

The New York Times

# A Graduate of Sha Na Na, Now a Linguistics Professor

By [ROBIN FINN](#)

Published: June 15, 2008

Hempstead, NY

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/15colli.html?ref=nyregionspecial2>



Robert A. Leonard, a founding member of Sha Na Na, with students at Hofstra University, where he is a department chairman and professor of linguistics.

BY the time he got to Woodstock - not just *to* Woodstock, but *onstage* at Woodstock, where his band, Sha Na Na, opened for their good buddy Jimi Hendrix -- Robert A.

Leonard, these days Hofstra University's resident forensic linguistics guru, remembers being cold, wet, weary and, yes, even a trifle grouchy.

Nothing like waiting around overnight to perform wearing a gold lamé bodysuit, a costume culled from a defunct "Bye Bye Birdie" road show: yet another example of the sort of absurdist ingenuity that provoked no less an authority than Frank Zappa to proclaim Sha Na Na "the freakiest group" he had ever seen. Bar none.

"By reprising greaser-dom, we made ourselves avant-garde," Mr. Leonard said. "The Grateful Dead loved us, Janis loved us, Jimi loved us, and I'm pretty sure that when we came out on that stage at Woodstock, there were plenty of people in the audience who took one look at what we were doing and wearing and thought, 'Oh, my God, now I know I took bad acid.' "



Mr. Leonard is second from the left in this photo of the band.

But that was 1969, back when the wine was on Janis Joplin (Mr. Leonard, whose day job was pursuing a Phi Beta Kappa education at Columbia, enjoyed imbibing with Ms. Joplin as they chatted backstage), and Sha Na Na, which accidentally evolved from an earnest a cappella group of Columbia students originally known as the Kingsmen, was the only doo-wop reincarnation on the rock 'n' roll-dominated scene. A bunch of white Ivy Leaguers on the same bill as B. B. King and Little Richard, singing oldies like "Teen Angel" and "Tell Laura I Love Her."

Mr. Leonard and his older brother, George, the band's mastermind, were the pride of Merrick. Thanks to Woodstock, which booked them on the strength of a thumbs up from Mr. Hendrix, who had seen them perform in New York City, Sha Na Na was an overnight cult sensation. Woodstock was just their second professional gig. Then Johnny Carson booked them. So did the Fillmores on both coasts. They opened for Zappa at the brand new Madison Square Garden.

But at age 21, Mr. Leonard, the son of a federal judge, walked away from rock fame to pursue his real love: linguistics. Turns out to have been an inspired choice.

Fast forward to 2008 and the snug campus office of Mr. Leonard, who is the chairman of Hofstra's department of comparative literature and languages and director of its Forensic Linguistics Project. From Monday to Friday, Mr. Leonard is teaching an intensive seminar alongside James R. Fitzgerald, a retired F.B.I. supervisory special agent whose groundbreaking application of forensic linguistics helped crack the Unabomber case.

By next year, Mr. Leonard, who consulted on the Jon Benet Ramsey case, plans to establish a master's degree program in forensic linguistics at Hofstra; so far as he knows, this would make it just the third place on the planet - the others are [the UK] and Barcelona - to offer such an advanced program. Still avant-garde, just in a different genre and venue. No more gold lamé suits. He projects Brooks Brothers in this mature, graying incarnation. But there is still music in his life, and at the moment, it's embarrassing him.

Mr. Leonard, a Brooklyn-born Fulbright fellow with a doctorate from Columbia and eight years of field research among the Swahili and Akamba tribes of East Africa, is explaining why he had no clue that the ring tone on his cellphone plays the theme from "Sex and the City."

"I had no idea where the music came from," he said. "My 12-year-old daughter programmed it for me. Wow, I'd better change it. People will think I have 9,000 pairs of shoes at home in my closet." Or worse. Home, by the way, is Lattingtown, where he lives with his wife and their four children, ages 10 to 16.

What he thinks about of late is forensic linguistics, which he describes as "the newest arrow in the quiver of law enforcement and lawyers."

"In a nutshell, just think of language as a fingerprint to be studied and analyzed," he enthuses. "The point to be made here is that language can help you solve crimes and language can help you prevent crimes. There is a tremendous pent-up demand for this kind of training. This can be the difference between someone going to jail over a confession he didn't actually write."

His consultation on the murder of Charlene Hummert, a 48-year-old Pennsylvania woman who was strangled in 2004, helped put her killer in prison. Mr. Leonard determined, through the quirky punctuation in two letters of confession by a supposed stalker and a self-described serial killer, that the actual author was Ms. Hummert's

spouse. “When I studied the writings and made the connection, it made the hair on my arms stand up.”

Last week, Mr. Leonard’s computer was cued to a less grisly case: a civil dispute over authorship stemming from comments in the blogosphere. “It’s become easier, in this age of the Internet, for disgruntled employees to disseminate information - or misinformation - about their companies that their employers don’t want made public.”

Like terrorism detection and prevention via forensics, this is, he says, a growth industry. Not as much fun as Sha Na Na, but arguably more important in the long run.

E-mail: [theisland@nytimes.com](mailto:theisland@nytimes.com)