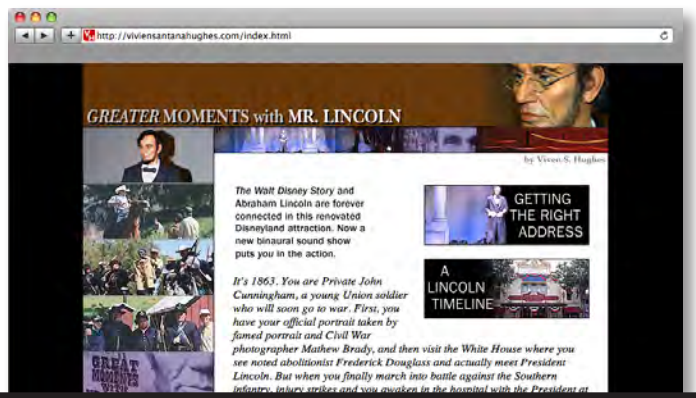


WDeye Online

by Vivien Santana Hughes



Note: interview subjects' last names have been deleted from Imagineering pieces written for internal publication.

Greater Moments with Mr. Lincoln

The Walt Disney Story and Abraham Lincoln are forever connected in this renovated Disneyland attraction. Now a new binaural sound show puts you in the action.

It's 1863. You are Private John Cunningham, a young Union soldier who will soon go to war. First, you have your official portrait taken by famed portrait and Civil War photographer Mathew Brady, and then visit the White House where you see noted abolitionist Frederick Douglass and actually meet President Lincoln. But when you finally march into battle against the Southern infantry, injury strikes and you awaken in the hospital with the President at your bedside, emotionally urging you to live. . . .

The *New Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln* is more than a theater show. It immerses guests in the Civil War experience using a technique new to Disneyland—binaural sound—complemented by the projection of original Mathew Brady images of the time, which Disney licensed from the Library of Congress and National Archives, among others.

Just put on your infrared headphones (a wireless first for binaural) and let the show begin.

"The feeling of being there is magic," says principal media designer Joe [REDACTED]. "Standing beside 'the man' as he whispers his concern for the struggling Nation is emotional. Feeling the musket balls scarcely miss you and a Rebel charge engulf you raises the hair on your neck. There's a storytelling power unleashed here that is rich and overtaking."

The audio equivalent of a 3-D movie, binaural sound provides listeners with the illusion of being right in the middle of the action. Specialized microphones are placed inside the ear canals of a model of a human head (nicknamed "Fritz"), which is then placed in a specific environment to capture sound the way human ears do. The action takes place around Fritz—from the close-up clipping of scissors for a pre-photo haircut to the distant sounds of trumpets and cannon fire as the battle approaches. "Your 'main character' is a character that doesn't talk," says Theme Park Productions senior show writer Steve [REDACTED], "but everyone talks to him."

Once the headset goes on, the guest becomes that main character—John, a Union soldier. "John is an amalgam of soldiers I read about," explains Steve. "All the things that our soldier does are historically accurate. Many soldiers went to Mathew Brady's and had their photos taken, the doors to the White House were always open so they could come to see the president. There weren't a lot of photos in those days, so they didn't have a face to put to the commander in chief." So, amazingly, the soldiers just waited in line to come in. "If a senator cut in line in front of a private, Lincoln would be incensed! He looked at the soldiers as his sons."

Imagineering has produced several binaural shows like *Soundsations* and *Sounds Dangerous* at Disney-MGM Studios and *Song of the Rainforest* at Disney's Animal Kingdom but, "This was unique in that the show was Marty's idea and he was excited about it from the outset," says Joe. "That gave everyone the confidence to push it into uncharted territory. The side of Abraham Lincoln as a regular guy, a dad, a genuine kindhearted human being is so rich and extensive that our problem was holding back."

"Actually," says Marty [REDACTED], "I'll gladly share the inspiration with Paul [REDACTED]. One day, he mentioned that he wondered if there was anything we could do to make the Lincoln show more interesting, so I took it from there with Steve, Joe and Tom [REDACTED]. We didn't show anything to Paul until we had all the answers—story, binaural, Lincoln's new voice, budget—and he really responded . . . especially when we discovered Don [REDACTED] is a history buff and joined our pitch chorus!"

Recreating History

There was no holding back when it was time to go to war, actually a very accurate re-enactment, when the team recorded at Gettysburg during five large battles in the midst of thousands of participants. “The camps were accurate to the last detail, the battlefield was kept authentic and we even had to be in complete uniform to be on the field,” recalls Joe. “The re-enactors were a very serious lot. They insisted on the correct clothing, the correct weapons, the correct shoes—no matter how uncomfortable. Their dialog was always true to form, even during battle.”

Well, except for one incident. “The only time I ever heard something out of character was when our recording position was overrun by a company of soldiers,” says Joe. “As they came crashing down on us—realizing for the first time that the binaural recording head wasn’t a soldier—one re-enactor grunted, ‘Oh sorry!’ as he stepped on one of our guys and forged ahead.”

It may seem like overkill to go to such extent for a sound recording, but “it really is like filming a movie on location, just without a camera or lights,” says Steve. “You need everything else, including a set, props, costumes. . .”

...And my cowboy boots,” adds Aaron ██████, director of Blue Sky and Participant Services and the project manager.

Seems the actor playing Anthony, Mathew Brady’s photography assistant, in one of the show’s first scenes, only brought sneakers the day of the recording. “We said, ‘Oh no that won’t work,’” recalls Aaron. Because the binaural head is so sensitive, every little sound is picked up—the squeak of Nikes on wood just wouldn’t substitute for the clomp of a hard-soled shoe. “So I had to give up the boots I was wearing,” says Aaron, who couldn’t wander far from the shoot that day.

Figuring it Out

Besides the new sound, film and script, the Lincoln *Audio-Animatronics*® figure got a new look as well—from the inside out. “We had the opportunity to tear the figure down to the last nut and bolt and update it to WDI standards,” says Disneyland animation machinist Mike Sanders. “We put in new parts featuring the latest technology.”

The figure’s facelift included new skin, body (the plastic shell) dentures (a realistic slight yellow) and an eye polish. (The eyes for all our A-A figures are actual glass eyes used as prosthetics for people.) Glasses were added because the team learned that Lincoln wore glasses at Gettysburg. “We go to extremes in the detailing because it shows,” says Tujung senior manufacturing technician Mike ██████. “For example, you never see an eye blink, but if that movement is not there, then it’s a stare. These subtle differences are what set us apart.”

Mike worked in Anaheim alongside Mike ██████ and the Disneyland team. “It was a true partnership,” Mike ██████ says. “As we restored and updated this historic *Audio-Animatronics* figure, we became part of history!”

And the teamwork paid off. “The feedback has been great,” says Steve. “Everyone, including senior management, has been very impressed with how the figure looks.”

The Walt-Lincoln Link

“At the end of May, we were asked to spruce up *The Walt Disney Story*—it wasn’t part of the original scope but Marty, Tony ██████ and Bruce ██████ wanted us to update Walt’s story as well as show his connection to Lincoln,” says Aaron. Now, in the lobby of the Opera House where the Lincoln show plays, there are about 100 pictures and graphics gathered together by curator/exhibits producer Randy ██████, as well as an eight-minute video TPP edited down from a new Diane Disney Miller ABC special on her dad.

The video chronicles Walt’s early years: how he got the idea for Disneyland, *Audio-Animatronics* technology and then Lincoln. “The last segment of the video and the last case of the memorabilia set up Walt’s fascination with Lincoln,” says Steve. There’s even a photo of Walt dressed as Lincoln. “Apparently he would go from class to class at school and recite the Gettysburg address,” adds Randy.

So with the attraction’s successful opening on July 17 (the 46th anniversary of Disneyland), the small team accomplished its goals. “The story stayed pure, the execution stayed pure, and there’s a real unity in the telling of the Lincoln story,” says Aaron.

And for some team members, this project awakened a personal interest. “I’ve been a history buff, but I’ve never focused as much on the Civil War,” says Steve. “Now I can’t get enough. I was at an antique store and there was a fruit crate with Lincoln on it and I really wanted to buy it. And did you know you can get Civil War cannon balls on eBay for \$30 to \$40 bucks? I couldn’t find muskets, though.”

“Steve needs a vacation,” says Aaron.

“You go to Maui,” counters Steve. “I’ll go to battlefields. I hear there’s a nice B&B near Antietam!”