

'Johnny Angel' and the Cuban missile crisis: 100 years of American History in a 3-hour show

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By John LeGear
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Editor's Note: Since the 1980s, John LeGear of Palos Hills has been a builder and promoter of national not-for-profit organizations, most of them in the sports and health care field. He turned his attention two years ago to completing "U.S. History and Today."

It came as no surprise to me that Americans poured into movie theaters during The Great Depression. Many were hungry, or jobless. Far too many were homeless. And everyone wondered when the misery would stop. People sought affordable diversions, and movie houses were selling screen dreams for a dime or a quarter.

What was surprising, as I looked back, was that so many Americans surrounded by hopelessness were so captivated by the glamour of Hollywood, with its top hats and tuxes and flowing gowns.

That contrast prompted me to create a three-minute music montage juxtaposing Depression-era hardship with Hollywood fantasy. The idea was to blend images with music to explore the depths of despair being experienced by millions while the wealthy were swimming in champagne.

Before long, my research spilled from the 1930s into both world wars and beyond.

In the end, I dedicated all or part of every day in 2017 to completing "U.S. History and Today," a three-hour seminar that recounts the past 100 years of American history spiced with memorable interludes of movies, music, dance and comedy.

The quest to create the presentation began three years ago and entailed some 2,000 hours of work. The question everyone has asked ever since is, "For heaven's sake, why?"

My answers were predictable: a keen interest in American history; a modicum of video editing skills; and the sheer joy of storytelling, which I inherited from glib Irish-born parents who arrived in the U.S. soon after World War II.

I was curious to know if regular folks like me would get a charge out of reviewing the past century of U.S. history when hard facts are combined with corresponding pop culture moments.

I explained the rationale to my skeptical brother this way: "For those who never acquired a taste for American history, the music and film clips are tantamount to a spoonful of sugar helping the medicine go down. And for those who know history well, some will attend for the sheer joy of critiquing it."

"U.S. History and Today" contains 600 historically relevant photographs along with 49 film and music clips that highlight milestones of American life from 1914 through present day.



Photo by Joe Lewnard, Daily Herald Staff Photographer

The only logical outlet for sharing it was community colleges, so I reached out to all 48 of them in Illinois. Fourteen have scheduled 23 presentations, including two-part showings that begin Friday at Harper College in Palatine and March 7 at Harper's satellite campus in Wheeling. Each includes time for discussion.

I began the project with an exhaustive study of Depression-era photographs found on the internet, coupled with dance clips from the 1935 film "Top Hat," the most successful of 10 movies that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers made together. Their dance to the Academy Award-nominated "Cheek to Cheek" appears early in the seminar. Dozens more film clips provide uplifting ballast to historically significant still images captured by photojournalists through the decades.

Once I completed the homage to the 1930s, I turned attention to both world wars, and then to the presidential election



John LeGear is constantly updating "U.S. History and Today"

years of 1956, 1976, 1996 and 2016, drilling deep into each of those years in hopes of transporting viewers to those times. While studying World War I, I came upon Charlie Chaplin's arrival in Hollywood from England in 1914. From viewing his work, it was easy to understand how by the mid-1920s he became the most beloved living person in the world.

I also did a close-up examination of 1962 to contrast the wholesome innocence of Shelley Fabares' tune "Johnny Angel" with The Cuban missile crisis, which could easily have brought the world to an end. And finally, to imbue continuity, I reviewed lists of headline events from every year since 1914, selecting photographs along the way to reflect some of the most memorable.

The first showings were well received. Audiences wrote in their evaluations that they enjoyed what one called "history at high speed." The most generous attendees described the seminar as "thought-provoking" or, bless 'em, "wonderful."

During the presentation, I invite audience members to compare today's headlines with lessons learned from the Vietnam War, the counterculture revolution of the 1960s, racial unrest, climate change, and the ongoing efforts by Americans with disabilities to receive equal treatment under the law.

I begin each seminar by asking the audience to imagine themselves riding on a glass train. But instead of viewing landscapes, I explain that they'll be viewing 100 years of American history coming at them at a fast pace. Audience discussion and debate is integral to success, so I've built in four Q&A breaks.

Some places schedule the full three hours in one sitting, while others, like Harper present it in two 90-minute chapters.

When "The Grapes of Wrath" author John Steinbeck set out in 1960 in a small camper to drive 10,000 miles around the U.S., he said he wanted to rediscover America. He wanted to see it, smell it, and hear from its people, just as he'd done during The Great Depression a quarter century earlier. I'll bet almost everyone who read his book about that journey, "Travels with Charley," allowed themselves the dream of one day driving across the country to experience all it has to offer.

I've had that dream for as long as I can remember. And if things go well, I hope to expand the reach of my American history seminar to present it at schools from coast to coast so that, like Steinbeck, I can hear what the people have to say about their country, all while I ride the tide of American history.

I cannot imagine a more joyful journey.

Harper College will present Chapter 1 of "U.S. History and Today" on its Palatine campus from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Friday, Feb. 2, with Chapter 2 at the same time one week later. The seminar will be presented again at 11 a.m. March 7 and 14 at Harper's satellite campus in Wheeling. Register through Harper's Lifelong Learning Institute at (847) 925-6300 or www.harpercollege.edu/ce/li/index.php. The fee is \$19 for members and \$38 for nonmembers. For information about U.S. History and Today or to check the schedule of upcoming presentations, please visit www.TimComm.com or email John LeGear at John@TimComm.com.

* The Daily Herald, headquartered in Arlington Heights, is the third largest newspaper in Illinois with daily circulation of 94,000.