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Item News-Democrat/Brad Kellerman

'I can hardly wait to open my mouth to sing...'

Like so many others, performer Bob Ellison takes pleasure in his voice

By MICHELLE MEEHAN

On a recent crisp fall morning, Sunday Magazine Bob Ellison holed up in the Belleville Philharmonic Hall, his mind drifting to decades past. He was just a kid in the ghetto when he started to sing. Next month, the 59-year-old will perform with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. It has been a long and melodious road.

"Nobody sang in my family," remembered Bob, scratching his gray-black beard. "My father played baseball. I didn't. It wasn't my bag."

Instead, he listened to the "The Voice of Firestone" radio program every Saturday night. It was during the late 1940s. And The Voice of Firestone, which featured talented black vocalists, fueled the young boy's dreams.

"I was influenced by (singers) Paul Robeson and William Warfield," Bob said. "They did excerpts from 'Showboat' and 'Porgy and Bess' and 'Carmen.'"

While Bob sang backup on the living room floor. "Paul Robeson was like an octave below the lowest range on the piano," he remembered. "And sometimes, when he sang 'Old Man River,' the radio would start vibrating toward the edge of the table. You had to push it back. He was fantastic.

"I said, 'That's what I want to be!' Of course, my voice never got that low. But it did get deeper. It had to. At that time, I was singing soprano."

Several years later, when Bob's family moved from Arkansas to Ohio, he met the teacher who would cultivate his talents. His name was John Howard Tucker and he taught Bob the correct way to sing.

"He chewed tobacco and smoked cigars," recalled Bob, who was a high school student at the

time. "He used to wear these tweed coats and they smelled just like he smelled. If he brought his coat in here right now and hung it up, you'd know he was in the area."

At the time, Bob was a teen-ager with a voice bigger than he was. Mr. Tucker pulled in the reins.

"He said, 'I'm going to keep you after school and teach you certain things,'" Bob remembered, "like singing from the diaphragm and breath control. We paid him what we could. I think it was something like \$3 a week."

Never mind Tucker charged his other students a whopping \$5 a lesson. He did not go easy on Bob.

"He'd make you lay on a table on your back, lay three phone books on your stomach and sing the scales," Bob remembered. "Then he'd have you roll over on your stomach and start all over again."

"He'd make you do it till you'd be wiping the sweat out of your eyes. Then he'd say, 'Do it again! It's not right!'"

"No matter how hard you tried — no matter how good you thought you were — it was never good enough. He had this big, old, gray beard. He'd be sitting there rubbing it like he wasn't impressed."

But deep down, you hoped he was.

"What I learned from that teacher is still with me today," said Bob, who has sung at two World Series games, Powell Symphony Hall and both of Gov. James Edgar's inaugurations.

"That's why I still have a voice, because of what he taught me. I wish he could have lived to see what the end product came out to be."

It is likely he would have been proud.

was one of many highlights in a career filled with ... well, many highlights.

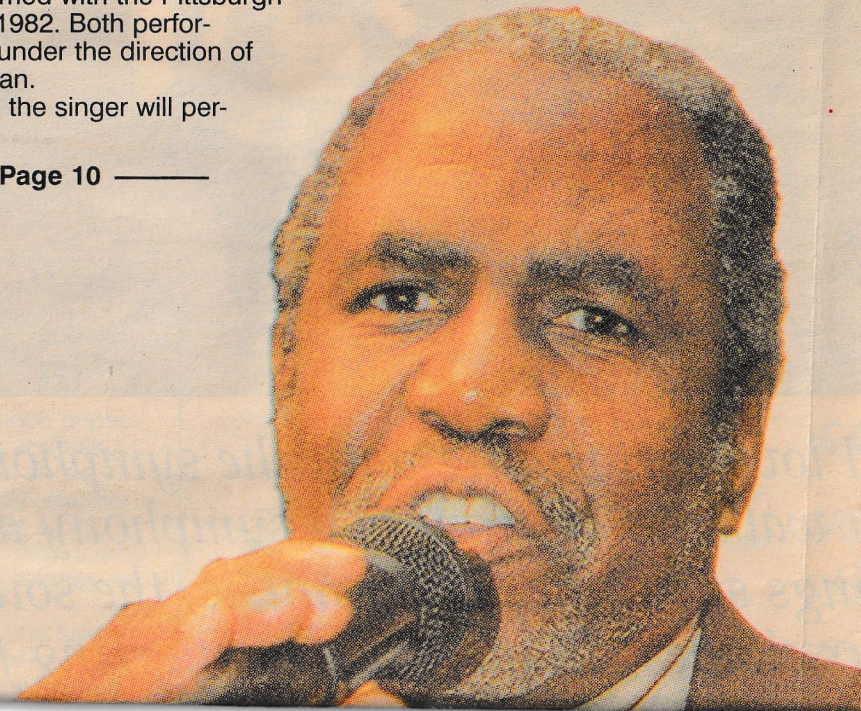
A retired Air Force chief master sergeant, Bob won three worldwide Air Force talent shows while enlisted, spending the last decade of his career performing with the Military Airlift Command Band.

"I loved the band," he said. "As far as I was concerned, that wasn't work. That was enjoyment."

In 1980, Bob performed for the first time with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. He also performed with the Pittsburgh Symphony in 1982. Both performances were under the direction of Richard Hayman.

Next month, the singer will per-

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Every singer warms up before a performance and Bob Ellison is no exception. If he doesn't have the time, he simply does lip exercises. But if he does have the time, he sings the national anthem.

"Tucker always said if you sang the national anthem before a performance, you didn't have to worry about warming up. It takes you from the lowest to the highest note."

And everywhere in between. It works so well Bob has been known to sing the national anthem before singing the national anthem.

"In '82 and '85, I performed 'The Star Spangled Banner' at Busch Stadium to 55,000 people," he recalled of the World Series' games. "The first time I did it, I didn't realize there's like a three-second delay after you sing the words."

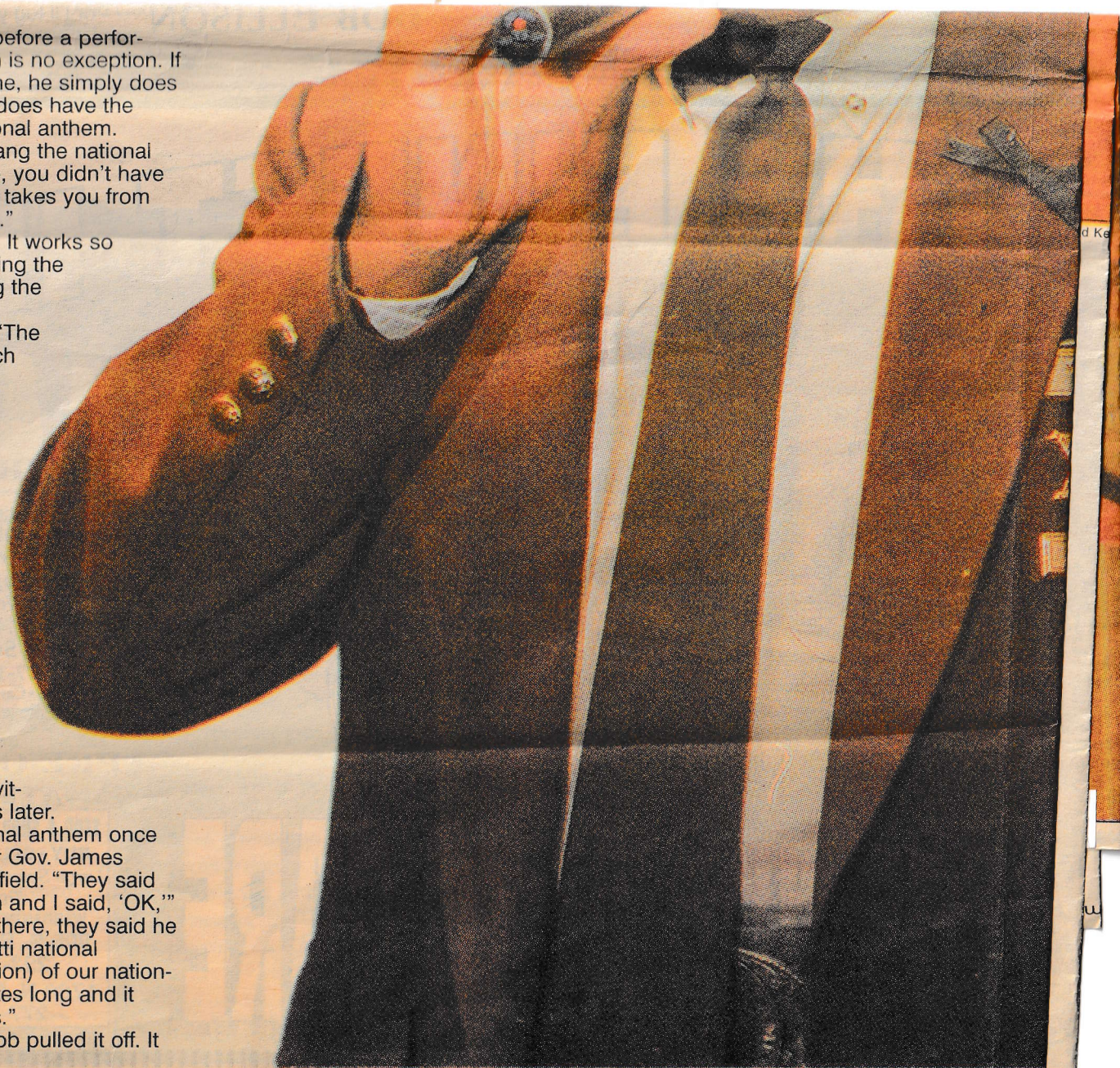
But a little echo couldn't throw Bob.

"I just started tapping my foot to keep time. I said, 'This is it. You've got to do it now. This is your one shot in life.' I was so excited, I did the whole song in 'C.' You can imagine what the (high) note was."

But Bob nailed it. And, much to his delight, he was invited back to perform three years later.

In 1991, Bob sang the national anthem once again. Only this time, it was for Gov. James Edgar's inauguration in Springfield. "They said he wanted the national anthem and I said, 'OK,'" he recalled. "Then when I got there, they said he wanted me to do the Sandi Patti national anthem. It's (an elaborate version) of our national anthem. It's about five minutes long and it changes keys about four times."

The consummate trooper, Bob pulled it off. It



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form under Robert Coleman's direction on Nov. 3 and 5 at Powell Symphony Hall, as part of a program titled "From Bossa Nova to Blues."

"I love performing with the symphony," he said. "When you walk out in front of a symphony and the strings start, the actual music, the sound, moves your clothes. To me, it's a comforting feeling. It's almost like air, but it's notes. I can hardly wait to open my mouth to sing with them."

He can't wait to sing, period. These days, Bob owns and operates "A Step Beyond," an entertainment company that provides music for all occasions. A board member with the Belleville Philharmonic Society, he resides in O'Fallon with his wife, Flora, and Missy the cat.

"I've had an interesting career," he said, modestly.

Talk about your understatement. While still in the Air Force, Bob was invited to perform for Bob Hope's wife, Dorothy, at her birthday celebration.

"They flew me from Scott Air Force Base to San Antonio, Texas, to sing 'Wind



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— BOB ELLISON

Beneath My Wings.' Bob Hope's wife, she had heard me sing it before at some other function and she requested me."

Aside from singing, Bob has also tried his hand at acting. He performed in "Godspell" and "Two Gentlemen of Verona" at the Wiesbaden Theatre in Germany and also starred in "Showboat" at The Looking Glass Theater in Lebanon.

"I played Joe and sang 'Old Man River,'" he remembered, proudly. "Then William Warfield took over the role for two nights. When he left, I resumed the role for another 2 1/2 weeks. It was great to get to work with one of my heroes."

As for the hero who made Bob's career possible — he will never forget John Howard Tucker.

"I wish he was alive to thank," he said, softly. "I'd find the money somewhere to fly him in. I'd have him come out and listen to the symphony performance. I'd say, now listen to this, Mr. Tucker. And you'd better clap — or I'll tug your beard."