

# *Dynamic vocalists* emote with more motion

Maple Leaf Singers' spring show marks 50 years of entertaining

By Alex Browne

**I**t was when the Maple Leaf Singers were being highlighted at the B.C. Pavilion at Expo '86 that New Westminster-based founders George and Marie Gillis made a discovery.

As the couple's son, Rob Gillis – assistant music director (and soon to be the group's new conductor) – remembers it, a glitch in the schedule led to an impromptu performance by the group without music books in hand.

"That's when they discovered the choir didn't need the music, and for the first time the choir stopped using it and converted into a show-choir, and started doing all of the choreography – that was a huge change in direction," he said.



*Rob Gillis grew up with the Maple Leaf Singers.*

Today, the Maple Leaf Singers – celebrating their 50th year in existence, with 50 members ranging in age from 18 to 80 – are known throughout Vancouver and the Lower Mainland for their dynamic shows, musical

versatility and a highly accessible repertoire that includes everything from show tunes, ballads and pop hits to rock n' roll, jazz and gospel.

With more than 12 shows each year, the group delivers upbeat, no-fee entertainment for special events, private bookings and fundraisers – in many cases bringing their music to shut-ins or those who otherwise would not see such a performance.

Now one of the Vancouver area's oldest choirs and the longest-standing member of the BC Choral Federation, the group continues to draw members from the White Rock, Surrey and Langley region, as well as regularly performing in the area.



*The 50-strong Maple Leaf Singers perform more than 12 high-energy concerts a year – often for audiences who would not otherwise get to see a fully choreographed theatre-style show. (Contributed photo)*



*Performing with the singers put me in touch with the seniors community – which has had a major influence on me choosing my current career.*

That included a full-house show April 18 at the Peninsula Seniors' Residence in South Surrey, where Gillis is a general manager for Sienna Senior Living (which also includes overseeing the Pacifica Seniors Residence).

But their biggest performance of the year will be the upcoming Solid Gold, their 50th anniversary extravaganza, which comes to New Westminster's Massey Theatre Saturday, May 26, at 7:30 p.m., and Sunday, May 27, at 2 p.m.

Included will be songs by the Hollies, the Beatles, the Doobie Brothers, Elton John, Billy Joel, and house-shaking specialties like *Rock This Town* and *You Can't Stop The Beat* – as well as the rousing gospel of *Hallelujah, By and By* and *Swinging With The Saints*, to the haunting melodies of *You'll Never Walk Alone*, *Shenandoah* and the *Water Is Wide*.

"It's the best of the best from 50 years of performing, including one of the songs that was in the first show in 1968 – *The Happy Wanderer*," Gillis said.

"You name it, we've got it – there's all kinds of stuff in there. It's songs we know that have been crowd-pleasers over the years. Putting a show together this year was more of a challenge this year than in previous years, with all this great music to choose from."

Gillis was singer and bass player with the Vancouver-based corporate and club band the Blue Meenies for 26 years.

A decade ago, he and his wife Josie decided it was time to join the Maple Leaf Singers as full-time singing members. Last year, Gillis stepped up to become assistant to musical director Wilson Fowlie, who has conducted the group for 17 years since Gillis's father retired in 2000, and this year he will succeed Fowlie following the latter's retirement.

Gillis's history with the group started a lot earlier, of course.

"I grew up with the Maple Leaf Singers," he said.

"(The group) was put together when I was one year old," he said, adding that his dad fused the short-lived Gillis Chorale, a small group that rehearsed out of their home, with the Maple Leaf Choir, which

had been seeking a new conductor.

Relatability to audiences was always a concern, Gillis said, noting that his dad was insistent on calling the new group the Maple Leaf Singers.

"We don't want people thinking it's a choir," he said.

Another principle has also been consistent from the beginning, said Gillis – who first started playing percussion and singing with the group when he was eight.

"It's a community choir – we play theatre-quality shows for people who can't always get out to theatres," he said.

"Performing with the singers put me in touch with the seniors community – which has had a major influence on me choosing my current career."

Fortunately, although both of his parents retired from the choir, they still remain highly involved, Gillis added.

"While dad stopped conducting, my mom, to this day, is still sewing all our costumes – at the ripe age of 85," he chuckled.

Recruiting new singers is an ongoing and highly necessary process, Gillis said, and singers are always invited to try out for the group (for more information, visit the website, [mapleleavesingers.com](http://mapleleavesingers.com)).

"It's only by getting new people that we can ensure that this will go on," he said.

"The biggest strengths of the Maple Leaf Singers are the members' sense of family, our joy in and love of singing, and the sense of contributing to the community."

Gillis notes that the organization is a registered not-for-profit society.

"It costs us money to be involved and real passion and devotion to rehearse and perform – the big spring show allows us to do what we do in the community, to raise the funds to provide the service we do."

The Massey Theatre is located at 735 8 Ave., New Westminster. Tickets (\$25, youth and students \$15) are available from 778-245-4445 or at the website, and special group pricing is available.