

Around town

Going back to the 'Civil War'

By Rick Kogan

It was 20 years ago today, or just about then, that we walked the few blocks from our Old Town apartment over to Wells Street and into a new world.

Our high school friend, Ron Pen, was there. He played a cow bell in a theater filled with music and with images, dance and mime, with people banging percussion instruments and words that pierced the heart.

Though we had spent some of the previous summer exploring the Summer of Love, Lincoln Park franchise, and otherwise tried to plug into the something that was happening here, nothing could have prepared us for "The Civil War." It was called a "rock cantata," a meaningful multi-media show, our first taste of rock theater and something we would never forget.

A few days ago, we told this to Bill Williams, who nodded understandingly.

"The first time I saw it, I was blown away, totally," he said.

Williams, Columbia College's music workshop instructor, is the production associate/vocal coach for Wednesday's free 20th anniversary performances of "The Civil War," commemorating the death of Martin Luther King (5:30 and 8 p.m. at Columbia College Studio Theater, 72 E. 11th St.; call 663-9465). It is a nearly all-student production, directed by William Russo (its composer and Columbia's music program director), and one that seeks to recreate a 20-year-old "experience," without such "modern" embellishments as synthesizers and computers.

"The kids have picked up on the sense of content in the music and words. They don't really know about any of this, don't know the link between



Illustration by Mitch O'Connell

the peace and civil rights movements," said Williams. "The lead singer [Darius de Haas] wasn't born when the show was first done."

"The Civil War" was composed by Russo in collaboration with Irma Routen. Based on the poems of Paul Horngan's "Songs After Lincoln," its aim was to explore the parallels between the 1860s and 1960s, between Lincoln's efforts to end slavery and Dr. King's movement.

It was given its initial performance at Notre Dame, premiered at HemisFair in San Antonio on April 7, 1968 (three days after Dr. King's assassination), played at the Museum of Contemporary Art that May and then in July settled in at The Theater, the Wells Street space where we first saw it.

We saw it many times afterward—when it moved to a church on Fullerton and later to an unused bowling alley on Lincoln (now the Body Politic Theater). It was, because of its structured improvisational nature, always unique.

Life moved on. Russo and Columbia's Center For New Music formed the Free Theater and developed new works such as "David" and "Ages of Man." Ron left the show and went to college. We have seen a lot of shows and heard a lot of music since 1968, but Wednesday, because it changed forever the way we would think about music and theater and life, we'll be watching "The Civil War."

Holograms for Mr. Jackson

The phone rang. Loren Billings picked it up. A man with a deep voice wanted to know if she gave VIP tours of the Museum of Holography, that Chicago treasure that Billings owns and operates.

She did, she told the man. In fact, at the very hour in which the man was interested, she would be conducting a tour for 45 school kids from Ohio. Billings said, "Sorry." The caller said, "But Michael Jackson would really like to see the museum."

Billings understood that

Jackson was no run-of-the-mill VIP. "Well, you could come at 5:30, after the kids have gone," she told the caller and that's exactly when two vans pulled up at 1134 W. Washington St. and Jackson, sans sunglasses, and seven associates piled out and into the museum.

The museum has three galleries, and bodyguards preceded Jackson into each. As we have been (we didn't know we had so much in common), Jackson was wowed by the surroundings. The man who has his own zoo, wants to buy the bones of the Elephant Man and is not, shall we say, easily impressed, was afflicted with the same wonder that strikes any museum visitor.

"He just kept going 'oooh' and 'aaaah,'" said Billings, who sat Jackson and his entourage down for an explanation of holograms.

Jackson, who did a lot of sightseeing and shopping while in town for concerts at the Horizon, spent about an hour at the museum. He was particularly interested in the holograms of animals—a snake, lion cubs, a hawk—but flipped at one of Boy George.

"He looks just like a girl," Jackson told Billings, laughing.

Before leaving, Jackson bought some holograms, including one of our favorites, binoculars through which one can actually see. Billings, as is her gracious and spread-the-gospel wont, gave the singer and his pals free holograms of clown faces.

"Tell your friends," she said.

First event for S.O.S.

The new Chicago chapter of the Society of Singers, the non-profit organization that provides legal, medical and other assorted aid for singers, is holding its first public event Sunday at 5 p.m. with an open-mike concert at Jorge's, 1161 N. Dearborn St. (787-5050). This is a very worthwhile group, spearheaded by Henry Mancini's wife, and an event that should attract some of the city's most pleasant voices.

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