

# The world according to Jim Heffernan

Matthew R. Perrine | Budgeteer News | Published Thursday, November 6, 2008

By now you've probably heard Bob Dylan's 1998 Grammy acceptance speech, in which he famously recalled being inspired by Buddy Holly's performance at the Duluth Armory Jan. 31, 1959 — three days before “the music died.”

One account of that legendary concert (which also featured Ritchie Valens, the Big Bopper and Dion and the Belmonts) you might not be familiar with is longtime Duluth columnist Jim Heffernan's. His experience was probably a little more along the lines of every other teenager in attendance that night.

“People have this image that everybody was worshiping Buddy Holly, but there was an Armory dance every other week,” the lifelong Duluthian told the Budgeteer Monday, “and it was all about Duluth teenagers going there and meeting members of the opposite sex.”

Heffernan's sentiment hasn't changed since 1987, when he first wrote about the concert in a Duluth News-Tribune & Herald column he titled, in stark contrast to Dylan's personal mythology, “Buddy Holly: Three Days Before the Rock Stars Died.” For many, he wrote, artistic appreciation at the Armory performances was secondary to “lightning striking.”

The column is just one of many (52, to be exact) appearing in “Cooler Near the Lake,” a collection that falls somewhere between personal favorites and greatest hits.

“I'm not a person to go around waving my own banner, but I really think it's a pretty good read.” Heffernan said. “And a lot of it surprised me, because it's been years since I'd seen some of this stuff. I think anybody can pick it up. ... It helps to be from around here, because a lot of it's really regional, but I hope it's a decent read [for all audiences].”

Considering that “Hef” has been writing columns for three-and-a-half decades, whittling down more than 1,500 columns to 52 was the “huge, daunting task” you can probably imagine.

“I made three piles and started going backward from the present,” Heffernan said. “One pile was ‘absolutely not’ [*Laughs and makes a disgusted sound*], one was ‘maybe’ and the other was ‘I think I'd like this in the book.’ I just kept on going through them. I had forgotten so many of them. ... Nobody bats .1000 at anything, so there were many, many weeks that I just went with what I had. Certainly nothing I'd put in a book. Many of them, their timeliness was all gone, discussing some silly city issue 15 years ago that nobody would remember.”

The veteran newspaperman did have some help with this process, however: His wife, Voula, ritualistically clipped his columns from the paper throughout the years — something he's never been too keen about.

Of course, Voula Heffernan shouldn't be confused with Blanche, her husband's fake wife, a literary creation he would lean on from time to time. (If you've never experienced Blanche, she is right at home in the section of “Cooler Near the Lake” lovingly referred to as “Outrageous Nonsense” — an entertaining byproduct of 34 years of weekly newspaper deadlines.)

“I wrote about her more than I should've,” Heffernan joked, making sure to point out that Blanche bears no resemblance to his better half.

### **'The Game of Hockey is a Lot Like Life: Stupid'**

At its core, Heffernan's columns in the DNT were ones of humor (as his subsequent ones are now).

"If you look through all 1,500 of them, a high, high percentage of them were attempts at humor — some perhaps successful at it," Heffernan said, self-deprecation intact. "Humor writing is very difficult, I think; but when it came to selecting for the book, I liked those [serious] columns."

As longtime readers will tell you, some of his best pieces were exactly that.

One of the most unwaveringly serious tales collected in "Cooler Near the Lake" is "The Boys Who Went Too Far on the Bus," which is exactly what it sounds like: Back in 1994, three teenage "punks" were making a scene on the city bus Heffernan was riding, and decided to take it one step further by incessantly yelling "retard" at a handicapped boy walking alongside the bus. Upon hearing this, the driver stopped the bus and gave them the boot.

"The older I get," Heffernan wrote in the column, "the more I realize heroism is less caught up in grand gestures than in little things people with character will do because it's the right thing to do. ... Way to go, driver."

Heffernan said that column was the exact "flipside" of "Double Bubble, Toilet Trouble," which found him riding down the Alworth Building's elevator with a toilet — unsurprisingly, this absurd number can also be found in the book's "Outrageous Nonsense" category.

"That's just the idiosyncratic type of thing that's just made for a humor column," he said. "... Man, you're a newspaper columnist generally writing humorous stuff and a guy pushes a toilet onto an elevator, you know that that's a column.

"It's just made for it."

### **Jim Heffernan, celluloid hero?**

Considering that he has dedicated his life to the newspaper business, it might come as a surprise to some that, were it up to him, Heffernan probably would've preferred to be an actor.

"I spent a lot of time in high school in the library reading about Broadway," he said. "Movies were my first love — I was the kind of kid who wouldn't walk across the street with free tickets to the World Series, because I didn't care about stuff like that."

By some stroke of luck, the Denfeld grad's freshman adviser at the University of Minnesota Duluth was none other than a theater professor with significant ties to "the business." Problem was, Heffernan's pleas to get into the theater program ("I bared my soul to the guy" were his exact words) didn't go far with his adviser, who also just happened to be a former USO organizer.

"He said, 'Get out of here. Who do you think you are, loving the theater?'" Heffernan recalled. "I'm sitting there, a pimply faced 17-year-old kid — I was young for my grade — thinking, Oh, well there goes that."

Despite his hopes and dreams being thrown out the window, Heffernan stuck it out at UMD.

"I didn't know what I wanted to be, even all the way through college," he said. "I majored in kind of general stuff that suited my interests: social sciences was my major, and English was my minor. I liked literature, but I didn't work on the UMD Statesman, nor did I work on my high school paper. I wasn't drawn to it."

After school, Heffernan enlisted in the National Guard. Upon his return to Duluth, he “stumbled” into writing, a career that has spanned more than four decades (and nabbed him a Distinguished Alumni Award at his alma mater).

### **‘Heaven Knows, Anything Goes’**

Heffernan’s experience in the newspaper business wasn’t limited to writing humorous “slice of life” columns, though — not by any means. From general assignment reporter to hitting the education beat, he’s worn many hats in his day.

His favorite role, though, was arts and entertainment editor, a position that coincided with the birth of his column.

“I was a one-man arts guy,” he said. “I have an interest in classical music, so I reviewed the symphony; I reviewed some books; I reviewed all of the university and Playhouse theater stuff; and I edited that section of the paper.

“I did that for about eight years, and it was really quite fun.”

The A&E inclination is evident in “Cooler Near the Lake,” as one of its most riveting sections is “The Rich & Famous Collide with Duluth.” In addition to the aforementioned Buddy Holly column, other big names chronicled include Johnny Cash, Gregory Peck, Elvis Presley and Jessica Lange (he attended the Superior premiere of the Cloquet native’s silver screen debut, the remake of “King Kong,” alongside her parents).

There is another reason columns of this fabric are so abundant in Heffernan’s canon: Memory is easier than imagination, and the writer is the first to admit it.

“Is it ever! You can dash off a memory column — like I did with the night I graduated from high school [‘Sometimes Life’s a Rat Shoot’] — a lot easier than creating something out of nothing,” he said. “Some of my favorites I created out of nothing, and it’s a great satisfaction to have done that; but, boy, when I needed a column, [I turned to] *memory* — and I just tried to find a way that would be of interest to others.”

Another debilitating factor: “Life doesn’t have that many unique experiences all the time,” Heffernan acknowledged.

Still, he managed to come up with more than 1,500 unique columns on a weekly deadline; deadlines that also included other stories for various sections, no less.

“One of the things you do when you do this is that you train yourself and you just do it automatically after awhile,” Heffernan offered. “No experience passes before your eyes or through your mind that isn’t filtered through a ‘Is there a column in this?’ funnel. You just do it automatically.”

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