



**PRESIDENT'S AWARD**  
for impact on media

# Steve Lopez

## FINDING A COMMON VOICE IN THE CACOPHONY

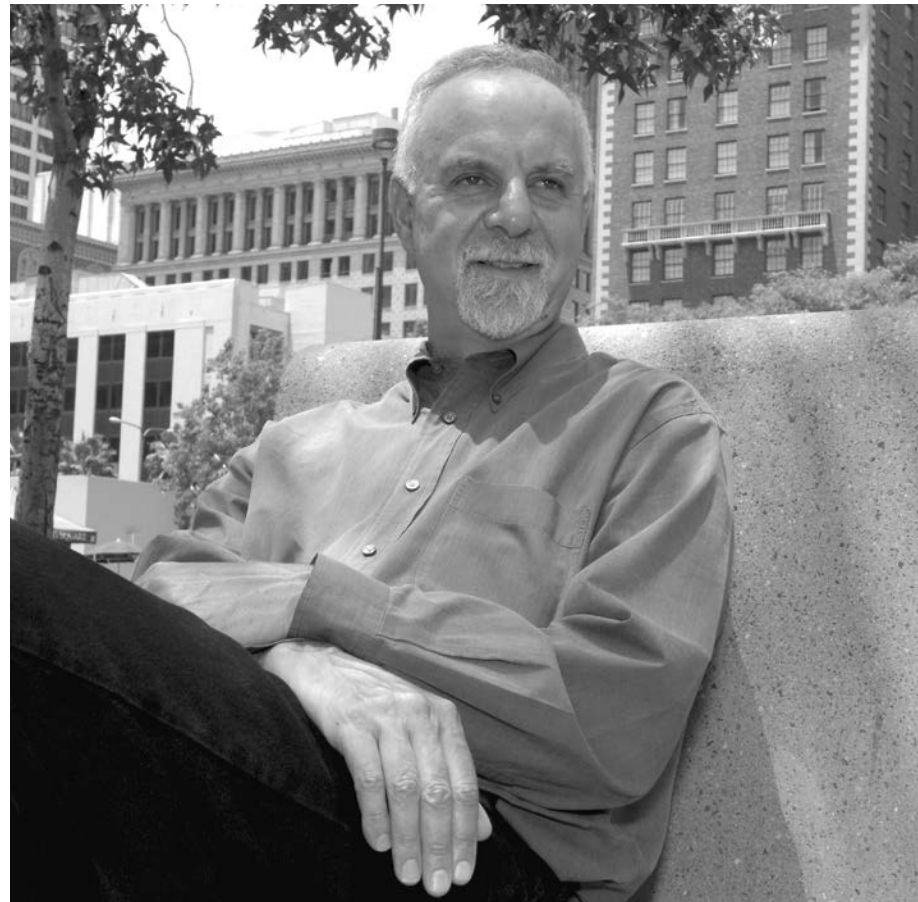
BY JANE ENGLE AND  
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In 2002 Washington Post writer Howard Kurtz singled out Steve Lopez as a surviving example of the vanishing, big-city, hard-edged, witty metro columnist. At the time, nobody quite realized that the new hire at the Los Angeles Times might become the ears and eyes for a place so sprawling and so decentralized that it defies the old definitions of a metropolis.

Mixing his hilarious trademark jabs at deserving politicians with his superb storytelling, his in-depth examination of Skid Row and his serious investigation of Sacramento's ills, Lopez has brought to L.A. the urban-advocacy traditions of a Mike Royko melded with the savvy of a William Safire. Los Angeles Times editors, who determinedly lured him from Time Magazine long after he had initially turned them down, recognized his uncanny ability to zero in on key figures and issues of the day, then tell it like it was.

His 1998 piece on Rudy Giuliani for Time was headlined "Hizzoner the Hall Monitor." In it, Lopez clearly had a field day, writing, "It was almost too perfect. The volcanic mayor of the new and improved New York City was on his way to speak at Our Lady of Pompeii church. That's Pompeii as in the city buried under the molten lava of Mount Vesuvius. What if Rudy Giuliani, in the middle of his big civility campaign, blew his top as the gathering of seniors digested their lunch of franks and beans?"

Yet it wasn't just about colorful words, it was about the work. Within a short time of arriving in Los Angeles, Lopez and his energetically reported column had begun to win over even critics, who had wondered aloud how a guy who hadn't lived in Southern California in many years could become the area's metro columnist. Lopez revealed to his longtime former newspaper, the Philadelphia Inquirer, in an interview last spring, "I was offered this job a year before I took it, but turned it down. I thought it was too difficult a city to write a local column in. Los Angeles being a city of transplants, you



have to work harder to find common ground for readers that don't have a heck of a lot in common."

He added, "I just liked the idea of being afraid of something again, so I took the job."

And so would follow hundreds of maddening, entertaining Steve Lopez columns, about Arnold and Gray, Antonio and Mirthala, Paris and Baca —and about scores and scores of lesser-known Californians who traveled below the radar but had fascinating stories to reveal.

In a column earlier this month, Lopez wrote simply and elegantly of Juan Romero, the busboy who knelt by a bleeding Bobby Kennedy when the presidential candidate was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in 1968. Lopez recalled how,



five years earlier, he had tracked Romero down, finding a man still intensely affected by that tragic day: "We went out for a couple of beers, and Romero began squirming and twisting himself up. When he finally found a way to let it out, it was for his own sake as much as mine."

Earlier this year, Times colleague Patrick Goldstein described just how successful Lopez has been at finding the common ground he was so worried about when he resisted taking the job. As Goldstein wrote in his "The Big Picture" column in Calendar, "Lopez is the conscience of our paper as much as he is of our city, whether he's chiding our feckless mayor, exposing the sorry state of our public schools or shining a light on our neglect of the homeless."

During his countless hours on the city's meanest streets, Lopez developed a poignant friendship with a mentally ill violinist, and now has authored a non-fiction book about his experiences with his friend Nathaniel Ayers, "The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship and the Redemptive Power of Music," which was published in April by Putnam. In its review of "The Soloist," Publishers Weekly praised Lopez's "self-effacing humor, fast-paced yet elegant prose and unsparing honesty"—all qualities found in his columns. (Besides "The Soloist," Lopez has penned three novels and is at work on another.)

Lopez will not be immortalized merely by his rich body of award-winning journalism, but also by the silver screen. "The Soloist" is becoming a feature film, with Robert Downey Jr. portraying Lopez and Oscar winner Jamie Foxx as Ayers.

His column explores subjects as varied as Los Angeles' dreadful traffic jams and his own early stirrings of religious awakening. And he often revisits his favorite topics, unleashing his signature sense of humor. Among those favorites, Lopez has angered and delighted readers by creating something of a mini-beat focused on Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's transporta-

tion aide, Jaime De La Vega, who drew Lopez' ire because he drives a Hummer.

In Lopez' most recent installment in the saga, De La Vega once again didn't call Lopez back for comment. So Lopez went to a Hummer dealership in Pasadena to get the dealer's take on how tough it must be to sell such a behemoth just now, with gas prices approaching \$5 a gallon in Los Angeles. The columnist ended up conversing with an eager young salesman. The exchange unfolded like this:

He threw open a door to reveal an interior slightly smaller than the Staples Center.

And what if someone asked him about the vehicle's impact on global warming?

"I'd just ask them how much longer they're going to be living."

Is De la Vega taking notes? These aren't bad lines to use when someone asks why the transportation chief in a city with legendary pollution is driving a Hummer. And [the salesman] wasn't finished extolling the advantages of super-sizing.

"If you get into an accident, nothing will happen to you," he said. "You'll just kill the other person."

Why is this kid not the sales manager?

A California native, Lopez lives in Los Angeles with his wife, two sons and daughter. His Times job is his seventh newspaper stint in a career that has also included, among other publications, Sports Illustrated, Entertainment Weekly, San Jose Mercury News and Oakland Tribune.

He has been honored with many national journalism awards for column writing and magazine reporting. And now, Steve Lopez is the Los Angeles Press Club's 2008 Recipient of the President's Award. 🍷