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## Clippings: They peek when François sings

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FRANÇOIS CLEMMONS, SHOWN at last year's Martin Luther King Day celebration in Mead Chapel, is a well-known figure whose rich tenor has been appreciated not just in the concert hall and chapel but also at Panther athletic events. He will retire this year. Independent file photo/Trent Campbell

I have a favorite moment at Middlebury College basketball games. It's when François Clemmons begins to sing the National Anthem.

I dreaded the Anthem when I was an athlete. I was ready to play the game. Starters had been announced and were out on the playing surface, tense, excited, full of adrenaline. *Let's go!*

Then we had to wait, often for a scratchy recording, sometimes for a live singer, who sang at a funereal pace.

So I identify with the players on the floor at Midd games, not the Panther players, but their opponents, who are standing on the foul line, facing the American flag hanging on the west wall of the gym.

François stands behind them at the scorer's table.

Their demeanor is respectfully sober, but it says at the same time, "Let's get this over with." They shuffle, they fidget, stand on one foot, then the other, stretch their necks.

Then François begins to sing in his rich tenor, and you see these players, their first time hearing him, in our gym, and they do this look: They subtly glance over their shoulders, in surprise and admiration. They peek. It's a little gesture but unmistakable.

By the time François sings out the "Land of the freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee," they know they have been treated to something special.

They have heard the best rendition of the Star Spangled Banner since the late Robert Merrill held forth in Yankee Stadium.

For the past 15 years, François has been the Alexander Twilight Artist-in-Residence at Middlebury College and has become a familiar and beloved figure in the community.

With a Bachelor of Music from Oberlin College, a Master of Fine Arts from Carnegie-Mellon University, an Honorary Doctor of Arts from Middlebury College, a performance career with various opera companies, 20 years as the founder and director of the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble, over 100 performances as "Sportin' Life" in Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, 22 years as Officer Clemmons on Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, and innumerable other honors and achievements, he would certainly appear to be qualified to sing the National Anthem at Middlebury College basketball games.

"I love singing the Star Spangled Banner, and always have," François told me recently at Steve's Park Diner. "I'm patriotic. When I travel abroad, I am grateful to have an American passport. Singing the Anthem allows me to pay tribute to this great country where I can be myself."

It started with the swim team. He became friends with former coach Peter Solomon who asked him to sing at home swim meets. He was then asked by Coach Jeff Brown to open basketball games and has done so on a regular basis. From time to time, he has also ensured that big games in ice hockey, field hockey, football, and track got off to a rousing start.

"I think more people know me from the Anthem than from my concerts," he said with a laugh.

He loves sports. "When I was growing up in Youngstown (Ohio), I was constantly out in the streets, playing baseball and football mostly. My nickname was 'tenderfoot.' I was fast and had no fear. My brother Willie played basketball.

"I played the clarinet in the marching band in high school at big football games. We (the Rayen School) were pretty good, but we couldn't ever beat Steubenville," he said.

Alas, we may have heard François sing the Anthem for the last time.

He is retiring.

At the end of this academic year, he will become the Emeritus Artist-in-Residence at Middlebury, and take a sabbatical year. He will undergo knee replacement surgery, first one knee in June, and then the other later in the summer. His health is a high priority. "The past couple of years have been a real challenge, physically," he said.

After he recovers from his knee surgeries, he hopes to travel. He has formed especially close relationships in his 15 years at Middlebury with international students, and he would like to see their home countries. "I'd love to go to India, Nepal, Bangladesh, China, various countries in Africa," he said. "I will do Graduation and Convocation, but other than that I'm not obligated to do anything. I can say 'no.'"

"I want to be active politically. I'm very interested in social justice, women's issues, sexual assault," he said. "I have been a counselor for gay students and others who have been challenged at Middlebury."

His permanent base will be right here in Middlebury. "I'm not going anywhere. It was never a question about leaving Middlebury. When I was in New York, I worked all the time, hustling, networking. I draw tremendous satisfaction from my career, even at Middlebury. I reached my 'peak' here.

"I will continue to have some role with the Music Department, and I know I will keep doing the Martin Luther King Choir. I have about 50 kids in the choir, along with townspeople and faculty. Many have never sung in a choir before and in the MLK Choir they have an active musical experience."

So it seems to me that retirement for François does not mean hanging up the vocal chords. Here's one basketball fan who hopes to hear François sing the Anthem again in Pepin Gym — and watch the opposing players peek in admiration.