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Hoity-toity? Hah! Not this opera

A year ago, Matthew Lord was singing with the Metropolitan Opera. Now, he's driving a 24-year-old former "Disney On Ice" bus to small towns across the country.

The bus has already broken down once. But then, that's how it goes when you're the creator and one of the "3 Redneck Tenors," a show that promises "down-home laughs" and "big-city music." It features classically trained performers -- and a circus ringmaster -- singing pop, country and, yes, opera.

Lord, 44, a Juilliard School graduate and California native, now lives in his wife's home state of Texas, where "3 Redneck Tenors" debuted last year. The show hit the road two weeks ago for a 40-city tour, and so far, every performance has sold out. It comes to Lenoir and Morganton this week.

Lord spoke to staff writer Jen Aronoff from his motel room outside Pittsburgh.

Q. What inspired the show?

I've worked since the early '80s at the San Francisco Opera, and kind of my nickname there was "Opera Redneck." Someone would come up to me at the theater invariably and say, "Hey, move the truck!" And I'd say, "I'm actually the singer of the show."

It's also from my disdain for the whole "Three Tenors" phenomenon. There's nothing more musically boring than three of the same voice types just singing together and having a big lovefest all night. I wanted to fix that, so in our show we kill a tenor right away, in a wood-chipping accident, and replace him with a baritone. We've got a quartet of different voices singing.

Q. What did people make of it at first?

When we were selling the show, people would inevitably say, "We're kind of over the 'Three Tenors' act." And so we'd go, "We understand, but this is kind of different." And they'd say, "What's it called?" We'd go, "3 Redneck Tenors." And immediately the response was laughter. We all wear mullets in the show. If you want to spell good entertainment, you've got to have a mullet on.

Q. What kind of audiences has it attracted?

I think the name brings them in, but one of the neat things (promoters) said was, they didn't know who half that audience was because they had never seen them before. So it's bringing in a new audience, showing them great music. All of the music is the best arrangements, and we do it extremely seriously. Even "YMCA," we sing the hell out of it. That's what makes the comedy work in the show.

Q. How have crowds reacted?

(The show) is working. In Bristol, Tennessee, a woman came up to me and she was crying, "I just want to tell you, I'm from New Orleans and it's been two months since I laughed." And that there just made the whole thing worth it. That's how I wrote it, and that's how I continued to evolve it. It's a lot of improv ... like an old vaudeville show with a bit of a (plot).

Q. Do people get offended?

There's not one redneck joke in the show. My favorite shows in the world were the old "Andy Griffith" shows: They had the goofiest characters in the world, but each show had heart, so you never felt like they were making fun of anybody.

Redneck to me goes across racial lines and everything nowadays. It's basically that uncle who told stories -- the good old boys who are funny to be around.

Q. Is anyone in the cast really a redneck?

(Tenor) Steven Sanders is a young artist who came in as a replacement, and he is actually from Chickasha, Oklahoma, from a family of nine. A real teeny town. He's about as redneck as you can get. (Baritone) Keith (Buterbaugh) is from Pennsylvania. He's as nonredneck as you can get, but you wouldn't get that in the show.

Q. What's next for you?

We've had some people from Vegas come and show an interest in bringing it there. We have some Broadway people interested. I'm in the process of writing Christmas Rednecks and European Rednecks. It'll be a trilogy once it's finished. And if the show becomes very successful, the first thing I'll be doing is trading in the bus, at least for a 1990 model.