

By BETTYE FOSTER BAKER

ON MOTHER'S DAY 2006, I attended the Ritz Chamber Orchestra's debut appearance at the Lincoln Center. Their guest performer was Robert Sims, a lyric baritone and singer of extraordinary artistry whose classical interpretations of spirituals and American folk songs are both beautiful and inspiring. A year later, little did I know that I would have the pleasure of meeting him on the Island at Brady's Bed and Breakfast, across the street from my home. Brady has an uncanny ability to draw interesting people to his bed and breakfast, and I rarely miss a chance to meet them.

Mr. Sims sent me a copy of his promotional compact disc across the street and after listening to it, I knew I had to learn more about this gifted artist. So early on a Sunday morning, we had a conversation. It was one of the most informative and delightful interviews I've done in a long time.

First we share the same paternal family name, Sims. My ancestors embellished mine of course and there are two m's (Simms.) As we talked about the spiritual and its unique place in American musical tradition as perhaps the only true folk songs that America can claim, it was clear that Robert Sims's heart and soul are deeply embedded in the spiritual and African American Folk music, though he is equally at home singing the traditional classical repertoire.

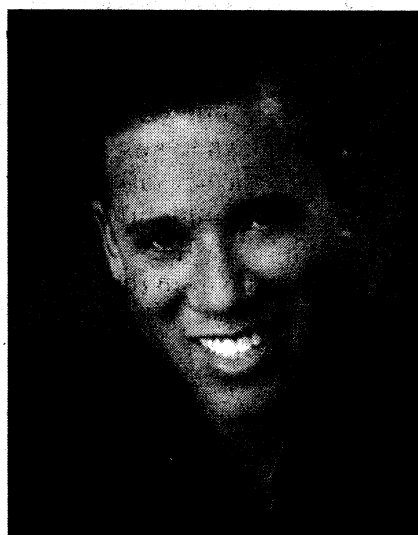
To both he brings a passionate commitment and a rich, luxuriant tone. He has sung with William Warfield, Odetta and around the world following the tradition of Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, and Todd Duncan, yet bringing his own incredible interpretation as the spiritual specialist to this music of the soul and the soil.

When I heard Little Boy, How Old Are You? on his compact disc, I confessed it was new to me. When asked how he selects his repertoire from the thousands of spirituals and folk songs, he said he likes to sing those songs that are less well-known. Mr. Sims commissioned Jan Bach and Lena McLinn, one of his teachers, to compose I'm A Soldier, (spiritual suite for baritone and orchestra) in honor of U.S. veterans. The work was premiered recently with the Savannah Symphony.

Having grown up singing spirituals along with a broad range of American music, I was curious about the challenge of getting young people, particularly African Americans to uphold the tradition. He recognized this as a challenge. "Certainly, things are improving," he said. "But we have a long way to go." He said it was important to help youth understand the connection of spirituals to other genres: jazz, blues, rock and roll and, yes even the classics (Anto-

nin Dvorak's New World Symphony.) The spiritual-like song, Goin' Home, by African American composer Harry Burleigh was adapted by Dvorak and used in this most famous piece. Blues performers such as B.B. King have explored a range of musical genres. Such represents how composers and musicians constantly draw on the spiritual and African American folk music.

This is Mr. Sims's first time visiting the Island. When asked if he had found inspiration here, he replied: "Being around people who appreciate the black experience has been wonderful." He attended the gospel concert at the Tabernacle on Saturday and was particularly delighted to see how much the choir was appreciated. When he mentioned Harry T. Burleigh, I told



LYRIC BARITONE ROBERT SIMS.

him that years ago Mr. Burleigh was a regular vacationer on the Island and stayed at Shearer Cottage and at one time I lived near Mr. Burleigh's home in West Chester, Pa. He was delighted and surprised to learn that we have an NAACP spirituals choir on the Island.

Robert Sims is a graduate of Oberlin Conservatory and has studied at Northwestern University. He is a Gold Medal winner in the American Traditions Competition and the recipient of the Friedrich Schorr Opera Award. He made his critically acclaimed debut at Carnegie Hall and has made appearances on PBS.

His Web site, RobertSims.com, is a great place to learn more about his work and his mission to share this music and engage audiences around the world in understanding this rich musical heritage and its connections to the music of our time. Mr. Sims sang a few bars as we talked about those techniques of the spiritual that give it uniqueness — that voice, so brilliant, evoking such emotion must return to the Island. We need to work on this.