

## Suburban Life

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Betty Houghton (at far right) leads the band at the American House, Farmington Hills, during rehearsal for upcoming public performances.

## The Music Makers

Their songs bring joy and good health

By Mary Rodrigue  
Staff writer

A gusty wind blew outside American House, but inside a warm and spirited group of senior citizens were gathered around the piano to sing a medley of oldtime songs.

It was weekly choir practice and music director Betty Houghton led them through "Your the Cream in My Coffee," "I Love You Truly" and a selection of tunes from "The Sound of Music."

Each of the two men and six women seated in a semicircle held a booklet of songsheets. Voices were loud and strong, with particular enthusiasm for favorite tunes.

A half dozen more men and women in the Livonia retirement residence sat nearby tapping their feet to the beat.

After the hour long rehearsal, the group disbanded in high spirits. Houghton reminded them of an upcoming performance scheduled at Livonia Mall.

"They really look forward to this," she said.

Originally hired as weekend manager of the Farmington Hills American House in 1986, Houghton was able to put her ample musical talent to use when a spot opened there for activity director last year.

"Music was always so much a part of my life," she said.

She began with a band, then formed a quartet who performed for a local cable tv show, then a choir.

Houghton herself has sung with the Farmington Community Chorus for eight years — since her husband's job transfer brought her to



Lucille Ducheno of the Farmington Hills American House, toots out a tune during rehearsal with the band.

this area from Ontario. Having just moved to Southfield last week after eight years in Farmington Hills, she is bowing out of the chorus but continues to remain active as soloist and choir member of North Farmington Baptist Church.

She earned a music certificate in piano and vocal from the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario (she taught elementary students music appreciation for a time) and a bachelor of science degree in gerontology from Madonna College in Livonia.

American House president Bob Gillette was so impressed with the Music Makers, the band Houghton put together in Farmington Hills, that he created the position of music

director for her last March. She now travels to all 13 American Houses in metro Detroit to implement her musical programs, working with the activity director in each building.

There are choirs in the Dearborn Heights, Livonia, Westland and Farmington Hills residences, two music appreciation classes in the two Royal Oak buildings, and a drama group in Rochester Hills.

Members, she says, are enthusiastic.

"We have one soprano who was church soloist for 40 years," she said. "Another sang in a men's choir for several years. Some were teachers."

The average age of members is mid 80s, she said. American House is a chain of housing developments for independent senior citizens. Although there are common dining rooms and social/recreational areas, residents have private rooms.

For public performances, the Music Makers play tamborines, wood blocks, several kinds of drums, cymbals and other instruments. Ladies wear t-shirts over their blouses and men wear vests and hats.

For the Livonia Mall performance and a second show at Meadowbrook Mall in Rochester, "We'll probably do some favorite peppy band numbers and some Christmas songs."

The Farmington Hills group, where Houghton has had the most exposure, has performed in all the other American Houses, in nursing homes, even at a nursery school.

"It's such a great group we have there," she said. "And we've had a few new people join lately."

Often those who sit on the sidelines at first are slowly drawn into the group when they see how much fun it is, she added.

"We laugh, we have a good time. A choir is a good thing. Most (American Houses) have people who like to sing."

"Last June we did a show for families of residents in Farmington Hills. Sixty people showed up. They loved it. They're happy to see (their relative) take part. The family of the church soprano said they didn't know she could still sing. They hadn't heard her in years."

Research has shown that singing is not only healthy for mental health, but physical well being, too.

Researcher Kathy McCormick of the Gerontology Research Center, National Institute on Aging, has reported that professional opera singers have stronger chest wall muscles and that their hearts pump blood better than those of otherwise normal non-singing adults.

Adds Houghton: "Many older adults lack the opportunity to use their voices in the full range of tones. They live alone and speak quietly. The loss of elasticity in the muscles, disease or changes in lung structure often cause shallow breathing. The opportunity to use the voice and lungs in singing, laughing and making music should maintain a higher level of functioning of these important facets."

Aside from the physical benefits, Houghton finds her singers just enjoy the camaraderie.

The American House Music Makers next performance will be Thursday, Dec. 8, in Meadowbrook Mall, Rochester at 2:30 p.m. A second performance is slated Friday, Dec. 16, at 2:30 p.m. in the Livonia Mall.

Staff photos  
by  
Randy Borst



Daniel Burban of the Livonia American House plays the gut-bucket, an old washtub with broomhandle and string which produces a sound similar to a bass.



Ruth May of the Music Makers, Farmington Hills American House band, shakes her castanet and kazoo to the beat.



Betty Houghton, director of music for American House and leader of the Music Makers, says music has played a great part in her life.