

# Mountain Express

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## Because a mullet is a terrible thing to waste

Musical comedy blends high art and low rent

by Alli Marshall

Comedian Jeff Foxworthy has perfected the "you know you're a redneck if ..." shtick, but none of his punch lines sound anything like "you and your two buddies sing opera."

However, music-theater veteran Matthew Lord is an equal-opportunity crooner: The creator of *3 Redneck Tenors* believes you can sport a mullet and sing "O Sole Mio" at the same time.

"My name in the business was 'Redneck Tenor,'" admits the vocalist, whose résumé includes engagements with the San Francisco Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago. "I'm low maintenance [and] I look like a redneck," he laughs. But Lord's show, which opens in Lenoir (about an hour northeast of Asheville) this week, *isn't* making fun of beer-swilling, trailer-dwelling Southerners.

Instead, it's dissing opera.

### Blame it on the tenor

"People hate tenors," continues Lord, who can number himself among their wretched ranks.

"I find nothing more boring than three tenors," he says. "It's three guys singing in unison all night." So, as soon as Lord's show opens, one of the tenors is killed off and replaced with a baritone. Plus, there's the character of the Colonel (as in Elvis' former manager), who acts as narrator and sings bass.

"Then we can actually make decent music," is Lord's take.

But how did a tenor who hates tenors end up writing the ultimate anti-opera musical comedy? Lord claims the name came first. In the wake of the ultimate Three Tenors (José Carreras, Plácido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti), there were the Three Irish Tenors (who sing operatic classics and Celtic tunes), followed by Three Mo' Tenors (a trio of African-Americans performing opera, Broadway standards, jazz, blues and gospel) – and Lord knew (no pun intended) the madness had to stop.

That's where *3 Redneck Tenors* comes in. "We sold 40 cities before we ever did a show, because the concept sold," the musician admits.

Here's the premise: Billy Bob, Billy Joe and Billy Billee live in Paris, Texas. They're discovered by the Colonel while singing in front of their trailer, and the rest of the show follows the motley trio as they try to find the right venue in which to perform. Hijinks

– including showing up at a Masonic lodge in drag, and warbling Italian standards at a saloon – soon prevail.

### Warm and fuzzy-like

"I came up with a basis of everything American – everything we love," explains Lord. "Like Elvis. Only Elvis is dead, so we can't make fun of him."

But the Billys do perform as the 3 Rockin' Renors, singing "Hound Dog" and a patriotic medley while wearing red, white and blue Elvis-in-Vegas-style jumpsuits. Only no Elvis wigs.

They also try their luck as the 3 Village Tenors (read: Village People); the 3 Italian Tenors dressed in fat suits; and Ye Olde Tenors 3, in medieval attire.

"But they always have mullets," Lord promises. And they always sing with absolute seriousness and skill – whether it's "La Donna e Mobile" or "YMCA." Sure, some of the songs might seem cheesy, but, as the reluctant tenor points out, "done well and done seriously, well, 'YMCA' sold [hundreds of thousands] of copies."

He continues, "No one will admit to liking Barry Manilow, but 'You Light Up My Life' was a huge hit." In fact, according to Lord, audiences regularly pick that song as their favorite from the show.

"We sing and do everything seriously, so it's like, "These guys have talent; they're not just dumb rednecks."

And though the show's creator and director proudly notes that half of his audience isn't drawn from the theatergoing crowd, he's also quick to point out that opera lovers can enjoy the song selections, too.

"Opera people don't go [to the theater] to enjoy: They go to critique," he reveals. "That's just a fact. But these audiences, they know they're allowed to laugh from the beginning. *3 Redneck Tenors* is a show written for towns like Sugarloaf, Hazelton and Lenoir."

And how does Lord know his demographic so well? According to the vocalist, he based the production on his inlaws – who hail from Lubbock, Texas.

"Our show has a lot of heart," he says. "There's no rebel flag; there's nothing malicious. Jeff Foxworthy made it okay to be a redneck – it's warm and fuzzy now."

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