."

That's not to say audiences won't hear excerpts from the likes of "La Boheme," "Carmen" and "Madame Butterfly," but interspersed with "You Light Up My Life" (performed in drag, natch) it's not as tough to swallow.

After writing an outline for the show, he passed it along to some presenters to get their take on it.

"They asked if I could make it clean and edgy, the kind of thing adults could bring their kids to," he said, comparing the humor to the kind found on the TV show, "Seinfeld."

"Another interesting thing is, there's not a redneck joke in the show, we just sit in front of a trailer," he said. "We don't even offend anyone who thinks they're rednecks. We don't make redneck jokes, we just are rednecks. These boys are really talented, and they do their job really seriously. We're not playing them as total idiots on stage. They're like these savants that are really smart with what they do. We embrace it. There's a lot of talking to the audience and making fun of ourselves."

What can audiences expect from The Three Redneck Tenors?

"They can expect to laugh more than they have in years and to hear probably the best singing they've ever heard," he said.