Flamboyant & Fabulous François
Bringing a little color to Vermont
MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD HAS ARRIVED at Middlebury College, in the form of the man known to two decades of eager-eyed toddlers as Officer Clemmons, the Singing Policeman.

François Clemmons' duties at Middlebury have been pedagogical, not constabulary, but in a deeper sense he has indeed been promoting peace and harmony. He first arrived as the leader of the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble, in a performance that packed Mead Chapel. That led to several equally successful return engagements, which the graduation program for June 1996 called "nearly an annual event."

That description was part of a citation for an honorary Doctor of Arts degree, which cited Clemmons' outstanding international opera career, his founding of the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble, his work with history classes as well as vocal students on campus, and of course his 22 years patrolling "that most peaceful of beats" on the Emmy and Peabody Award-winning children's show.

Since then, Clemmons has become even more a part of daily life at the school, as a Twilight Scholar (named for 1823 Middlebury College graduate Alexander Twilight, the first African American to receive a college degree). The honor does not spell out the recipient's duties, but they have come to include teaching, performances, the creation of a unique amateur choirale, and the role of adding a "colorful" presence, as he put it, to a sometimes winter-white campus environment.

Clemmons has made no secret of the fact that he is house-hunting, though he also makes clear that he is in no hurry to abandon the gracious quarters on South Main Street that Midd has provided for him and, recently, his mother. Though a background figure in her prayerfully meditative closing years, Mrs. Inez Boswell is a backbone of intense spirituality, whose influence is evident to any who meet her at their home.

Not that he's abandoned his professional connections or his pied à terre in New York City, a residence close enough to Central Park for him to have witnessed a Big Apple tapestry of human theatricality, criminality, incivility, and nobility. He has used that physical connection to take students to Harlem so that they can shed their all-black, violence-laden stereotypes of what that vibrant neighborhood is like.

Inevitably, situating himself in Bob Newhart country has led to a good deal of ribbing from city friends, who question why he would banish himself to "the sticks." He acknowledges that cities, Western civilization's traditional centers of culture, are uniquely interesting and important. But in three decades in New York City, he never felt as settled as after three years in Middlebury.

"I love Middlebury. I think I've found my home," he said. "There is a lot for me, in the way I approach life." The long, cold, snowy winters? He's survived and enjoyed them. Not being at the center of what's happening? "Where I am, I AM at the center of things," he tells urban associates.

Making himself available to students informally as well as by schedule, Clemmons has become a familiar and much-beloved figure, easily identified from afar by his flamboyant shirts and authentic baseball caps. Athletic in his youth (at one point baseball stardom rivaled singing as a personal goal), he remains a Yankee fan, glorying in their World Series triumph. Yet along with the cutting of a figure, he has gained a reputation as a force for tolerance and acceptance, a role suggesting one of his lesser-known titles: the Reverend Clemmons, which he became through his 1990 ordination in the nondenominational Christian Church.
There’s no need for an Underground Railroad these days—Amtrak will do, or Burlington International Airport—but in the state whose unofficial motto has long been “live and let live,” he has found warmth by coming North.

**A VOICE AND A CALLING**

IT'S BEEN A LONG TREK FOR CLEMONS, whose first name reflects his family’s former residence in the Mississippi Delta bayou region, home also of many of the French Canadian refugees known now as the Cajuns.

It was a “Hard Times Come Again No More” existence for the small farmers and sharecroppers of the post-Reconstruction South, to use one of Stephen Foster’s lesser-known song titles, so when World War I and World War II created a demand for industrial laborers, millions of rural Southerners migrated northward. For the Clemons family, the first stop was the factory city of Birmingham, which schoolchildren of another era will remember as “the Pittsburgh of the South” due to its proximity to iron ore, coal, and limestone.

In 1950, when François was five, his mother and stepfather left segregated Birmingham, came up roads where there were often no public bathrooms at all for coloreds, and finally arrived in Youngstown, Ohio, a steel center of about 200,000 people. From that distance, the boy was to watch with more than casual interest the civil rights struggles that soon overtook the Deep South.

Meanwhile, fate had dealt Clemons a handful of acts, in the form of his voice, his musical talent, his family’s interest in music, and his school system’s music program. His musically talented mother inspired and nurtured his ability: one of his enduring memories was hearing her singing spirituals around the house during his early years, which developed into family duets and trios.

In the Youngstown school system, “from second grade they decided that I had a singing voice,” and had him performing solos, Clemons said. He still remembers the first such number, standing before his second-grade friends and belting out “You’ve got to be a football hero/To get along with the beautiful girls.”

A fine athlete looking toward athletic scholarships, he finally had to choose between team practices and being serious about music. He chose music and Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, which had a fine music school. Oberlin was “a wonderful experience,” he said, with “a lot of like-minded, serious musicians” and an exposure to opera that began a lifelong love affair.

Graduate training followed at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where he took a Master of Fine Arts. But his ticket to the big time came when he won the regional Metropolitan Opera auditions in Pittsburgh, which gave him entrée to the prestigious New York company’s regional competition in Cleveland, Ohio, where he took a third prize.

He impressed the judge enough so that eventually he became a member of the Metropolitan Opera Studio. That meant working with many of his idols, including Leontyne Price, an inspiration since his Oberlin days.

“There those great singers were so good to me,” Clemons said. “It was a very special time, and I’m very grateful for that.”

In his seven seasons with the Studio, he performed in 70 roles, with opera companies from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. To fast-forward a bit, he is renowned for his more than 100 portrayals of Sportin’ Life in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess,* including a 1973 recording with the Cleveland Symphony for London Records that won a Grammy and is considered definitive by many.

But Clemons was not fated to settle down to a series of performances as a “divo” in the operatic world.

For one thing, surviving as a young singer meant doing all sorts of freelance vocal work, especially in Manhattan, where he lived for nearly 30 years. Count among his successes advertising jobs for MacDonald’s, AT&T, Manufacturer’s Hanover Trust, soup and shoe commercials, and numerous others.

At one point, he got a chance to appear on national television, singing for a children’s show by one Fred Rogers. He did well enough to be offered a contract to appear regularly, something he thought would last maybe one or two months.

“It became 24 years,” Clemons said—or rather, make that Officer Clemons, a role that was to take him “all over America” as the show was filmed in various locations.

There are those who make jokes or critical comments about the kind of bland goodwill Rogers extends to his preschool audience, which grates on some adult nerves just like the antics of Barney the Dinosaur. But don’t put down Fred Rogers in the company of François Clemons.

“He became my spiritual father,” Clemons said. “I love him. He’s the most wonderful human being you would ever want to meet. I don’t think I could have worked with a better person.”

**HARLEM SPIRITUAL ENSEMBLE IS BORN**

LOOKING AROUND AT ALL THE KINDS OF MUSICAL ENSEMBLES AND SOCIETIES in existence—Bach, Handel, St. Cecilia, Schubert, Mendelsohn, etc.—he realized there was no singing group dedicated to one of America’s foremost creations, the internationally beloved Negro spirituals.

Moved by the struggles his people had endured since being taken from Africa, Clemons had begun programming entire concerts of spirituals, and as he said in a written account of those years, “much to my relief, these concerts were supported emotionally and psychologically by presenters and musical institutions all over America.” But far from culminating his journey into this repertoire, he found himself possessed by “a certain holy dissatisfaction” that led, after much thought and prayer, to the decision to found the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble.

That meant years of historical research at a long string of col-
Moses stood on the Red Sea shore, SMOTE that water with a two-by-four,” goes one work song.

“Go down Moses, go down and tell old Pharaoh, tell old Pharaoh let my people go”—this was “signifying,” not just singing. “The spiritual took on a double meaning to allow communication under the slavemaster’s nose and to facilitate communication among slaves who wished to escape to freedom,” Clemmons wrote.

At first, he hoped others would join him on a volunteer basis to form the troupe, but, after struggling with their departures, realized he would have to pay his performers. In 1986, they got a break: a chance to do a free concert at Federal Hall on Wall Street, for which he paid the singers out of his own pocket. “Word was out that we had done a decent job, and we began receiving requests for paying jobs.” They finally signed with the Thea Dispeker Agency, which led to a recording contract with Arcadia. The rest is international musical history, but also a continuing mission.

In his travels, Clemmons found “there was a general cry for meaning and substance. People began to talk—and still do—about inner healing and a profound sense of fulfillment they were experiencing at one of our concerts.”

Or, for that matter, at his classes and college choir rehearsals. During “J-Term” last winter, Clemmons taught “The History of the American Negro Spiritual and Its Influence on Western Civilization.” Students who overlooked the words further down in the catalog, saying that “the lives of abolitionists and their legacy will be reviewed,” soon learned that they would be involved in serious research and equally serious peer review of their results, not just melodically hoping that the sweet chariot would swing low and carry them home. Visit one of his classes and words like “teach,” “tutor,” “mentor,” and “inspire” acquire simultaneous operational definition.

The class is in Mead Chapel, partly because it’s good for singing, partly because no one else thought the space would work for a classroom. A dozen or so students of various ethnic backgrounds sit in pews while Clemmons talks about the papers they have written on major figures in African American history.

He challenges positions: No, he doesn’t think Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings could have had a true love affair, with such a disparity in power. No, the Underground Railroad wasn’t a myth, even though Harriet Tubman’s role may have been mythologized out of proportion.

At the end, Malyssa Adodo ’02, an African American student from New York City, praised Clemmons’s honesty and his openness, his ability to create a class in which “we learn from each other. We all have knowledge of different things.”

Drew Rudnick ’00, a white student from Skaneateles, New York, said, “He has opened up many things that no other person here ever acknowledged existed. He facilitates wonderful communication in the students. We’ve had fabulous discussions.”

In a somewhat different way, but with equal intensity, Clemmons has made the formation of the 35-member Middlebury Choir into a profound educational experience. Rather than put out a call for those with superior voices, he has taken people into the choir because they have a passion to sing. Staff members, faculty, students—all are welcome if they care to share. “Singing is like making love: you’ve got to give it away,” he tells them.

Clemmons has no use for the “academic” view that singing is “extracurricular,” just a casual activity with no further ramifications. He already knew what a recent article in Atlantic Monthly stated, that “in the past decade a half-dozen studies have supported the idea that the study of music enriches a young person’s thinking capacities.”

Sometimes he comes in singing what he has to say, and tells them to answer back in melody—something those who weren’t glued to the set when Fred Rogers did his “opera” find a bit strange at first. But the inherent naturalness soon takes hold. “If I had my way, we would be singing all the time,” Clemmons said.

“I think the College community is searching for a spiritual light or a spiritual place where they can express that spirituality,” he said. “My coming here was part of an acknowledgment that we need more overt diversity at Middlebury and in Vermont as a whole,” Clemmons said.

As many at Middlebury College would attest, when Officer Clemmons comes around, it’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

Ed Barna, a Middlebury native and son of a 1951 Middlebury College G.I. Bill graduate, is a poet and freelance writer living in Brandon, Vt.