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The Invictas rock for Matthew House

By Erik Sorensen / Special to The Citizen

AUBURN - Mick Jagger once said he couldn't imagine still strutting on stage when he was older than 30.

Jagger still struts at 64. Bluesman John Lee Hooker was 83, and still touring, when he died in 2001. So can senior citizens still rock?

Herb Gross, 62, definitely thinks so, and the frontman for the Rochester legends The Invictas showed he's still a rock-n-roller as his band played a benefit concert Saturday at Tinker's Guild on Franklin Street in Auburn.

John Mortimer, the founder of Tinker's Guild and its owner once again, has been a fan of The Invictas since he first heard them play at their favorite Rochester stomping grounds, Tiny's Bengal Inn, in the early 1960s.

Mortimer was just a teenager, but he'd always remembered their exciting live shows. He knew they still toured and wanted them for an outdoor show. Once that was arranged, he decided Matthew House should benefit, a hospice home on Metcalf Drive that is staffed almost entirely by volunteers.

"It's a great organization. If you're going to give money to an organization I can't think of one better," he said.

The "official" party at Tinker's was from 4 to 8 p.m., and then continued informally for a few more hours. For The Invictas, a tent, tables, and food-and-drink were set up in the back end of the tavern's parking lot.

Three of the four original members still perform - joining Gross are drummer Dave Hickey and bassist Jim Kohler, the band's on-stage jokester.

Last year, they were featured on "The Today Show," much of the footage showing their warm-up performance for The Beach Boys. They've also been written up in USA Today, The Washington Times, and many other national newspapers and magazines.

The Invictas formed in 1961, and while many of his classmates at the Rochester Institute of Technology were more enamored of their slide rules, Gross put together his garage band. They started out playing frat parties and small clubs before becoming regulars at Tiny's Bengal Inn. They broke up in the late-1960s, not because of any strife between the band members, but more because of increasing personal responsibilities and the craziness of the time period, Gross said. They always kept in touch, though, and reunited briefly in 1980.

The band was reformed in 2005 with two new members, guitarists Dick Calleri and Dave Profeta.

"We weren't sure if anyone would show up. Would anybody remember the band?" worried Gross, but more than 300 people attended their first club date at the California Brew Haus in Rochester. "The place was just packed. You want to play for people, and we really enjoy playing. It was a great night."

It took awhile to get to the Brew Haus. The band had been on a long hiatus.

"We were really rusty," said Gross. "And our CMO Dave Profeta - our Chief Musical Officer - just said 'We've got a lot of work to do.' Nine months later, we were ready to play."

The band has a new album out called "Skip 'N go Naked," a popular drink back in their Tiny Bengal's heyday - a combination of a Tom Collins and beer.

For Mortimer, he's enjoying a second act much like Gross and his bandmates are.

Tinker's Guild opened in 1975 and was an immediate hit. Mortimer sold Tinker's in 1990, and the tavern was closed for a little more than a year before he bought it back this January. After several months of renovations, he opened the doors in late spring.

Mortimer is now 61, soon to be 62. His daughter, Lindsey, helps her father at the tavern when she's not working as a substitute teacher, or looking for full-time work in her own classroom. Lynn Mortimer encouraged her father, and her mother, Nancy, to buy back the well-known business he'd first established more than 30 years ago.

"We balance each other out very well," said Lynn, 26, who admits she sometimes has to "grit her teeth" when the sometimes raucous bar business becomes a little too stressful.

And running Tinker's is not John Mortimer's full-time focus either. He is a sales associate for Florida-based Senergy, a company that markets synthetic stucco and other building products. "I cover all of New York state and I stock it here in Auburn," he said.

Now a resident of Charlotte, N.C., Gross has to fly to all of his band's gigs. His bandmates all live in upstate New York, most in the Rochester area. With all the travel and related expenses, Gross said his music is truly a labor of love because he usually loses money playing out-of-state shows.

"We play about 14-15 times a summer, and I plan to expand that in the winter months to playing down south - Florida, Mrytle Beach, places like that," said Gross.

Gross is also the author of a new book titled "Rock Till You Drop," that not only gives an interesting history of The Invictas but is also an entertaining read on how senior citizens can stay young by focusing on activities like taking the stage at 62 and still being a commanding presence to young and old alike.

"I'm telling people that we are living our dreams right now playing in a rock-and-roll band. I'm telling boomers - follow your dreams, follow your passions, because life is short," said Gross.
